The Daily Star

Rohingya crisis needs greater solidarity

Yunus's seven-point proposal deserves attention

It is encouraging to see the Rohingya crisis getting renewed attention following a three-day conference in Cox's Bazar that brought together global stakeholders and Rohingya representatives in part to prepare inputs for a high-level conference scheduled at the UN Headquarters next month. A salient feature of this event was a seven-point proposal forwarded by Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus, which needs to be acknowledged for capturing the major talking points of this evolving crisis. For too long, the crisis has been met with either indifference or a passive, short-term approach. Yunus rightly reminds the world that the Rohingya people's "umbilical" bond with their homeland cannot be severed, and that their safe and dignified return must remain at the core of any solution.

His first proposal—creating a "practical roadmap" for repatriation—underscores this point, for without such a plan the crisis risks being trapped in perpetual rhetoric. His second proposal highlights the need for sustained international aid, with major funding gaps emerging in the Joint Response Plan for 2025-26, especially after US cuts. The third and fourth points relate to the cessation of violence in Rakhine, allowing internally displaced persons to safely return home, and the creation of a platform for dialogue among Myanmar's ethnic groups to ease tensions.

Equally important is his fifth point stressing greater involvement from ASEAN, neighbouring countries, and the international community in fostering peace and tackling cross-border crimes that destabilise the region. In this regard, he particularly mentions the ASEAN five-point consensus. In his sixth proposal, Yunus called on regional and global actors to stand firmly against ethnic cleansing and calibrate their relations with the Myanmar government, Arakan Army, and other armed groups accordingly. Finally, he placed justice and accountability at the heart of the solution, urging stronger international commitment to ongoing processes at the ICJ, ICC, and other forums. These seven pillars collectively outline a path towards both immediate relief and long-term resolution.

Going forward, we expect to see greater efforts on these fronts, especially from China which has the leverage to influence happenings in Myanmar and press for dialogue under ASEAN's five-point consensus. The fact is, as long as conflicts continue in Rakhine, the journey to desired outcomes, especially Rohingya refugees's repatriation, is unlikely to gain momentum. Even today, discriminatory policies like the 1982 Citizenship Law deny them basic rights. As Khalilur Rahman, the national security adviser and high representative for the Rohingya issue, has reiterated at the Cox's Bazar conference, Bangladesh submitted lists for approximately eight lakh Rohingya to Myanmar, which confirmed over 1,80,000 as eligible for return. But unless those root causes are addressed, not only will their return remain elusive but new challenges will complicate things further. Since early 2024, 1,50,000 more Rohingya have already arrived in Bangladesh following the surge in conflicts in Myanmar.

Bangladesh has done all it could so far, opening its borders to the refugees and carrying a burden far beyond its capacity. The refugees themselves have repeatedly voiced their yearning to go home. Regional and global leaders now must step up to ensure that this crisis is not allowed to being dragged on indefinitely.

Rising poverty needs proper responses

PPRC study raises concerns about ongoing efforts

We cannot overstate the seriousness of the latest findings on poverty and indebtedness in Bangladesh. According to a study by the Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC), the national poverty rate now stands at nearly 28 percent—up from 18.7 percent in 2022. Extreme poverty, too, has risen from 5.6 percent to 9.35 percent during the same period. These figures highlight widening economic distress in the country, especially for low-income households, with their growing dependence on debt flagged as a major vulnerability. Average household debt in mid-2025 was Tk 189,033—45 percent higher than the average household savings of Tk 130,728. For the poorest 10 percent, debt stands at Tk 62,767, more than three times their savings. In stark contrast, the richest 10 percent maintain far higher savings than debts, reinforcing the inequality gap.

As per the PPRC study, borrowing is largely being used for essentials, such as food, healthcare, and basic survival, not asset-building. Nearly one-third of debt is spent on household consumption, followed by medical expenses and housing repairs. Over half of the surveyed households reported at least one chronically ill member, underlining how healthcare costs are pushing families deeper into a debt trap.

To address this situation, we need a people-centred approach to development that prioritises their well-being, equity, and inclusivity. Five areas of growing vulnerability were identified in the PPRC report: debt burden, food insecurity, chronic illness, non-sanitary latrine use, and poverty in female-headed households. These challenges demand immediate policy attention and targeted interventions. While some macroeconomic reforms are currently underway, these are not enough. The government must continue to focus on reducing food prices and improving the supply chain to ease inflationary pressures, which hurt the poor disproportionately. At the same time, we need a comprehensive social protection framework that includes affordable healthcare, debt-relief mechanisms, and sustainable financial assistance for the most vulnerable.

