## The Daily Star

## Take effective steps to reduce child mortality

### An equitable healthcare system can bring down stillbirths, under-five deaths

If there is one area of healthcare where Bangladesh made commendable progress over the last three decades, it is the decrease in maternal and child mortality rates. Yet, based on data published by two recent UN reports, this success is being eclipsed by the number of stillbirths and infant mortalities still occurring in the country. According to one report, 63,000 stillbirths are recorded in the country each year, which is equal to one stillborn for every 41 births—the highest among South Asian nations. The second report shows that in 2023, over 100,000 children died in Bangladesh before reaching their fifth birthday, while approximately 75,000 did not even survive the first month after birth.

The impacts of these deaths, which experts say are mostly preventable, are not just about lost human lives, but also about the psychological and emotional toll on the parents and families of these children. Sometimes, families in developing countries like ours also have to bear the financial and social burden of taboos associated with stillbirths and neonatal deaths. Unsurprisingly, the inefficiency and inadequacy of our healthcare system contribute to these preventable deaths and their impact on the families. Causes of the deaths include premature birth, complications during delivery, and infections like sepsis and pneumonia, which could be managed easily if expecting mothers across the country, irrespective of their economic condition and locality, could access well-equipped and well-maintained primary healthcare units, and avail neonatal and postnatal services as well as trained midwives in time.

Instead, home deliveries are still a reality in this country, accounting for 30 percent of all births. And how can families be blamed for choosing home deliveries when upazila and union healthcare facilities fail to provide 24/7 quality healthcare services? Even the private medical centres are no better. Despite charging exorbitant fees, their service qualities remain poor. In fact, one UN report highlights how unregulated private medical centres, through their inconsistent practices, are contributing to these preventable neonatal and under-five deaths.

We have repeatedly written about the need for an equitable healthcare system and the urgency of making primary healthcare affordable, accessible, and reliable in the country. While it is important to increase the number of community clinics and healthcare facilities at union and upazila levels, their accessibility should be prioritised too. Recruiting skilled manpower with good remuneration should be another priority to ensure quality primary care. This should include trained and certified midwives, birth attendants, and other community health workers. With just five years left to reach Sustainable Development Goals, we must not let the progress we have made so far go awry.

## Crisis in emergency care

### Eid holidays highlight systemic failures in our healthcare system

It is unacceptable that people suffering from various health issues were deprived of necessary treatment or had to endure long delays due to a shortage of doctors and nurses at hospitals around the country during the Eid-ul-Fitr holidays. As in previous years, major public hospitals were mostly operated by non-Muslim doctors and nurses. However, the number of patients in the emergency departments at Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) and Pongu Hospital increased significantly during the holidays, causing immense suffering for those in need of urgent care.

A man named Riyad Hossain, who was allegedly beaten by a mob, died due to a lack of timely treatment caused by this shortage. Reportedly, police first took him to Kurmitola General Hospital, which refused to admit him and instead referred him to DMCH. However, the country's largest hospital also did not admit him. He was given some medication and the police were informed that his condition was stable. When Riyad's condition deteriorated, police took him to a nearby private hospital, but he was denied admission due to the unavailability of doctors. With no alternatives, police had to keep him at the station. As his condition worsened, they took him back to Kurmitola General Hospital, but the hospital once again refused to admit him. Ultimately, he succumbed to his injuries at the hospital's emergency department—an avoidable tragedy.

A correspondent from this daily, upon visiting various hospitals, found that most were severely understaffed. At Pongu Hospital, a long list of patients waited at the emergency department, with only one doctor available to treat them. If an emergency department is so understaffed and struggling to cope, one can only imagine the plight of non-emergency patients. At DMCH, an average of 1,680 people visited the emergency department last week—higher than the usual 1,300-1,400 daily visits under normal circumstances, according to DMCH sources. The surge in emergency visits during Eid was attributed to many district, upazila-level, and private hospitals either remaining closed or providing minimal services.

This clearly indicates a severe lack of planning at all levels before the Eid holidays. As a result, granting leave to too many doctors and hospital staff at the same time led to immense suffering for patients.

To prevent such crises in the future, hospitals should implement a rotational duty system for medical workers during major holidays, recognising that healthcare is an essential service. Additionally, district and upazila-level hospitals should establish contingency plans, including incentives for medical staff to work during holidays. Private hospitals must also be required to keep emergency services operational. Without these measures, the healthcare system will continue to fail those in need, particularly during national holidays.

# Are we trading away our privacy for comfort?

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The revolution we once dreamt of is here. Once the stuff of science fiction, technology today pervades almost every corner of our lives. Smartphones that fit in our pockets now hold more computing power than NASA had during the Apollo moon missions. Artificial intelligence is writing poems, diagnosing diseases, and driving cars. Cloud computing, genetic databases, and the Internet of Things (IoT) have knitted themselves so seamlessly into our daily routine that we rarely stop to notice them anymore. Technology has gifted us with convenience beyond imagination.

