

## Restart the ICUs of 25 public hospitals

Why abandon a project that saves lives?

We are shocked to learn from a report in this paper that intensive care units (ICUs) in 25 public hospitals across the country have not been functional, or only partly functional, for the last few months, mainly because of a shortage of trained staff. This has created a crisis, with critically ill patients being turned away. Most cannot afford private ICU costs and have to turn to the already overburdened, understaffed government hospitals.

According to the report, these ICUs, comprising a total of 240 beds and around 1,000 medical and technical staff, were set up in 22 districts between 2020 and 2024 under a project mainly funded by the World Bank. The contract, however, expired in December 2024, and the government did not reappoint or replace the staff, leaving these ICUs non-functional. At present, 22 districts still lack any ICU facilities, while the majority of ICU beds remain concentrated in hospitals in Dhaka. As a result, many patients must be referred to Dhaka hospitals, with the lengthy travel time posing additional risks to their health. Some hospitals have managed to keep ICUs partially operational by redeploying staff from their existing workforce and relying on dismissed staff from the project, some of whom continue to work unofficially despite their dismissal.

Originally launched to treat Covid patients during the pandemic, these ICUs are essential components of regular hospital care. We are also dismayed to learn that several other vital initiatives under this project have been abandoned after the World Bank declined to extend the contract. These include 10-bed ICUs planned for 33 other districts, paediatric ICUs in 16 medical college hospitals, obstetric ICUs for critically ill pregnant women in 15 medical colleges, 10-bed ICUs at two specialised hospitals, and one-stop emergency centres at 21 medical colleges.

Other crucial facilities that would have been established under this project include microbiology laboratories, the installation or expansion of liquid medical oxygen at 30 hospitals, and medical waste treatment plants at 20 hospitals. These are crucial services for a hospital, especially amid the rising cases of Covid and dengue infections.

It is unfortunate that the World Bank chose not to renew the contract and that the health ministry has been unable to restart these ICUs. Although the government plans to introduce a cluster system, whereby one hospital's ICU will serve patients from two to three neighbouring districts, this hardly meets the growing demand for critical care.

There has always been a glaring gap in ICU and other essential services across public hospitals nationwide. Discontinuing a project aimed at reducing this gap is unwise and shows a lack of foresight. We urge the government to raise funds through alternative donors to restart this project, which would benefit many critically ill patients and save lives.

## Dengue surge demands urgent action

Govt must listen to expert advice to combat its spread

The rapidly rising dengue cases in the country raise a pressing concern: are we heading towards another deadly outbreak this year? The hospitalisation of 1,160 dengue patients in just the first three days of July paints an alarming picture. According to DGHS data, as of July 4, dengue has claimed 45 lives, with the total number of reported cases reaching 11,660. Given the rapid spread of dengue during the monsoon season, the numbers are expected to rise further in the coming weeks. Experts have warned that all 64 districts could face more severe outbreaks than in previous years, as Aedes mosquitoes are now widespread across the country. Unless the government takes urgent and comprehensive action to curb the spread, we may suffer another devastating dengue crisis this year.

Since the beginning of the year, we have repeatedly urged the authorities through this column to take effective measures to curb dengue before it spirals out of control. Unfortunately, the government's response has been largely inadequate. Instead of implementing a comprehensive and well-structured dengue management plan, efforts have been mostly limited to routine fogging and occasional cleaning drives. Moreover, dengue control efforts outside Dhaka have been particularly weak. The recent surge in cases in Barguna is a stark example of this weakness.

This year, DGHS data reveal another troubling trend: women have a higher fatality rate relative to their infection numbers. Men account for 59.3 percent of infections and 53.3 percent of deaths, while women represent 40.7 percent of infections but 46.7 percent of deaths. While several factors may have contributed to this, experts point out that gender-based neglect plays a significant role here. Patriarchal norms often delay women's access to timely medical care, with families often seeking help only when it is already too late. This societal attitude must change if we are to reduce preventable deaths from dengue.

