

## A call for restraint

India-Pakistan tensions must not be allowed to escalate further

We are deeply concerned by the escalating tensions between India and Pakistan, as both countries exchanged fire across the Line of Control in disputed Kashmir, following the recent terrorist attack in Kashmir's Pahalgam that resulted in the deaths of 26 tourists. As the Indian government has accused its long-standing adversary, Pakistan, of supporting "cross-border terrorism," relations between the two countries have plunged to their lowest level in years. Denying any involvement, Pakistan called the Indian attempts to link Pakistan to the Pahalgam attack "frivolous" and vowed to respond to any Indian action. Both nations have since introduced a series of retaliatory measures against each other. While we strongly condemn this heinous attack in Kashmir—the worst of its kind in a quarter of a century—and expect those responsible to be brought to justice, we also urge both countries to refrain from actions that could escalate the situation.

Reportedly, India has taken some strong measures following the attack. It has formally informed Pakistan of its decision to suspend the Indus Waters Treaty of 1961, closed the main land border crossing, downgraded diplomatic ties, and revoked visas for Pakistanis. Indian Home Minister Amit Shah also urged state chief ministers to ensure that no Pakistani remains in India beyond April 27. In response, Pakistan has closed its airspace to Indian airlines, expelled Indian diplomats and military advisers, cancelled visas for Indian nationals (except Sikh pilgrims), and shut down its side of the main border crossing.

It goes without saying that any further escalation will have far-reaching consequences for both nations. And it will be particularly disastrous for the economy of Kashmir, which is heavily dependent on tourism.

The UN has emphasised that issues between the two nations should be resolved peacefully through meaningful mutual engagement, a view we strongly support. A proper and thorough investigation is essential to identify and punish those involved in the recent terrorist attacks. However, even before such an investigation is carried out statements from India's water resources minister, pledging that "not even a drop" of water would go to Pakistan, and Pakistan's warning that halting the water supply from the Indus River would be an "act of war," are deeply concerning.

We hope both these nuclear-armed nations will renounce retaliatory actions and resolve their disputes at the negotiating table. With Pakistan reportedly proposing an international investigation and expressing willingness to cooperate, India should consider such an initiative. Finally, we urge both nations to avoid actions that could destabilise the entire region and instead focus on diplomatic solutions for the greater benefit of both sides.

## The alarming rise of teen gangs

Authorities must wake up to this crisis

We are extremely concerned by the recent incidents in Cumilla city, where around a hundred members of "kishor (teenage) gangs" were on the streets in three neighbourhoods wielding weapons such as machetes, hockey sticks, rods, etc, while at least 15 motorcycles circled the streets making loud noises, terrifying residents and visitors who watched helplessly, according to a *Prothom Alo* report. This happened on Friday during admission exams of a university, which is why there were many parents and guardians of candidates waiting outside. It is disturbing that these young men felt emboldened enough to openly demonstrate with weapons in broad daylight.

This was not the first time that these gang members have shown their muscle on the streets of Cumilla city. On January 3, more than 50 members of teenage gangs staged a similar demonstration with weapons in various areas, including near Victoria College. Cocktails were also exploded, creating an atmosphere of panic. Later, police arrested some of the members.

But such arrests did not deter these gangs, as is evident from the even bigger demonstration on Friday. In fact, while police have said that they are conducting raids to catch the gang members, a few arrests here and there are not enough to stop this deep-rooted problem that has spread all over the country, including Dhaka. According to the police, there are at least 15 active "kishor gangs" in Cumilla alone. There are hundreds more all over the country, with Dhaka having the highest number. Since 2017, these gangs have been involved in at least 12 murders. They are also involved in other crimes like extortion, drug peddling, sexual harassment and sexual assault.

Such gangs have continued to thrive because of the sense of impunity and often political patronage they enjoy. Violence is a way of showing power and a way to earn the "respect" of peers. The lack of role models, financial hardship of the family, and a sense of purposelessness make gang culture all the more appealing to many youths. Youth wings of political parties, such as the Chhatra League, which became notorious for its criminal activities and violence, have been a major catalyst in the rise of teenage gang culture.

