

Are we ready for the upcoming floods?

Reports of slow, sloppy embankment works worrying

We are concerned about the lack of, or slow pace in, preparation for the upcoming floods as seen in a number of haor and other vulnerable regions even though the monsoon season is approaching fast. According to media reports, one key problem relates to the vulnerability of existing flood protection embankments or those under construction, where a large part of the work either remains unfinished or is being hastily executed without adequate quality control—inviting the risk of being overflowed or washed away once the monsoon sets in. The threat this situation poses to crops, homes, and life in general cannot be stressed enough.

A recent report by *Prothom Alo* highlights the risks facing Sunamganj, where the Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB) is implementing a Tk 308 crore project to construct permanent embankments in 14 haors across seven upazilas. But so far, less than 60 percent of the work has been completed, making it unlikely that those will be ready in time. Sloppy work has also been seen during field visits to multiple sites. For example, in some cases, soil work remains incomplete but concrete blocks are already being placed there; in others, construction appears rushed and poorly planned, with some sections already eroding due to early rains. BWDB officials have denied allegations of negligence or irregularities and attributed the slow progress to various constraints. But the fact is, things would have turned out differently had they planned better and started earlier.

A similar trend of neglect has also been observed in Shariatpur's Jajira end of the Padma Bridge project area, where, according to this daily, a two-kilometre-long embankment has been facing erosion for months. Reportedly, BWDB delayed repair work for over four months after a 100-metre section collapsed last November. Only on April 24 did they finally begin repairs with geo-bags and CC blocks. If the embankment is not reinforced properly and fast, several critical infrastructures within 500 metres of the bridge's Jajira end and four surrounding villages could come under severe threat from erosion. In another alarming development, there was a severe breach in the BWDB embankment along the Kapotaksha River in Assuni upazila of Satkhira on Friday, triggering fears that saline river water could inundate at least five nearby villages.

These are not isolated incidents. Embankments built by the BWDB routinely give way due to natural calamities, tidal pressure, and poorly planned or weak construction, affecting communities time and again. These failings reveal a wider problem of bureaucratic inefficiency, poor planning, contractor negligence, and inadequate local engagement, all of which must be addressed. We urge the government to undertake a critical review of the state of flood preparedness across the country. It must mobilise resources to properly complete all embankment works in haor and erosion-prone areas, empower community-led flood protection schemes wherever feasible, and strengthen rapid-response mechanisms in vulnerable regions so that any damage from flooding or erosion can be minimised.

Prioritise well-being of our protectors

Firefighters must have proper compensation, insurance, safety gear

Despite the critical role played by firefighters who put their lives at risk to rescue victims from catastrophes, it is quite disappointing that the state has failed not only to provide them with due compensation and benefits, but also to equip them properly with safety gear while at work. According to a report in this daily, since independence, at least 47 firefighters have lost their lives in the line of duty, with the highest number of deaths taking place at the BM Container Depot in Chattogram's Sitakunda in 2022, which killed 13 firefighters.

Over the years, our increasingly dense urban spaces, the general lack of fire safety measures, and a failure to enforce building rules and regulations have contributed to a surge in fire incidents in the country. Unfortunately, the capacity of the Department of Fire Service and Civil Defence (FSCD) has not increased at the same pace. Currently, the FSCD has 14,570 members, meaning there's less than one firefighter per 1,000 people in Bangladesh. Sadly, we are not even ensuring proper compensation for them. The compensation they receive from the government and their departmental welfare fund in case of death or injury is inadequate, according to an official quoted by this daily. What's worse is that firefighters do not even have insurance coverage for death, disability, or injury caused while at work. As a result, their families are often left to fend for themselves when a firefighter dies or is maimed.

Besides, not all members have safety gear, including fire suits and breathing equipment. In many countries, trained volunteers often work alongside career firefighters in fire departments. But if we fail to provide proper equipment even to career firefighters, how can anyone feel encouraged to volunteer for such a risky job? Furthermore, there is the issue of inadequate training, which came into discussion particularly after the 2022 chemical-induced Sitakunda fire.

Reportedly, the new director general of the fire service has promised to take steps to meet some of the challenges the department faces. We hope that the interim government will consider increasing the department's budget to enhance its capacity and manpower, as well as create specialised units equipped to handle catastrophes such as earthquakes. For both man-made and natural disaster preparedness, there is no alternative to fairly compensating and ensuring the safety and training of our first responders, among whom firefighters play a major role.

