

Step up efforts to curb misinformation

February saw at least 268 instances of fake news circulation online

We're concerned about the continued prevalence of misinformation in post-uprising Bangladesh, with Rumor Scanner identifying 268 instances of fake news circulating online in February. Of them, 127—or 47 percent of the total—were political in nature, while 73 were related to national issues, 10 to international affairs, and 18 to religion. Naturally, the interim government was a frequent target, with 16 misinformation cases about it, mostly negative, along with 16 cases against the chief adviser and several others targeting other advisers. Meanwhile, BNP and its leaders, including Khaleida Zia and Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir, each faced six negative cases. Jamaat-e-Islami and Islami Chhatra Shibir faced 13 and 16 cases respectively, mostly negative. The Student Against Discrimination platform also faced 10 cases, while its leaders were also targeted.

In contrast to these mostly negative portrayals, misinformation cases involving Awami League, Chhatra League, and Sheikh Hasina greatly favoured them, suggesting a campaign by the fallen regime to improve its image. Clearly, fake news is being manufactured to manipulate public opinion with often devastating consequences. Worryingly still, mainstream media outlets themselves disseminated 10 pieces of fake news, while there were also cases of media impersonation, which is quite concerning. The role of Indian mainstream and social media in propagating false narratives has been equally troubling. For example, nine instances of misinformation about Bangladesh were found in Indian media. Rumor Scanner also identified 20 instances of communal misinformation, with half traced back to Indian social media accounts.

These trends at a time of continued political upheavals do not augur well for Bangladesh. The sheer volume of misinformation that spread in the months after the ouster of the Awami League government has been truly alarming. In January, we were alarmed to learn that fact-checking organisations had debunked 58 percent more content in 2024 compared to the previous year. According to Dismislab's annual roundup, fact-checkers identified and verified over 3,000 unique pieces of false or misleading information last year, fuelling a wave of chaos the effects of which are still being felt. While everyone agrees that curbing misinformation has become more urgent than ever before, no one seems to know how to go about it in a manner that eliminates the threat without infringing on people's rights.

The dangers of misinformation should be clear to us by now—it is fuelling confusion, division, and instability. Therefore, we must adopt a multi-pronged approach to address it. There should be more digital literacy campaigns to help users identify fake news, while social media platforms should take stronger action against misinformation. Fact-checking organisations should also receive greater institutional support to enhance their reach and impact. Meanwhile, mainstream media platforms must step up efforts to restore their credibility, and debunk false narratives.

Hospitals need proper waste disposal

Resolve the crisis at Rangpur Medical College Hospital

We are concerned about the medical waste problem at Rangpur Medical College Hospital where hazardous waste has been piling up inside the premises, posing health risks to both patients and visitors. According to a report by this daily, the planned construction of a waste management plant at the hospital has remained suspended for over five months due to protests from locals.

Locals are apparently worried that the plant's location, near the district's Bangladesh Medical Association building and adjacent residential areas, would cause odour pollution and pose health risks. They also allege that the plant does not have a location clearance certificate from the Department of Environment. Meanwhile, approximately 1.5 tonnes of waste, including 300 kilograms of hazardous waste generated daily by the hospital, are not being disposed of properly, which can have serious consequences.

Unfortunately, the situation at Rangpur Medical College Hospital is not an isolated one. Around 83 percent of hospitals in our country do not have a waste management system, according to a 2022 study by the Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB). The study also found that around 60 percent of hospitals do not have bins to store medical waste, let alone ensure basic segregation among reusable, recyclable, and non-recyclable waste—with hazardous medical waste being mixed with solid garbage in the bins that are available. In fact, at the Rangpur hospital, such waste is currently being dumped out in the open. Do the locals opposing the waste management plant not see the health risks of this uncontrolled dumping? A properly constructed waste management plant cannot pose more risks than the current situation.

Under these circumstances, hospital authorities must engage with locals, raise awareness with the help of experts if necessary, and ensure the plant's construction follows all due process. Meanwhile, all public hospitals in the country must take urgent action in line with the recommendations that came up in the TIB study. Simultaneously, the government must enforce the Medical Waste Management and Processing Rules 2008, penalising any non-compliance. The authorities also must ensure proper hygiene and cleanliness in public hospitals so that people do not fall sicker while undergoing treatment because of hospital-acquired infections.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Steve Fossett circumnavigates Earth

On this day in 2005, American adventurer Steve Fossett became the first person to complete a solo nonstop circumnavigation of the globe without refuelling when he landed in Kansas after more than 67 hours in flight.

