

Uttara air crash exposes deadly gaps

It should serve as a wake-up call for aviation safety and emergency response

The death toll from Monday's tragic aircraft crash at Milestone School and College in Dhaka's Uttara has risen to 31 as of the latest count. At least 165 others also remain injured, as per the ISPR press release issued around 2:15 pm on Tuesday. As we have noted in our initial response, this is not the first tragedy involving air force training missions. While none has been as deadly, it is deeply alarming that few—if any—precautionary measures have been taken over the years to protect either military pilots or civilians from the risks posed by such exercises over a densely populated area like Dhaka.

In the aftermath of the crash, aviation experts as well as military and civilian pilots have rightly questioned the logic of allowing training flights over the capital. One expert pointed out that, given Dhaka's extreme population density, conducting such exercises here is far riskier than doing so in less populated regions where the air force also operates. Despite these dangers, air force aircraft continue to use the only runway at the Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport. Experts have long advocated for relocating the adjacent air force base, not only due to safety concerns but also because its operations often disrupt commercial aviation.

According to one air force pilot, flying in such a congested urban environment presents additional challenges. Flight paths should ideally be clear of buildings taller than one or two storeys, yet numerous high-rises now lie directly in their way. Unplanned urbanisation around the Dhaka airport—including the construction of schools, colleges, and shopping malls near approach paths—further complicates the situation. Pilots are forced to ascend rapidly and maintain higher altitudes, placing extra strain on their aircraft. Given the limitations of these machines, even a few seconds lost can prove critical.

Experts have questioned why such high-risk operations are still being carried out from Dhaka when alternative air force bases are available in Jashore and Chattogram. They have also criticised the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh (CAAB) for failing to safeguard civilian passengers, whose safety is compromised by the continued presence of military flights at the capital's airport.

Another disturbing issue is the chaos prevailing at hospitals where injured victims were taken. Political leaders, journalists, and others were seen crowding these facilities, despite the fact that burn patients are acutely vulnerable to complications such as infections. How were so many unauthorised individuals allowed near the victims? What does this reveal about our emergency response protocols and disaster preparedness? Do the authorities have a comprehensive plan in place for such crises—or are we merely reacting in the face of a disaster?

These are questions that demand clear answers and prompt responses from the authorities. Most importantly, it is critical that this does not become yet another tragedy from which we learn nothing and allow history to repeat itself.

Restore peace in Gopalganj

Govt must address fears of arbitrary arrests, harassment

It is distressing to learn that fear still grips many in Gopalganj due to ongoing police drives, with 322 people arrested so far and over 8,400 accused in eight cases filed over the deadly violence that occurred during clashes on Wednesday. On Monday, our correspondent visited Tungipara, Gopalganj. While the last few days have seen things return to some semblance of normalcy, locals still expressed scepticism amid continuous patrols and raids. Some reported experiencing blackouts during night-time raids. Many, accused or not, especially men with suspected Awami League ties, remain at large fearing arrests. Some families have taken shelter in the houses of relatives or local leaders. This situation has obviously created security risks for vacated houses or families unattended by male adults, as well as threats of legal harassment.

These fears are real even though the authorities have dismissed allegations of mass arrests and exploitative litigation. Already, the number of inmates in Gopalganj District Jail has surged. Although the prison has a capacity of 360, it is currently holding 865 inmates, not to mention the dozens transferred to the neighbouring Pirojpur jail due to space constraints. The protracted security fallout is but an indication of the government's poor handling of a known flashpoint like Gopalganj from the start, which reached an extent that even the families of victims refused to file cases, fearing they would not get justice. Another indication, no less significant, is its failure or inability to perform autopsies on time, which can help determine who or what was responsible for the killings. It was only on Monday, five days after burial, that the bodies of three of the five killed were exhumed for post-mortem examinations, that too following a court order.

The background and details of this saga are well known by now. There is no denying that prolonged tension in Gopalganj will only negatively affect other parts of the country. State officials, try as they may, cannot abdicate themselves from the responsibility for the so-called "arrest trade" or "litigation trade", a natural outcome when the rule of law is compromised. More importantly, they must understand that the image they created of themselves by initially allowing four victims to be laid to rest without any inquest or post-mortem examination raises unsettling questions about their capability and sincerity. These questions must be answered and addressed through an impartial investigation.

Going forward, any arbitrary arrest and intimidation—rights violations more easily associated with the fallen regime—must be ceased. The government should instead focus on fully restoring peace in Gopalganj and holding to account not just the perpetrators of July 16 violence but also those who failed to prevent it or acted irresponsibly in its aftermath.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Egyptian monarchy falls

On this day in 1952, the Free Officers, a nationalistic military group led by Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser, engineered a coup that overthrew King Farouk I of Egypt, ending the monarchy and bringing Nasser to power.



