

## Stop teen gang menace in Manikganj

Recent surge in violent teen activities raises alarm

We are alarmed at the growing menace of teen gang violence in different parts of the country, especially in Manikganj where things have been particularly disturbing. According to some recent reports, clashes between teen gangs have become quite common in the district city and nearby regions. Just over the past month, there have been at least five violent incidents in the town, as per locals. For instance, about 30-40 members of teen gangs, armed with machetes and Chinese axes, ran amok on the streets last Tuesday, following what appeared to be an internal feud among the groups. Several students were injured. While police have made a number of arrests and filed cases in connection with these incidents, their lack of effect suggests that the root of the problem lies deeper—and reactive law enforcement alone cannot solve it.

These teenagers often come from lower- or middle-income families; some are school dropouts, while others are still enrolled but heavily disengaged from academic activities. Often, members of the gangs are seen roaming the streets, creating panic through open displays of weapons, engaging in turf wars, and harassing female students. Their involvement in drugs, "senior-junior" rivalries, and romantic disputes has also been reported. The teen gang culture is usually attributed to children's exposure to political exploitation during Awami League's 15-year rule, when Chhatra League formed its units even at the school level, drawing teenagers into street politics and creating a breeding ground for gang activities. Other political groups also provided patronage. That said, we must also acknowledge the influence of persistent social tensions and lack of parental supervision, which combined to create a climate where young minds easily find validation in violence.

While the Awami League's fall on August 5 brought a temporary lull in the teen gang culture, it has surged again in recent months, with violent activities reported in Dhaka's Mohammadpur, Cumilla, and Chandpur early this week. This suggests that successive political actors have been either reluctant to confront this issue or interested in exploiting it, as teen gangs—with their potential for street-level muscle—can be used to extend influence on the ground. And this situation, we fear, may worsen with the approach of the next elections.

But given its long-term effect on the future of the nation, it is vital that we address the teen gang culture with the seriousness it deserves. There is an evident need for awareness, especially of parents, as well as community support, safe recreational spaces, and quality education for our young men so that they can direct their energy to constructive things. Political parties also must stop providing patronage to teenagers for their own gain. We all must understand that we risk losing an entire generation to violence if we fail to act now.

## Procurement rules must be fair

Grievances of local manufacturers are justified

A recent roundtable discussion on the public procurement process in Bangladesh has again brought to light issues that have long been raised but sadly remain unresolved. The event, attended by local industrialists, procurement experts, and government officials, highlighted how the existing procurement framework sidelines local manufacturers in favour of foreign experts and companies, limiting their ability to compete for government contracts. Some participants called the procurement rules "discriminatory," as they allegedly lock out well-established local companies from a government spending pool worth \$30 billion.

They also pointed out that the existing rules neither ensure full transparency nor guarantee fair competition. There were instances where domestic bidders were reportedly rejected for invalid reasons. This lack of competitiveness has been an issue for long, with a recent Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) study revealing that over the last 12 years, more than 62 percent of tenders went to just five percent of contractors. The introduction of the electronic government procurement (e-GP) system—which was intended to address such irregularities and promote fair bidding—has failed to make a difference. In 2023, TIB found that public contracts worth Tk 60,069 crore were awarded based on single bids through the e-GP system. How is that possible if the system isn't being manipulated? The role of Bangladesh Competition Commission in addressing such malpractice has been questionable, to say the least.

Over the years, Bangladesh's manufacturing base has grown significantly in several sectors. We now have multibillion-dollar industries that have successfully expanded operations in multiple countries. This should give them ample expertise to participate in domestic projects—provided the process is transparent, competitive, and merit-based. The engagement of local companies also helps boost domestic expertise and revenue. In the process, local manufacturing can receive a strong push, creating jobs, saving valuable foreign currency currently spent on hiring foreign firms, and making meaningful contributions to the national economy.

Unfortunately, corruption in public projects remains a grave concern that needs urgent intervention. According to TIB, around 27 percent of government contracts involve corruption. Overinflated cost estimates regularly make headlines. For instance, in 2023, the state-run Power Grid Company of Bangladesh Ltd (PGCBL) reportedly imported 68 kg of tower bolts, nuts, and washers from India for \$239,695, when the actual price should have been a mere \$148! Examples like this are far too common.

