

# The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

## Splitting the NBR is a timely step

### Govt must straighten out the kinks to ensure smooth transition

On Monday, the government introduced a significant reform measure: dissolving the National Board of Revenue (NBR) to replace it with two new agencies. The goal is to separate the tax policymaking and implementation processes, in line with a key conditionality of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for the \$4.7 billion loan deal. We agree with experts that this is a "bold" and "timely" move that can help modernise our tax system.

By dissolving the NBR along with the Internal Resources Division (IRD) through an ordinance, the government is paving the way for the Revenue Policy Division and Revenue Management Division. The first will be tasked with designing our tax policy framework, formulating tax laws, determining various rates, and overseeing the coordination of international tax treaties and trade-related tariffs. The second, on the other hand, will be responsible for tax administration, compliance, audit, and enforcement of income tax, VAT, customs, and other taxes and duties. The separation of duties is meant to make the tax system more efficient and boost overall revenue earnings. Until now, the NBR has been in charge of all these tasks—both policymaking and policy enforcement—something that has been criticised for creating an overlap of functions leading to poor performance and coordination.

Given that Bangladesh has one of the lowest tax-GDP ratios in Asia (around 7.4 percent), restructuring the country's tax authority has been long overdue. The NBR has consistently failed to ensure effective resource mobilisation, increase revenue generation through direct taxes, and plug loopholes to prevent tax evasion, among other things. Moreover, in its mission to meet revenue collection targets, it has often ended up enforcing policies that created unjust pressure on taxpayers and businesses. Under the new system, we expect to see a shift away from this state of affairs.

Merely overhauling the structure, however, will not bear the desired results if the underlying problems are not addressed. As experts have said time and again, the government should reduce its overreliance on indirect taxes and expand the tax base to improve our tax-GDP ratio. Tax exemptions must also be reconsidered and allowed more conservatively, and corrupt practices in tax collection must be stopped. The entire system must be designed in a way that eligible taxpayers feel encouraged and are able to pay taxes without hassle.

Of course, the latest decision is not without contention. NBR officers and staff members have been protesting against the move, arguing that the new ordinance sidelines experienced tax professionals. We believe this can be sorted out through dialogue and necessary readjustments. But the ongoing overhaul must be followed through, because it is in line with international best practices and, if done right, will improve tax governance and transparency.

## Don't let cartels exploit migrants again

### Malaysia talks must prioritise workers' interests

We are concerned by the news that a syndicate of recruitment agencies that once exploited Bangladeshi workers migrating to Malaysia—before its labour market was closed to them in May 2024—is allegedly becoming active again. This comes as Bangladesh is about to engage in a series of talks with Malaysia as the latter prepares to begin fresh recruitments. If the syndicate is allowed to form and take control of recruitment again when the market is reopened, it may leave workers exposed to the same cycle of exploitation and suffering they endured before. Prior to the 2024 market closure, there were frequent reports of irregularities, including exorbitant migration fees, with each worker having to pay as much as Tk 5.5 lakh even though the government-mandated ceiling was just Tk 78,990.

At the heart of the crisis is our long-standing failure to ensure transparency and accountability in the recruitment process. Previously, syndicates, enabled by political influence and administrative complicity, often monopolised access to the Malaysian labour market, sidelining more capable and ethical recruiting agencies. Over the years, many workers have fallen prey to such syndicates from both countries as well as exploitative employers that profited at their expense. There have been many cases of workers being defrauded, left jobless, unpaid or underpaid, and burdened with debt. According to official data, 898,970 Bangladeshis are currently working in Malaysia. There is no record of the undocumented workers, however, with one migrant rights activist estimating that around one or two lakh Bangladeshi workers remained jobless in Malaysia last year.

Therefore, besides ensuring that no cartel is formed to exploit aspiring workers and monopolise the migration process again, a key priority for the government should be to get the Malaysian authorities to consider our undocumented workers in their recruitment plans. We must remember that these people often become undocumented through no fault of their own. Often, it is because their employers fail to renew their visas, or they cannot get their passports renewed on time. And then there are the fraudulent companies enticing them with the promise of jobs. Reportedly, Bangladesh is prioritising the recruitment of the nearly 18,000 who were scheduled to fly to Malaysia by May 2024 but failed either due to ticket shortages or because their employers were blacklisted. This issue must be addressed. Equally importantly, it is vital that both governments act decisively to prevent all irregularities in labour migration before fresh hires are started.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

### Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan



On this day in 1988, Soviet troops began their withdrawal from Afghanistan since their invasion in 1979. The event marked the beginning of the end to a long, bloody, and fruitless Soviet occupation of Afghanistan.

# India, Myanmar, and the weight of regional instability on Bangladesh



Altaf Parvez is a researcher and writer.

ALTAf PARVEZ

Before their latest fighting, India and Pakistan fought three wars, and those experiences suggest that conflicts between these two countries rarely remain confined within their borders. Bangladesh inevitably feels the ripple effects. Much like during the India-Pakistan cricket matches, Bangladesh finds it difficult to remain emotionally neutral or indifferent to their armed confrontations.

