

## India’s impunity at the border must end

### Continued push-ins testing the limits of bilateral relations

We are quite concerned—and frankly, shocked—by the continued push-in operations being carried out by the BSF and other Indian agencies, despite repeated protests from Bangladesh. The persistence of these incidents, even after formal objections raised through flag meetings and diplomatic channels, reflects a blatant disregard for international norms and bilateral agreements. Equally disturbing is India’s denial of these actions, which not only points to an attempt to distort the truth, but also a possible strategy to maintain plausible deniability while continuing such operations under the cover of darkness.

Since May 7, at least 1,053 individuals have been pushed into Bangladesh through different border points, according to a report citing the BGB headquarters. Among them were Selina Begum and her three young daughters, who were allegedly thrown into the Feni River along the Tripura border while being tied with empty plastic bottles to keep them afloat. They floated helplessly all night before being rescued by locals in Khagrachhari’s Ramgarh area on May 22. The mother and also the father, who was also rescued, were working as labourers in India’s Haryana state. But then they were detained by Indian agencies, allegedly robbed of valuables, and pushed in.

Over the last few weeks, there have been multiple accounts of the victims of such push-ins from India. Although the expulsions seemed to primarily target “illegal migrants,” there have been notable exceptions, including Rohingya refugees registered with the UNHCR in India. Most of the victims are Bangla-speaking Muslims, some allegedly with valid Aadhaar cards, voter IDs, and decades-long residence records. In some cases, entire families were apparently picked up in random raids, herded into detention centres, and dispatched to border areas. While talking to *The Daily Star*, the BGB director general confirmed that many of those pushed in are Bangladeshi nationals who lived in India for years. Some of their children were born in India and held Indian documents, he said. Many victims, he added, also reported inhumane treatment including physical abuse and forced starvation prior to being dumped at the border.

These harrowing accounts highlight the utter absurdity and hollowness of India’s actions. At this stage, we cannot help but wonder if India, as the bigger neighbour, feels it can act with complete impunity simply because it expects Bangladesh to remain silent or submissive. Whatever its strategy or expectation may be, it is clearly violating human rights and breaching due process and established diplomatic protocols—a combination that would be seen as a red flag for any bilateral relations.

We urge the Indian authorities to stop these unilateral push-ins immediately. If they refuse to halt these actions and engage in a transparent, acceptable repatriation process, the interim government should seriously consider involving the international community, including the UN and regional multilateral platforms, to draw attention to these morally reprehensible actions. For us, this is not just a border or humanitarian issue; it is also a test of Bangladesh’s sovereignty and dignity. So, we must act accordingly.

## Save Sonadia Island’s mangrove forests

### Govt must take stern action against the grabbers

We are concerned about the relentless forest grabbing in Sonadia Island. During the AL regime, individuals connected to the government razed vast acres of forest on the island, and alarmingly, the destruction has continued even after the regime’s fall. Since August 5, over 1,000 acres of protected mangrove forest have been reportedly cleared for shrimp and crab farming. This came to light after grabbers recently set fire to piles of felled trees to destroy evidence of their activities.

Over the years, Sonadia’s encroachers have cleared more than 3,000 acres of mangrove forest to establish shrimp enclosures. With the latest 1,000 acres encroached, the total now stands at 4,000. We wonder why the concerned authorities are unable to stop these illegal activities. In October last year, the High Court ordered relevant officials to remove illegal shrimp projects, take legal action against those destroying the mangroves, and submit a compliance report within 90 days. On November 28, the Supreme Court upheld this order, directing the government to stop mangrove destruction immediately. Yet forest grabbing, along with shrimp and crab farming, continues in this ecologically critical area. This is deeply unfortunate.

While the relevant officials have sometimes taken actions, those have been mostly ineffective. For instance, last July, the Department of Environment (DoE) filed a case against 26 individuals, mostly linked to the AL, for seizing 128 acres of forest land, temporarily halting their action. But they soon resumed it in the absence of administrative follow-ups and legal consequences. Again, on May 18 this year, the DoE filed a case against 20 individuals, including a local BNP leader this time. This shows how the encroachment business has continued to enjoy political support regardless of the political transition, for which BNP and other parties must also answer.

We urge the authorities to make lawsuits against forest grabbers effective by ensuring swift case disposal and strict punishment. While the Sonadia administration has reportedly conducted some drives to stop the grabbers, these were insufficient. Such efforts must be increased. Moreover, the DoE must assess the actual scale of forest loss as the figures mentioned in official cases reportedly fall far short of reality. While the interim government’s cancellation of land allocated to the Bangladesh Economic Zones Authority (BEZA) for establishing an eco tourism park on the island is reassuring, it must now take comprehensive actions to stop the culture of forest grabbing.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

### Joan of Arc burnt at the stake

On this day in 1431, having led the French Army in a momentous victory over England at Orléans during the Hundred Years’ War, Joan of Arc was charged with heresy and witchcraft, and was burnt at the stake.

