

# Water crisis deepens in Khulna

People suffer as 85pc of tube wells in the region have run dry due to drop in groundwater levels

DIPANKAR ROY, Khulna

Till last year, every morning before dawn, Nimai Chandra Roy's house in Khulna's Batiaghata upazila used to be a gathering point for his neighbours – not for any festival, but for survival.

People from at least two dozen families used to line up, desperate to collect a few pitchers of water from the hand-pumped deep tube well he installed in 2004.

But even that source has gone dry.

Since early March this year, Nimai's tube well has stopped pumping water. "Until last year, I used to get a little water after pumping for 15 to 20 minutes. Now, there's nothing," he said.

Attempts to install a motor on the pump also failed.

He and his neighbours are not facing the problem alone. Across Khulna and adjacent districts, over a lakh hand-pumped tube wells have stopped working



Schoolchildren attempt to pump water from a tube well near their school in Khulna's Dumuria. PHOTO: HABIBUR RAHMAN

➔ **1,01,350 hand pumps in Khulna division are non-functional, including 28,452 in Khulna district**

➔ **In Jashore, two-thirds of 24,303 tube wells are unusable**

➔ **Excessive groundwater extraction, low rainfall, and lack of water retention bodies likely causes**

as the groundwater level plunged. According to the Department of Public Health Engineering (DPHE), 85 percent of the 1,01,350 hand pumps in Khulna division, including 28,452 in Khulna district alone, are now non-functional.

According to DPHE officials, in

Batiaghata, out of 4,185 deep tube wells, 80 percent can no longer pump water. The scene is similar across Jashore, where two-thirds of the 24,303 tube wells are dry.

Experts and DPHE officials say that hand-operated tube wells stop working when the water level falls below 26 feet, and even motor pumps fail if it dips below 30 to 35 feet. Only submersible pumps can extract water at those depths.

They attributed the crisis to the lack of water bodies in the region and excessive groundwater extraction.

Whatever the reasons are, for people like Gurudashi Boiragi, a neighbour of Nimai, the crisis only means suffering.

She now spends her days waiting in long queues at the only working tube well at Kachari Bari Primary School, also the only safe water source in the nearby villages.

"It's a struggle to fill a 20-litre pitcher competing with 300 to 350 people who gather here daily," she said. "It takes 180 to 190 pumps to fill the pitcher."

Gurudashi said the hand-pumps in her

village were fully functional only 5/6 years ago.

UP Chairman Pallab Biswas echoed her, adding that, in all 18 villages of Sadar union, 90 percent of tube wells are dry.

The situation is equally dire in Gangarampur union. Milan Kanti Mandal of Jhar Bhangra village installed a deep tube well in 1989. But it became non-functional a couple of years back.

He now walks two kilometres daily in the sweltering heat to fetch water. "Only one of 18 tube wells in my village works. Around 300 families are in crisis," he told this correspondent.

Gangarampur UP Chairman Md Aslam Halder said 25 villages out of 27 in the union are now facing a water crisis due to groundwater depletion.

"In some areas, water has vanished from even the 1,000-1,200 feet layers," he said, adding that some people who can afford it are now buying water.

According to DPHE, groundwater level in the Khulna region ranged from 18 to 22 feet in March and April in 2015-16. Now, it's plunged to 24 to 32 feet in some areas

in the southwestern region of the division.

In response, the agency has begun installing submersible pumps and promoting rainwater harvesting. DPHE is also deploying centrifugal pumps where feasible.

Runa Akhter Sumi, sub-assistant engineer, DPHE of Batiaghata, admitted that tube wells are not functioning properly in the area.

"Hand-pumped tube wells cannot extract groundwater if the water level drops below 26 feet. And the motor pumps do not work if it drops below 30-35 feet," she added.

In Jashore, DPHE Executive Engineer Md Zahid Parvez said water level dropped below 30-35 feet in some areas in Jashore Sadar, Bagharpara, Jhikargacha and Sharsha.

12,500 submersible pumps have been installed so far to tackle the crisis, he said. "We are deploying Tara No. 6 tube wells and centrifugal pumps where the water level has dropped below 30 feet."

