

## No end in sight to Iran–Israel conflict

Bangladesh must act swiftly to protect its citizens in Iran

The continued intensification of the Israel-Iran conflict since Israel's attack on Iran on June 13 is extremely alarming. One would have hoped that cooler heads would have prevailed by now, and that the international community—particularly the more influential countries—would have united to de-escalate the situation. But far from it, the two countries have continued to exchange attacks, with the use of increasingly sophisticated and destructive weaponry. Meanwhile, not only has the West lent its full and unwavering support to Israel, but there are rumours that the US may become directly involved in Israel's attacks on Iran, further increasing the risk of drawing other powers into the conflict.

Beyond the deaths and destructions on the grounds, the conflict has already begun to exact a far wider regional and global toll. Oil and energy prices have shown significant volatility, and supply chain disruptions may soon have further negative impacts on an already weakened global economy. On top of that, with US President Donald Trump warning people to evacuate Iran's capital, Tehran, and Israel intensifying its targeting of the city, foreign nationals—including diplomats—have been put in harm's way. Among them are about 400 Bangladeshis, including embassy officials, staff members, and their families. Reportedly, amid growing threats of targeted strikes, Bangladesh's ambassador to Iran has been forced to leave his residence in Tehran and take shelter in a more secure location. And after the residence of at least one Bangladeshi embassy official was destroyed, all Bangladeshi nationals have left their previous locations and taken shelter in various parts of the city.

Despite this relocation, it is clear that Bangladeshi nationals in Iran, numbering around 2,000, continue to face grave threats. India has already managed to relocate its citizens to safer areas within Iran. Pakistan has opened its border with Iran, giving Pakistanis wishing to leave a way out. China, too, has successfully evacuated its nationals. Therefore, our government also needs to consider the best course of action to ensure the safety of Bangladeshis there. If necessary, it should reach out to other governments or actors that can either help ensure their safety or assist in evacuating them.

But until this conflict is brought to an end, its impact will continue to escalate, with increasingly dire consequences not only for the region but for the world as a whole. Recognising this, all other countries must refrain from engaging in any acts of aggression, and must also engage with Iran and Israel and convince them to cease all attacks against each other. The international community must not allow this conflict to spiral any further.

## Shield street children from vulnerabilities

Worrying levels of exclusion from social safety net reported

We are concerned about the street children's persistent exclusion from social protection systems and mechanisms. According to a survey recently unveiled by Caritas Bangladesh, a staggering 94.3 percent of street children remain excluded from the government's social safety net, while 58.2 percent do not have birth certificates, preventing them from accessing formal education and state-sponsored services. Among those without birth certificates, 71.4 percent do not know their parents' national ID numbers, making their registration difficult or impossible. This shows, among other things, how the system itself can fail the vulnerable thanks to interlinked, often complicated procedures. It is no surprise then that 51.6 percent of the children surveyed are not currently enrolled in any school or madrasa.

The survey size may be small—covering 667 street children across Dhaka, Mymensingh, and Rajshahi—but the picture that emerges from it more or less aligns with the alarming levels of exclusion, abuse, and vulnerabilities reported by the media. So, not only are they being deprived of essential services but they are also being exposed to life-altering dangers including sexual abuse, assaults, early exposure to crime and drugs, and child labour. Even children growing up with parents in slums are often similarly vulnerable because of the lack of support for the marginalised communities. These circumstances offer a reality check about the challenges facing the interim government as it tries to recast the social safety net schemes.

In the proposed FY2025-26 budget, the government allocated Tk 37,076 crore for 39 social safety programmes that directly benefit the poor and vulnerable, excluding unrelated components like pension, savings certificate interest, and agricultural subsidies that previously consumed much of the budget. Monthly cash benefits for marginalised groups have also been slightly increased, and the number of beneficiaries expanded. However, these efforts will fall short unless they are accompanied by systemic reforms to address inclusion and identification barriers. The fact that most street children lack identification, and thereby access to required support and protections, is a structural failure that must be fixed. No reform of the safety net can be meaningful if it continues to leave behind the most vulnerable.

We, therefore, urge the government to prioritise bringing those children into the fold and ensure that they are provided with necessary support. At its survey unveiling programme, Caritas Bangladesh made a number of recommendations which deserve to be considered. With so many children living in vulnerable conditions, we must do more—and do better—going forward.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY



### Pablo Escobar surrenders

On this day in 1991, Colombian drug lord Pablo Escobar surrendered to the police.

# Do we need a foreign operator for terminal maintenance?



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The interim government is pressing forward with plans to lease out the New Mooring Container Terminal (NCT), the largest and most profitable terminal at Chattogram port, to the UAE's state-owned DP World, through a government-to-government (G2G) arrangement. This initiative was originally undertaken by the Awami League government in March 2023, but was stalled in the face of the port workers' protest. Now, the interim government is pursuing the same arrangement, under the public-private partnership (PPP) model, bypassing an open and competitive bidding process.

