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Remembering Aug 15 as a national tragedy

It derailed the trajectory of a newly independent nation

The assassination of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, along with most of his family members, on August 15, 1975 is a dark chapter in Bangladesh's history. The cold-blooded way in which they were murdered—including his minor son, wife, and daughters-in-law, as well as individuals with no familial ties—was shocking and reprehensible. It was also destabilising for a nation still grappling with the trauma and devastation of a nine-month bloody war.

Carried out by a group of army officers, Bangabandhu's assassination was followed by another dastardly act on November 3 of the same year: the brutal jail killing of four national leaders Tajuddin Ahmad, Syed Nazrul Islam, M Mansur Ali, and AHM Qamaruzzaman. Some researchers allege a foreign conspiracy behind both the assassinations of August and November, while others attribute them primarily to internal reasons and power struggles. But these were the very men who had formed a provisional government in April 1971 while Bangabandhu was imprisoned in Pakistan, trained ordinary citizens to become freedom fighters, and led the fight for liberation against a well-equipped occupying army.

Their assassinations steered the country further away from the ideals it was founded on and towards years of military rule. The governments that followed shunned democratic principles and legitimised these heinous crimes. The precedent set on August 15 made future political assassinations more conceivable, including repeated attempts on President Ziaur Rahman, one of which ultimately led to his death in a 1981 military coup, again creating a national crisis.

History must assess Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in two distinct phases: as a leader who inspired a nation to fight for its freedom, and as the prime minister after 1971, whose controversial actions, including the formation of the one-party BAKSAL system, failure to curb corruption, and perceived inability to prevent the 1974 famine, led to public disillusionment.

But it is unfortunate that such a pivotal figure in our history is now often met with contempt and narrow partisan judgement, largely due to his daughter Sheikh Hasina's obsessive dedication of him and monopolising the narrative of the Liberation War. She politicised and weaponised both the war and Bangabandhu's legacy in order to extend her rule and clamp down on anyone she considered an opponent, whether political rivals or ordinary citizens showing signs of dissent. The student-led people's uprising of July-August 2024 was a consequence of her 15 years of abuse of power, culminating in the killing of around 1,400 citizens. As a result, anything associated with Mujib is now anathema to many of those who suffered during her rule.

But Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's foundational role in our struggle for independence is indisputable and cannot be ignored, no matter how politicised his memory has become. Attempts to rewrite history only repeat the mistakes of past regimes.

August 15 should be remembered as a national tragedy that derailed the democratic trajectory of a newly independent nation. Commemorating it is not about political allegiance. It is not about overlooking Bangabandhu's mistakes and failures. It is about acknowledging a truth that shaped the course of our history. Let history judge him in all his contradictions, and not through the narrow lens of politics as we often tend to do.

Save Sada Pathor from total ruin

Illegal stone extraction pushing this tourist spot to the brink

It is disturbing to see the peril facing Bholaganj's Sada Pathor, a broad, shallow stretch of the Dholai River where smooth white stones once lay against the backdrop of Meghalaya's hills. Long considered as one of Sylhet's top tourist attractions, this area, according to a report, now resembles a ravaged quarry—scarred with pits and mud, with its iconic boulders almost gone—following months of rampant extraction. It is equally unfortunate that the plunder, estimated to be valued at hundreds of crores of taka, has surged rather than declined after the Awami League's ouster from power, despite expectations that a so-called environment-friendly, non-political interim government would be able to at least keep the worst excesses in check.

Sada Pathor's plight recently drew national attention after videos and photos of massive stone looting went viral, with hundreds of people, accompanied by small "Barki" boats, seen extracting stones in broad daylight while excavators are also seen tearing into the riverbed. The Zero Point area of Jallong in Gowainghat has been similarly plagued by such looting, which reportedly occurs even at night. According to environmental groups, illegal stone extraction, especially in Companiganj and Gowainghat upazilas, has become an organised crime with mass participation and backing from politically influential quarters.

What is most alarming is the administration's relative inaction and helplessness in this regard. Even after the government decided in April to halt stone extraction from eight Sylhet quarries, the looting has continued unabated. Locals allege that while the previous syndicate at least operated under a regulated system, a resurgence of impunity has opened the floodgates to indiscriminate plunder, with syndicate members encouraging boat owners to supply stones from anywhere, regardless of their legality. They have even used organised pressure tactics, including transport strikes, to resist government restrictions. As Environment Adviser Syeda Rizwana Hasan recently observed, there appears to be "an all-party consensus" when it comes to stone extraction. Indeed.

