

FUNDING CUTS Education of 2.3 lakh Rohingya children under threat Says UNICEF, seeks urgent action to mitigate disaster

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The education of nearly 230,000 Rohingya refugee children in Cox's Bazar is under threat due to an acute and deepening funding crisis, UNICEF warned in a press release yesterday.

The UN agency said that without immediate and sustained financial aid, it may be forced to scale back or suspend critical educational services in the world's largest refugee settlement -- potentially leaving an entire generation of Rohingya children behind.

In recent months, UNICEF has faced a significant decline in humanitarian funding for its operations in the Rohingya refugee response, affecting the education of 83 percent of school age children in the camps, who are enrolled in UNICEF-supported learning centres.

Despite exhaustive efforts to attract new resources and reprioritise activities, funding gaps have forced UNICEF to take painful decisions, including suspending support for host community volunteer teachers working with kindergartens to grade 2 learners.

A total of 1,179 host community volunteer teachers will see their contracts end with UNICEF's implementing partners by June 30, 2025.

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High officials of the government receive Chief Adviser Professor Muhammad Yunus upon his return at the Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport from Japan early today.

PHOTO: CA PRESS WING

Investor confidence

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hesitant," he said while addressing a pre-budget debate for the 2025-26 fiscal year, organised by Debate for Democracy at the Film Development Corporation in the capital yesterday.

Expressing regret over the lack of dialogues between the interim government and political parties regarding the national budget, Debapriya said, "Such discussions could have assured investors of a long-term policy continuity."

According to him, the government should pursue fiscal discipline, restore stability in the banking sector, and engage in cross-party dialogue to assure investors of a predictable policy environment.

"Only then can the budget become a tool for recovery, not mere survival."

Debapriya's comments come at a time when the interim government is preparing to announce the national budget for the next fiscal year on Monday amid economic uncertainty and political transition.

He criticised the interim government's reliance on borrowing from local banks and noted that high interest rates and a weak banking system are undermining private investment.

"Investment and employment are interconnected," he said, adding that macroeconomic stability will falter if confidence in long-term policy continuity is not ensured.

Expressing concern over the present state of revenue mobilisation, Debapriya said Bangladesh's tax-to-GDP ratio has dropped below eight percent, which is among the lowest globally.

He highlighted the case of the neighbouring nation Nepal, which collects more tax than Bangladesh despite having a lower per capita income.

Debapriya cautioned against over-reliance on indirect taxes, saying it fosters inequality and disproportionately affects the poor.

To build a fairer system, he called for a shift toward direct taxation, particularly targeting luxury spending and wealth.

"Two-thirds of our taxes come from indirect sources. This must change," he said, suggesting new tax measures on second cars, high-value services, and digital transactions.

Debapriya also urged reforms in tax administration, including digitisation and the integration of tax identification numbers with national IDs, bank accounts, and social benefit cards to curb evasion.

Tax compliance is not just the government's job. Citizens must also demand receipts, avoid cash deals, and stop enabling the culture of evasion."

He criticised the Implementation Monitoring and Evaluation Division (IMEI)'s narrow focus on financial expenditure rather than performance-based outcomes, stating, "Budget accountability must shift from inputs to impacts. Otherwise, taxpayers lose faith."

Regarding budget financing, Debapriya proposed seizing and monetising illicit assets to fund next year's budget.

"This could be a breakthrough -- using laundered, untaxed, and defaulted funds as a source of budgetary finance."

Despite some achievements, like repaying \$5 billion in foreign debt and maintaining exchange rate stability, he warned that the upcoming budget risks being a "repackaged version of the past" without structural change.

While moderating the pre-budget debate, Hasan Ahmed Chowdhury Kiran, chairman of Debate for Democracy, said, "Corruption, inequality, and weak tax management will hinder budget implementation."

Kiran warned that political instability could deter investment and disrupt trade.

He urged the interim government to expose and prosecute corrupt officials and loan defaulters.

Without tax reform and increased allocations for health, education, agriculture, and social security, he said, the upcoming 2025-26 budget will be just "old wine in a new bottle".

A politically neutral tax structure is essential to restoring fiscal balance, he added.

Tax-free income ceiling to stay the same

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account balances from Tk 1 lakh to Tk 3 lakh. Penalties for import-related misdeclarations are expected to be reduced to 200 percent from the current 400 percent.

As part of broader reforms, the budget will propose withdrawing or reducing supplementary duties on 622 products and grant duty-free access for 110 items. This step is aimed at enhancing trade competitiveness and expanding market access.

Officials at the finance ministry say these measures are needed for enhancing Bangladesh's global competitiveness after LDC graduation.

To enhance revenue collection while preparing the economy for LDC graduation, VAT on services rendered by construction firms has been increased from 7.5 percent to 10 percent while the VAT on commissions from online sales platforms has been sharply raised from 5 percent to 15 percent.

