

## US fund cuts will worsen Rohingya crisis

The world must not ignore their plight

We are deeply concerned about the US government's recent executive order suspending aid funding worldwide, which will further exacerbate the Rohingya crisis. According to a report, the impact is already evident in the Rohingya camps in Cox's Bazar's Ukhia and Teknaf upazilas. While the World Food Programme's emergency food assistance—supported by the US—continues, at least five US funded hospitals have suspended operations. Waste management and landfill activities have also ceased. This will significantly affect the Rohingya, limiting their access to healthcare and worsening their already dire living conditions.

The US has long been the largest donor for the Rohingya humanitarian response. According to the UN, out of the \$852.4 million required for the Rohingya in 2024, the US contributed \$301 million—55 percent of the total \$548.9 million provided by foreign donors last year. Therefore, its suspension of funding is bound to have disastrous consequences. If support for World Health Organization and the vaccine alliance GAVI is also halted, the Rohingya will further struggle to access critical medical care and life-saving vaccines, especially for women and children. Although the Trump administration is currently reviewing all overseas funds and projects before making any final decisions, the uncertainty is already affecting nearly 100 projects in Bangladesh—worth \$450 million last year—as well as the development professionals involved, who have been asked to stay home without work.

This crisis comes amid concerns over renewed conflict in Myanmar, which has forced around 80,000 more Rohingya to seek refuge in Bangladesh since August, adding to the staggering 1.2 million already residing here. Since foreign aid for the Rohingya has been on the decline for several years now due to conflicts in other parts of the world, Bangladesh as a host has already been in a tight spot. A recent RMMRU study painted a grim picture of living conditions in the camps, highlighting gender-based violence and security concerns. With each refugee receiving only Tk 16 per day, many have been forced into informal labour or even criminal activities. The US fund cuts will only worsen their plight and complicate efforts to manage the crisis.

As we have reiterated many times before, the Rohingya crisis is a global issue, so Bangladesh cannot be expected to bear this burden alone. The international community must step up to support them. Since the US provided humanitarian aid to the Rohingya even during Donald Trump's previous tenure, we urge the US administration to continue this support in the interest of humanity. The global community must also take concrete steps to resolve the crisis and ensure safe repatriation of the Rohingya to their homeland.

## Bring more businesses under the VAT net

Why are 80 percent of jewellers outside the net?

The heavy loss of revenue due to the government's failure to bring all high-cost luxury item sellers into the value-added tax (VAT) net is alarming. Consider the case of gold. Reportedly, out of 40,000 jewellery shops in Bangladesh, only 8,000 have VAT registration, while only 1,000 have Electronic Fiscal Devices (EFDs) installed for sales monitoring. As a result, VAT collection from this sector was only about Tk 100 crore in the last fiscal year.

Given the high price of gold, which ranges from Tk 8,533 to Tk 12,673 per gram, and its estimated demand of 20-40 tonnes per year, the government could have earned at least Tk 850 crore annually in VAT, taking into account the five percent VAT on jewellery sales. Yet, over the past 15 years, efforts to boost tax collection through electronic sales registers have largely failed—not just in the jewellery sector, but in many others as well. It is no wonder that Bangladesh remains among the countries with the lowest tax-GDP ratio—below eight percent.

It is ironic that while the government struggles to collect VAT from luxury sectors such as jewellery, it has, earlier this year, raised the VAT on some essential items and services, such as mobile phone talk time and broadband internet. This decision, though later withdrawn, sparked criticism from experts who advocated for expanding the tax base rather than imposing additional indirect taxes on ordinary citizens.

Thankfully, the National Board of Revenue (NBR) has initiated measures to enforce VAT registration and EFD installation, beginning with the jewellery sector. While the agency's meeting with the Bangladesh Jewellers' Association is expected to bring positive results, NBR officials must also conduct on-site visits to ensure compliance and encourage businesses to digitise their VAT payment processes. Strict action must be taken against any attempts at VAT evasion, and internal investigations should be conducted to identify and penalise officials likely complicit in helping businesses evade VAT and tax.