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The scent of burning jet fuel has a terrifying permanence. It sears itself into memory, a chemical ghost haunting the places where metal meets earth in catastrophic fury. On the July afternoon in 2025, as a Bangladesh Air Force F-7 BGL fighter jet screamed out of control over Uttara, that acrid stench descended upon the Milestone College campus. It mingled with the chalk dust of interrupted lessons, the ink of unfinished exams, and the horrifying, metallic tang of blood. At least 31 lives (and still counting)—students, teachers, everyday citizens—were extinguished not by war, not by natural disaster, but by a cascade of seemingly mundane, utterly preventable decisions made years, even decades, before. The wreckage cooled, the funerals were held, a day of mourning declared. Yet, the fundamental questions that tragedy screamed into Dhaka's smog-choked sky remain, hanging heavy and unanswered: why must Dhaka's children learn beneath the shadow of aging war machines?

Let's be blunt. The image of a military training jet, older than most of Dhaka's wheezing carbon monoxide gushing public buses, plunging into a schoolyard is not just a tragedy; it's an indictment. That FT-7 BGL is a variant of Chinese-manufactured J-7 jets, which were developed using the Soviet-era MiG-21 design and first entered service globally in the late 1960s. Bangladesh acquired its F-7s, primarily from China, decades later, reportedly in 2013. Years of wear on these airframes stressed by the violent physics of supersonic flight isn't antiquarian charm; it's rolling the dice with lives—the pilots' and everyone beneath their flight path.

Which brings us to the first, glaring question: why is a densely packed metropolis, groaning under the weight of over 2.4 crore souls, the designated playground for training military pilots? Kurmitola Air Base, nestled beside Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport, is literally surrounded by residential areas, schools, and markets. Uttara isn't some distant outpost; it's a pulsing heart of the city. Every takeoff and landing, every simulated engine failure practised over these rooftops, is an exercise conducted over a human powder keg. The calculus is horrifyingly simple: mechanical failure

plus urban density equals to potential catastrophe. The afternoon of July 21, 2025, proved it wasn't just theoretical. It was a formula written in fire and grief. The pilot ejected—a testament to the training and reflexes—but the aircraft, a multi-ton meteor of failing technology, was left to find its own deadly trajectory, which it did, with devastating precision, onto a place of learning.

This isn't merely about one aging jet. It's about a system. It's about why the state persists in using a civilian international airport complex,



The roar of an ancient jet engine over a school is the sound of rusted policy paralysis.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

embedded deep within the urban sprawl, as a primary hub for military flight operations and training. The risks are not unknown. Experts and urban planners have repeatedly flagged the dangers of operating high-performance military aircraft over such environments. The argument often cites convenience, infrastructure, and cost. But what cost? The cost of dozens of lives? The cost of living under a constant, low-frequency dread? The cost of knowing that the roar overhead might not always be routine? Convenience becomes a grotesque euphemism when weighed against the incalculable value of human life extinguished in an instant.

And then there's Tejgaon. Sitting closer to the city's core, Tejgaon Airport is another anachronism

etched into Dhaka's frantic landscape. Originally a major airport, its role has significantly diminished since Shahjalal International took over commercial traffic. Yet, it persists. Helicopters, smaller fixed-wing aircraft, and VIP movements still utilise its runways. Its existence, a vast, underused 300-acre tract of incredibly valuable land locked behind fences in the heart of a suffocating city, defies logic. Why does this operational airport, a relic of a different era, still dominate prime real estate when Dhaka gasps for green lungs and public space? The roar of engines here isn't training jets, but it is a constant reminder of priorities seemingly frozen in amber. The persistent rumours, occasionally acknowledged in official corridors, about its potential relocation or repurposing have yielded little but dust.

The questions compound, each demanding an answer louder than the last:

Why is the modernisation of the Bangladesh Air Force's (BAF) training fleet, particularly the phasing out of geriatric F-7s, not treated with the urgency a ticking time bomb demands? While some newer platforms exist, the continued reliance on aircraft designed in the mid-20th century for missions over a 21st-century megacity is unconscionable. Every extra flight hour squeezed from these machines is a gamble. The pilots strap themselves into coffins with wings, trusting systems decades past their intended lifespan, while the city below remains an unwitting participant in this deadly game of chance.

Why are dedicated training facilities, purpose-built away from population centres, not the absolute, non-negotiable priority? Bangladesh isn't devoid of space. Establishing

modern airbases in less densely populated regions for initial flight training and high-risk manoeuvres, simulated engine failures, isn't a luxury; it's fundamental aviation safety and responsible urban planning rolled into one. It protects the trainees, it protects the public, and it allows for more realistic training without the sword of Damocles hanging over a schoolyard.

Where is the comprehensive, independent investigation into the systemic failures that led to the Uttara disaster, with findings made public and acted upon? While the BAF conducted its inquiry, with lightning-fast accuracy, citing "engine failure," the broader context—the age of the fleet, the location of the base—demands scrutiny that goes beyond the immediate mechanical cause. The public deserves transparency and assurance that the root causes are being addressed, not just the symptoms of one catastrophic failure.

