

Better protections for migrant workers vital

HRW report on migrant deaths in KSA raises fresh alarm

Only the other day, we ran an editorial on the stream of coffins carrying migrant workers home. Activists have long questioned the official narrative that most of these deaths resulted from "natural causes"—stroke, brain haemorrhage, heart attack, etc—highlighting that the deceased were often not old enough to have had serious pre-existing health issues. According to one estimate, 4,813 bodies of migrant workers were brought back in 2024 alone. Unfortunately, these bodies are not re-autopsied upon arrival, leaving question marks about the true causes of death, especially amid allegations of abuse and exploitation in a number of destination countries, especially in the Middle East.

Now, an investigation by Human Rights Watch (HRW) has added fresh urgency to these concerns, revealing that migrant workers from Bangladesh, India and Nepal died in gruesome yet preventable workplace-related accidents in Saudi Arabia. It has also confirmed the suspicion that many such deaths are classified as "natural," and are neither investigated nor compensated as employers often evade their obligation under Saudi law that requires them to bear the costs of repatriation of the remains. For instance, HRW has found that the "No Objection Certificate" given to a Bangladeshi worker who died of "electrocution" marked the possibility of compensation as "no," with the cause of death as "not available." His son revealed that his employer had said that they would get compensation if they agreed on a burial on Saudi soil, which they rejected, and therefore had to pay more than Tk 5 lakh to repatriate the body, leaving them in debt.

Similarly, the families of nine deceased Bangladeshi workers have told HRW that their employers offered lump sum payments or coverage of monthly expenses provided that the dead are buried in Saudi Arabia, which most rejected despite their dire economic conditions. It goes without saying that the circumstances surrounding such deaths and the cruelties of employers or Kafils (sponsors) only add to the agony of surviving family members. The accounts provided by HRW also offer horrifying details about the deceased. Some died after falling from buildings due to lack of safety gear; some were crushed under heavy machinery or concrete blocks; others were electrocuted or fatally injured while operating unfamiliar equipment. In one case, a worker was decapitated when a machine was accidentally turned on. These are not isolated tragedies but symptoms of a systemic failure to ensure even the most basic protections for workers.

Saudi Arabia's General Organization for Social Insurance—funded not less by a two percent salary contribution—provides mandatory coverage for work-related injuries and deaths. But the families HRW spoke to said that accessing this was a long, uphill battle and often tied to local burials. Moreover, employers often do not pay overdue wages and end-of-service benefits. This state of affairs is totally unacceptable. We urge the government to take the HRW report with the seriousness it deserves. It must engage with Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia, to ensure proper compliance of their own laws as well as better safety protections and social security for our workers. These rights violations cannot go on indefinitely.

Stern actions needed to save our ECAs

Protect Sonadia Island from the encroachment of shrimp enclosures

Despite being declared an Ecologically Critical Area (ECA) in 2006, the Sonadia Island in Cox's Bazar continues to suffer massive environmental destruction. Clearly, the existing High Court orders and government directives to protect the area have gone unheeded as local land grabbers, backed by political actors emerging after the 2024 mass uprising, continue to destroy the island's mangrove forests for shrimp farming.

The nine-sq-km island hosts a rich ecosystem, including endangered green turtles, red crabs, 250 fish species, 170 bird species, dolphins, foxes, monitor lizards, fishing cats, and a wide variety of plant species. However, a recent *Prothom Alo* report revealed that over 1,000 acres of mangrove forest on the island—including around one lakh *keora* and *bain* trees—were burnt overnight using petrol to build seven new shrimp enclosures.

This continues a long and troubling legacy of shrimp-related encroachments in Sonadia. During the Awami League's rule, more than 3,000 acres were cleared for 37 shrimp farms. While AL leaders were accused of enabling the deforestation before the party's fall in August, locals now blame Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) leaders for the recent clearing. But if you ask, leaders of both parties would deny any involvement. What's worse, the state itself has also been complicit. In 2017, the then government leased over 8,000 acres of forestland and 2,700 acres of ECA to the Bangladesh Economic Zone Authority (BEZA) for a supposed eco-tourism project. To date, no eco-tourism facilities exist. In November 2024, the High Court stayed the lease and ordered the local administration to stop tree felling and shrimp farming on the island.

Despite this, the number of shrimp farms now stands at 44. In April, two interim government advisers, during their visit to the area, instructed local authorities to evict illegal enclosures, yet no action followed. Forest officials cite a lack of manpower and the threat posed by armed guards hired by shrimp enclosure owners. Local environmentalists allege that vested interests across the board are benefiting from the farms and thus resist enforcement. Under these circumstances, issuing orders is not enough. The government must take firm action to ensure compliance. It must empower the Forest Department with adequate staffing, resources, and financial incentives, and engage local communities in the process of protecting biodiversity. We cannot lose an ecologically delicate and biodiverse island to the monoculture of shrimp farming.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

School segregation outlawed in US

On this day in 1954, lawyer Thurgood Marshall scored a landmark victory as the US Supreme Court unanimously ruled in *Brown vs Board of Education of Topeka* that racial segregation in public schools was unconstitutional.