But convenience comes with a cost. And perhaps the steepest cost of all is privacy.

In this age of hyper-connectivity, we need to ask ourselves a simple but profound question: does personal information even exist anymore? We unlock our phones with our faces, let Siri, Gemini, and Alexa answer our most personal questions, and eagerly pour the details of our lives onto social media platforms for a few fleeting moments of validation. Every click, every scroll, every heartbeat recorded by wearable tech is meticulously analysed and categorised—and often sold to the highest bidder.

An article in *The Guardian* published in 2018 revealed how Google collects various types of data about a user every day, including their precise location, browsing history, shopping preferences, social media habits, and even sleep patterns. Social psychologist Shoshana Zuboff, in her seminal book *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, warns of a dangerous new economic order where "human experience is claimed as free raw material for translation into behavioural data." Her conclusion is frightening: "If you're not paying for the product, you are the product."

Governments are not far behind in this data-driven pursuit. Take the Chinese government's social credit system, for example. Under this system, citizens are constantly monitored—both online and offline—and their actions are scored and ranked in a complex algorithm that determines whether they can travel, what kind of jobs they can apply for, and even whom they can marry. A late payment on a loan, spending too much time playing video games, or voicing political dissent online can lower an individual's score, leading to severe restrictions in personal freedom.

The United States National Security Agency (NSA) has long been accused of mass data collection and wiretapping, as revealed by whistleblower Edward Snowden in 2013. Closer to home in Bangladesh,



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questions around digital surveillance are becoming increasingly pressing. GPS tracking, biometric databases, facial recognition, and a growing network of CCTV cameras are becoming ubiquitous in cities like Dhaka and Chattogram. What began as tools to enhance efficiency, public safety, and security are inching ever closer to becoming tools of control.

This growing web of surveillance technology recalls philosopher Michel Foucault's concept of the Panopticon, a design for a prison where inmates never know whether they are being watched, so they behave as if they always are. Foucault argued that the mere possibility of surveillance leads people to regulate their behaviour voluntarily. "Visibility is a trap," he warned.

In the digital age, we may be constructing a new kind of Panopticon, where constant connectivity means constant observation. Unlike the inmates of the Panopticon prison, we have volunteered to enter the cell, bringing with us our smartphones, smartwatches, and smart home devices. We are living under what some call "digital feudalism," where we trade away personal information in exchange for convenience, comfort, and social connection. As philosopher Byung-Chul Han argues in *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*, "The neoliberal regime of self-optimisation and transparency makes the citizens complicit in their own domination."

This dystopian future was anticipated long ago. In *1984*, George Orwell envisioned a world where Big Brother watched everyone, everywhere, all the time. But our reality is more complex. We have welcomed Big Brother into our homes in the form of smart assistants and smart devices. In *Brave New World*, Aldous Huxley warned that people wouldn't need to be oppressed by force, but would willingly surrender freedom in exchange for comfort and pleasure.

What does all of this mean for personal freedom? As Yuval Noah Harari observes in *Homo Deus*, "Once Big Data systems know me better than I know myself, the authority will shift from humans to algorithms." Already, algorithms determine what news we see, what ads we're shown, and what content gets prioritised on our feeds. The concern is that predictive analytics will not just predict our behaviour—but shape it.

If artificial intelligence can predict, with high accuracy, how we will vote, what we will buy, and even what we might be thinking, then how free are we, really? Will our choices remain our own, or will they be subtly nudged and manipulated by forces beyond our understanding?

Consider behavioural economist Cass Sunstein's concept of the "nudge." Subtle changes in how choices are presented can significantly influence decisions. In a world where data allows personalised nudges, the potential for manipulation becomes dangerously powerful. Who controls the data controls the narrative—and, by extension, human behaviour.

Despite this dystopian trajectory, all is not lost. Movements advocating for digital rights and privacy are gaining momentum. The European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) has become a global benchmark for privacy protection. It empowers individuals to know what data is collected about them, how it is used, and to demand its deletion. Organisations like the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) continue to fight for internet freedom and privacy rights. In countries like Bangladesh, the conversation around digital privacy and cybersecurity is slowly beginning, though much work remains.

Technologists and ethicists are also calling for a "Privacy by Design" approach in developing new technologies—embedding privacy considerations into the architecture of digital systems, rather than treating them as an afterthought.

Some thinkers, like Jaron Lanier, advocate for a complete rethinking of the data economy. In his book *Who Owns the Future?*, Lanier argues for a system where people are paid for the data they produce, creating a more equitable digital economy.

As we stand on the threshold of a new digital age, we face a critical choice. Will we drift further into a world where privacy is a relic of the past, or will we fight to reclaim our autonomy?

Perhaps the question is not whether we can live without privacy, but whether we are willing to. What does it mean to be human if our thoughts, desires, and actions are constantly predicted, categorised, and commodified?