This is not solely due to their geographical proximity. Their shared religious and sociocultural heritages also formed a connection over the centuries. These inseparable connections are why it often feels like Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India are members of a vibrant, albeit feuding joint family. The "past" may have politically divided these societies, but their separate "presents" have not emotionally detached them from one another. On the first day of the latest conflict, a friend working at a leading national daily informed me that their viewership had tripled. It's not just curiosity—it's a reflection of collective anxiety, nostalgia, and unresolved identity questions that still echo from the subcontinent's traumatic history of Partition and its aftermath.

However, besides shelling Pakistan, India has also initiated a massive push-in operation along its borders with Bangladesh, further complicating regional dynamics. So far, according to the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB), Indian forces have pushed around 300 individuals into Bangladesh, including Rohingya, through remote border areas in Sakhira, Khagrachhari, Moulvibazar, and Kurigram. Some of these people are reportedly Bangla speakers and have come from Gujarat. If some among them were really illegal Bangladeshi migrants residing in India, that issue could have been addressed through formal channels. Instead, India has simultaneously launched push-in operations at multiple border points, which is clearly unjust and contrary to diplomatic norms.

Those already pushed into Bangladesh have claimed that various Indian agencies on the other side of the border are gathering more Bangla-speaking individuals. Many Rohingya who migrated to India from Arakan are also reportedly being assembled. These developments are deeply concerning. It is hard to believe that Indian policymakers do not understand how

such actions would upset and anger the Bangladeshi government and people.

To respond to the push-in, Bangladesh may inevitably be compelled to initiate a pushback programme. While that may appear inhumane, the government has no real alternative. The border situation is bound to get heated up due to such back and forth.

This development is especially significant in light of the relentless propaganda war Bangladesh has faced from some segments of Indian media since the ouster of the Awami League

is the visible decline in international financial assistance. The question is, why has there been a renewed influx of Rohingya from Arakan? The new wave of refugees claim that they are facing security threats from the Arakan Army.

The Arakan Army has already taken control of approximately 80 percent of the Rakhine state. At the same time, the Myanmar military, the Tatmadaw, continues bombing various parts of the region. This ongoing conflict has created a severe humanitarian and security crisis. In response, the United Nations has recently requested Bangladesh to open a channel towards Arakan to facilitate the delivery of international humanitarian aid.

Now, there are precedents for such channels or corridors being established by third countries in conflict or war-ravaged zones. The UN initiated similar efforts in Gaza and Ukraine in recent years, but the outcomes were far from satisfactory. Those experiences failed to achieve

highly sensitive issue. If there were a functioning parliament in the country, elected representatives would undoubtedly have deliberated on these matters. However, it appears that the interim government is yet to consult political leaders on this sensitive topic.

Senior officials of the government have issued contradictory statements regarding the channel. Initially, one adviser claimed that the government had agreed in principle to the proposal, subject to certain conditions. Another official stated that there had been no discussion on the matter. Later, it was said from the government's side that it was not considering a "corridor," rather a "channel." These disjointed and conflicting remarks have sparked public concern regarding the southern border.

Bangladesh's top priority regarding Myanmar and Arakan must be the repatriation of Rohingya and the prevention of further entries. Given the current situation in Arakan, any repatriation will require the consent and cooperation of the Arakan Army. At the same time, Myanmar remains a sovereign state with a functioning government in Naypyidaw, meaning their consent will also be needed for establishing a channel in Arakan. Only with the agreement of all parties can any humanitarian aid initiative be considered. And in that case, the primary condition must be the refugees' return. However, it remains unclear whether this crucial issue has been included in the current initiative. Without sufficient dialogue with political stakeholders on such a nationally critical and militarily sensitive matter, the country risks future controversies and divisions. Joining a military-style international initiative without a broad national consensus undoubtedly entails significant risk. The question, then, arises: does the current government have the authority to make such high-stake decisions unilaterally?

Though this government, formed through a mass uprising, has popular support, it remains unelected. The country is witnessing significant political tensions and uncertainty about when the next election will be held. In such a context, the prospect of establishing a humanitarian channel towards Arakan has added a new dimension to that. Moreover, some fear that a channel at the border could trigger military consequences. Considering the overall situation across our borders and the societal reverberations of the India-Pakistan war, there are reasons for concern. Are the people of Bangladesh being unwillingly dragged into the psychological and strategic orbit of a multi-front conflict, or have they already been entangled in one?



The illegal entry of Rohingya refugees from Arakan has surged in recent months.

FILE PHOTO: STAR

from power in August last year. The nature of Bangladesh government should be a matter solely for the people of Bangladesh to decide. India may understandably be uncomfortable with the political changes here, but engaging in widespread misinformation campaigns targeting an entire country and its people is downright antagonistic.

