

Remittances not at the cost of lives

Ensure safe recruitment and working conditions for migrant workers

It is unfortunate that we celebrate the remittance earnings of our migrant workers but our actions fall drastically short when it comes to ensuring their safety, dignity, and well-being both at home and abroad. In particular, the steady stream of coffins returning home—with migrants' lives cut short by health issues, workplace accidents, etc.—is a stark reminder of our collective failure to protect them.

According to the Wage Earners' Welfare Board, 4,813 bodies of migrant workers were brought back to Bangladesh in 2024 alone. The number of deaths has been rising steadily since 2020, increasing by more than 50 percent. In total, over the past four decades, at least 57,216 migrant workers' bodies have been repatriated. Many more are buried overseas, with families sometimes choosing not to bring the bodies home. When a body is repatriated, the Welfare Board provides Tk 35,000 for burial and transport costs. Besides, under a 2023 insurance scheme, families of insured workers who paid a one-time Tk 1,000 premium can receive up to Tk 10 lakh in the event of a work-related death.

Ironically, the official causes of death in most cases are listed as strokes, brain haemorrhages, or heart attacks—categorised as "natural causes." But experts have questioned this narrative, pointing out that most deceased workers were between 38 and 42 years old and reportedly had no prior health issues. Unfortunately, bodies are not re-autopsied upon return to Bangladesh. As a government official told this daily, rather unconvincingly, it is "difficult" to probe these untimely deaths further as autopsies conducted in host countries fall under their legal jurisdiction. But the question remains: Why, after all these years, have we failed to ensure a transparent and credible process for investigating the deaths of our migrant workers?

Government data shows that most of these deaths occur in the Gulf region, where extreme heat and gruelling work conditions—especially at construction sites—have taken a severe toll. A 2023 study highlighted the link between excessive heat and poor health outcomes among workers in the Gulf. Yet, there has been little visible effort to negotiate better terms for Bangladeshi workers abroad.

Given these realities, we urge the government to push for safer and more humane recruitment and working conditions in host countries. Employers must be compelled to comply with international labour standards, ensuring not just better wages but also improved living conditions and healthcare access. At the same time, migration costs must be reduced so that workers are not forced to endure dangerous jobs just to recover their investment. The authorities must also ramp up efforts to crack down on fraudulent agents involved in fake recruitment, wage theft, and forced labour. We must remember that migrant workers deserve protection, dignity, and justice. Their lives, health, and the well-being of their families must be as high a priority as the remittances they send home.

Take steps to repair Pirojpur roads

Regular maintenance, provision of funds necessary

It is disheartening to learn about the deplorable condition of roads in Pirojpur municipality, where nearly 90 percent reportedly require urgent repairs. According to sources, aside from around 20 kilometres of paved roads and approximately 70 kilometres of earthen roads, most roads across the nine wards remain damaged. For instance, the Dhuppashar Road has been unfit for vehicular movement for nearly a decade. As a result, vehicles are often forced to navigate carefully due to potholes and uneven surfaces, while many residents choose to walk as a safer alternative. Unfortunately, the municipal authorities have taken no meaningful steps to renovate these roads, citing a lack of funds.

Pirojpur's situation is hardly unique. Roads in districts and villages across the country often suffer from the same fate. In many cases, roads become dilapidated soon after construction due to the use of substandard materials. In others, projects remain incomplete or abandoned for years. Numerous reports have exposed the inefficiency, mismanagement, and corruption within the Local Government Engineering Department (LGED) that oversees most of these projects. One such example is a road constructed by LGED in Patuakhali's Bauphal upazila, which collapsed just a day after completion. In another case, an 11-kilometre road in Narayanganj deteriorated within six months of repairs.

The condition of bridges is similarly troubling. For instance, in the Amtali upazila of Barguna, the collapse of 10 iron bridges in just eight months severely impacted around 65,000 residents. Likewise, a concrete bridge built over the Banshbaria canal in Patuakhali remains unused due to the absence of approach roads—another example of poor planning and execution.

These cases reflect a chronic lack of attention towards road infrastructure outside the capital and major cities, particularly in rural and municipal areas. A *Prothom Alo* report from last year noted that about 50 percent of LGED roads required repairs, while many village roads were unusable—a situation that remains largely unchanged to this day. Insufficient budget allocations often delay necessary maintenance, which ends up costing more in the long run. This scenario must change. The government must not only ensure adequate funding for repair but also overhaul its project implementation processes. The practice of awarding contracts to politically connected contractors must end to ensure accountability and quality. For Pirojpur municipality, in particular, immediate fund allocation and repair are paramount.

