

Stop another fresh Rohingya influx

This crisis must not be allowed to drag on indefinitely

We are alarmed by the situation in Myanmar as fresh clashes erupted between the Arakan Army and Rohingya armed groups on the opposite side of the Whykong border from August 22 until the early hours of August 23. Reportedly, this was the fourth such clash over the past month, amid indications that Myanmar junta troops are preparing to retake parts of Rakhine. According to community leaders (Majhis) at the Teknaf Rohingya camps, who cited their relatives in Myanmar, between 400 and 700 Rohingyas have already fled their homes in Laldia, located across Teknaf's Jallia Island. Many have attempted to cross into Bangladesh but were unsuccessful due to heightened border patrols. In addition to the ongoing military clashes, the Arakan Army's extortion and harassment are also forcing many Rohingyas to flee to Bangladesh. If the fighting persists, there is a risk of another large-scale Rohingya influx.

For over eight years, Bangladesh has generously hosted 1.2 million Rohingya refugees despite the significant socio-economic and environmental strain this has placed on us. The crisis has deepened in recent months with approximately 150,000 more Rohingyas crossing into Bangladesh to escape intensifying conflict between the Arakan Army and the military junta. With repeated failed repatriation efforts, Bangladesh is already struggling to support the existing Rohingyas. If more arrive, it will be even harder for us to provide for them, especially with global aid shrinking significantly. The recent US funding cuts have already strained the conditions in the camps, limiting the Rohingyas' access to vital services like healthcare and education. Numerous projects, including those related to health, family planning, nutrition, and education, have been affected. According to a recent report by this daily, around 400,000 Rohingya children face an uncertain future as fund cuts force nearly 6,400 NGO-run schools in Cox's Bazar to shut down or cut back classes.

Humanitarian organisations have repeatedly warned that the situation will further deteriorate unless funds are urgently released. A recent RMMRU study revealed poor living standards, rising gender-based violence, including physical violence, sexual exploitation, coerced marriages, and deep psychological distress, as well as serious safety issues inside the camps. Given the current instability and conflict in Myanmar, if more Rohingyas arrive, the situation in Bangladesh will further deteriorate.

Against this backdrop, a three-day international seminar on the Rohingya crisis commenced yesterday, bringing together experts from both home and abroad, and this will hopefully generate concrete proposals for alternative funding mechanisms and a sustainable resolution to the crisis. These proposals could be presented at the upcoming High-Level Conference on the Rohingya Crisis, scheduled to take place in New York next month on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly. We would urge the international community not to shirk its responsibility in this regard. It must play its role in resolving this protracted crisis through meaningful engagement with Myanmar. Without an urgent and sustainable solution, the Rohingya crisis risks escalating into a serious threat to regional stability.

Protect the rights of domestic workers

Include them in the labour law

Accurate estimates of domestic workers are hard to find as they remain outside the formal workforce in Bangladesh. According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), there are approximately 2.5 million domestic workers, 80 percent of whom are women. As poverty rises, these numbers also rise. But despite providing essential services to countless households, these individuals remain largely "invisible" to both the state and society, leaving them exposed to widespread exploitation. There is currently no standardisation in their pay or working hours, resulting in many being underpaid and overworked. Many also face verbal and physical abuse, with little legal recourse due to the absence of representative organisations. Live-in workers, particularly young girls, are especially at risk, with numerous cases of sexual abuse and torture.

So, how can we protect their rights? At a recent dialogue jointly organised by Shobujer Oviyan Foundation, Oxfam in Bangladesh, The Daily Star, and co-funded by the European Union, participants offered several key recommendations. First, domestic workers must be formally recognised under existing legal frameworks. A crucial step would be for Bangladesh to ratify ILO Convention No. 189, which promotes protections and decent working conditions for domestic workers. Meanwhile, the 2015 Domestic Workers' Protection and Welfare Policy, which includes a code of conduct to safeguard their rights, must be enacted into law. Despite repeated proposals from the Domestic Workers Rights Network (DWRN), this has yet to happen.

An ordinance followed by parliamentary ratification is essential, supported by nationwide awareness campaigns targeting both employers and workers. Since the policy's publication, some police stations have begun registering complaints from domestic workers, but without a binding legal framework, justice has remained elusive in most cases.