Clearly, the public procurement system is in urgent need of an overhaul. We hope the interim government will take necessary steps to introduce long-overdue reforms to make public procurement fair, transparent, efficient, and corruption-free.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

### Cuba gains independence

On this day in 1902, Cuba gained its independence from the United States, which had taken control of the island in 1899 after defeating Spain in the Spanish-American War.

# Why job creation must come first



**MIND THE GAP**  
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**NOSHIN NAWAL**

In Bangladesh, the economy grows, flyovers rise, export numbers impress, and yet the average citizen stares blankly at their plate, wondering how to make groceries last the week. It is the great national contradiction: GDP goes up but job security goes down. Economic success stories echo in the halls of power, but the garment workers in the narrow alleys of Mohammadpur, the fresh graduates in Natore, and the rickshaw pullers in Cumilla are all asking the same thing: where are the sustainable jobs?

The truth is, we have perfected the art of looking developed without actually becoming it. Our problems aren't hard to diagnose. Nearly 20 lakh young people enter the labour force every year, yet formal job creation trails far behind. According to the latest quarterly labour force survey by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), the unemployment rate has reached 4.63 percent, the highest in recent years. Besides, informal employment makes up over 80 percent of the labour market. Automation, climate migration, lack of upskilling, gender exclusion, and concentration of opportunities in urban areas have made this labour market not just tight, but unjust.

What makes this particularly painful is that Bangladesh is not short of talent, ambition, or work ethic. What it lacks is a system that knows how to convert that into meaningful employment. Instead, we hand out certificates without purpose and diplomas without direction. Across slums and suburbs, young people with degrees are waiting to be useful, watching their potential rot under the pressure of parental expectations, rising food prices, and the suffocating stasis of doing nothing in a country that always claims it's doing everything.

So, let's talk about the real story: jobs—not one-off projects, not Facebook training workshops, not the kind of "entrepreneurship" where the youth are told to sell pickles online for "self-reliance," but actual, living-wage, future-ready jobs. We need a serious national strategy, not sloganeering. And that starts with understanding



ILLUSTRATION: BIPOB CHAKROBORTY

who needs jobs and what's stopping them.

For those in the working class—garment workers, domestic workers, small traders—the hurdle is not just low wages, but zero protection. There is no social safety net if they fall ill, no pension, no legal recourse if they're cheated. These are the hands that run our economy, but they are treated as disposable. Legal reform, minimum wage guarantees, and union protections are not luxuries; they are the foundation of justice in a labour market.

For educated youth, the problem is even more sinister. Years of public money are spent educating them, only for the state to shrug when they graduate. What should they do? Join a political rally in exchange for lunch money? Compete for a public sector job where the recruitment board changes rules mid-exam? Or dream of Dubai while they tutor O Level students to pay their loan instalments?

Meanwhile, rural youth are either

all need is a government that listens, and not just before elections.

Recently, Tarique Rahman, acting chairperson of BNP, released a 31-point reform plan that, for all its politics, at least puts jobs where they belong: at the centre. Unemployment allowances for educated youth? About time. Investment in decentralised agro-industries? Necessary. Rebuilding institutions to ensure merit-based recruitment? Revolutionary, if done sincerely. But what's more important than individual party promises is this: whoever comes to power next must stop treating employment like an afterthought to economic growth. It is the centrepiece that will stabilise the country, combat rising crime rates, and curtail the chaos.

The new government must begin with a national employment guarantee framework, particularly in rural and climate-affected zones. It must invest in large-scale public works that not only create jobs but solve real problems: canals, climate-resilient housing, and rural

Rajshahi, and for the slum child who just wants to go to school so they can someday work with dignity. These aren't demands, they are rights. All the reform commissions and their timelines might be resultantly futile if, in the next five years, Bangladesh cannot address the issue of sustainable livelihood.