The VAT at the production stage of self-copy paper, duplex boards, and coated paper has been increased from 7.5 percent to 15 percent.

Similarly, all types of plastic tableware, kitchenware, household goods, hygiene products, and toilet items will now see 15 percent VAT, up from 7.5 percent.

The VAT on blade production has been raised from 5 percent to 7.5 percent, while wire cutters, screws, connectors, nuts, bolts, electric line hardware, and pole fittings will also

see their VAT increased to 7.5 percent from 5 percent.

On the taxation front, the specific tax on mild steel products is set to rise by approximately 20 percent. Additionally, the specific tax on cotton yarn has been raised from Tk 3 to Tk 5 per kg, and the same rate will apply to yarn made from man-made fibres or fibre blends. To support local industries, the AIT on raw material imports by manufacturers will be reduced from 3 percent to 2 percent.

US TARIFF RESPONSE

To meet trade challenges, the National Board of Revenue (NBR) is set to propose zero import duties on an additional 110 products. The move is intended to mitigate the impact of a proposed 37 percent tariff on Bangladeshi exports by the US, following policy changes introduced by the Trump administration.

The list includes raw materials for the textile sector, military equipment, and industrial machinery. The government aims to expand duty-free imports to offset the impact of new tariffs and safeguard market access.

PHARMACEUTICAL INDUSTRY

To reduce healthcare costs, the budget is expected to expand duty exemptions on raw materials and medical equipment. An additional 79 items may be added to the duty-free list, particularly benefiting manufacturers of drugs for cancer, kidney, and vascular diseases.

Besides, the government plans to exempt duty on cold storage

machinery, including compressors, to stabilise food prices and reduce post-harvest losses.

Duty cuts are also likely for raw materials used in toy and cricket bat production. The tariff value of imported toys may be set at \$4 per kg, while duty on willow wood, used in cricket bats, may be lowered from 37 percent to 26 percent.

CUTS FOR PUBLIC TRANSPORT

In an effort to ease traffic congestion, the import duty on buses with 16-40 seats is expected to fall from 10 percent to 5 percent and supplementary duty on microbuses with 10-15 seats from 20 percent to 10 percent.

The government is also likely to reduce the specific duty on refined sugar imports from Tk 4,500 to Tk 4,000 per tonne.

BOOST FOR SOFTWARE EXPORTERS

The government may reduce import duty on development tools, operating systems, databases, and security software from 10 percent to 5 percent.

Tariffs on lipstick and face wash may be doubled to \$40 per kg. A similar increase is expected for chocolates.

The duty on import of helicopters is expected to rise from 1 percent to 10 percent.

The government wants to lower energy costs for power generation and industrial operations by doing away the 15 percent VAT on its import.

wisdom and reality."

He added that once a proper election roadmap is unveiled, political disagreements would ease.

Islami Andolon Bangladesh, while critical of the government's "inefficiency", said the BNP's firm stance could amount to brinkmanship. Its Ameer, Syed Muhammad Rezaul Karim, said political forces were now split between "patriots and power seekers".

"The patriots are demanding reforms, justice, and polls, while the power seekers are only eager for a quick election," he told supporters at a rally in Bogra on Thursday.

"Even the Indians are showing interest in a quick election, and some parties in our country are eager for the same... We know the past of those crying for polls. Under their leadership, Bangladesh became champion in corruption. After the July uprising, that opportunity should not be given to anyone again."

He insisted the interim government must first deliver reforms and justice for the July killings. "If there's any negligence, we will protest. But repeatedly calling for an election and making the country unstable is meaningless."

The party's Secretary General Yunus Ahmed said, "We say that if necessary reforms are not implemented and the killers of July are not brought to justice, the election will not be free, fair, or meaningful..."

The BNP, from its partisan perspective, wants the election by December. But we support the chief adviser's timeline."

Some are advocating a middle ground. Bangladesh Khelafat Majlis's Mamunul Haque suggested an election by March 2026 -- allowing space for essential reforms while avoiding Ramadan and the monsoon.

19 more pushed in thru two border districts

OUR CORRESPONDENT, *Kushtha*

At least 19 more Bangladeshi nationals were detained after they were pushed in, reportedly by the Indian Border Security Force (BSF), through different border points in Chuadanga and Kushtha, said Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB).

In Kushtha, BGB detained nine Bangladeshi in the Bhagjot Bazar area of Ramkrishnapur union in Daulatpur upazila yesterday morning.

The BSF pushed them in through an unfenced char area of the border in Daulatpur, according to a press statement signed by Lt Col Mahbub Mursheed Rahman, commander of BGB 47 Battalion.

According to the statement, around four years ago, the detainees had illegally entered India through the Bamonhat border in Kurigram and had been working at a brick kiln in New Delhi.

Meanwhile, in Chuadanga, BSF pushed back 10 Bangladeshi through the Jibannagar border, according to a press statement signed by Mohammad Saiful Islam, acting quartermaster and assistant director of BGB 58 Battalion in Maheshpur.