Md Jamanur Rahman, superintending engineer of DPHE, Khulna circle, said the crisis has impacted Khulna, Satkhira, and Bagerhat the hardest.

"We have been installing specially designed Tara No. 6 tube wells, which can draw water from depths of 60 to 70 feet, over the past two years to tackle the crisis," he added.

Experts attribute the crisis to unsustainable groundwater extraction, less rainfall, and insufficient water retention bodies. They have also pointed to climate change and increasing salinity intrusion in the region as factors contributing to people's suffering.

Professor Abdullah Harun Chowdhury, Environmental Science Discipline at Khulna University, said the cause is simple – groundwater is not being replenished at the rate it is being withdrawn.

"If the water table is not refilled, the level drops. That's why tube wells have stopped functioning," he said.

However, villagers are worried as the crisis becomes more acute every year.

"It is unbearable," said Milan Kanti. "What will happen to us in the coming months?"

## Five-year-old girl strangled to death in city

STAFF CORRESPONDENT



Roza Moni

On Monday afternoon, five-year-old Roza Moni got hungry while playing in front of her house in Tejgaon's Tejkunipara. She went to her mother and asked for lunch, but the meal was not ready yet.

Her mother, Shilpi Begum, asked her to wait a little and go back to playing.

About half an hour later, when the meal – consisting of mola fish that Roza picked up in the local kitchen market – was finally ready, Shilpi called out for her daughter.

But there was no response. Despite combing the neighbourhood frenetically, Roza was nowhere to be found.

The next day, Roza's lifeless body was discovered. Her small, fragile body had been wrapped in three layers of bags. A rope was tightly wound around her neck, indicating the horrific abuse she suffered before her death.

"Why did they kill my innocent daughter so brutally?" Shilpi cried out, her voice breaking with grief at their tin shed one-room house, where she and her children had hoped for a better life.

"We want justice," said Shirin Akter, Roza's elder sister, her eyes filled with sorrow and tears.

After Roza went missing on Monday, the family's frantic search began.

In the evening, they, along with their neighbours, made desperate announcements over loudspeakers and continued to search the area through the night, praying to find her.

Roza's body was discovered just yards behind their home, on a plot where a tin shed structure was being demolished to make way for a new building.

The family had moved to Dhaka from Narsingdi just eight months ago. Shilpi started living in the house with her six children just two weeks ago, since her husband, Nur Alam, had lost his job in Malaysia.

To support her family, Shilpi worked as a domestic worker for others.

Anwar Hossain, a day labourer who had been demolishing the tin shed structure for several days, said that they left the site around 5:30pm on Monday but did not notice anything unusual.

"When we returned in the morning, we saw a sack, and when it was opened by locals, including the victim's two sisters, we found the little girl inside," he said, his voice filled with shock and sorrow.

Mohab Hossain, the officer-in-charge of Tejgaon Police Station, confirmed that it was a murder case and assured that the police were doing everything they could to arrest the killers.

An autopsy was conducted at Shaheed Suhrawardy Medical College morgue. Morgue sources said the body was decomposed, and she might have been strangled in the evening.

## Tax authority split in major overhaul

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They also argue that the Revenue Policy Division will oversee enforcement of tax laws and evaluate collection performance – a provision that blurs the intended separation between policy and implementation.

Farid Uddin, member of a five-member advisory committee formed to make the reforms, criticised the ordinance for disregarding the committee's recommendations.

"This is an arbitrary move by the government. Although the NBR is a specialised institution, it has been led by officers from other cadres for over four decades. If their leadership had been truly effective, would the NBR be in such a crisis today?"

"We keep talking about raising the tax-to-GDP ratio from 8-9 percent to 16 percent. But if that's the goal, why weren't the necessary reforms implemented over the past 40 years to get there?"

"Although the government is separating policy and administrative functions, both divisions will continue to be led by the same group. So what has really changed? What difference will this

make?" he questioned.