Additionally, amid such hostile propaganda and aggressive push-in efforts, Bangladesh is also facing a tense situation along its southern border.

During the tenure of the interim government, the illegal entry of Rohingya refugees from Arakan has surged. The population in the refugee camps is now close to 13 lakh. A major concern for Bangladesh regarding these new and old refugees

their objectives. Understandably, the Arakan-bound channel proposal has triggered intense reactions in Bangladesh from the outset. Many questions have arisen: who will manage this channel—Bangladesh or the UN? What kind of supplies will be transported through it, and will the Rohingya refugees be involved in their distribution? Most importantly, who will ensure the channel's security? If Myanmar's armed forces object to the channel, or if China or India raise objections, who will be responsible for its protection? Will this require the creation of a "no-fly zone" or a similar security arrangement?

Matters related to the channel's security and management—including the possibility of a no-fly zone—are inevitably tied to military considerations, making this a

# No more silence, speak up, act for all women and girls

Gitanjali Singh is representative of UN Women in Bangladesh.

Masaki Watabe is representative ad interim for the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) in Bangladesh.

## GITANJALI SINGH and MASAKI WATABE

In 1995, as many as 189 governments, including Bangladesh, unanimously adopted the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action as a groundbreaking and far-reaching framework for the achievement of gender equality and the realisation of the human rights of women and girls as an inalienable, integral, and indivisible part of all human rights and fundamental freedoms. This year marks a pivotal milestone in the pursuit of gender equality and the rights and empowerment of ALL women and girls: 30 years of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, 25 years of UN Security Council Resolution 1325, and the five-year countdown to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) deadline.

In March this year, member states including Bangladesh adopted a political declaration by consensus to respect, protect, and champion the rights, equality, and empowerment of women and girls. The political declaration reaffirms the commitments of the Beijing Declaration and

Platform for Action, originally adopted in 1995 at the Fourth World Conference on Women, stressing the need to uphold all human rights and fundamental freedoms for every woman and girl, without exception. The declaration expresses concern that progress has been slow and uneven, and therefore recommends accelerating implementation across all 12 areas of concern. It underscores the importance of eradicating poverty in all its forms, including through ensuring women's and girls' right to education, particularly in STEM fields, and by increasing public investments in care systems. Recognising the vast potential of technology, it highlights the necessity of closing the gender digital divide and calls for renewed investment in gender statistics and data to drive informed policymaking.

The declaration recommit member states to eliminating all forms of violence against women and girls, including emerging forms such as digital violence, online harassment, and cyberbullying. Further, it acknowledges that achieving progress in these areas requires substantial resources and financing. It calls for strengthened national systems, women's machineries, and international mechanisms, including a revitalised Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), to accelerate gender equality efforts globally. It reinforces commitments to women, peace, and security, emphasising the need to integrate women's voices and

leadership into all stages of conflict prevention, peace-building, and conflict resolution.

Globally as well as in Bangladesh, we have seen change happen: stronger national normative frameworks; more girls in schools; reduction in maternal mortality; increasing number of women in the labour market; more women breaking the glass ceiling across sectors; and dynamic and vibrant women's movements. While there has been significant progress, we are also witnessing calculated pushbacks. As UN Secretary-General António Guterres noted in his 2025 International Women's Day 2025 message, "Centuries of discrimination are being exacerbated by new threats. Digital tools, while brimming with promise, are also often silencing women's voices, amplifying bias, and fuelling harassment. Women's bodies have become political battlegrounds. And online violence is escalating into real-life violence. Instead of mainstreaming equal rights, we are witnessing the mainstreaming of chauvinism and misogyny. We cannot stand by as progress is reversed."

In Bangladesh, too, we see this trend. On the one hand, we saw women and girls at the frontlines of the anti-discrimination movement—visible, vocal, bold, and leading from the front. On the other hand, we are seeing a regressive trend towards controlling women's voice, choice, and agency: online harassment and incessant trolling to curb freedom of expression

of women and girls; use of derogatory language and hate speech targeting women's rights advocates; policing of women's behaviour and attire in public spaces; restrictions on women's and girls' mobility; and disruption of girls' football matches and public rallies targeting women using appalling and abusive language. The one constant has been violence and harassment. Women and girls have endured it before, during and after the anti-discrimination movement. What is disturbing is how violence against women and girls continues to be normalised, including on social media, and at times venerated.

The vision of a new Bangladesh must be steadfast in its commitment to equality, non-discrimination and freedom from violence and abuse. When women and girls are heard and not silenced; when they are seen and not invisibilised; when they have equal rights, leadership opportunities and a seat at the decision-making table—everyone prospers.

Women's rights are human rights. We stand firm in our commitment to gender equality, women's rights, and empowerment for all women and girls and will continue to work closely with the government and civil society partners. Investing in women and girls is always the right thing and smart thing to do.

No more bystanders. No more silence. The time to speak up and push forward to accelerate the rights of women and girls is now.