According to a recent *Prothom Alo* report, the World Bank's International Finance Corporation (IFC) is the project's transaction adviser. If all goes as planned, a concession agreement is scheduled for signing by November. After that, the operator will fully take over the terminal, recruit manpower, collect container handling charges, and pay the port authority an upfront fee, an annual payment, and a per-container fee. But it is not yet clear how much DP World will invest, what specific improvements it will bring, and how the revenue will be shared between the Chittagong Port Authority (CPA) and DP World.

Costing Tk 2,000 crore, the 950-metre NCT was constructed by the CPA in 2007. It is equipped with five berths: four for ocean-going container vessels and one for smaller container ships. Of the port's 18 quayside gantry cranes, an important container-handling equipment, the NCT alone has 14. It can currently handle around 1.3 million TEUs against the design capacity of 1.1 million TEUs. About 44 percent of the port's container traffic goes through this terminal, making it the most revenue-generating facility. The CPA's records state that it earned Tk 1,216 crore in revenue from the NCT in FY23, with a net income of Tk 574 crore after expenditures. Why, then, lease out such a profitable terminal that has been operating successfully for 17 years?

Some argue that Chattogram port is inefficient compared to seaports in other countries, and that hiring a foreign operator will solve the issues. However, port performance does not solely depend on the operator's efficiency. It also depends on various

factors like channel depth, number of terminals and berths, yard space, customs management, etc. While crane moves per hour may relate to operator skill, other metrics—such as vessel waiting time, berth occupancy, container dwell time, and overall handling—depend on the broader infrastructure and systemic factors.

*Bonik Barta* recently reported that Chattogram port's channel is prone to siltation due to its geographical location. With regular dredging, the maximum depth reaches 9.5 metres during high tide, dropping to six to seven metres during low tide, preventing larger vessels from entering. The port's limited channel depth naturally hinders its



FILE PHOTO: STAR

The New Mooring Container Terminal is the largest and most profitable terminal at Chattogram port, handling 44 percent of its container traffic.

ability to match the efficiency of deep-sea ports like Singapore (16 metres), Colombo (18 metres), or Vietnam's Cai Mep (16-18 metres). However, improvement can be made through automation, streamlined customs, improved connectivity, and better logistics infrastructure. Handing it over to a foreign operator isn't the only option available; the CPA can achieve much by hiring expert consultants if necessary and implementing targeted reforms.

Furthermore, deciding who manages a country's ports should not be based only on technical or management capabilities. Ports are strategic national assets with implications for national security. In 2006, DP World tried to acquire terminal operations at six US

ports from a British firm named P&O, but the US Congress opposed it citing security risks. As a result, DP World had to hand over those terminals to an American company called Port America.

There are many such instances, demonstrating that port management is not treated like just any other investment. Foreign company ownership can change hands for political or strategic reasons, leading to uncertainty over port control. While big powers may be able to influence such ownership changes, weaker countries may not have that leverage. Hence, these risks must be taken into consideration.

Another revealing case is the dispute between DP World and Djibouti. The East African country sits near the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden—close to the Suez Canal, one of the world's busiest maritime routes—and serves as Ethiopia's main seaport. In 2006, Djibouti signed a 30-year concession deal with DP World to operate Doraleh Container Terminal (DCT), which began operations in 2009. But in 2018, Djibouti cancelled the contract, saying

under foreign control.

Bangladesh also had an unfavourable experience with Patenga Container Terminal, handed over in June 2024 to Saudi Arabian firm Red Sea Gateway Terminal International (RSGTI). RSGTI was supposed to invest \$240 million (Tk 2,640 crore) into the terminal over 22 years, and the port authority would get revenue of Tk 300 crore annually, according to a *Samakal* report.

However, 10 months on, the promised investment did not materialise. Due to a lack of equipment and skilled personnel, the terminal was operating at only 12 percent of its expected container handling capacity—handling just 170-180 containers per day out of a possible 1,369. Moreover, the port authority's revenue per container from Patenga is only \$18, while it is currently \$47 per container from the NCT.

There is also concern that container handling charges may increase under a foreign operator, which could raise business costs and undermine competitiveness. For example, according to an UNCTAD report, in Australia, DP World unilaterally raised infrastructure surcharges dramatically to recover its investment: Melbourne port's surcharge soared from 3.45 Australian dollars per container in 2017 to 85.30 dollars in 2019—more than 2,000 percent increase. Similar hikes occurred in Brisbane and Sydney, raising alarm at Australia's competition regulator.

The New Mooring Container Terminal currently provides employment to nearly 1,000 workers. If it is leased out to DP World, instead of creating new jobs, there is a risk that existing employment opportunities could be adversely affected. For example, in 2019, DP World reduced 10 percent of its workforce in Australia to deal with volume losses and blamed the Maritime Union of Australia for refusing to make concessions in the bargain to deal with the losses.