Without jobs, no amount of infrastructure will save us. What's the point of a six-lane highway if the only traffic it carries is outbound flights of our brightest minds? What use is a smart city when its residents are too broke to afford broadband internet? A state that cannot provide work is not a prospering state. It is a waiting room for disillusionment.

And when disillusionment reaches its limit, it doesn't stay quiet. So, before we build another monument, another megaproject, another symbol, let's do the one thing that truly builds a country: give its people a chance to work, earn, and live with dignity. Otherwise, it's all flyovers to nowhere.

## Rickshaws, rights, and the rulebook



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**MAISHA ISLAM MONAMEE**

Recently, Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC) launched a long-anticipated crackdown on rickshaws, especially battery-powered ones, operating on the capital's main roads. Within hours, around 30 vehicles were seized, and scenes of drivers breaking down in tears quickly circulated online. Some collapsed to the ground, devastated at the loss of their livelihoods. In a city that often confuses chaos with character, Dhaka's latest attempt to restore some semblance of road sanity has, predictably, met with backlash. The public conversation fractured into two polarised camps: one hailing the move as long overdue, the other condemning it as a classist assault on the livelihoods of the poor. But somewhere between these extremes lies the harder, more uncomfortable truth.

Battery-operated rickshaws, by law, are not allowed on major roads of DNCC. Not because someone woke up with a vendetta against three-wheelers, but because they became one of the leading contributors to road accidents. These vehicles lack basic safety measures and are driven without formal documents, frequently speeding and weaving dangerously

through traffic. Passengers riding them are not safe. Nor are pedestrians crossing the road. Anyone who has had to drive or walk in Dhaka during rush hour knows this. These rickshaws, while affordable and accessible, are often chaotic and erratic. They swerve

with. This is not just a governance failure but a betrayal of the poor in slow motion. It is a deeply flawed cycle, where informality fills the void left by inadequate policy, and the informal becomes so embedded that even lawful enforcement begins to look unjust. And, when enforcement agencies finally decided to act, after issuing repeated warnings, the narrative quickly turned to one of state cruelty.

So, is this crackdown selectively cruel? That question deserves to be taken seriously. Too often, policy disproportionately affects those who already live precariously; those who do not have the cushion to absorb

everyone around them?

I do not think it is cruel to want our roads to be safer. It is cruel, however, if we do not offer people a way to be part of that safety. This is not a case of overnight authoritarianism but one that is an inevitable outcome of decades of selective ignorance. Here, the state's failure to regulate, license, and formalise these vehicles for so long has bred a false sense of legitimacy. So, the failure is not on these drivers but on the system. And, while we begin enforcement, we must also reckon with responsibility. DNCC has already announced training programmes for rickshaw drivers scheduled to begin this month. Those who complete the training will be issued valid licenses. And rickshaws produced by approved manufacturers will be allowed in designated areas.

However, the promised training programmes must be real, accessible, and timely. We must ensure alternative employment pathways for those affected. The debate is not whether the poor deserve to earn a living. Of course they do. The concern, therefore, is what kind of system we are allowing them to earn in. Informality may offer quick entry points, but it also locks people out of long-term security. A driver with no license and no vehicle registration has no protection, no insurance, no labour rights, and no claim if something goes wrong. It is a freedom with no safety net. Is that the best we can offer? So no, an illegal rickshaw is not a civil right. It is a symptom of a broken system that we have finally started fixing. And one that was long overdue.

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unexpectedly, brake without warning, and in many cases, operate outside any system of accountability. None of this is breaking news. And, none of this has happened in the shadows. For several months, these vehicles have been tolerated in a kind of legal limbo and as a daily reminder of a state that often looks away rather than step in. Drivers, in turn, invested what little they had to enter a system that was never fully legal to begin

sudden shocks. In this case, the people caught in the dragnet are those who have been systematically left without alternatives. They were allowed to live in an illusion of legitimacy until the curtain was abruptly pulled back.

But at the same time, we must ask whether it is progressive to accept illegality simply because it is popular or accessible? Are we doing justice to these people by letting them operate in a system that endangers them and