Not all tax professionals are critical of the reform. Mutasim Billah Faruqi, president of the BCS Taxation Association, welcomed the move. "We raised several concerns after receiving the draft ordinance, most of which have been addressed," he said. "There is still a tremendous amount of work ahead, but I believe this will help strengthen the professional standing and career prospects of tax cadre officers."

Kazi Mostafizur Rahman, president of the BCS Customs Association, declined requests for comment.

Finance Adviser Salehuddin Ahmed dismissed fears that the dissolution of the NBR would disrupt revenue collection. "Revenue collection rose 2 percent year-on-year in fiscal 2024-25," he told reporters yesterday. "A small division will be formed to frame tax policy. Officials' interests have been safeguarded."

Ahmed said consolidating both policy and execution under a single agency creates a conflict of interest. "Internationally, the two functions remain separate," he said. "Framing the policy requires people who understand

the economy, statistics and GDP."

The decision comes amid long-standing complaints from the business community that tax policy in Bangladesh often prioritises revenue targets over fairness, growth, and long-term planning.

Economist Selim Raihan, executive director of the South Asian Network on Economic Modeling, also endorses the move. "This structure reflects international best practices. It could better align the revenue system with evolving economic realities," he said.

However, he warned that structural change alone would not be enough. "Corruption must be tackled. Rules must be clear and enforcement must be strict. Without modernising tax laws, the appeals process, and judicial framework, no structure – however well designed – will work."

Raihan called for the formation of a committee comprising both the reform architects and experienced tax officials to resolve grievances. "This resistance is not new. Tax reform in Bangladesh has historically faced internal opposition. But constructive dialogue is the only way forward," he said.

## Dhaka's uphill battle to break syndicate chains

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"Our focus will be on the reopening of the labour market and regularisation of the undocumented Bangladeshis in Malaysia."

He added that the government will try to open the labour market to all capable recruiting agencies.

According to Malaysian official data, 898,970 Bangladeshis are currently working in Malaysia – the highest number among foreign nationalities after Indonesians and Nepalis. Migrant rights activists in Malaysia say the actual number would be higher if undocumented migrants were counted.

The rights activists reported numerous issues affecting the labour recruitment sector, with many migrants left jobless, unpaid, underpaid, defrauded or trapped in debt.

### LABOUR ISSUES PERSIST UNCHECKED

Labour recruitment from Bangladesh to Malaysia has been halted multiple times since formal recruitment began in the 1990s, largely due to powerful lobbies in both countries. The latest instance was in 2022, when Malaysia selected only 101 Bangladeshi agencies to conduct recruitment without clarifying the criteria for selection.

Before halting recruitment in May 2024, Malaysia had recruited nearly 500,000 Bangladeshis. Each of these workers reportedly spent between \$4,500 and \$6,000 for a job there. Many employers were allegedly fraudulent but managed to secure approval to recruit foreign workers by bribing officials in both countries.

Nepal-based migrant rights activist Andy Hall, who closely follows Malaysia's labour issues, estimated that around 1.2 lakh Bangladeshi workers in Malaysia were jobless last year.

"By now, some of them might have managed jobs, but there are others who have become jobless," he told this newspaper.

"We've seen many workers unpaid or underpaid. They report to the labour department, but hardly get redress... New recruitment, as being discussed, can definitely happen but what about the ones already jobless and in trouble?" Hall questioned.

An independent migration researcher based in Kuala Lumpur said it is unimaginable how so many Bangladeshis in Malaysia are surviving without jobs or pay, after spending large sums to migrate.

Many workers became undocumented because their employers fail to renew their visas. Others fall into this category because they cannot get their passports renewed on time by the Bangladesh high commission, he said.

"These workers remain indebted and worried for their families. This is a serious level of migrant exploitation," he told The Daily Star, requesting anonymity for fear of being targeted by agents and authorities.

Meanwhile, the same syndicate of 101 recruiting agencies in Bangladesh is lobbying the interim government to reopen the Malaysian market.

Mohammed Fakhrul Islam, joint secretary general of the Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies (BAIRA), said, "I am not against the reopening of the market, but the question is how will it be reopened, what will be the recruitment system – syndicated or open for all agencies?"