It is, however, encouraging that the Labour Reform Commission has proposed including domestic workers in the labour law. Other important recommendations include written employment contracts, skills training opportunities, and a workers' welfare fund. Given Bangladesh's ratification of ILO Conventions on the Minimum Age and Worst Forms of Child Labour, the government should also move to end the employment of minors in domestic work. Ultimately, only a binding law, and its proper enforcement, can protect the rights of domestic workers and hold employers accountable. Legal recognition is essential to ensuring these vital workers receive the support and dignity they deserve.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Mass exodus of Rohingya

On this day in 2017, hundreds of thousands of Rohingya fled brutal military attacks in Myanmar and sought refuge in Bangladesh. Within a week, the number reached half a million. Today, around 860,000 Rohingya live in camps in Cox's Bazar.

Why the Bangladesh-US deal demands public scrutiny



Kamal Ahmed
is head of the Media Reform Commission in
Bangladesh and an independent journalist.
His X handle is @ahmedkal.

KAMAL AHMED

The hastily struck tariff deal with the Trump administration has brought a measure of relief to Bangladesh, both economically and politically. But if the early signs are any indication, the story is far from over. Reports in the media have mostly focused on the positives—most notably, a surge in orders for readymade garments, in some cases rerouted from neighbouring countries facing higher tariffs. In the short term, this has led to a boost in apparel exports. Encouraging as this may be for the apparel sector, the bigger picture is still unfolding, and the long-term impact remains uncertain.

Commerce Adviser Sheikh Bashir Uddin stated that the government is working to reduce the US imposed reciprocal tariff from 20 percent to 15 percent. Speaking to reporters on August 12, he said talks with Washington were ongoing and that a reduction could come before the final agreement. "We hope that the steps we have taken to reduce the US Bangladesh trade deficit will reduce the duty," Bashir said. He

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also promised that the government would disclose the much-debated Non-Disclosure Agreement (NDA) once approval comes through from the US. That NDA has been at the heart of a storm, fuelling controversy and criticism of the government for months.

NDAs are nothing unusual in bilateral trade negotiations. Confidentiality often gives negotiators an edge, especially when global

competitors are watching. However, secrecy makes little sense once a deal has been signed. The expectation now is that the government will publish the NDA sooner rather than later. Other countries are already doing so, allowing their businesses to plan ahead and strategise, while giving the public space for debate. Bangladesh risks falling behind if it does not follow suit.

One of the biggest sticking points in the talks remains agriculture. Here, the debate echoes far beyond Bangladesh. In Europe, the issue is particularly charged. Last month, the US and EU narrowly avoided a tariff war with a last-minute deal. Yet, agriculture remains unresolved. A joint statement released on August 21 confirmed that Washington would keep high tariffs on European vehicles until Brussels lowered duties on US industrial and agricultural goods. It was described as only "a first step," leaving the toughest questions for later.

For Washington, those questions involve securing broader access for

its farm exports—ranging from bison and dairy to tree nuts and seafood—as well as rolling back digital restrictions that hamper the big US tech platforms. Yet, Europe has long resisted opening its markets to US agriculture, citing higher standards for food safety, environmental protection, and animal welfare. The EU's precautionary principle means no product enters

Chowdhury—a politician once known for her strong anti-US stance—to allow limited cultivation of GM crops such as brinjal and cotton. In 2013, Bt Brinjal became the country's first GM crop, followed by the approval of GM cotton in 2023.

The interim government initially tried to show goodwill towards Washington by buying US fuel, wheat,



VISUAL: MAHIYA TABASSUM

until proven safe—a sharp contrast to the US approach, where products are assumed safe until proven otherwise.

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That point has been underlined by Fisheries and Livestock Adviser Farida Akhter, a long-time campaigner for farmers' rights and indigenous agriculture. She has gone public with her concerns that Bangladesh is under mounting pressure to open its markets to beef, genetically modified (GM) crops and seeds, and to ease restrictions on chemical and pesticide giants.

In fact, US agribusiness influence in Bangladesh runs deeper than many realise. Monsanto has lobbied for years to introduce GM seeds here. The company even managed to persuade former agriculture minister Matia

and aircraft in hopes of narrowing the trade deficit. But those gestures fell short. In the end, it was Bangladesh's powerful apparel lobby that pushed hardest for the deal, arguing that access to the US market had to be protected at any cost—even though the US accounts for only 18 percent of Bangladesh's exports. Their clout created an impression of urgency that overshadowed other risks. That urgency may yet come with a price, opening the door to GM foods, hormone-treated beef, and chlorine-washed poultry.

There is also the climate cost. Before Trump's re-election, momentum was building worldwide around localising food systems as a way to cut carbon emissions—the biggest driver of global warming. Trump's trade agenda has rolled back much of that progress, rewriting the rules to suit short-term US interests. Adapting to this new reality does not mean Bangladesh should embrace policies that risk long-term harm to its people, farmers, and environment.