Bangladesh's economic resilience is being tested



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Economic resilience, defined as the ability of an economy to quickly rebound from shocks while remaining stable and growing over the long term, is one of the most important determinants of a country's ability to withstand internal and exogenous shocks. For Bangladesh, this resilience is being rigorously tested against the backdrop of domestic inefficiencies and global uncertainties. As much as the country has registered important economic and social advancements since its independence in 1971, mounting uncertainty in the global economic environment, internal political economy dynamics and institutional deficiencies pose fundamental questions regarding its resilience in absorbing and responding to growing disruptions. Can Bangladesh sustain and accelerate its growth while mitigating risks from both domestic vulnerabilities and international shocks? To answer this, it is essential to dissect the structural, institutional, and geopolitical factors that underpin its economic resilience.

Despite narratives of sustained economic and political stability over the past decades, deep-seated structural weaknesses pose significant threats to Bangladesh's ability to navigate ongoing and future economic crises. The most glaring weakness of the country is its excessive dependence on RMG exports and overseas remittances. Though these two sectors have been the major driving forces behind the country's economic growth, excessive dependence on them has created an unbalanced economic structure that is highly vulnerable to external shocks. Lack of diversification into alternative growth engines, such as other labour- and skill-intensive manufacturing, information technology, and high-value services, has further constrained Bangladesh's economic flexibility and resilience.

Compounding these structural weaknesses are persistent governance challenges and institutional deficiencies. Corruption, crony capitalism, lack of transparency in public policy, and political instability have undermined effective economic



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

management. As the strength of democratic institutions eroded and power became concentrated among political and business elites, it became increasingly difficult to implement much-needed structural reforms. In addition, inconsistencies and possible manipulation of official statistics have undermined the credibility of economic evaluations, impacting both domestic policymaking and foreign investment decisions.

The structural fragility of Bangladesh's economy is further reinforced by several interrelated challenges. Private investment, for instance, has remained stagnant as a share of GDP for more than a decade. Bangladesh lags behind regional peers in attracting foreign direct investment (FDI), missing opportunities to integrate into global value chains and diversify its industrial base. Fiscal constraints also loom large, as the country struggles with one of the lowest tax-to-GDP ratios in the world. Rising non-performing loans, inadequate regulatory oversight, and political interference in loan disbursements have weakened the banking sector. Meanwhile, the underdeveloped capital market restricts long-term financing options, hindering private sector expansion. External debt is another growing concern, as increasing reliance on non-concessional loans has raised debt

servicing costs, putting pressure on the foreign exchange reserves and raising questions about long-term debt sustainability.

Persistent underinvestment in education and healthcare has also resulted in human capital constraints, limiting the productivity and employability of the workforce. Job creation remains insufficient to absorb the growing labour force,

measures. Non-performing loans must be addressed, and development of the capital market is essential to accessing long-term financing channels.

Third, human capital development has to be central to resilience. Increased investment in education, vocational training, and healthcare is required to generate a skilled and productive workforce. Scaling up social protection programmes will help mitigate exposure to risk factors among the poor, leading to enhanced social and economic inclusion.

Fourth, proactive foreign policy and strategic engagement are essential. Strengthening diplomatic relations, leveraging regional trade agreements, and engaging in climate diplomacy will help Bangladesh navigate geopolitical risks and pursue its long-term development agendas.

Lastly, institutional and governance reforms are vital. Strengthening democratic institutions, curbing corruption, and improving regulatory efficiency will enhance state capacity and create a more stable economic environment.

It is a matter of deep concern that numerous reform agendas, debated

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while social protection programmes suffer from low coverage and inefficiencies in targeting the most vulnerable populations.

Geopolitical dynamics further complicate Bangladesh's economic resilience. The country must navigate a delicate balancing act in its relationships with major global and regional powers like the US, the European Union, India, and China. Moreover, development financing and FDI are increasingly influenced by geopolitical considerations, potentially limiting the country's policy autonomy and bargaining power.

Meeting these interconnected challenges will demand a full-spectrum and multi-dimensional approach.

First, economic diversification and industrial upgrading must be prioritised. Moving beyond the RMG sector by investing in labour-intensive and skill-intensive manufacturing and service sectors, fostering entrepreneurship, and integrating into global value chains can enhance economic flexibility and reduce vulnerability to external shocks.