He said corrupt leaders and officials were involved in the syndicate earlier, adding, "Will the interim government that was established to check inequality follow the same path? It will be extremely unfortunate if it does."

Fakhrul, who regularly campaigns against the syndicate, said Chief Adviser Prof Yunus, who has a good rapport with Malaysian leader Anwar Ibrahim, must work to dismantle the syndicate and help reduce recruitment costs.

Andy Hall said Nepal has always strongly opposed syndicates in Malaysia's

labour recruitment, allowing it to secure a far better deal than Bangladesh.

"I would urge Bangladesh to take a strong position against the syndicate if it wants to improve the lives of the migrants in Malaysia."

He also said Malaysia must address the issue of jobless migrants before beginning new recruitment. "Those who are unemployed can be recruited into the companies that want new workers," he suggested.

**18,000 WORKERS LIE IN WAIT**  
During Anwar Ibrahim's visit last October, a key request made by Bangladesh was for the recruitment of nearly 18,000 Bangladeshis who had already paid Tk 4-5 lakh and obtained visas.

These workers were scheduled to fly to Malaysia by May 31, 2024. However, a ticket shortage – caused by a surge in demand before the deadline – prevented many from travelling.

Some others, despite having tickets, were unable to go as the Malaysian government blacklisted the companies that hired them.

The workers filed complaints with the government and staged several protests, prompting the Bangladesh High Commission in Malaysia to raise the issue with Malaysian authorities.

A joint technical group, comprising representatives from Malaysia's immigration department and the Bangladesh High Commission, was formed and initially created a list of around 8,000 workers for recruitment. However, the workers have yet to travel.

"This is a priority issue for Bangladesh to discuss and take forward," a foreign ministry official said.

Regarding the renewed engagement with Malaysia, BAIRA Secretary General Ali Haider Chowdhury said, "It is essential to prioritise the regulations of both governments, safeguard the interests of workers and ensure low-cost migration."

## HC commutes sentences of 10 Huji leaders

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On April 14, 2001, two bombs exploded during the Pahela Baishakh celebrations organised by Chhayanaut at Ramna Batamul in the capital. The blasts killed 10 people and injured several others.

In its verdict, the HC commuted the death sentence of one to life imprisonment; reduced the death sentences of six others to 10 years' imprisonment; and commuted the life sentences of three to 10 years in jail as well.

The bench of Justice Mustafa Zaman Islam and Justice Nasreen Akter delivered the verdict after rejecting the death reference (trial court documents required to confirm death sentences) and disposing of the appeals filed by the convicts.

It observed that the bombings during the Pahela Baishakh celebrations at Ramna Batamul in 2001 constituted one of the most brutal killings in the country's history.

Citing the Holy Quran and Al Hadith, Justice Mustafa Zaman Islam remarked that killing a single person is akin to destroying the entire world.

The HC upheld the life imprisonment of Shahadat Ullah Jewel and commuted the death sentence of Moulana Mohammad Tajuddin, who remains absconding, to life imprisonment.

The six convicts whose death sentences were commuted to 10 years in prison are: Mufti Abdul Hye, Arif Hasan Sumon alias Abdur Razzak, Mufti Shafiqur Rahman, Moulana Akbar Hossain alias Helal Uddin, Moulana Abu Baker alias Hafez Selim

Howlader, and Hafez Jahangir Alam Badar, who is also on the run.

The court also commuted the life sentences of Hafez Moulana Abu Taher, Moulana Sabbir alias Abdur Hannan, and Moulana Showkat Osman to 10 years' imprisonment.

Mufti Abdul Hannan, who used to be a key figure in Huji operations across Bangladesh, had also been sentenced to death in the Ramna murder case but was executed on April 13, 2017, at Kashimpur High Security Prison in a separate case. It was filed over a grenade attack on then British High Commissioner Anwar Choudhury in Sylhet on May 21, 2004.

Meanwhile, Moulana Yahya died in jail on August 3, 2019, while Moulana Abdur Rouf died in custody on September 7, 2021. Deputy Attorney General Sultana Akter Rubi told The Daily Star. Both had been sentenced to life imprisonment in the Ramna murder case.