According to the statement, a patrol team from the Benipur Border Outpost (BOP), led by BGB Nayek Md Moshier Rahman, detained five women and five children who had illegally entered Bangladesh near Border Pillar 61/14-S -- about 10 yards inside Bangladeshi territory -- at Achhor Ali's Mahogany Garden around 1:00am on Friday.

Jibannagar Police OC Mamun Hossain Biswas said the detainees were handed over to their families.

Political divide deepening over polls timing

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as the BNP hardened its stance for December election.

While some parties endorsed the BNP's call as timely, others -- particularly Islamist parties and newer entrants like the National Citizens Party (NCP) -- warned against rushing into elections without key reforms.

Biplabi Workers Party General Secretary Saiful Haque claimed most political parties want polls by December or even earlier.

Criticising the government for not clarifying the need for delay, he called Yunus's remarks in Japan "misleading" and warned of public agitation. "If the BNP and others take to the streets over election demands, it would be unfortunate for the government."

Some opposition voices argue the delay benefits the NCP, the party many see as closely tied to the government.

Bangladesh Jatiya Party Chairman Andaleeb Rahman Partha said Yunus had initially pointed to a December timeline. "If the government is genuinely focused on holding an election, then two of the current advisers should no longer remain in their posts."

Several parties have echoed this demand, raising concerns about bias and fears that the electoral process is being manipulated to engineer a favourable outcome.

Nagrik Oikya President Mahmudur Rahman Manna believes elections by December are possible. "If the government wishes, it can be done, which would be reasonable."

Reflecting on the interim government's performance so far, he said the expectations regarding reforms have not been met. "Even if the polls timeline is extended, it

doesn't seem like much more will be achieved."

Gono Odhikar Parishad General Secretary Rashed Khan said polls must be held by December and warned the government's credibility would be at risk if the two advisers in question -- Information Adviser Mahfuj Alam and LGRD and Sports Adviser Asif Mahmud Sajeeb Bhuyain -- are not removed.

The NCP, on the other hand, alleged that by constantly pressing for the election, the BNP is "threatening" the government.

Its Chief Coordinator Nasiruddin Patwary yesterday said, "What the BNP is saying -- that the election must be held in December -- is a threat to the government."

"If the BNP tries to topple the government or something, things will escalate into a conflict."

Backing the chief adviser's timeline, Patwary said that without reforming constitutional institutions, any election would merely replace Sheikh Hasina with another party figurehead.

Meanwhile, Jamaat-e-Islami sticks to its preference for reforms and trial first and then polls.

Speaking at an event in Kishoreganj yesterday, its Nayeb-e-Ameer Mujibur Rahman said that while the people of Bangladesh want an election, they do not want one of "just any kind".

"We'll tell the government that justice must come first, then reforms, and only after that, the election can take place."

Downplaying the prospect of conflict, Jamaat's Assistant Secretary General Ahsanul Mahboob Zubair on Friday said, "There might be a difference of opinion regarding the polls' timeframe... But I don't think there would be any conflict... The issue will be settled through political

adviser's timeline."

Some are advocating a middle ground. Bangladesh Khelafat Majlis's Mamunul Haque suggested an election by March 2026 -- allowing space for essential reforms while avoiding Ramadan and the monsoon.

Misery persists in coastal areas

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Sylhet, Sunamganj, Moulvibazar, and Netrokona districts within the next two days.

The BMD has advised lowering signals at the maritime ports of Chattogram, Cox's Bazar, Mongla, and Payra.

The Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) also lifted the restriction on inland water transportation yesterday.

Meanwhile, a trawler on the Meghna river near Noakhali's Hatia capsized around 3:00pm yesterday, leaving a cop dead.

The trawler was carrying 39 passengers. Of them, 30 were rescued alive, and eight people, including a police officer, remain missing, said AKM Azmal Huda, officer in charge of Hatia Police Station.

Four Dhaka-bound flights were diverted to Chattogram yesterday afternoon due to bad weather. Engineer Ibrahim Khalil, a spokesperson for the airport, said the flights would return to Dhaka once conditions improve.

"Based on preliminary data, approximately 378 unions and municipalities were affected by the deep depression, leaving 259 houses completely damaged and 8,901 partially damaged," said Netai Chandra Dey Sarker, director of monitoring and information management at DDM.

He added that the final data would be compiled soon, and relief will be disbursed accordingly.

In Cox's Bazar, residents of St Martin's Island are facing acute food and water shortages and power outages, as boat services remained suspended for the sixth day due to inclement weather.

Teknaf Upazila Nirbahi Officer (UNO) Sheikh Ehsan Uddin said aid had been sent to tackle the crisis, and more relief would be dispatched once boat services resume.

In Patuakhali, a newly built section of Marine Drive near Kuakata beach collapsed due to tidal surges on Thursday.

Md Robiul Islam, UNO of Kalapara, said two-thirds of the 1