EDITORIAL

Time to forge a strategic consensus on national interests



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The mass uprising of 2024 marked a pivotal moment for us to forge a lasting consensus on national interest and security. Yet, this imperative remains marginal in public discourse, despite its foundational importance in today's shifting global and regional contexts. Throughout history, nations that have charted sustainable paths have done so by cultivating a strategic culture. In its absence, stability and developmental progress risk faltering.

Bangladesh has already missed at least two critical junctures to build such a consensus. The first came after the 1971 Liberation War, when the powerful unity of the time could have been harnessed to establish a robust national security framework grounded in the principles of sovereignty, equality, and justice. The second opportunity came in 1991, after the fall of dictatorship, when this crucial task was left unfinished despite the restoration of democracy.

Now, a third window of opportunity has opened. It is incumbent upon our political parties to embrace and work on this vital agenda, grounding their approach in the principles of *strategic autonomy* (the capacity to make independent decisions) and *developmental deterrence* (the assurance of peace, stability, and rights) as the bedrock of progress.

The July Charter, therefore, must incorporate a clear commitment that, following the elections, all political parties will work collaboratively towards establishing a national consensus on our core interests, national security policies, and the institutional frameworks needed to uphold them—including the formation of a National Security Council. Consensus on national interests cannot remain abstract; it must be institutionalised through a strategic culture.

Strategic culture
Strategic cultures are not born of inertia. They are forged in moments

of crisis, conflict, or transformation. After its 1962 defeat to China, India reorganised its defence posture, moving beyond a purely Gandhian ethos to a deterrence-based policy grounded in self-reliance. China, over decades, has defined its core interests with clarity: supremacy of the Communist Party, territorial integrity, sovereignty, and developmental continuity.

Across the Atlantic, the United States has consistently framed its national interest through strategic doctrines—from Monroe to Truman—tying economic prosperity to geopolitical dominance. After the trauma of 1940, France reasserted its sovereignty under de Gaulle, withdrawing from NATO's military command in 1966 while acquiring independent nuclear capability.

Post Meiji Japan prioritised industrialisation and national consolidation. Vietnam, emerging from colonialism and war, placed reunification and socialist reconstruction at the heart of its strategic identity. Indonesia rooted its national security in the Pancasila, an indigenous philosophy integrating moral and ideological values.

These cases affirm that it is often

moments of rupture that compel nations to define their interests, and that strategic culture must extend far beyond military doctrine, encompassing education, diplomacy, and development planning.

Strategic autonomy and developmental deterrence

For Bangladesh, the path forward lies in building a national security

advantages but risks subordinating Bangladesh's long-term interests to the strategic calculus of a more powerful partner. Such an approach can quickly erode autonomy, especially if regional priorities shift or diverge.

The second—leaning towards a superpower—offers the allure of economic or security dividends but can entangle Bangladesh in geopolitical rivalries, compromising its ability to pursue independent goals.

The third—a balancing act—seeks to navigate among competing powers to extract benefits while avoiding full alignment. Though seemingly pragmatic, this approach requires agile and nuanced diplomacy. Without a coherent domestic strategic framework, it risks becoming reactive and inconsistent.

The fourth and most sustainable path is an independent, mutually inclusive strategy, one anchored in national priorities and the aspirations of the people. This approach fosters equitable, respectful relations with all nations while upholding sovereignty in domestic and foreign policies. It demands strong political consensus, normative legitimacy rooted in the ideals of the Liberation War, and a clearly articulated vision of Bangladesh's role in the world. A coherent framework could guide our actions in multilateral forums, trade negotiations, climate diplomacy, and global development partnerships, thus projecting a distinctive strategic identity.

Institutionalising national security
The July uprising reaffirmed the nation's agency, and to honour this moment, all political parties must commit, through the July Charter, to defining and institutionalising national interests. By doing so, Bangladesh can reconcile its past, stabilise its present, and secure its future.

History offers a compelling lesson: nations that clearly define their fundamental interests are more likely to survive and thrive; those that effectively institutionalise these interests are better positioned for sustained prosperity and global influence. A cohesive and inclusive national security framework, built on consensus and a clear understanding of our strategic destiny, is undoubtedly the way forward for Bangladesh.



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

architecture grounded in strategic autonomy and developmental deterrence. This is not deterrence in the classical, militaristic sense, but a strategic doctrine that ensures stable conditions for unimpeded development.

Singapore's modernisation of its defence capabilities—not for aggression, but to safeguard its economic trajectory—offers a telling example.

Bangladesh must capitalise on its demographic dividend and strategic location in the Bay of Bengal. A peaceful and prosperous Bay—the largest in the world—should be central to its foreign policy vision, while defence policy must ensure credible deterrence. Amid Indo-Pacific rivalries and regional instability (e.g. conflicts in Myanmar), strategic autonomy will help Bangladesh navigate such complexities without entanglement.