She added that the convicts who have already served their sentences in the murder case cannot be released if they have been arrested in the other case filed under the Explosive Substances Act relating to the same incident.

The trial proceedings of the case, filed under the Explosive Substances Act, 1908, are currently underway at a Dhaka court, said DAG Sultana, noting that all the convicts are leaders of the banned militant outfit Huji.

Many of them allegedly returned from Afghanistan, she added.

"The grounds on which the High Court commuted the sentences will be known once the full text of the verdict

is released," the DAG said.

Lawyer Mohammad Shishir Manir, who defended convicts Mufti Abdul Hye, Arif Hasan Sumon and Shahadat Ullah Jewel, told this correspondent that his clients will be released from jail as they have already served their sentences in the murder case and are currently on bail in the case filed under the Explosive Substances Act.

"They'll be released after the High Court verdict reaches the jail authorities," he said.

On February 18 this year, the HC kept the death references and appeals filed by the convicts as curia advisari vult, meaning the judgment was reserved for delivery at a later date following the conclusion of the hearings.

On June 23, 2014, a Dhaka court sentenced eight Huji members to death for their roles in the attack. They are: Mufti Abdul Hannan, Moulana Akbar Hossain alias Helaluddin, Moulana Mohammad Tajuddin, Hafez Jahangir Alam Badar, Moulana Abu Bakar alias Selim Howlader, Mufti Shafiqur Rahman, Mufti Abdul Hye, and Arif Hasan Suman.

Six others – Moulana Abu Taher, Moulana Sabbir alias Abdur Hannan, Moulana Yahya, Moulana Showkat Osman, Moulana Abdur Rouf, and Shahadat Ullah – were sentenced to life imprisonment.

During the hearings, a team of defence lawyers, including SM Shahjahan and Mohammad Shishir Manir, represented the convicts, while DAG Sultana Akter Rubi appeared for the state.

## Recruitment cartel gearing up again

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and Benazir Ahmed for their links to the cartel.

Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies (BAIRA) demonstrated several times in recent months and wrote to Prof Asif, requesting that the government take steps to resist formation of another syndicate.

Association leaders say key members of the cartel – notably Ruhul Amin Swapon, a recruitment agency owner, and Amin Noor, a Bangladesh born Malaysia citizen, who runs an online platform through which the authorities choose recruitment agents – are becoming active again, colluding with people from political parties.

Fakhrul Islam, former joint secretary general of BAIRA, said, "The cartel creates a system where Bangladeshi agents must bribe the syndicate for the migration of each worker."

On February 5 this year, BAIRA submitted a memorandum to Prof

Asif, calling for legal action against the ringleaders.

Last year, Malaysia authorities selected 100 Bangladeshi recruitment agents from a list of 1,520. There were allegations that the agents who bribed the cartel were chosen.

Riajul Islam, former BAIRA vice-president, said, "Currently, all arrangements are being made to go back to the old ways."

### HOW MALAYSIA HIRES FROM BANGLADESH

Malaysia selects Bangladesh agents by using Foreign Workers Centralised Management System (FWCMS), an online platform.

MyGrams, an app used in the process, is owned by Bestinet, a firm owned by Noor.

There are allegations that the online tools are manipulated by Noor's firm.

BAIRA leaders demand changes in the MoU between Bangladesh and Malaysia or a new bilateral deal.

The current MoU is valid until

August 2026.

On April 7, UK-based rights activist Andy Hall issued a statement, warning that a syndicate was being formed and calling for revisions to the MoU.

Despite repeated attempts, Ruhul Amin and Aminul Islam could not be reached for comment.

Contacted, Shahidul Islam Chowdhury, joint secretary (employment) at the expatriates' welfare ministry, said, "There will be a joint working group meeting in Dhaka on May 20-21, in which these concerns will be at the top of the agenda."

Shariful Hasan, head of migration programme at BRAC, said, "For four decades, Malaysia's labour market has been plagued by exploitation and mismanagement. Every time reforms were promised, exploitation worsened. If this government, born of an uprising, follows the same path, it will be tragic for our workers and the country."