

## Unilateral push-ins a blow to strained ties

India should respect international norms in border conduct

We strongly protest India's action of pushing at least 123 individuals, including Rohingyas and Bangla-speaking people, into Bangladesh through the Kurigram and Khagrachhari border points. Reportedly, Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) has detained these individuals and is currently verifying their identities, as they possess no IDs or passports. Furthermore, the BGB has issued a high alert along the border and lodged a strong protest note with India's Border Security Force (BSF), advising against such push-ins.

Flag meetings with the BSF have also been requested at various levels. Meanwhile, the Police Headquarters has alerted the superintendents of police in 31 bordering districts to ensure that our national security is not compromised amid the escalation of the India-Pakistan conflict. At a time when tensions between India and Pakistan have reached their highest point in years, it is shocking that India would choose this moment to push individuals into Bangladesh without consulting the Bangladeshi authorities.

Out of these individuals, 44, including 35 Rohingyas, were detained from the Roumari and Bhurungamari upazilas of Kurigram—30 in Roumari and 14 in Bhurungamari. Meanwhile, in Khagrachhari, at least 79 additional Bangla-speaking individuals were detained after being pushed in through three border points—27 at the Shantipur border in Matiranga upazila, 22 at the Taitong border in Dighinala upazila, and 30 at the Panchhari border in Panchhari upazila. According to a resident of Shantipur who had sheltered one of the individuals arriving from India, these people were flown from Gujarat to Agartala and then forcibly pushed across the border. They were also reportedly warned by BSF personnel never to return, or they would be shot.

We must say that there is no basis in international law for such unilateral “push-ins.” In fact, it is entirely contrary to accepted diplomatic norms. The question is, why did India not consult the Bangladeshi government before deciding to send these people? This is a question Bangladesh must raise. At the same time, our border security forces must remain on high alert. After all, we still do not know the identities of the individuals who have been pushed in. Moreover, it remains unclear whether India intends to carry out further push-ins—including of Rohingyas from Myanmar—into Bangladesh in the future.

In their interactions with Indian officials, Bangladesh authorities must make it clear that any such action must involve consultation with the local authorities first. No unilateral decision that threatens our national security, sovereignty, or territorial integrity can be accepted.

## Support returnee female migrants

Their rights must be protected both at home and abroad

It is deeply troubling to learn about the persistent abuse and exploitation faced by our female migrant workers abroad, as well as the depression and social isolation they experience upon returning home. According to a BRAC report, more than 4.7 lakh Bangladeshi migrant workers have returned over the past six years after enduring various forms of mistreatment and hardship. Among them, 67,199 women suffered sexual and physical abuse. In 2020 alone, 49,924 women were sent back, primarily from Middle Eastern countries. Upon their return, many shared harrowing accounts of their experiences. While the authorities in Bangladesh have done little to protect their rights abroad, they have also failed to provide the support necessary for their reintegration at home.

A combination of factors including financial struggles, lack of education and skills, unemployment, social insecurity, and environmental hardships often compel women to seek employment abroad. However, their desperate attempts to find better economic opportunities often end in exploitation, as they fall victim to trafficking, forced labour, and gender-based violence. In many cases, their wages are withheld, and working conditions are harsh, but they can hardly seek help due to language barriers. Restrictions on movement and communication further deepen their plight.

And it does not end upon return either. Many come home with serious injuries, illnesses, and psychological trauma, yet receive no support at the airport or access to medical care. Mental health challenges such as trauma, depression, and social isolation make their lives even more difficult, while many are burdened with debt. According to a 2023 study by the Bangladesh National Women Lawyers' Association, a staggering 37.3 percent of female migrants returned home empty-handed. Many also struggle to find work due to social stigma. Unless the government addresses these challenges, their dream for reintegration will remain out of reach.

We, therefore, urge the authorities to develop gender-responsive migration policies that protect the rights of female migrant workers and take meaningful action to improve their lives upon return. These vulnerable women need adequate medical care, psychological support, and financial assistance. The government must also ensure that the migration process is more sustainable. Instead of sending unskilled workers abroad, it should provide training to aspiring migrants, equipping them with the knowledge of their rights and responsibilities in destination countries. The structural vulnerabilities faced by Bangladeshi women throughout the migration journey must be effectively addressed to create a more secure system.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY



### Fourth and final voyage of Christopher Columbus launched

On this day in 1502, master navigator and admiral Christopher Columbus, long considered the “discoverer” of the New World, set sail from Cádiz, Spain, on his fourth and final voyage, hoping to find a passage to Asia.