It is unacceptable that despite having approximately 2.72 lakh registered companies and 79 lakh small and medium enterprises, the number of VAT payers in Bangladesh stands at only five lakh. This number must be significantly increased. A comprehensive approach—combining strict enforcement, technological integration, and institutional accountability—is essential to ensure that all businesses, particularly those dealing in luxury goods, contribute their fair share to national revenue.

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# EDITORIAL

## Police reform must break free from colonial legacy



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MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

The Police Reform Commission instituted by the interim government in October last year has come up with a set of recommendations for improving police efficiency and transforming the organisation into a people-friendly outfit. The reform proposals focus on various functional areas such as human rights, use of force, arrest, search and interrogation, criminal investigation, police corruption, training, changes of law, regulation, and procedure, among others.

While the recommendations don't show any novelty, they have demonstrably failed to indicate the rationale behind principal changes that need to be made in the Police Act, 1861, Police Regulation of Bengal, 1943, and also the procedural legislation of the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1898. It is now well-established that the 1861 law is an anachronism insofar as managing a 21st-century police organisation is concerned. Let me elaborate on the legislative deficiency and how that has affected the police performance, and what needs to be done.

The current Police Act was principally aimed to administer a static, immobile, and backward rural society living in villages and small towns in the 1800s. It envisaged exercise of authority without local accountability. It presupposed a society without constitution, basic and fundamental rights, organised public opinion, and mass media projecting and agitating the public interest.

The Police Commission, 1902-03 presided over by Sir Andrew Fraser reported that the 1861 system had completely failed to produce an efficient and professional police force in the region. One of the major causes of failure of the 1861 law, according to this commission, was undue interference with the police by the civilian authorities. However, it was strange

that despite gathering compelling evidence to support, in addressing adequately the fundamental and chronic organisational deficiencies of the police organisation created under the Police Act, 1861, no action was taken.

A reasoned view in this regard is that the colonial rulers purposely designed the police organisation in such a manner so as not to attract better talent, thereby ensuring built-



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

in subservience of the police to the executive, regardless of the resulting corruption, lack of professional excellence, police high-handedness, and police-public estrangement.

In the years that followed the Fraser Commission report, the mass political agitation for freedom threw up unprecedented challenges to the skills and strength of the police in the subcontinent. What we saw during those tumultuous years ending in 1947 was a hardening of the foreign rulers' attitude, enactment of draconian legislations, and making the police respond to the national struggle with fury and unbridled violence.

proactively give up their long-held powers of "superintendence" over the police in favour of apolitical public safety commissions charged with the responsibility of designing and implementing measures necessary to ensure political neutrality of police operations.

As a first step, the responsibility of the maintenance of law and order will need to rest unambiguously with the police. The police hierarchy will have to be made responsible not merely for the organisation and the internal administration of the force, but also exclusively for all matters connected with maintenance of law and order.

## Teachers are responsible for students' mental health, too



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RUHINA TABASSUM PROMI

The start of the new year was marked by a tragedy that sent shockwaves throughout academic communities: the untimely death of Mehdi Hasan, a student of urban and regional planning at Rajshahi University of Engineering and Technology (RUET). Found in his dorm room on January 10, Mehdi's death by suicide painfully underscores the crisis of academic depression and the systemic failures that allow such despair to fester. His death, far from being an isolated incident, follows a disturbing pattern. In July 2023, Tanveer Fuad Rumi and Samir Rahman, students of the same institution, also died by suicide. These cases are part of a broader epidemic of student suicides in Bangladesh—513 in 2023 and 532 in 2022, according to Aachol Foundation—each a harrowing story of unfulfilled dreams, silenced voices, and grieving families.

While the causes of student suicides are complex and multifaceted, ranging from societal pressures to financial struggles, the role of academia—specifically educators—requires urgent attention. University years, intended to foster growth and discovery, often become a source of despair for students. Allegations of unprofessional conduct by faculty members, including deliberate failing of students, highlight a darker side. Students have alleged that the combined impact of teachers' behaviour and the environment at RUET, creating a toxic atmosphere, is responsible for the recurring suicides. Mehdi's tragic case points towards irresponsible teaching practices: bias,

grudge-driven grading, and hostile communication.