# As a nation, we are not focused on education

The reality is the world is leaving us behind

### THE THIRD VIEW

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### MAHFUZ ANAM

On May 22, this daily reported that National University Vice-Chancellor Prof ASM Amanullah had been attacked by a group of students demanding automatic pass in their degree (pass) examination held in 2022—three years ago. The NU had already permitted grace marks to this batch of students, whose studies had been affected by the COVID pandemic and political unrests in the country. Still, they could not procure the pass mark, so poor were their results. The students had also been given the opportunity to apply for the re-evaluation of their answer sheets. Despite these measures, according to an NU press release, a group of students decided to attack the VC so that he would concede to their demand out of fear. As of this writing, we did not hear of any stern action by the authorities against these students. Immediately following the July-August uprising, we saw a similar demand of “auto pass” by students in the vicinity of the secretariat.

On May 16, we reported about the operational stalemate due to protests by students, and in one case by teachers, at four public universities, namely Dhaka University, Jagannath University, Khulna University of Engineering and Technology, and Barishal University. Disruptions in these universities brought classes, tutorials, and examinations to a halt, jeopardising the future of nearly 70,000 students. In these universities, almost all of the top echelons of administration were removed after the uprising last year.

According to our earlier reports, VCs of 47 public universities who had been appointed during the reign of Sheikh Hasina either resigned or were forced to resign after the changeover of August 5. This included VCs of all our prestigious institutions, i.e. Dhaka University, Jahangirnagar University, Rajshahi University, Chittagong University, and Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology. Their successors were appointed from the other political spectrum. At least 30 VCs out of the 47 have links with pro-BNP or pro-Jamaat teachers’ bodies. So what we saw was a change of guards and not of the practice.

Why did the VCs of 47 public universities have to run away like our politicians? Were they so devoid of academic credentials and so intellectually bankrupt that they had no legitimacy of being appointed as heads of our highest seats of learning—other than sycophancy? The harsh truth is that most of the VC appointments

at public universities—if not all—stemmed from political consideration, rather than academic. Sheikh Hasina politicised almost all institutions, but perhaps among the most damaging were the universities, especially the posts of VC. Once teachers saw that writing academic papers, doing original research, upholding academic standards, and creating an open academic environment where creative minds could flourish, did not pave the way for career success, things started to change. They saw clear and everyday evidence that toeing the political line was the surest way to getting foreign scholarships, higher positions, and, sadly, vice-chancellorships. It is then that our universities started crumbling. As the competition to seek favour got tougher—because sloganeering was always far easier than academic rigour—teachers started aligning themselves with student politics, whose support, in the last days of the Hasina regime, they needed to

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get elected to the Dhaka University Teachers’ Association—which was a stepping stone for the VC post. This led to a deep moral bankruptcy. However, there were exceptions, too; we saw many teachers hold their head high, defy power, jeopardise their career, and uphold academic dignity.

One can easily imagine the quality of the administration of VCs who came to occupy their chairs as a part of political rewards. This got reflected in recruitment, appointments, promotions, office holdings, and foreign travels. Research grants, which were always meagre, got awarded on the same lines. Thus, university teachers—again, not all of them—became a part of the culture of partisan politics that engulfed each and every institution in the country. The corruption of the academic world that followed dragged

the quality of each of our famous universities to the bottom, which was epitomised by former DU VC Prof Md Akhtaruzzaman (2017-2023), whose famous comment that DU was the only university where “you could buy a chop and somucha only for Tk 10.” It said it all about his notion of the academic standard of a university.

We have focused only on the situation of our universities,

that message?

When we talk about the success of countries like Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and most recently Vietnam and China, we mostly focus on their economic success. Never, if ever, do we talk about the contribution of their education systems that provided the crucial backbone to their economic strength. All these countries have spent a huge part of their resources



The photo shows students of Barishal University staging a protest demanding the removal of their VC earlier this month. Four public universities including Barishal University recently saw an academic stalemate due to protests, some of which ran for several weeks.

FILE PHOTO: TITU DAS

controlling which should have been easy as student leadership is part of this government. The situation of other institutions is the same, if not worse. Here is a story from a well-regarded girls’ school. Two girls were caught using their smartphones to copy answers from. When a teacher took away the phones and cancelled their answer sheets, a few of the students got together and started agitating and the school authorities decided to overlook the matter. It is the same in many institutions. Teachers come to class, utter the bare minimum, and leave immediately. The customary chatter and personal conversations between teachers and students have all but disappeared for fear as to who will interpret what and then upload on social media, taken mostly out of context.