# Bangladesh’s export dilemma post-transshipment ban

**Khondaker Golam Moazzem**, *research director at the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), talks with Naznin Tithi of The Daily Star about India’s decision to revoke transshipment facility for Bangladesh and its implications.*

### How would you assess India's sudden decision to revoke the transshipment facility for Bangladesh?

The formal explanation provided by the Indian side is that, since Bangladeshi exports are increasing through Indian ports, their own exports are facing additional time and cost burdens. Therefore, they decided not to continue with this arrangement. Before making this decision, India could have discussed with Bangladesh that they were facing congestion and could not handle the increasing cargo volume, or that they could only allow a relatively lower cargo capacity from Bangladesh. However, as far as we know, no such discussion took place between the two countries. Therefore, it seems the decision was made suddenly. However, there could be other underlying reasons.

It was stated from India's side that they needed to consider the kind of decisions being made in Bangladesh. This implies that some bilateral issues or decisions were involved, which, to some extent, were political. For example, even before the transshipment revocation decision was made, discussions were ongoing in Bangladesh regarding the impact of Indian yarn imports through land ports on the local textile industry. Indian yarn was allegedly being under-invoiced, and as a result, large quantities were entering with little or no duty, making it difficult for domestic textile owners to remain competitive in the market. Therefore, they requested the government to redirect yarn imports through seaports instead of land ports.

From India's perspective, it may seem that Bangladesh was trying to discourage imports. But from our perspective, importing by sea will increase costs, putting financial pressure on yarn users. The discussion was ongoing, but the decision was implemented after India announced the closure of transshipment. Another concern from the Indian side was whether there was any intention on our part to facilitate yarn imports from a third country. In fact, the announcement to use seaports for yarn imports was made at a time when representatives from other countries were visiting Bangladesh. Therefore, I believe both economic and political factors might be behind this decision.

### How will this decision affect our RMG sector, especially when Bangladeshi goods, including readymade garments, are currently facing higher tariffs in the US market?

The transshipment facility allowed many of our goods, especially those requiring quick delivery to the market, to be exported through Indian ports. Dhaka airport's loading and handling capacity was becoming overburdened

compared to demand. The airport was not adequately equipped to manage the increasing load. Indian ports helped alleviate some of this pressure. Additionally, when Chattogram port became congested, Indian ports served as an alternative. Now that this option is no longer available, shipping these products will take more time, and air shipments will be further delayed. Another challenge is that air cargo planes face relatively high costs when landing in Dhaka to transport goods. The reason is that the volume of goods leaving Dhaka by air cargo is high, but the volume of goods arriving in Dhaka is relatively low. As a result, planes often arrive empty, which increases costs. In contrast, at Indian airports, there is demand for both incoming and outgoing cargo, making them comparatively cheaper for air carriers.

more economical for them. However, they will likely arrive almost empty and leave with a full load. In that case, they will charge for both ways, which would be costly. So, considering all that and our current capacity, I think if we plan future expansion focusing on one port, it should be Shahjalal Airport.

Regarding the third terminal, if it is completed by the end of the year, its capacity must be evaluated. Besides, our current capacity should also be assessed to determine how much expansion is required. For cargo planes landing and handling, additional facilities might be needed. The sheds seem small, so loading, carrying, sorting, and dispatching facilities may require upgrades. To ensure all these improvements, the government will need investment. I think, if we can negotiate with foreign

products shipped by air are usually short duration goods with slightly higher margins. Additionally, if for any reason shipments by sea are delayed, air cargo remains an alternative option.

Earlier, the government had taken an initiative to convert old passenger aircraft of Biman Bangladesh Airlines into cargo planes. Possibly one aircraft was modified. However, since this plane was repurposed, it was not fully optimised for cargo. Moreover, strategically, using converted aircraft for cargo is not a good idea. But buying a new aircraft for Biman is also not advisable. Instead, if rental agreements can be made on a long-term basis with neighbouring or regional countries, and feasibility studies indicate their interest in carrying cargo from Bangladesh, then that could be considered.

### India has been among the top trading partners of Bangladesh. How will this sudden policy change impact our bilateral relationship?

Recently, several issues have unfolded in a way that has created political tensions between the two countries, affecting both people-to-people relationships and government-to-government relations. Indian visa restrictions, for example, have contributed to this tension. Besides, many political and economic decisions have been made involving various countries, and India may have different perspectives on these decisions and find them concerning. Therefore, we need to consider whether we are adequately addressing these concerns while making such decisions. However, during the previous government's tenure, Bangladesh-India relations showed weakness in fairly considering the interests of both parties. We expect fair treatment from India.

Against the backdrop of Bangladesh's new political reality, a kind of distance is increasingly developing between Bangladesh and India. I think this will impact not only our economic or trade relations but also political ties and relations involving third countries like Nepal and Bhutan. Many of our engagements with India are no longer just about trade in goods. For instance, we are now importing electricity from Nepal through India. In the regional context, where interdependence is increasing, India remains an important partner. I think Bangladesh must take these dynamics into account while making future decisions so that people-to-people contacts, trade, investment, and social sector relations, such as education and healthcare, as well as all important bilateral or trilateral engagements are preserved and strengthened.