2025 WORLD BANK-IMF SPRING MEETINGS

What it means for the Global South



MACRO MIRROR

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The Spring Meetings of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank Group (WBG) on April 21-26, 2025 were held at a time of deep uncertainty in the global economy. The catchy theme of the meetings, "Jobs: The Path to Prosperity," was an attempt to project optimism behind such difficulty. But the world is currently grappling with intensifying trade protectionism, surging debt burdens, slowing economic growth, and a growing climate emergency. For the least developed countries (LDCs) and small island developing states (SIDS), the meetings fell short of offering concrete and transformative solutions for several reasons.

A world in flux

The global economic context preceding the meetings was bleak. The IMF downgraded the global GDP growth for 2025 to 2.8 percent from the 3.3 percent forecast earlier. This downward revision was prompted by heightened trade tensions, particularly following the sweeping tariffs introduced by the US. The resultant retaliatory tariffs from China have strained global supply chains and added inflationary pressure, further dampening growth prospects.

At the same time, the world is also experiencing "aid shock" as donor countries announced deep cuts in official development assistance (ODA). According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), in 2024, international aid from official donors fell by 7.1 percent in real terms compared to 2023. This was the first drop after five years of consecutive growth. Net bilateral aid flows from OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC) members to LDCs fell by three percent in real terms compared to 2023. This came at a time when fragile economies are more dependent on concessional financing than ever before.

The aid crisis has emerged as a silent emergency for these countries. With the shuttering of USAID funds and other traditional donors slashing aid budgets, grant-based financing is drying up. In response, both the IMF and World Bank have doubled down on mobilising private capital. However, without equity, affordability, and accountability, the effectiveness of such private funds will be under scrutiny.

Jobs as a silver bullet?

WBG President Ajay Banga highlighted job creation as the linchpin of poverty eradication since a large number of youth in

developing and poor countries enter the workforce every year. The World Bank's new strategy stands on three pillars: foundational infrastructure, business-enabling governance, and private capital mobilisation. However, concerns remain as business-enabling governance and private capital could fall short in their efforts to bring the large informal workforce to the formal sector, ensure job security, and improve job quality.

Debt distress and the mirage of reform

Debt featured prominently in this year's meetings. The IMF warned that global public debt is projected to reach nearly 100 percent of global GDP by 2030. For developing



FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

The 2025 Spring Meetings highlighted the growing disconnect between the Bretton Woods Institutions and the realities of their borrowers.

economies, debt servicing costs are becoming unsustainable, which often exceeds spending on education and health. In sub-Saharan Africa, debt service already outpaces social sector expenditures. More worryingly, climate risk is still not fully embedded in debt sustainability analyses. It is now clear that climate change is a macro-critical issue and should be integral to future debt frameworks. Yet, no decisive move was made by the Bretton Woods Institutions to adopt climate-contingent debt clauses or ensure meaningful creditor participation in future restructurings.

Climate change: A side act, not centre stage

Despite earlier commitments, climate issues were conspicuously sidelined during the 2025 Spring Meetings.

Under pressure from its largest shareholder, the US, the World Bank seems to have shifted its focus back to "core mandates." This has effectively marginalised climate adaptation financing. Although the World Bank committed to allocating 45 percent of its financing towards climate-related projects by FY2025 at the 28th Conference of Parties (COP28), the lion's share of these funds still targets mitigation rather than adaptation. For climate-vulnerable countries like Bangladesh, adaptation finance is essential, especially in the face of rising sea levels, erratic monsoons, and flooding. Moreover, the continued preference for loans over grants exacerbates debt vulnerabilities and undermines the countries' long-term resilience. Worse still, the World Bank's energy strategy, which includes nuclear power and natural gas, poses risks to low-income countries as it could lead to a high-carbon trajectory. The needs of energy-insecure communities of these countries should be fulfilled through community-based, decentralised renewable systems.

Is Bangladesh falling through the cracks?

For Bangladesh, the outcome of the 2025 Spring Meetings is not encouraging. While the rhetoric of job creation may align with its vision of harnessing its demographic dividend, the IMF and World Bank frameworks do little to address the structural hurdles the country faces, including declining export competitiveness due to tariffs, a mounting subsidy bill, and climate-induced displacement. The issue of informality in the labour market is also acute, with more than 80 percent being engaged in the informal sector for employment.

Bangladesh, as a lower-middle-income country, would benefit significantly from multilateral reforms in the financial architecture. Its access to concessional finance is shrinking as it prepares for graduation from the LDC category in 2026, even though it still faces climate vulnerabilities and foreign exchange constraints. Hence, the inability to reach a consensus on reform is a setback for countries requiring international finance.

Bangladesh is also a candidate for energy and infrastructure investments under the World Bank's private capital mobilisation model. However, without guarantees on fair pricing, social safeguards, and climate alignment, these investments may deepen rather than mitigate risk. The country also stands to lose from the continued emphasis on fiscal consolidation—a core plank of IMF conditionality—at a time when it needs fiscal space to invest in resilience, health, and education.