Second, macroeconomic stability and financial sector reform are necessary. Fiscal discipline must be enhanced, tax collection increased, and financial system regulation strengthened as the most urgent

for over three decades, have yielded minimal progress. While the civil society has consistently advocated for reforms, the lack of interest from the country's political and business elites remains a significant hurdle. To safeguard its economic resilience and effectively respond to ongoing and future crises, Bangladesh must implement decisive measures to rectify its structural vulnerabilities, governance deficiencies, and external dependencies. Continued inaction will severely limit the country's capacity to withstand shocks.

Reality is different from perceptions about RMG sector



RMG NOTES

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MOSTAFIZ UDDIN

For years, discussions about Bangladesh's ready-made garment (RMG) sector have been shaped by narratives that do not always reflect the current reality. While global media often highlights past tragedies or focuses on labour concerns, it overlooks the significant strides made in safety, sustainability, and ethical business practices. However, while acknowledging these improvements, it is equally important to recognise the challenges that remain, particularly regarding workers' rights and fair wages.

As a factory owner, I have seen firsthand the transformation of our industry. Our factories have undergone rigorous upgrades, yet misconceptions persist. Changing perceptions is crucial not only for our reputation but also for ensuring sustainable growth for our workers and businesses alike. We all stand to benefit.

The collapse of Rana Plaza in 2013 was a turning point for Bangladesh's garment industry. In response, the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh and the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety were introduced, leading to over 38,000

factory inspections and significant remediation efforts. Today, over 1,600 factories have successfully remediated safety issues under the accord, making our factories among the safest in the world.

Despite these advancements, concerns remain about compliance in smaller subcontracting factories, where enforcement is weaker. While larger exporters meet international safety standards, ongoing monitoring is needed to ensure that all workers, regardless of factory size, operate in safe conditions. Standards need to be raised across the board, and I would argue that we are, as an industry, only as good as our weakest link.

The garment sector employs over 4.2 million workers, of whom nearly 60 percent are women, according to a 2023 Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics report. While minimum wages have increased over the years, they remain a contentious issue. In November 2023, the government raised the minimum wage for RMG workers to Tk 12,500 (\$113) per month, a 56 percent increase from the previous Tk 8,000 set in 2018. However, worker unions argue that this wage is still not a living wage

given rising inflation and living costs.

Efforts to improve working conditions go beyond wages. Several factories have introduced healthcare facilities, childcare centres, and skill development programmes, but these benefits are not yet widespread. A stronger commitment from both government regulators and factory owners is needed to ensure that every garment worker receives fair compensation and a dignified working environment.

Bangladesh is now home to over 200 LEED-certified green garment factories, the highest number in the world. According to the US Green Building Council, investments in solar power, water recycling, and energy-efficient production have positioned Bangladesh as a leader in sustainable apparel manufacturing.

However, challenges persist. Textile dyeing remains a major environmental concern, with rivers suffering from industrial waste. While some factories have installed effluent treatment plants (ETPs), enforcement gaps allow smaller factories to discharge untreated waste. The industry must work collectively to ensure all manufacturers comply with environmental regulations. It only takes a negative report on one factory for us all to be tarred with the same brush.

One of the most effective ways to reshape perceptions is by increasing transparency. International buyers often arrive in Bangladesh with outdated assumptions about factory conditions. Factory tours provide them with firsthand insight into modern, well-equipped facilities that meet and

often exceed global safety standards.

However, transparency must extend beyond factory tours. Ensuring that all labour policies are publicly documented, workers have a voice in decision-making, and violations are addressed swiftly will reinforce Bangladesh's reputation as a responsible manufacturing hub. Encouraging direct engagement between buyers and workers, rather than curated visits, will strengthen trust in our commitment to ethical production.

While the industry has made commendable progress, we cannot overlook the areas that still need improvement. Ensuring living wages, enforcing compliance in smaller factories, and addressing environmental concerns must remain priorities.

Bangladesh's RMG sector is a success story; but for it to remain sustainable, we must acknowledge both achievements and challenges. By embracing full transparency, strengthening labour rights, and reinforcing environmental responsibility, we can ensure that our industry is recognised not just for its growth, but for its commitment to fairness and ethical business practices.

As stakeholders, factory owners, workers, policymakers, and international buyers, we have a shared responsibility to uphold the integrity of Bangladesh's most vital industry. Only through collective effort can we truly transform the narrative surrounding our garment sector for both local and global audiences.