The poet Rumi once said, "Don't you know yet? It is your Light that lights the world." In a world obsessed with data and control, we must remember our humanity—the inner light that technology can never fully quantify or predict.

The tools of surveillance are already here. Whether we wield them with wisdom and care, or let them wield us, remains to be seen.

# CAAB's monopoly is a barrier to aviation growth

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In Bangladesh, airlines are often the primary target of complaints about poor services, both from passengers and the media. While some of these grievances are justified, not all issues can be attributed solely to the airlines.

General passengers may not realise that nearly 30 years after airline privatisation, the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh (CAAB) still has a full monopoly on the country's airport and aviation infrastructure.

CAAB's bureaucrats, lacking accountability, have squandered crores in the name of airport development since the 1990s, seeking billions for unnecessary and wasteful projects. It submitted an exorbitant Tk 10,000 crore funding request to the government to extend Saidpur airport's runway from 6,000 feet to 10,000 feet in the name of regional connectivity. The question is: did CAAB conduct a business case with a detailed financial forecast to justify its funding request?

According to CAAB, the project will transform the Saidpur airport into an international one as well as a regional cargo hub. The extended runway would be able to accommodate larger aircraft carrying over 300 people, targeting passenger as well as cargo aircraft from Nepal, Bhutan, and India's Seven Sisters.

According to media reports, in 2019, Nepal expressed interest in enhancing regional connectivity by establishing direct flights between its small regional airports—Bhadrapur and Biratnagar—and Saidpur in Bangladesh. Both of the Nepali airports have a single 5,000-foot runway. Saidpur airport, with a lower altitude and longer runway (6,000 feet), can accommodate much larger aircraft than the Bhadrapur and Biratnagar airports. Meanwhile, Bhutan, due to its high altitude and mountainous terrain, does not have an airport capable of handling as large an aircraft as Saidpur can.

Moreover, Saidpur is the farthest Bangladeshi airport from the population centres in the Seven Sisters region. Bangladesh's three existing international airports—Dhaka, Chattogram, and Sylhet—despite being closer, have no direct air service with that region in India.

Even after spending billions of dollars on constructing three under-utilised 10,000-foot runways outside Dhaka (Chattogram, Sylhet, and Cox's Bazar), CAAB continues to push the false narrative that an airport must have a 10,000-foot runway to operate international flights. In reality, the primary requirement for an airport to be designated "international" is the presence of a customs and immigration facility. To establish regional connectivity with Nepal and Bhutan, Saidpur simply requires a customs and immigration processing facility—not a costly, billion-dollar runway expansion. Its existing runway is sufficient to accommodate flights from Bhadrapur and Biratnagar airports in Nepal and any airport in Bhutan.

Besides, one can take the Skiathos Alexandros Papadiamantis Airport in Greece as a case in point. It handled over 600,000 passengers across Europe in 2024 utilising a 5,341-foot runway.

The development of Bogura airport can also be presented as another example of rampant waste and incompetence.

In January 2025, CAAB announced that Bogura airport needed a 1,300-foot runway expansion, costing taxpayers Tk 1,200 crore. It would take two years to start commercial service, it said.

The existing runway and passenger processing facilities at Bogura airport may require some repairs and upgrades to initiate commercial operations, but not an expensive and prolonged runway expansion.

Despite receiving billions of dollars in taxpayer funding and benefiting from low labour costs, CAAB, which serves as the regulator, promoter, and sole provider of airports and air traffic control services, has yet to succeed in building a healthy aviation sector.

According to the International Air Transport Association (IATA), the total economic impact of aviation in Bangladesh is only $5.3 billion, compared to over $17 billion in other similarly sized economies, such as Denmark and Vietnam. Vietnam's commercial jet fleet is nearly eight times larger than that in Bangladesh. Even more concerning is that Bangladesh's aviation industry lacks the skilled workforce and infrastructure to effectively operate and maintain a fleet of only 25 commercial jets.

The civil aviation authority has also not been able to attract a single airline from regions outside the Asia-Pacific and the Middle East to operate flights to Bangladesh. This has tremendously impacted the country's connectivity, trade, remittance flow, and overall economic growth.

Unless CAAB is restructured solely as a regulatory body and airport operations are spun off into separate entities, Bangladesh will keep facing challenges in building a globally competitive aviation industry.

To run the country's airports, Bangladesh could adopt the Canadian model, where each airport is leased to a non-profit organisation comprising local and national stakeholders. These organisations would compete with one another and take full responsibility for funding the operation and development of airports, operating independently without government or political interference. The government will be able to collect a substantial amount of revenue from the airports in the form of lease payments, VAT, and other passenger-specific taxes.

The July uprising has allowed us to question those in power. Now is the time to rein in CAAB's monopolisation over the country's airports, and ensure that they are run by competent, professional, and an accountable manpower.