Handing over port operations to a foreign operator offers no guarantee of national benefits. For example, Singapore's ports, widely praised for efficiency, are operated by state-owned PSA Corporation and Jurong Port. Ultimately, everything depends on governance. Without proper oversight, even foreign operators fail to deliver; with effective supervision, even domestic operators can perform well.

Considering Chattogram port's strategic importance, geopolitical risks, and existing profitability, handing over the NCT to a foreign company is not advisable. Moreover, it is questionable whether the interim government has the mandate to make such a strategic decision before a national election. The government should rather focus on building national consensus around reform recommendations and preparing for a credible election.

# What is paedophilia and why Bangladesh should be concerned



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There is no subtle way to say this: the safety of our children is under threat, and our society is miserably and cruelly failing them.

In Bangladesh, nearly nine out of every 10 rapes in the first four months of this year involved children, according to recent findings by Ain o Salish Kendra. Many of the victims were infants, some just a few months old.

While temporary outrage follows each disturbing headline, there is a deeper, more disturbing problem that we have barely begun to address: paedophilia.

Paedophilia is not just an act of abuse; it is a diagnosable psychiatric disorder, manifesting as persistent sexual attraction to prepubescent children. However, calling it a “disorder” does not, and should not, excuse the act of physically or sexually abusing a child. It simply urges us to understand how this pathology functions, so we can better confront and contain it.

In other words, we are facing a threat we barely understand and one we're too afraid to confront directly.

Paedophiles do not usually fit our image of a monstrous stranger lurking

in the dark. They are often known to their victims: relatives, teachers, or neighbours. This makes the problem particularly difficult to detect and harder to prosecute.

A University of New Hampshire study argues that many societies, including conservative and religious ones, are particularly vulnerable due to a culture of silence surrounding sexual matters. Children are taught not to speak, parents fear scandal more than trauma, police lack training, and courts lack the will to act swiftly. Sounds familiar, doesn't it?

While our ignorance festers, other nations have begun to reckon with this crisis, experimenting with bold, even controversial measures, such as chemical castration, to prevent repeat offences. However, some methods remain under scrutiny, as questions about human rights violations arise with drastic measures for punishment.

Switzerland, meanwhile, has been debating how to strike a balance between civil liberties and the need for stricter surveillance and monitoring of sex offenders after release.

Bangladesh, on the other hand, has done almost nothing apart from sporadic legal reforms. The death

penalty for rape was introduced in haste in 2020 following mass protests. But, as many warned, punishment without systemic overhaul is like a band-aid over a bullet wound.

With overloaded courts, investigations are almost always botched, leading to survivors being re-traumatised by the very systems meant to protect them. And amid all this, the word “paedophilia” is never uttered, let alone understood or addressed.

In a 2019 exposé by *The New York Times*, investigators revealed that online forums around the world allow paedophiles to trade abuse materials and groom each other with disturbing advice on how to avoid detection. With increasing internet access and insufficient cybersecurity enforcement in Bangladesh, we are a ripe target for these networks. And the signs, as ominous as they are, are already showing.

So, what can be done? First and foremost, we must name the problem. Paedophilia must be included in our national policy conversations, not just as a moral abomination but as a psychiatric threat that demands intervention.

Public awareness campaigns need to teach parents, teachers, and children alike how to recognise paedophilic and grooming behaviours. Schools must be equipped with trained counsellors, while mental health services should offer confidential but accountable pathways for those who fear post-complaint backlash.

Second, our justice system must evolve—radically. Judges and investigators must be trained in handling crimes of child sexual abuse

with sensitivity and scientific rigour.

Legal reforms must include surveillance mechanisms for released offenders, including mandatory therapy and digital activity monitoring. Parliament must debate the merits of punishments used globally and find an urgent solution for our children.

Third, we must collect data. Right now, we don't even know how widespread paedophilic tendencies are in Bangladesh because no serious national research has been undertaken. This absence of data is not accidental; it is the result of a cultural shame that prefers ignorance over uncomfortable truths. Like in many other countries, offenders already convicted of child sex abuse must be interviewed and studied to understand the true nature and gravity of the problem.

Finally, we must listen to survivors—not just the ones who made it to a courtroom or a newspaper article, but the ones who never told anyone because they knew no one would believe them. Every single child who has been sexually abused deserves justice, therapy, and the assurance that their abuser will not walk free to hurt another.

Paedophilia is not a Western problem. It is not just a psychological curiosity or a topic for debate in academic journals. It is here, it is real, and it is robbing our children of their safety, their sanity, and, in many cases, their lives.

We can no longer afford to look away. The question is no longer whether we are ready to face this horror. The question is: how many more children must suffer before we are forced to?