Four scenarios of engagement
Imagine four scenarios of engagement: aligning with a neighbour; leaning towards a superpower; pursuing a balancing act; and adopting an independent, mutually inclusive strategy.

The first—aligning with a neighbour—may bring tactical

Underinvestment threatens our demographic dividend



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Bangladesh has roughly 15 years left to enjoy its first demographic dividend. But have we been able to connect all the necessary dots of developing our human capital to harness the benefits of this unique opportunity? According to the Human Capital Index by the World Bank, if a child is born in Bangladesh, they will be 46 percent productive even if they grow up enjoying complete education and full health. This percentage is lower than the South Asian and Lower Middle Income Countries' (LMIC) average of 48 percent. The youth employment scenario is not satisfactory either. According to the Quarterly Labour Force Survey 2022, around 22 percent of the youth in Bangladesh are not in education, employment or training (NEET). The crisis is more pronounced among the female youth as they comprise 65.5 percent of the total unemployed population.

The major challenge lies in prioritisation of the policies and the lack of consistent follow-up mechanisms. It is seen that while Bangladesh could make some notable achievements by focusing on the "low-hanging fruits," we could not harvest our "high-hanging fruits" much.

In the education sector, the country has attained notable success in primary school enrolment rate, achieving gender parity at the primary and secondary levels and distributing free textbooks countrywide. According to the Annual Primary School Census 2021, the net enrolment rate in primary education is 97.42 percent, with girls comprising 49.54 percent of the total enrolled. Targeted interventions like the

1993 Compulsory Primary Education Act, Food for Education, Primary Education Development Programme (PEDP) and stipend programmes contributed to this success. Along with the government interventions, a major role in this success was played by the

immunisation, reducing maternal mortality through initiatives like the Expanded Programme on Immunisation (EPI). The initiatives were largely supported by external funding and targeted, vertical programmes. However, core systemic issues persist. We have high out-of-pocket healthcare expenditure, a critical shortage of skilled healthcare professionals, urban-rural disparities, and a growing burden of non-communicable diseases (NCDs). According to the World Health Organization (WHO), Bangladesh has only 0.7 physicians per 1,000 people, which is lower than WHO's recommended minimum of 1:1000. Combined with the lowest health

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development partners and NGOs.

On the other hand, due to a lack of timely and long-term planning, the quality of the education system has not improved much. The Human Capital Index found that the learning outcomes are severely low, especially in rural areas, reflected by 51 percent of the children not being able to read and understand a simple text by age 10. This results from a lack of deeper, systematic investment and reforms. Lack of investment is evident from the national budget. Bangladesh's education budget as a percentage of GDP has consistently hovered around or below two percent over the last 15 years, significantly falling short of UNESCO's recommended minimum investment of six percent of total GDP.

The healthcare sector shows a similar pattern. Bangladesh has had significant achievements in child

spending among 45 Least Developed Countries (LDCs) in 2021, this limits the country's ability to effectively tackle critical issues like malnutrition, urban health, NCDs, and Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH). To fully benefit from its demographic window, Bangladesh must ensure a healthy, skilled, and productive population through stronger, sustained investments in healthcare systems, cross-sectoral collaboration, and long-term strategic planning, which currently lack adequate prioritisation and follow-through.

In an attempt to find the impact of government prioritisation in human capital, we conducted a study titled "Impact of Government Investment in Human Capital on Harnessing Bangladesh's Demographic Dividend." Considering employment growth

as an indicator for demographic dividend, the study attempted to find out whether government spending on human capital influences employment growth both in the short and long terms for Bangladesh. In the short run, increasing government spending on education leads to a significant immediate boost. For every unit increase in education spending, there is a 5.39 unit improvement, while in the long run, the impact is slightly smaller (0.24 units increase). Similarly, a one unit rise in healthcare spending results in a 10.38 unit rise in employment growth. However, there is a negative long-run effect of healthcare spending (-6.28 units).

The study result echoes the existing literature highlighting that while education and health spending yield quick returns in employment, sustaining that impact over time may require deeper structural reforms and higher investments. Without well-targeted planning, the long-term impact on employment growth will be diminishing. To improve education quality in Bangladesh, it is essential to increase national budget allocations for teacher training, curriculum update, and enhancement of employability of graduates from both tertiary and technical and vocational education systems. For health, increasing the budget in public healthcare services, hiring more nurses and doctors, emphasising nutrition for children, etc needs a much bigger focus.

Overall, Bangladesh needs to spend more on capacity-building to improve human capital, like training, research, and hiring more skilled professionals, rather than heavily investing in building infrastructure. Rather than focusing on achieving quick wins, we need to undertake structural, high-impact reforms to avoid stagnation despite early successes. A clear roadmap, political commitment, and evidence-based policymaking, along with higher public spending, are essential to translate short-term gains into sustainable development.