The government must urgently listen to expert advice and develop a comprehensive dengue management plan with clearly defined priorities. Entomologists emphasise that larviciding and the elimination of mosquito breeding grounds should be prioritised over general fogging, which has become largely ineffective. They recommend the use of Insect Growth Regulators (IGRs)—which remain effective for up to three months—alongside targeted larvicide application. Equally crucial is community involvement. Without active public participation in destroying breeding grounds, dengue cannot be effectively controlled. In parallel, the government must ensure that hospitals outside Dhaka are equipped with adequate treatment facilities. Experts have also called for a dedicated vector control department for cluster identification, surveillance, and targeted interventions. Timely implementation of these measures is critical to averting yet another deadly outbreak this year.

# One year after July: A nation waits in uncertainty



**Bobby Hajjaj** is the chairman of Nationalist Democratic Movement (NDM) and a faculty member at North South University. He can be reached at bobby.hajjaj@northsouth.edu.

BOBBY HAJJAJ

As the calendar wheels into July once more, we approach the first anniversary of the great civic insurrection that unseated what was, by any measure, one of the most enduring authoritarian regimes in South Asia's history. The events of that month, its tremors, its torch-lit vigils, its bloodied pavements, constituted more than just an upheaval. They were the birth pangs of a people's longing to breathe freely, to be governed not by fear, but by consent. Yet, as we mark this sacred milestone, the grand celebrations, what really grips us is a creeping unease, a quiet admission that much remains undone.

There was, for a brief interval last month, the hope of reaching consensus, of returning to democratic nation-building in earnest. Following the meeting in London last month between Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus and BNP's Acting Chairman Tarique Rahman—a dialogue heralded as a cornerstone for national reconciliation—the nation dared to believe again. We heard whispers of reason, signs of structured transition, the first contours of institutional sanity. But before the month could pass, and like the monsoon clouds that hover before evaporating into nothingness, the promise of direction has already started to dissipate. We now find ourselves ensnared once more in the ominous choreography of brinkmanship—where actors, seen and unseen, gamble not merely with policy, but with the fate of the republic.

It is the economy—always the economy—that feels the tremors first and most profoundly. Bill Clinton's infamous admonition in 1992—"It's the economy, stupid!"—remains the only compass in times of political confusion. Yet here, the compass spins wildly. Inflation has surged beyond 10 percent, eroding real wages and eviscerating what little remains of the middle class's purchasing power. The proposed budget for FY2025-26 projects a deficit of Tk 2.26 trillion, or roughly 3.6 percent of GDP—an official optimism purchased with heroic revenue assumptions. The Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) warns that the National Board of Revenue may miss its target by Tk 1.05 trillion, perhaps more if present trends persist. This is not a gap, it is a chasm.

Private investment, both domestic and foreign, has frozen. Investors are rational creatures; they demand

not only profit but predictability. No one writes cheques to a state whose stewardship is in limbo. A caretaker administration, however principled, cannot catalyse long-term capital formation. The chambers of commerce know it. So do the garment factory owners, the agribusinessmen, and the fintech pioneers. And so, tragically, do



FILE VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

the retrenched workers now seeking overseas contracts to survive.

Current businesses are suffocating. Their margins are under siege from inflationary pressures, disrupted supply chains, and a merciless tax regime scrambling for revenue. Bankruptcy looms large for many, not due to mismanagement, but because the very atmosphere in which they operate is toxified by uncertainty. And when the private sector falters, the consequences spill far beyond commerce; they seep into livelihoods, into families, into the very moral fabric of society.

Into this void of economic and political ambiguity have crept actors whose motivations are far more malign. Certain parties, many of them historically allergic to liberal democracy and obsessed with theocratic absolutism, have seized upon the vacuum. With rhetorical sleight and strategic opportunism,

evidence of PR's tendency to empower fringe groups and paralyse governance to recognise the threat. This is not an academic squabble. It is a naked power play by those who could not secure popular mandates and now wish to engineer institutional loopholes for influence. Worse still, their ideological lodestar is not democratic pluralism, but an ideological orthodoxy that has historically regarded secular governance as an aberration to be corrected.