The government has now reportedly decided to go tough amid mounting criticism. Planned interventions include round-the-clock deployment of joint forces at the Jallong and Sada Pathor areas, continuous drives to dismantle illegal crushing machines and cut off their power supply, identification and arrest of all involved in stone theft, etc. Already, an overnight drive has resulted in the recovery of around 12,000 cubic feet of stones looted from Sada Pathor. Such efforts must be sustained regardless of any pushback from the syndicate. That said, for these measures to be really successful, political parties, especially the BNP, must do more than public condemnation and token disciplinary action. They must actively resist party members abusing power to extract stone and commit other crimes against our nature.

GRADUATION OR DEFERRAL

Is Bangladesh ready for the post-LDC era?



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SELIM RAIHAN

Bangladesh is set to graduate from the Least Developed Country (LDC) status in November 2026. This will be considered as a milestone once celebrated as a triumph of development. However, the national conversation has shifted; the feeling that was once a cause for celebration now evokes worry. Business leaders warn that the economy's foundation is fragile, strained by macroeconomic instability, elevated interest rates, evolving and uncertain political transition, and waning investor confidence. With almost 85 percent of exports concentrated in ready-made garments, the loss of duty-free access to major markets threatens to erode export volumes and put millions of livelihoods at risk.

The hard truth is that in the past few years since graduation was confirmed, Bangladesh has made little tangible progress in addressing the structural reforms required for a smooth transition. The earlier celebratory tone overlooked the fact that time alone does not guarantee readiness. The question is, if we could not deliver meaningful reforms in the past decade, what gives us confidence that they can be achieved in the short run-up that remains?

The challenges are well-known. Our export base remains dangerously narrow. Even pharmaceutical exports, currently benefitting from TRIPS waivers, will lose their cost advantage post-graduation, not just for Bangladesh but also for the millions in other countries who rely on affordable medicine. Bangladesh is already far behind competitors like Vietnam and India in securing important free trade agreements (FTAs) with major markets. An FTA between India and the UK and FTAs for Vietnam with the EU and Canada are stark contrast to Bangladesh's limited progress, a small preferential trading agreement (PTA) only with Bhutan.

Global conditions are no less demanding. Trade tensions, such as the US's reciprocal tariffs under the Trump administration, highlight how



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

the rules of World Trade Organization (WTO) are ignored in ways that are less sympathetic to the LDCs. Post-graduation, Bangladesh will face higher compliance costs related to labour standards, environmental sustainability, and intellectual property rights. In the EU, our single largest export destination, duty-free access will remain for another three years until 2029, but new challenges, including ESG reporting and stricter labour compliance, will impose additional costs and uncertainty.

The government and development partners have explored the notion of a "smooth transition," with the Economic Relations Division producing two reports on graduation and private investment and the Bangladesh Investment Development Authority (BIDA) assessing investment diversification. These are important steps, but reports alone cannot deliver reforms. Without alignment among political and business stakeholders and bureaucracy, the reform agenda risks stalling. And herein lies the danger: deferring graduation could

more time. There is nothing wrong in seeking for this breathing space when the current domestic and global headwinds are strong. But such an appeal must be very well-grounded on evidence-based arguments. Three of the LDCs, namely Bangladesh, Nepal and Lao PDR, are scheduled to graduate simultaneously in 2026. The problem is, if only Bangladesh seeks for an extension, it may not gain the required traction internationally, while a collaborative appeal with Nepal and Lao PDR could carry more weight. However, initial indications suggest that the deferral debate is not particularly active in those two countries, which could complicate the possibility of a coordinated approach.

While attempting to seek a deferral of graduation, the bigger question is whether a deferral would actually help. Without an urgent, coordinated reform drive spanning trade policy, industrial diversification, investment facilitation and skills development, any extension would be wasted time. The forthcoming political transitions (with

through accession of regional blocs such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), and prepare the private sector to face increased compliance requirements. It has to reform investment facilitation frameworks, improve institutional capacity, and advocate diversification of both exports and export destinations. A reinvigorated commitment to attracting substantial foreign direct investment (FDI) is also fundamental to the reform project, since FDI can provide not only capital but also technology, managerial skills, and entry into new markets.