It is now nearly 10 months since students left their classes and took to the streets to remove a dictatorial government. That government has been replaced, but the students have not fully returned to their classes. Has anybody asked them to? No adviser, no political leader, no student leader and not even the chief adviser, whom everyone respects, have urged the students that what they have achieved is incomparable and the whole nation is grateful to them, but their future and that of the nation are tied to knowledge and our ability to use them in every aspect of our nation-building through innovation, enterprise, and energy. But for all that to happen, they must return to their studies. Where is

in preparing their youth to face the future and succeed. In the latest and most advanced field of artificial intelligence, the world got surprised by a young Chinese scholar inventing the DeepSeek and upstaging the US. Did it happen by chance? Will it ever happen here? Of course it can. But for that, we have to set our priorities and invest in them. It may sound like a fairytale that in the late 60s, South Korean business teams would visit East Pakistan to learn about textile and steel industries, especially from the Kobe steel complex that the Japanese had set up in Chattogram at that time.

After 54 years of independence, where does our education stand today? We have had several education commissions, several revisions of our curricula, and spent billions, yet we have miserably failed to give the nation an education system that will prepare us for the future. Presently, we have had so many reform commissions, but none on education, reflecting our own sense of priority. In the 21st century world, there is no future without education—not of the old variety, but one that will lead us to the world of AI, quantum computers, blending of technology and all the sciences. A whole new world awaits us. Will we be a part of it or remain an onlooker?

The changes can come not from rhetorics, but from real, concrete, and well-thought-out actions. We remain enamoured with slogans and confined to self-serving narratives. This will not open us up to the possibilities of the new world.

# Food safety in public hospitals is a basic right, not luxury

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### SABRINA PERVIN SHANTA

Food safety in public hospitals is not merely an operational issue but a legal right for patients. It goes without saying that hospital-prepared food should be tailored to a patient’s medical condition. Furthermore, the hygiene, safety, and nutritional value of the food must be ensured. Reports from hospital food vendors, unfortunately, point to unhygienic food preparation and vending environments, with a lack of adequate food safety measures. There is also insufficient data on hygienic food practices, availability of food safety facilities, and perspectives of hospital food vendors. This creates a knowledge gap that can be quite impactful.

In a country where more than 654 public hospitals serve millions of people—particularly low-income patients—access to safe, nutritious, and medically appropriate food is a crucial issue. Most patients seek care at public hospitals due to their affordability,

especially for those without insurance or the means to access private care. These hospitals are often the only available option in underserved or rural areas. Despite this, patients’ rights to proper treatment are being violated through unhygienic and poor-quality food.

Earlier, the food budget per patient was Tk 125, which increased to Tk 175 after the COVID pandemic. For patients in the intensive care unit (ICU) and high dependency unit (HDU) at the National Institute of Burn and Plastic Surgery, the allocation is Tk 300 per patient. Despite these increases, complaints about food quality persist. Common issues include coarse, foul-smelling rice; watery lentils; and flavourless curries. There is no system to customise meals based on caloric needs, age, weight, or medical condition. Dietitians are often only nominally involved, with little influence on meal planning or

monitoring. Oversight of food quality and nutritional care remains weak. This state of affairs can have severe consequences for patients.

The Bangladesh Food Safety Authority (BFSA), established under the Food Safety Act, 2013, is responsible for regulating food safety, including in public hospitals. The BFSA oversees various aspects of the food supply chain, including import, production, storage, and distribution. However, enforcement in public healthcare settings has been weak and inconsistent. This gap between policy and practice further endangers patient health.

Over the years, there has been a surge in the number of public hospitals and health facilities. However, a substantial portion of the population still faces significant barriers to healthcare access. Over 60 percent of people lack access to basic healthcare, and fewer than 40 percent receive essential medical care. These figures highlight broader structural problems including underuse of government hospitals, cost-effectiveness concerns, and sustainability challenges. They also reflect the urgent need to improve the quality of care—starting with something as fundamental as safe food.

To identify gaps in hospital nutrition care, we should consider

issues such as a lack of proper staff training, inconsistent implementation of guidelines, poor teamwork, failure to focus on individual patient needs, limited screening for malnutrition, and challenges related to technology. Additionally, we must evaluate food quality, follow up on patient outcomes, assess resource limitations, and measure how well nutrition is integrated into overall care. Evidence-based research is essential to addressing these gaps effectively.

But first, we must acknowledge that food safety is a basic patient right—not a luxury—and that poor hygiene, low food quality, and weak enforcement of food safety laws in public hospitals are endangering patients. Simply increasing food budgets is not enough without proper management, monitoring, and trained personnel.

To resolve this problem, the government should strictly enforce the Food Safety Act of 2013, hire trained dietitians, ensure regular hygiene training for food handlers, and customise meals according to patient needs. Collecting data from hospitals and vendors is also crucial to closing existing knowledge gaps. Safe food in hospitals can lead to better recovery outcomes, reinforce patient dignity, and strengthen the healthcare system overall.