In response to growing dissatisfaction regarding the suicide cases, RUET students have put forward a set of demands aimed at improving transparency, fairness, and mental health awareness within the institution. Key points include the implementation of a coding system for exam evaluation to ensure impartiality, prompt publication of results with opportunities for students to review answer scripts, and stricter accountability for faculty members

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accused of misconduct. They have also demanded for regular mental health awareness sessions for both students and teachers to reduce stress and promote understanding. Importantly, they emphasise the need for enhanced campus security and fairness in attendance policies, ensuring that institutional structures support, rather than hinder, students' well-being. These demands reflect students' deep discomfort with the university system, particularly the grading system and the conduct of teachers, highlighting their frustration with perceived biases, lack of transparency, and insufficient

policies that focus on mentorship and individualised support, offering resources like personalised feedback or flexible exam retakes.

Adequate training is a critical missing link in the current system. Universities in Bangladesh rarely provide structured programmes to equip educators with the tools necessary to handle diverse challenges. Training in mental health awareness, active listening, and conflict resolution should be mandatory as well as ensuring that teachers can recognise signs of distress and respond constructively. Additionally, educators

In short, policing operations will no longer have to be subjected to general control and direction from outside the police department.

Without enabling the police to function freely, fairly, justly, and independently, there can be neither justice nor an enviable order. Since the sole purpose of police is to enforce the laws of the land, without fear or favour to anybody, it is crucial to render it politically neutral. Such neutrality has been achieved in other countries by placing the police under apolitical control, thus creating a cushion between political expediency and law enforcement. In the absence of such a cushion, persons of influence simply won't let police do its mandated duty.

Under the circumstances, the first order of business is the enactment of a new police law to replace the present archaic legislation. As it is, the act is weak in almost all the parameters that must govern democratic police legislation. For example, the Police Act has made it easier for others to abuse and misuse the police organisation, mainly because: a) the law gives the government the authority to exercise superintendence over the police, without defining the word superintendence or prescribing some guidelines to ensure that the use of power will be legitimate; b) it does not establish any institutional and other arrangements to insulate the police from undesirable and illegitimate outside control, pressures and influences; c) it does not recognise the government's responsibility to establish an efficient and effective police force; and d) it does not make it necessary to outline objectives and performance standards, nor does it set up independent mechanisms to monitor and inspect police performance.

The police law needs to be in consonance with the requirements of democratic policing, which the current law is not. These requirements insist on the existence of a police force that is subject to the rule of law, rather than the whims of the party in power, can intervene in the life of citizens only under limited and controlled circumstances, and is publicly accountable. Without rectifying these issues, building a modern, pro-people and democratic police organisation will not be possible.

should adapt their teaching methods to suit the university setting, where students need a balance of guidance, autonomy, and respect.

Another issue is the lack of accountability for educators' behaviour. Instances of bias, grudge-driven actions and unprofessional conduct often go unaddressed due to the hierarchical nature of academic institutions. Universities must establish mechanisms for students to report grievances without fear of retaliation. Independent committees should investigate complaints and ensure fair outcomes. Regular performance evaluations, incorporating student feedback, can help identify and address problematic behaviours, if any, among faculty members.

To address these systemic issues, institutional reforms are essential. Universities should revamp recruitment processes to evaluate candidates' teaching aptitude, interpersonal skills, and understanding of student needs. Orientation programmes for new faculty members should emphasise empathy, fairness, and the psychological impact of their actions. Periodic workshops on mental health awareness and effective communication should be mandatory for all educators.

Universities also must invest in resources such as trained mental health counsellors and peer support networks. Very few universities provide dedicated counselling services, and many students do not even know how to access them. Institutions must prioritise breaking the stigma surrounding mental health by encouraging open and judgement-free discussions. Replacing hyper-competitive academic cultures with one that values collaboration, personal growth, and learning over grades and rankings is critical. These changes can transform universities into spaces where students feel safe, supported, and equipped to thrive.

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