Creating more jobs is also critical. Without sufficient employment opportunities, rising poverty and debt burden will only worsen. Business-friendly policies, political neutrality in trade, and proper regulatory reforms are necessary to restore confidence in the economy and attract both domestic and foreign investment. Bangladesh has only five years left to meet its SDG targets. Allowing poverty and inequality to deepen further will clearly derail progress. Our policymakers, therefore, must act urgently to not just stabilise the macroeconomy but also to protect citizens from the cycle of debt and deprivation.

Resetting the republic: Caretaker, 15th Amendment, and July Charter

Barrister Khan Khalid Adnan
is an advocate at the Supreme Court of Bangladesh, fellow at the Chartered Institute of Arbitrators, and head of the chamber at Khan Saifur Rahman and Associates.

KHAN KHALID ADNAN

In December 2024, the High Court ruled that the portion of the 15th Amendment that abolished the non-party caretaker government (NCG) was unconstitutional, thereby restoring both the caretaker framework and the referendum mechanism. It published its full reasoning in July. The verdict declared that repealing Article 58A of the constitution (NCG provision) "destroyed the basic structure of [democracy]," struck those repeal sections as void with prospective effect, and revived Article 142's referendum safeguard. That holding sits atop a mountain of record evidence in the judgment itself, which traces how parliament passed the 15th Amendment on June 30, 2011, even as the Appellate Division's short order (May 10, 2011) had allowed two more elections under the caretaker system. Yet, the High Court also declined to void the entire amendment for procedural flaws, limiting its remedy to the parts that injured the constitution's basic features. In practical terms, the legal situation today is this: the NCG's abolition has been judicially undone, referendums are back, and finality awaits the Appellate Division's review.

The implications of this legal development for election-time governance are profound. First, the door is legally open to hold the next parliamentary election under a constitutionally grounded caretaker—a demand born of hard experience with elections in 2014, 2018 and 2024 that were widely criticised or boycotted. The EU Election Expert Mission, EU institutions, and the United States all flagged the 2024 polls as lacking full participation and credibility; those assessments now echo inside the judgment itself. Second, the restoration of referendums raises the bar for any future attempt to dismantle election-time neutrality: the people must now be asked directly. And third, by grounding its remedy in Bangladesh's basic-structure jurisprudence, the court has signalled that "free and fair elections" are not merely policy choices but part of the constitutional architecture.

If the law has moved, politics is sprinting to keep up. Last week, the National Consensus Commission (NCC) circulated the final draft of its "July National Charter 2025" among political parties. The charter can be seen as a sprawling blueprint to translate major reform proposals and expectations into operating rules: term limits for the prime minister, a bicameral legislature, an independent appointments architecture—and, crucially, a process to select a chief adviser for the caretaker by a multi-party committee that can draw in senior judges and use ranked-choice voting if consensus fails. Yet, the caretaker question remains exquisitely sensitive. Major parties diverge not on whether to restore an NCG, but on who gets decisive voice on adviser selection when initial orders stall. The NCC's own account shows a spectrum: one consolidated proposal for a 13-member cross-party selection panel; a BNP package that keeps parliament central and excludes the judiciary; Jamaat options that re-empower the chief justice; and newer entrants pressing for vote-share-based formulas. After extensive discussions, the NCC's July

Charter outlined a detailed procedure for selecting the chief adviser through a five-member committee consisting of: (i) the prime minister, (ii) the leader of the opposition, (iii) the speaker, (iv) the deputy speaker representing the opposition, and (v) a representative from the second-largest opposition party in parliament. If the committee fails to decide following this process, two judicial members—one from the Appellate Division and one from the High Court Division—would be added. However, the "notes of dissent" indicate that the BNP opposed including senior judges and adopting ranked choice backups, instead advocating parliamentary intervention—an approach critics caution could enable

the ruling party to influence the outcome.

These differences are not academic. They go to the heart of our election-engineering pathology since 2011. After the Appellate Division's 13th Amendment case (*Abdul Mannan Khan vs Government of Bangladesh*) prospectively invalidated the caretaker but permitted the next two elections under it, parliament moved ahead of the full judgment and erased the NCG entirely. The results—boycotts, disputed administrations, and eventually the student-led July-August 2024 uprising—are now part of the judicial record and contemporary reporting alike.

So, what would it take to get out of this toxic loop and run a genuinely free and fair election? I suggest following three steps immediately. First, lock in a neutral and workable caretaker design with "fail-safes" that do not return discretion to whoever holds a parliamentary majority. The NCC's ranked-choice fallback with limited judicial representation is worth keeping because it reduces single-party vetoes;

the parliamentary-override model should be rejected for the same reason. Second, implement the election-integrity basics before polling day: an empowered, consensus-appointed Election Commission; enforceable codes for police and administration; public dashboards on results and complaints; and expedited adjudication of election offences. These are not abstract ideals—they track what recent expert missions and observers have urged. Third, legislate a binding timeline. One weakness of the July Charter draft is the absence of an execution calendar; without dates, reform is a moving target.