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EDITORIAL

Post-LDC challenges and the future of our exports



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As Bangladesh approaches its graduation from the Least Developed Country (LDC) category, the anticipated challenges of losing preferential trade benefits are already manifesting. The United States has recently imposed a 37 percent reciprocal tariff on imports from Bangladesh, which is a significant blow to the latter's exports. Though the tariff's execution has been temporarily put on hold, if not resolved in time, this sudden increase threatens to erode the country's competitiveness in its largest export destination.

Concurrently, India has withdrawn the transhipment facility that previously allowed Bangladeshi exports to third countries via Indian ports and airports. This decision, which the Indian authorities claim is aimed at alleviating congestion and costs in India's own export channels, is expected to disrupt Bangladesh's export logistics, particularly affecting shipments to some countries. These developments underscore the urgent need for Bangladesh to diversify its export portfolio, invest in infrastructure development, revisit the trade architecture, and engage in strategic trade negotiations to mitigate the impacts of its LDC graduation.

The path ahead is becoming clearer, and more complicated. While diversification has long been a talking point, it is now a matter of survival. Relying on the export of ready-made garment (RMG) products alone is no longer an option. Bangladesh must invest in building up sectors that have already shown early signs of promise. Pharmaceuticals, ICT, and agro-processing are no longer fringe players. They are contenders, capable of anchoring the next chapter of the country's export story. Take pharmaceuticals, for instance. The

world's appetite for generic medicine continues to grow, and Bangladesh has both the factories and the know-how to meet that demand. The transition from the LDC status could actually open the door for producing patented drugs, a game-changer if handled right.

But shifting what we sell is only half the equation. Where we sell must change too. For years, Bangladesh's

The other force reshaping competitiveness is less visible but equally powerful: technology. Automation, artificial intelligence, and real-time data have changed how factories run and decisions are made. In Bangladesh, these tools have been met with some hesitation, and understandably so. Fear of job losses is not unfounded. But the truth is, technology can enhance jobs as much as it replaces them. A sewing machine operator can become a line technician. A production supervisor can become a systems analyst. What is needed is training—not just any training, but programmes that are fast, focused, and aligned with the real industry needs. If done right, automation does not hollow out the workforce; rather it strengthens it.

a systemic overhaul—faster customs, smarter ports, and better roads—because the supply chain has to move as fast as the market it serves.

As the world grows more demanding, compliance is no longer a choice. It is the ticket to staying in the game. Product safety, labour rights, and environmental responsibility are the new benchmarks. Global buyers want transparency, certifications, traceability, and proof that what they are sourcing is ethical. This means companies must invest in more than just machines. They must invest in processes that show compliance and in people who can manage it. The government must play a part in this as well. Streamlined standards, quicker approvals, and constant engagement with exporters will make the difference between staying competitive and falling behind.

Trade diplomacy, once a quiet background act, now needs a front-row seat. The era of simply receiving trade perks is ending. Bangladesh must learn to negotiate on its own terms. It will not be easy, but the playbook is out there. Vietnam, with its network of deals stretching from Europe to Asia, has shown what is possible when trade is treated as strategy. Bangladesh has the size, the location, and the market to cut its own deals; what it needs now is the will to execute.

Sustainability, once seen as a luxury, is fast becoming a business requirement. Major retailers are making it clear: green practices are no longer treated as an add-on. And Bangladesh, surprisingly, is already ahead of the curve. The country is home to the largest number of certified green RMG factories in the world, which gives us a competitive edge. The next step is to scale that success and make it visible to the global consumer. Sustainability should not just be part of the story. It should be THE story.

The choices Bangladesh makes in the next few years will define the next few decades. Graduation from the LDC status is not the end of the journey, but the beginning of a harder one. A journey that will test the depth of strategy, the speed of execution, and the strength of collective will. But as history has shown, Bangladesh has never lacked resolve. The real question now is whether it can turn that resolve into reinvention.



FILE VISUAL: SHAIKH SULTANA JAHAN BADHON

export playbook has read like a short list: the European Union, the US, Canada—dependable, but limited. The world is bigger than that. Africa, South America, the Middle East and even some large economies in Asia are waking up as consumer markets. These are regions with rising demand, growing populations, and very few Bangladeshi products on their shelves. Cracking these markets will not be easy. It will mean understanding local tastes, building smarter logistics, and pricing with precision. But the opportunity is real, and the timing has never been better.