Moreover, Bangladesh's debt-GDP ratio, while manageable compared to peers, is inching upwards. The combination of tighter global financing conditions and rising interest rates poses serious challenges. Yet, the World Bank and IMF meetings offered little in terms of concessional refinancing or structured debt relief mechanisms that Bangladesh and other vulnerable emerging markets and developing economies could benefit from.

Hence, while the 2025 Spring Meetings emphasised stability and continuity, they also highlighted the growing disconnect between the Bretton Woods Institutions and the realities of their borrowers. The Spring Meetings indicate that the IMF and World Bank are at a crossroads. They can either continue to operate within the confines of outdated paradigms or embrace a new vision of multilateralism that prioritises climate justice, debt sustainability, and inclusive development.

The coming months offer an opportunity to continue the momentum of such demands. With the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development (FfD4) approaching, the world must demand that international financial institutions truly deliver on the promises of sustainability, resilience, and equity.

The critical role of midwives in ensuring maternal health



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When a pregnant woman arrived at a Rohingya refugee healthcare facility in Cox's Bazar, bleeding profusely and nearing death, it was midwife Rokhsana, trained with support from the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), who helped save her life. Rokhsana and her team stabilised the patient's condition and arranged a hospital referral for a life-saving blood transfusion. "My journey is fuelled by a simple but powerful belief," Rokhsana says. "No mother should ever have to fear childbirth. I am committed to ensuring that every birth is a moment of joy and not a moment of sorrow."

Each year, on May 5, we celebrate the International Day of the Midwife, a moment to honour midwives around the world who provide critical care across communities. Midwives are specialised healthcare professionals who can deliver around 90 percent of essential sexual, reproductive, maternal, newborn, and adolescent healthcare services, including services for survivors of gender-based violence

(GBV). Their role is indispensable.

In Bangladesh, midwifery care has played a key role in achieving a 79 percent reduction in maternal mortality since 2000, as recently reported by UN agencies. Since 2010, the Bangladesh government has made significant strides in integrating midwives into the national healthcare system. Today, the country is recognised as one of six champion countries in the global Midwifery Accelerator initiative. Yet, it still faces a considerable gap: while an estimated 25,000 midwives are required to meet the needs of women and girls, fewer than 3,000 have been deployed to date.

A recent study shows that further scaling up midwifery services in Bangladesh could save over 31,000 additional maternal and newborn lives by 2035. The evidence is clear: midwives save lives. But their impact goes far beyond delivery rooms.

Midwives frequently serve on the front lines during crises, as seen in

Bangladesh, one of the world's most climate- and disaster-vulnerable countries. The rising frequency of emergencies disproportionately affects women, girls, and gender-diverse individuals, limiting access to sexual and reproductive health services. Midwives ensure continued access to safe delivery, family planning, and response to GBV in even the most challenging settings.

In May 2024, Cyclone Remal devastated parts of the Mongla upazila, including Sonakhali village. There, nine-month pregnant Swapna, 29, faced a precarious situation. Fortunately, midwife Nazmin, stationed at a nearby UNFPA-supported facility, quickly assessed her high-risk condition, arranged a referral, and provided a cash voucher to cover transport. "When I came to this facility, I just prayed to Allah that I could serve the women and girls for whom I was appointed," Nazmin recalled. "Without the midwife's support, our story could have ended tragically," said Swapna's husband. "Thanks to her, our baby is safe and healthy."

Nazmin's working conditions were far from easy. Upon arrival, she found the healthcare facility damaged, with spalling cement, no water supply, and a community unsure of her role. "At first, the local community didn't accept the facility as a place to safely give birth," she explained. But she didn't give up. Nazmin worked with

local health workers and volunteers to build trust. With support from health service managers, she began offering delivery services, eventually conducting 27 normal births in just three months. Her story is a testament to the resilience, trust, and professional dedication that midwives bring to communities across Bangladesh.

Midwifery is also a sector for sound economic investment. Every \$1 invested in midwives delivers \$16 in economic and social returns. However, the deployment of midwives in Bangladesh remains painstakingly slow. Shrinking international resources and recent cuts in official development assistance threaten the progress already made.

We know what works. Midwives are at the heart of the solution. But training midwives is not enough. They must be deployed, equipped, supported, and protected. Without investing in midwives, we cannot improve the quality of maternity care or end preventable maternal deaths.

Now is the time for the government and donors to step up and accelerate the midwifery gains already made. Every delay puts lives at risk—investing in midwives is investing in the health and future of women and newborns. With strategic investment, stronger policies, and community engagement, Bangladesh can ensure that every woman, regardless of location or circumstance, has access to life-saving midwifery care.