The victims of Uttara weren't statistics. They were *our* children. They were *my* children. They were students with textbooks open, teachers guiding futures, people going about their lives. Their deaths are a permanent stain. But their legacy *must* be changed. We cannot accept the shrug of bureaucratic inertia or the whispered excuses of budget constraints. The cost of inaction is measured in blood, in terror, in burned flesh, and in the erosion of the most basic social contract: the state's duty to protect its citizens from foreseeable harm.

Dhaka is bursting. Its air is thick, its streets choked, its people pressed together. To layer the inherent risks of military aviation, conducted with outdated equipment, onto this pressure cooker is not just poor planning; it is a form of societal negligence. The roar of an ancient jet engine over a school isn't the sound of national security; it is the sound of rusted policy paralysis.

The arithmetic of loss from Uttara is clear. The question now is whether we, as a society, and those entrusted with power, dare to finally learn the brutal lesson. It's time to ground the flying relics before they claim more futures. It's time to reclaim Tejgaon for the people gasping for space and air. It's time to move training far from the nurseries and the markets. The next roaring shadow over Dhaka's rooftops should not be a prelude to another unspeakable headline. It should be the sound of progress, finally taking flight. Let the memorial for those dozens of souls be a city that chooses life, safety, and breathable space over deadly inertia. We owe them, and ourselves, nothing less. We plant saplings in memory; let's uproot the policies that made their deaths possible.

Supercharging the clean energy era



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Energy has shaped humanity's path—from mastering fire, to harnessing steam, to splitting the atom. Today, we're at the dawn of a new era. The sun is rising on the age of clean energy.

Last year, nearly all new power capacity came from renewables. Investment in clean energy soared to \$2 trillion. Solar and wind are now the cheapest sources of power on Earth, and clean energy sectors are creating jobs, boosting growth and powering progress, despite fossil fuels still receiving far greater subsidies.

Countries that cling to fossil fuels are not protecting their economies, they are sabotaging them, undermining competitiveness, and missing the greatest economic opportunity of the 21st century.

Clean energy also delivers energy sovereignty and security. Fossil fuel markets are at the mercy of price shocks, supply disruptions, and geopolitical turmoil, as we saw when Russia invaded Ukraine. But there are no price spikes for sunlight, no embargoes on wind, and almost every nation has enough renewable resources to be energy self-sufficient. Finally, clean energy spurs development. It can reach the hundreds of millions of people still living without electricity



FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

Clean energy delivers energy sovereignty and security.

quickly, affordably, and sustainably, particularly through off-grid and small-scale solar technologies.

All these make the clean energy era unstoppable. But the transition is not yet fast or fair enough. Developing countries are being left behind. Fossil fuels still dominate energy systems, and emissions are still rising when they must plummet to avoid the worst of the climate crisis. To fix this, we need action on six fronts.

First, governments must fully commit to the clean energy future. In the coming months, every country has pledged to submit new national

climate plans—known as Nationally Determined Contributions—with targets for the next decade. These plans must align with limiting global temperature rise to 1.5 degrees Celsius, cover all emissions and sectors, and lay out a clear path to clean energy. G20 countries, responsible for around 80 percent of global emissions, must lead.

Second, we must build 21st-century energy systems. Without modern grids and storage, renewable power can't fulfil its potential. But for every dollar invested in renewable power, just 60 cents go to grids and storage. That ratio needs to be one-to-one.

Third, governments must aim to meet the world's surging energy demand with renewables. Major tech companies must also play their part. By 2030, data centres could consume as much electricity as the entire country, Japan does today. Companies should commit to powering them with renewables.

Fourth, we must embed justice

in the energy transition. This means supporting communities still dependent on fossil fuels to prepare for the clean energy future. And it means reforming critical minerals supply chains. Today, they're riddled with rights abuses and environmental destruction, and developing countries are trapped at the bottom of value chains. This must end.

Fifth, we must make trade a tool for energy transformation. Clean energy supply chains are highly concentrated, and global trade is fragmenting. Countries committed to the new energy era must work to diversify supplies, cut tariffs on clean energy goods, and modernise investment treaties so they support the transition.

Sixth and finally, we must drive finance to developing countries. Africa received just two percent of investment for renewable energy last year, despite having 60 percent of the world's best solar resources. We need international action to prevent debt repayments sucking developing country budgets dry, and to enable multilateral development banks to substantially increase their lending capacity, and leverage far more private finance. We also need credit rating agencies and investors to modernise risk assessments and account for the promise of clean energy, cost of climate chaos, and the danger of stranded fossil fuel assets.

A new energy era is within reach, where cheap, clean, abundant energy powers a world rich in economic opportunity, where nations have the security of energy autonomy, and the gift of electricity is a gift for all.

This is our moment of opportunity to supercharge the global shift. Let's seize it.