Ultimately, LDC graduation is not voluntary; entry into the club may be, but exiting is inevitable once the criteria are met. The choice we have is whether to make it a symbol of sustained capability or an exposed vulnerability. If reforms are deferred under the guise of a graduation delay, we risk turning a historic milestone into a prolonged stumble.

A path to trauma healing for Milestone survivors



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GAWHER NAYEEM WAHRA

Initially, the father of two students of Milestone School and College was not feeling comfortable talking with me. Perhaps he was forced to put himself under self-embargo due to the meaningless inquiries from a group of "news hunters." He was in his office when the incident happened. He rushed to the location to learn that both his sons were unharmed. The older one, a 10th-grader, was at home, but the younger one was at school that day.

After assuring him that I wouldn't reveal his name to anyone, the father began to share. "My younger boy has been extremely frightened ever since the incident. He was stuck in a room adjacent to the Hyder Ali Building where the plane crashed," he said. "He used to not talk much to begin with; now he speaks even less. And he gets anxious whenever the topic of going to school comes up."

The school authority, with the help of Bangladesh Air Force, Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) and Hospital, and BRAC, opened medical camps and mental health services on the campus.

On July 28, a week after that terrible afternoon, I went to the crash site and

saw parents picking up their children's school bags. The bags were stacked in rows in a room of a single-storey building. The stack created a gloomy sculpture. Every bag had a story. A sheet of paper with the pupil's name, roll number, class, and branch written on it was attached to each bag. One black bag stuck out among the others. It was badly burnt in the fire.

The snooping mob was still there. A few of them were filming and taking photos. An air force delegation reached the crash site at around 10 in the morning. They gathered some evidence and debris. Many students who came to avail medical services at the campus with their parents seemed visibly scared and wanted to leave right away.

"I've been to the medical camp three times since the incident," a fifth-grader informed me. "Every time I enter the campus, my heart races and I can hear the loud sound of the plane," he said. The sound of the jets and planes became intolerable to him. Another girl from the same class joined him, "Every time I hear the sound of an aeroplane, I feel like I'm about to get hit and feel the urge to flee."

I met a survivor whose ears were hurt in the incident. His ears were still

swollen, and his face and hands had burn marks. He was examined by the camp doctors and offered medication and advice. According to the health aid provider, he was going to be taken to the Combined Military Hospital (CMH) if necessary.

I came across three pupils who were grieving the loss of their best friends. One of them said he went to the cafeteria to eat something and bring food for his friend just before the plane crashed. The incident claimed the life of his friend.

Another student who lost two friends now gets frightened every time he hears a plane fly over their house. In his dreams, the deceased buddies visit every night.

This kind of trauma cannot be treated with medication. The attending physician from the camp suggested that parents must encourage their children to play with friends rather than being alone. The doctor also suggested that the parents take their children out. These steps aid in the healing process. It is important to remember that not all traumatised children need professional counselling or clinical treatment, but all of them require assistance from their parents and others around them. Having a supportive network of family, friends and teachers, as well as reassurance and open communication can help many kids recover from traumatic events. However, clinical assistance such as trauma-focused therapy could be required if a child's symptoms have a substantial influence on their everyday functioning, mental health, or quality of life.

Instead of conventional class

activities, children should spend more time engaging in age-appropriate games and creative art. Playing is an effective healing strategy for traumatised kids because it offers a fun and safe space for resolving feelings and developing resilience. Children can rebuild healthy relationships, examine their vulnerabilities, and learn coping skills at their own pace with play therapy. Those who may find it difficult to vocally communicate complicated emotions associated with trauma might be able to do so through play.

Games can be designed with the assistance of child psychologists to teach coping skills like emotional control, problem-solving methods, and relaxing techniques. Additionally, via play, kids can gain a sense of mastery, control, and self-worth—all of which are essential for fostering resilience in the face of hardship. Through play with classmates and caregivers, traumatised children can lessen feelings of loneliness, develop a sense of belonging, and re-establish social ties.

Children must return to school because it will aid in the process of restarting "life as usual." Initially, the focus should be on socialising, playing games, singing, painting, and conversing with friends rather than typical academic pursuits. They can progressively re-enter the demanding job of studying and taking tests, etc once these activities have helped settle their thoughts. Additionally, parents ought to be able to visit the school whenever they choose. In a variety of ways, they (parents and caregivers) should also receive emotional support.