None of this will matter, though, if the product gets stuck at port. Bangladesh has an infrastructure problem, which has been dragging down competitiveness for years. Roads get clogged too easily, customs clearances move too slowly, and ports often lag behind demand. The result is cost: exporters lose both money and time. According to the World Bank, logistics eat up nearly one fifth of export costs in Bangladesh. That is double what many of our competitors face. Fixing this will take more than patchwork solutions. It will require

Is the BNP really anti-reform?



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In a political climate defined more by slogan than substance, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) finds itself in an ironic predicament. Despite being the first major party in Bangladesh to propose a full-scale roadmap for national reform, it has been accused of being anti-reform, status quo-driven, or politically outdated. The reality, however, deserves careful unpacking.

In as early as 2010, BNP unveiled its "Vision 2030," a document that laid out a comprehensive reform agenda covering governance, decentralisation, electoral transparency, and economic restructuring. During the anti-authoritarian mass uprising and the subsequent transition to an interim government, BNP not only extended support to the movement but also expanded its reform agenda. These were not merely cosmetic additions; they dealt with core state functions—from electoral reforms and institutional balance to judicial independence and decentralisation of power.

And yet, criticisms have continued to swirl around BNP—criticisms that allege resistance to change, a lack of willingness to share power, or a refusal to support reforms such as a bicameral parliament or the redistribution of executive authority.

BNP's position has often been interpreted as reluctance. Take, for example, the proposed reconfiguration of Article 70 of the constitution, which currently disallows MPs from voting against party lines. BNP has voiced support for amending it, but within boundaries: maintaining party discipline during votes of no confidence, money bills, and constitutional amendments, while allowing greater autonomy otherwise. This is not obstructionism—it is a safeguard against returning to the era of chaotic floor-crossing and "horse-trading" that plagued parliamentary

politics in other countries.

Similarly, BNP's reservations about allowing the proposed National Constitutional Council (NCC)—an unelected body—to make major state appointments are grounded in concerns about undermining democratic accountability. In a parliamentary system, if key powers are shifted away from the elected prime minister and parliament, we risk hollowing out the very

core of representative democracy.

As constitutional scholar Vernon Bogdanor observed, "Reform is not the destination of democracy, but its servant. When it begins to undermine representation, it ceases to serve."

BNP agreed with 20 of the 23 recommendations on judicial reform, 19 of the 20 recommendations on Anti-Corruption Commission reform, and even with a significant portion of reform proposals regarding public administration. Disagreements

mostly concern the mechanics of implementation and the preservation of democratic balance. Where the proposals threatened to overempower unelected actors or weakened the mandate of elected officials, BNP argued against them.

That BNP has been selective in accepting certain recommendations is neither new nor irrational. In fact, such behaviour aligns with democratic practice across the globe. In their influential work *Why Nations Fail*, Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson emphasised that reforms succeed only when they emerge from "inclusive political institutions"—that is, reforms must be rooted in legitimacy, debate, and public support, not in theoretical perfectionism or technocratic design.

Therefore, it can be argued that BNP is not opposed to reform. What it resists is impractical idealism dressed up as



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FILE PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

for elections. Some voices within the civil society have advocated for completing reforms before holding elections. While the intention may be noble, perhaps the prescription is constitutionally and politically impractical. Reforms, in a democracy, are carried out by elected governments through their electoral mandate. As political theorist Adam Przeworski writes, "Democracy does not promise the best policies, but it guarantees the right to change them."

BNP has invested considerable resources in building consensus around its 31-point roadmap—holding dialogues, consultations, and campaigns in every district, upazila, union, and ward across the country. No other political party has engaged the grassroots so comprehensively on the question of reform. This is not just political strategy; it is democratic pedagogy.

It is worth asking why, despite this sustained effort, BNP is so frequently labelled as anti-reform. The answer may lie in the uneasy political ecosystem of Bangladesh—one in which narratives are often manufactured by partisan echo chambers and amplified by select voices. This, unfortunately, has blurred public perception and reduced complex debates to simplistic binaries: pro-reform vs anti-reform, old vs new, mainstream vs movement.

But such binaries ignore a crucial reality. BNP, despite its past mistakes and the political baggage it carries, remains one of the few parties capable of translating reform into governance. Political scientist Larry Diamond's caution is relevant here, "Democratic reforms fail not because of lack of good ideas, but because of the absence of political will and organisational strength."

Bangladesh stands at a critical crossroads today. Reform is necessary, but not at the cost of elections, and certainly not if it sidelines the very concept of democratic choice. In the end, it is not slogans or social media narratives that will rebuild our institutions—it is political courage, strategic clarity, and an unflinching commitment to the people's mandate. BNP, with all its imperfections, remains one of the few forces in Bangladesh today that is capable of doing that.

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