Rainwater can be an irrigation lifeline



Dr Makhan Lal Dutta
is an agricultural engineer, and
chairman and CEO of Harvesting
Knowledge Consultancy. He can be
reached at Makhan_Dutta@hk-bd.org.

MAKHAN LAL DUTTA

Every monsoon, Bangladesh receives around 2,500 mm of rainfall, but much of this rainwater flows into rivers and drains without being captured. Meanwhile, farmers face water scarcity during the dry season and groundwater levels in cities, including Dhaka, have declined sharply due to over-extraction for irrigation. Amidst climate change threats and increasing salinity, rainwater harvesting is emerging as a practical solution to support irrigation, safeguard food security, and build resilience.

Groundwater extraction in Bangladesh is among the world's highest, with over 90 percent of groundwater used for irrigation. In Dhaka, water tables have dropped by 60-75 metres, while in the north, depletion threatens agriculture and drinking water supplies. Without intervention, groundwater scarcity will intensify by 2030, risking land subsidence and a decline in crop productivity.

However, rainwater harvesting, a centuries-old practice, can offer a solution if modernised to collect, store, and use rainwater for irrigation during the dry season. In coastal districts like Satkhira and Khulna, where salinity restricts freshwater access, many households use storage tanks to collect rainwater. This allows them to cultivate vegetables and grow backyard gardens, thus improving

nutrition and livelihoods. These low-cost systems have empowered women, who maintain water systems in their communities and earn additional income.

Rainwater harvesting also aligns well with water-saving irrigation methods. The Alternate Wetting and Drying (AWD) technique, promoted by the Bangladesh Rice Research Institute (BRRI), International Rice Research Institute (IRRI), and Asian

and water-efficient practices can complement each other for maximum impact.

Despite its clear benefits, the adoption of rainwater harvesting for irrigation remains limited. The Bangladesh Water Act, 2013 encourages water conservation but lacks clear incentives or subsidy mechanisms for farmers to install rainwater systems. Although the Bangladesh National Building Code (BNBC) mandates rainwater harvesting for all new buildings constructed on plots larger than 300 square metres, enforcement is weak, and retrofitting remains rare. There is also a lack of clear guidelines on how to implement farm-scale rainwater harvesting systems, making it harder for rural communities to adopt the practice systematically.

A 10,000-litre tank connected to a 150-square-metre rooftop can

while building climate resilience.

A clear, integrated policy approach to harness the full benefits of rainwater harvesting is needed. Subsidy programmes, tax incentives, and low-interest financing for rainwater systems would encourage farmers and industries to invest in them. Public-private partnerships can help scale up local tank production, and trained community-based maintenance teams can ensure that the systems remain operational and effective for years. Local governments can integrate rainwater harvesting with broader climate adaptation strategies to build resilient water systems at the community level.

Affordable modular tanks, gutter systems, basic filtration units, and low-pressure pumps can be assembled locally at manageable costs. Community-driven initiatives led by women's groups have shown how collective action can sustain rainwater systems, while private sector engagement can drive innovation in design and maintenance services.

Rainwater harvesting for irrigation also aligns with Bangladesh's climate commitments. By reducing groundwater extraction, rainwater harvesting helps conserve aquifers, while water-efficient farming methods like AWD reduce emissions. Consequently, smallholder farmers can lower production costs while improving productivity and resilience to weather shocks. As the climate crisis deepens, traditional reliance on groundwater will become increasingly unsustainable. In contrast, rainwater harvesting is a nature-based, practical, scalable, and equitable solution. With supportive policies, investments, and community engagement, Bangladesh can transform its monsoon rains into a year-round resource for agriculture, livelihoods, and climate resilience.

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Development Bank (ADB), reduces water use while maintaining rice yields. Field trials in Naogaon and Sirajganj have shown that AWD can reduce water usage by up to 20 percent, lower irrigation costs, and cut greenhouse gas emissions by 30 percent without harming yields. Farmers have reported stable or even increased production while using fewer irrigation cycles, demonstrating how rainwater storage

provide sufficient water for household and small-scale irrigation needs throughout the dry season. In rural areas, bunds and ponds can capture monsoon runoff for later use in fields, reducing dependence on groundwater. In urban industrial zones, factories are beginning to explore rooftop rainwater harvesting for non-potable industrial processes, which could significantly reduce their groundwater dependence