How far is the reality? To be frank, we are midway. The court has cleared the constitutional obstacles and published

its full reasoning. The NCC has delivered a final draft and parties have engaged, but dissent notes—especially on who ultimately decides the chief adviser—could still turn a reform into a new instrument of partisan control. Meanwhile, the interim administration faces pressure to go to the polls even as it confronts violence, party registration controversies, and public fatigue. In this context, the July Charter could serve as a bridge, but only if it becomes legally enforceable and aligned with the court's rulings: its caretaker provisions should be embedded through a constitutional amendment, to be applied when an elected parliament is in session, backed by a legally binding framework (including a referendum where necessary), with implementing laws enacted and institutions activated immediately rather than waiting until after an election.

An enduring lesson runs through our jurisprudence and our streets alike. The Appellate Division's short order in 2011 was a compromise with necessity; it did not license permanent partisan control of elections. The 15th

VISUAL: **ANWAR SOHEL**

Amendment's caretaker repeal—and the politics built upon it—taught us how quickly public trust erodes when that control returns. The High Court has now reset the constitutional baseline. The July Charter can translate that reset into practice, but only if parties accept constraints on themselves. If they will not, the court's restoration of the referendum gives the electorate a tool to insist. That is the cleanest way out of election engineering: a neutral caretaker chosen by rules no party can rig, an election run by institutions no prime minister can capture, and a timetable no government can move. Anything less risks repeating the last decade under a new name.

Students need to be taught responsible use of AI

Joyanta Jyoti Mondal
is a graduate researcher at the College of Engineering of the University of Delaware in the US.

JOYANTA JYOTI MONDAL

Since the concept of Artificial Intelligence (AI) emerged, it has become an integral part of university academia. The increased usage is also seen among Bangladeshi students. From simplifying complex concepts to generating entire assignments, generative AI technologies have undeniably changed how students learn and work. With this rapid adoption, a major concern arises: are we teaching our students to reason manually and critically before they head towards such tools for answers?

There is nothing wrong with embracing new technology. In fact, I welcome it, especially given our country's comparative gap in digital access. However, we must also recognise its potential to weaken essential human reasoning if used mindlessly.

AI is a powerful tool, but like a sword, it must be wielded with skill

and intention. Some of the students I mentor for research sometimes rely on AI without first trying to form an opinion or construct an argument on their own. Research by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology suggests that, over time, this can create what they refer to as "cognitive debt"—a reduction in brain connectivity and problem-solving ability when external tools are overused. We may be on the right track using AI to make our lives easier, but not by being unmindful. Before students rely on AI, they must engage their brains. Otherwise, what comes after is the gradual erosion of the strength of critical thinking that defines us as humans.

This is not just a theoretical concern. Bangladesh's National AI Policy 2024 rightly states that AI should be used to *enhance* education quality and *promote* critical thinking, not replace them. The policy calls

for AI solutions to support problem-solving capacity. But in practice, we see a different reality: students often skip the thinking process altogether and go straight to the chatbot. This undermines the very goals the policy sets out to achieve.

Bangladesh's education system already faces deep-rooted challenges. For instance, the emphasis on memorisation and a lack of encouragement towards open-ended inquiry have created generations of students trained to recall, not reason. If we do not act now, the risk is not just academic dishonesty, but the long-term underdevelopment of intellectual independence.

Around the world, universities are already rethinking how they teach. For instance, the University of Washington in the US is redesigning its computer science curriculum with a bold message: "coding is dead." Director of the programme Prof Magdalena Balazinska explained this does not mean coding has no value; rather, AI can now handle much of the routine translation of designs into software. The goal is no longer to train coders, but to develop software engineers who can think critically, design intelligently, and guide AI tools effectively.

The same shift is required

here. Teachers and institutions in Bangladesh need to urgently reconsider how curricula are structured. Are we training students to navigate ambiguity, ask better questions, and justify their claims? Or are we rewarding mechanical outputs that AI can easily replicate?

To be clear, this is not about being anti-technology or anti-AI. AI can be a brilliant partner in learning when students know how to think. When it is used prematurely, it robs students of the very skills they are supposed to develop in their academic institutions.

Students should be encouraged, even required, to manually draft arguments and explore possible perspectives *before* turning to AI chatbots. Educators can play a key role here by redesigning assignments to reward process over product, and reasoning over parroting.

To make this shift sustainable, support from different institutions is key. The University Grants Commission (UGC), education ministries, and individual universities must provide updated guidance, training modules, and revised assessment strategies that acknowledge the presence of AI without letting it replace thought. Integrating AI into education must be a structured, deliberate process, not an unregulated habit.