The fragility of law and order adds another sinister layer to this already precarious situation. Violent crimes—extortion, land grabs, even assassinations—have not abated. In fact, in some regions they have increased. The police, under-resourced and demoralised, struggle to enforce the writ of the state. The moral authority of the interim advisers has waned, not because their intentions were suspect, but because

For every month that passes without electoral resolution, the economy haemorrhages, the polity polarises, and those with extreme views gain ground. Time, which once seemed to be on our side, now conspires against us. There is no "ideal" moment to vote. The revolution did not ask for perfection. It asked for legitimacy, for representation, for the return of the republic to its rightful stewards: the people.

If we betray that promise now—through delay, through deception, or through distraction—we do not merely postpone democracy. We imperil it.

The July uprising was a moment of rupture, yes—but also of rare unity. That unity is fraying. Let us not allow the silence of inaction to become louder than the chants of the people who made history only a year ago. Let us not forget what we rose against—and more importantly, what we rose for.

# The future of indigenous recognition in Bangladesh



**Mong Sing Hai Marma** is a journalist at The Daily Star.

MONG SING HAI MARMA

On June 23, the Ministry of Cultural Affairs convened an inter-ministerial meeting to discuss a proposed amendment to the Small Ethnic Group Cultural Institute Act, 2010. The new draft is titled Cultural Institution for Ethnic Diversity Act 2025, replacing the term "small ethnic group" with "ethnic diversity", and "institute" with "institution".

While this might appear to be a mere change in wording, it raises a pressing and deeper concern: is this semantic shift a precursor to a larger policy move aimed at removing the constitutional recognition of indigenous peoples in Bangladesh?

### More than semantics: A constitutional question

The relationship between the Bangladesh state and indigenous communities—particularly in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) and the plains—has been shaped through unique legislative and constitutional

arrangements. These include: i) The Chittagong Hill Tracts Regulation, 1900; ii) Regional and District Council Acts; iii) The CHT Land Dispute Resolution Commission Act; and iv) Small Ethnic Group Cultural Institute Act, 2010.

These legal frameworks not only acknowledge the distinct identity of indigenous groups but also ensure a respectful and historically rooted relationship with the state. Any change to these foundations, especially involving terminology, therefore demands careful scrutiny and inclusive dialogue.

### From 'indigenous' to 'ethnic diversity': A shift in philosophy

Replacing "small ethnic group" with "ethnic diversity" might seem innocuous, but it signifies a deeper philosophical shift. While "indigenous" or "small ethnic groups" refer to specific, constitutionally recognised peoples with historical, cultural, and

territorial rights, "ethnic diversity" is an abstract concept. It lacks legal clarity and dilutes the specificity of indigenous identity.

Who exactly does "ethnic diversity" refer to? How is it defined? Does it include constitutionally recognised indigenous peoples, or does it submerge their identity into a generic framework, stripping them of special protections?

### No indigenous representation in policy revision?

Despite calling secretaries from 21 ministries and four director generals to the June 23 meeting, the government excluded direct participation of indigenous institute leaders. They were only allowed to attend online, without voting or speaking rights.

How can a law meant to represent indigenous cultural rights be amended without their physical presence or input? This exclusion raises fundamental questions about representation and legitimacy in the legislative process.

### Undermining multiculturalism

If a state weakens the constitutional foundation of its most marginalised communities, it risks not only alienating them but also damaging the broader ideals of pluralism, inclusivity, and democratic governance.

Following the success of the people's

uprising on August 5, 2025, one piece of graffiti captured the national mood: "This country doesn't belong to any one group. It belongs to all of us."

This sentiment must be reflected in state policy, especially towards indigenous peoples.

### A constructive proposal

We urge the government not to erase identity through abstraction. Instead of shifting from "tribal", "small ethnic group", or "ethnic diversity", we propose enacting a new, modern, and inclusive law titled: Indigenous Cultural Institute Act.

Such legislation must be developed with indigenous representation and built on the principles of constitutional recognition, cultural protection, and administrative participation. This would strengthen—not sever—the bridge between the majority and the minorities in our country.

### A call from the new generation

Today's indigenous youth no longer want to live on the margins of the republic. They seek meaningful participation in every aspect of national development, from policymaking to education, culture, and beyond.

The state must realise that acknowledging and empowering its indigenous peoples is not a concession; it is a constitutional and moral obligation.