Khondaker Golam Moazzem

Now that shipments must go through Bangladesh, costs will also rise. So, our entrepreneurs will have to accept these increased costs and continue shipments. Until our internal capacity improves, they might also opt to send products by sea if feasible or reduce orders for those types of goods that require short delivery windows and yield high profit margins.

### How can we improve our internal capacity? Will the third terminal at HSLA, once operational, enhance our capacity to export goods directly to other countries?

For building capacity, I think we need to focus on one specific airport. Although we have several international airports, I think we should plan facilities, especially for air cargo, at an airport where it would be cost-effective and profitable for both freight operators and exporters. If our air cargo carriers could bring in some goods, it would be

donor agencies, they might be willing to provide funds. However, it is also true that Bangladesh's air cargo handling facility does not meet international standards. Since the goods being transported will be time sensitive, the port handling facilities must comply with international standards.

### What other alternatives do we have?

Using other ports might not be sustainable, considering their low usability by exporters. Goods based in Chattogram could be handled through Chattogram airport, but if those goods need to be transported from Dhaka, the cost will significantly increase. Therefore, in terms of existing infrastructure, it would be relatively easier and quicker to upgrade Shahjalal Airport. If the third terminal is opened quickly, only a limited investment might be needed. However, businessmen might have to accept the additional costs to keep operations running, as

# The need for smart election observation



Jeffrey Noel Vanness is managing partner at Compasspoint Logistics. He has participated in election observation missions in various countries.

JEFFREY NOEL VANNES

Bangladesh's next parliamentary elections promise to be the most consequential since voters went to the polls in December 2008 to restore democracy after a two-year-long state of emergency. By sponsoring smart, meaningful, and cost-effective international election observation this year, the international community can demonstrate that it takes these elections as seriously as Bangladeshis.

If the election process goes well, the return of multi-party democracy would be the first step necessary to reset Bangladesh's embittered political culture. But if either citizens or political actors doubt the integrity of the results, it risks dropping the country back into a pattern of political polarisation, corruption, and social instability.

In either scenario, smart international election observation gives the global community a powerful tool to help Bangladeshis head off post-election controversies. Objective, non-partisan international election observation helps keep disappointed political contestants at the table by assuring them that their legitimate grievances won't be ignored or

forgotten.

I saw these efforts up close in 2008 when diplomats combined international observer statements, public opinion surveys, and exit polling to help the BNP understand how and why they trailed the Awami League in that election. By confirming that the election was fundamentally sound, the international community helped all political parties focus on why citizens voted the way they did instead of speculating about ballot rigging.

But the value of international election observation is squandered if the global community views it as just a box-checking exercise. Donors need to be clear and specific with observer missions at the inception phase about how they intend to use observation reports in their decision-making and engagements with Bangladeshi stakeholders before and after election day. In return, international observers owe donors smart and meaningful election observation plans fulfilling specific informational and analytical needs of their sponsors.

It is clear that this will be Bangladesh's next transitional election. However, questions remain

regarding how to enfranchise the millions of adult Bangladeshis living overseas, how to protect ethnic and religious minorities from intimidation and political violence, how to prevent active disinformation campaigns from manipulating voters' choices, and how new patterns of money in politics are taking shape. These issues deserve thorough investigation and analysis.

To justify this investment of increasingly scarce resources, donors require election observation designs that speak to the moment. If a donor cares about things like women's roles in society, corruption caused by money in politics, or protecting religious minorities, they should say so, because knowing this will help observers write much better, more relevant reports. The output should be a cost-effective way to produce an actionable roadmap leading to more fulfilling political participation and less political dysfunction after the election.

This doesn't mean donors can or should dictate a methodology to election observation missions or limit their independence to call it like they see it. We expect international observers to bring cutting-edge methods for social media monitoring, tracing disinformation narratives on- and off-line, conduct parallel campaign expenditure tracking, and use election forensics to spot statistical anomalies that may indicate manipulation of results after the votes are cast.

Importantly, Bangladesh needs international election observers sooner rather than later. Today, Bangladesh's diverse stakeholders

are rewriting the legal framework. They are also cautiously testing out a new political culture of collaboration before the election is declared.

And Bangladesh will need international election observers on the far side of the election as well to report on possible post-election violence, formal electoral dispute resolution, and public feelings about the credibility of the elections.

Unfortunately, international election observation doesn't come cheap. However, given the cost of political instability—not just to Bangladesh but to regional interests and the country's socio-economic development—the international community cannot afford not to observe these next elections at some level. Smart election observation can't be budget-driven, but it can be highly cost-effective.

But the value of smartly designed international observation is irreplaceable for those who want to speak definitively about the quality of the elections in order to incentivise contending parties to cooperate in the post-election period.

This time, just like in 2008, credible elections are absolutely essential for Bangladesh to move forward democratically. This election will define the terms for political competition for years to come. We don't know how much time remains before the election, but the global community should assure Bangladesh's voters now that international election observers will be here to protect their votes.