Friday's incident should be a wake-up call for us. The government must act swiftly. Police must amplify its vigilance of known hotspots with strict enforcement of juvenile justice laws. At the same time, there must be rehabilitation programmes that address the root causes of gang culture. Educational institutions must teach students basic values of empathy and kindness towards others. Parents, guardians and communities have a responsibility too, to engage with young people, create environments where children and youths are nurtured and where they develop a sense of belonging. Opportunities must be created for skills development so that these young men feel empowered and can dream of a wholesome life that does not involve violence and crime.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY



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## EDITORIAL

Naziba Basher  
is a journalist at The Daily Star.

NAZIBA BASHER

Do you remember the film *Slumdog Millionaire*?

While the story centres around a teenager from the slums of Mumbai taking part in a game show to win a fortune, it is a part of his backstory that hits the hardest.

As a child, the protagonist, Jamal Malik, played by Dev Patel, and his brother are forced to survive on the streets after their mother is killed during the Bombay riots. The brothers, along with another child, are found by Maman—a gangster who trains and disables children to become more "effective" beggars. The money the children collect rarely belongs to them.

The reality Jamal faced under Maman's control is not fiction for hundreds of thousands of children across this subcontinent. It is their daily existence. A reality we routinely ignore, even as these children reach out for help on our streets.

Just last Friday, a six-year-old boy was found unconscious beside a man at the Rupsha Ferry Ghat in Khulna. The man, later identified as 30-year-old Rafikul Islam Biplob, had been begging with the child by his side. The boy had gone missing from his home six months earlier. During that period, he was starved, tortured, and paraded across cities as a "disabled" child—his fingers broken to elicit pity and money.

How many more children need to be broken—literally broken—before we, as a region and as a people, say "enough"?

Across South Asia, children are trafficked, crippled, and discarded—all so someone can pocket loose change from your car window.

There is no justification for this. No cultural nuance, no economic hardship makes it morally defensible. It is a grotesque violation of every human right, every shred of decency we claim to uphold.

## So how does it continue?

The answer lies in a lethal mix of systemic failure and societal apathy. Law enforcement agencies are often ill-equipped, under-resourced, or

simply unwilling to pursue trafficking networks. Some officials turn a blind eye; others are complicit. Traffickers pose as guardians, and without proper documentation or welfare checks, they go unquestioned. It is easier to dismiss a begging child as a sad by-product of poverty than to recognise them as the victim of a brutal, organised enterprise.

Cultural and religious practices are also manipulated. The sacred act of giving alms, deeply ingrained in the spiritual traditions of this region,

every time we choose to turn away from the real situation.

The traffickers? Undeniably monstrous. But what about the governments that know—have known for decades—this is happening and still fail to act with urgency or resolve?

The laws exist. Bangladesh has the Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act. India has the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act. Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka have similar frameworks.

But laws that are not enforced are as good as non-existent. Cases stagnate. Survivors are lost in bureaucratic mazes. Traffickers roam free. The systems are there, but they are deliberately neglected—because corruption is easier than compassion.

Because law enforcement can be bought. Because it is more convenient to celebrate GDP growth than to admit the streets are being lined with the wreckage of children's lives.



FILE VISUAL: STAR

## So, what must be done?

We need national task forces with real authority, capable of investigating and prosecuting trafficking networks instead of simply releasing statements to the press. Law enforcement must be retrained, monitored, and held to account. A child found begging should not be ignored—it should trigger an immediate welfare investigation, including medical and forensic checks to determine their true situation and who is responsible for it.

South Asian nations must share intelligence and cooperate across borders. Trafficking is transnational;

Because right now, we are failing our children. Every child left on the streets, every child mutilated for sympathy, is a stain on our collective conscience. We cannot call ourselves civilised, just, or faithful if we allow this to continue.

South Asia must rise, not with more policies, not with more headlines, but with action. With anger. With unshakable resolve. Because this is not just about poverty or crime. This is about who we are.

And if we do not stop this now, we are no better than the monsters who do this. Will we finally choose to be better?

## What the educated elite are getting wrong

Bobby Hajaj  
is the chairman of Nationalist Democratic Movement (NDM) and a faculty member at North South University. He can be reached at bobby.hajaj@northsouth.edu.

BOBBY HAJAJ

In the months following the end of a long and autocratic rule, Bangladesh has witnessed a fragile but remarkable return to administrative sanity. Under the interim government, led by Prof Muhammad Yunus, the state has achieved a measure of control that seemed impossible under the previous regime.

The management of Eid travel and the stabilisation of food prices during Ramadan stand out as concrete improvements. These are not small feats, especially given the devastating state in which this government inherited its institutions and economy.

As someone who supported the idea of an interim administration led by Prof Yunus long before it materialised, I take personal pride in these early achievements. They reflect not only the credibility of his leadership, but also the seriousness of a government trying, however briefly, to re-establish the idea that public service should serve the public.

However, praise must be accompanied by proportion. Prof Yunus himself would be the first to say that this is a team effort—one enabled by a reform-oriented planning ministry, a finance ministry willing to act against cartels, and state agencies such as the Trading Corporation of Bangladesh given actual authority to intervene in markets. Crucially, none of this would have been possible without a renewed civic energy: a citizenry that,

after the mass uprising of July 2024, has become more aware, more vocal, and far less tolerant of manipulation.

And yet, a new danger is emerging from within the very segment of society that should know better. Among urban, educated, social media savvy citizens, a narrative is spreading with alarming speed—that Prof Yunus should stay on, not for three months, but for three years or more. Some of this sentiment is organic, born of understandable exhaustion. But some of it, clearly, is not. There are unmistakable signs that promotional campaigns are shaping this rhetoric, possibly by groups that are uneasy about elections and accountability.

At the heart of this sentiment is an implicit belief that because this interim government has delivered some basic services better than the last unelected regime, it is therefore more fit to rule long-term. This logic is not only flawed, it is historically dangerous.

There are several reasons why this logic must be challenged. First, no interim government, however competent, has the mandate to govern a democracy. Second, the idea that Bangladesh never experienced good governance until now is plainly untrue. The arc of our national development, with all its contradictions, has included moments of serious reform, dedicated leadership, and meaningful public service. Third, short-term efficiency

should not be mistaken for the long-term work of institution building. Real transformation requires depth, continuity, and accountability. No interim body, however sincere, can deliver that.

But the deeper issue here is a lack of political education. The call for an extended unelected rule, following the fall of an autocrat, is a contradiction that must be named. We cannot claim to support democracy while asking an unelected official to govern indefinitely. We cannot honour the sacrifice of thousands of citizens in the July movement only to discard the principle of popular sovereignty so soon after victory.

This is where the insights of political philosophy remain relevant. European thinkers such as Rousseau, Hegel, and Tocqueville, however culturally distant, understood one core truth: democracy is not natural; it must be learned. Freedom is not merely the absence of tyranny, but the presence of civic responsibility and political maturity.

Rousseau's *Emile* teaches that the good citizen must be educated into self-awareness, not simply granted formal liberty. The teacher must guide the child not only towards freedom, but towards the recognition that freedom is only meaningful within a just society.

Hegel, in his vision of *Bildung*, emphasises the development of the individual through structured encounters with the institutions of state—family, civil society, law. Through this process, the individual becomes capable of true freedom, which is found not in isolation but in participation.

Tocqueville observed that in America, political freedom was sustained not by theory, but by

practice—by the habits of local engagement, voluntary associations, and religious socialisation. A democratic state, in his view, can only function when the citizen has already internalised the ethics of liberty.

All three thinkers, despite their differences, converge on one point: democracy must be underpinned by education—not technical education, but moral and civic education. It is precisely this education that is lacking among many of our best-educated citizens today.

To see people, many of them graduates of elite institutions, calling for a "benevolent extension" of interim rule is to witness how little they understand the hard demands of democratic life. Governance is not a matter of finding the perfect person; it is about building institutions that prevent abuse and ensure continuity regardless of who holds office.

This article is not an attack on Prof Yunus. He has served well and with integrity. But the real test of his leadership lies not in how long he stays, but in whether he can oversee an orderly, timely transition to elections.

The future of our republic depends not on individuals, but on principles. Let us not replace an unelected despot with an unelected reformer, however well-meaning. Let us demand of ourselves the maturity to distinguish temporary competence from lasting legitimacy.

We need not rush into cynicism—but neither should we retreat into comfort. The path forward is difficult. It requires an educated public, a culture of civic participation, and institutions that reflect the people's will. The alternative is clear: a cycle of dependency, however refined, that will eventually bring us back to where we started.

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