

Act now to curb air pollution

It has become the country's deadliest external health risk

We are distressed by the lack of measures to curb air pollution which continues to wreak havoc across the country, posing a serious threat to public health. According to a recent report, the average life expectancy in Bangladesh is being cut short by 5.5 years due to toxic air, making it the deadliest external health risk in the country. The report, published by the University of Chicago's Energy Policy Institute (EPIC), warns that the health toll caused by particulate matter (PM) pollution far surpasses that of tobacco use, malnutrition or unsafe water. While smoking shortens life expectancy by approximately two years, malnutrition accounts for a reduction of 1.4 years. According to the study, Bangladesh's population is exposed to fine particulate matter pollution levels that exceed both the World Health Organization (WHO) guideline of five micrograms per cubic metre and the national standard of 35. These findings are deeply worrying.

In recent years, various reports and studies have highlighted the perils of air pollution, often ranking Dhaka among the most polluted cities in the world. One study reported that air pollution causes about 20 percent of all premature deaths in Bangladesh, while another linked poor air quality to rising cases of premature birth and low birth weight in Dhaka. Amid growing concerns from citizens and environmentalists, the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change formulated the Air Pollution Control Rules in 2022, but it remains unimplemented to this day.

Sources of PM2.5 in the country include transboundary pollution, brick kilns, smoke from low-grade fuels, solid waste burning, dust from construction sites, etc. Reportedly, brick kilns around Dhaka alone contribute 58 percent of the city's air pollution. Although there is a law that prohibits kilns near residential, commercial, agricultural and sensitive areas, it has been hardly enforced. Earlier this year, the High Court ordered the removal of all illegal brick kilns nationwide, yet no visible progress has been made to this end. Another major challenge is phasing out old, unfit vehicles, a key source of pollution in the cities. The interim government initiated a plan to remove expired, dilapidated vehicles from the roads, but vehicle owners have not complied. As a result, rundown vehicles emitting black smoke remain a common sight in the capital.

As laws and policies remain largely unenforced, air pollution continues to worsen by the day. To contain the debilitating effects of air pollution, the government must immediately implement the Air Pollution Control Rules. This requires formulating a National Air Quality Control Plan, nationwide monitoring, identifying pollution sources, and setting emission standards for industries, vehicles, and major projects. We need some tangible progress in combating air pollution before it's too late.

Save Moheshkhali's mangrove forest

Profit-driven enterprises are inviting long-term disaster

We are appalled by the sheer extent of destruction caused to the mangrove forest in Moheshkhali upazila of Cox's Bazar. This forest, planted after the devastating 1991 cyclone, serves as a natural shield against cyclones, tidal surges and flooding. Yet, according to a recent *Prothom Alo* report, 12,563 acres of this protective forest have been cleared and converted into shrimp enclosures and salt fields by certain quarters. According to local environmental organisations, more than 50 shrimp projects and salt pans now operate in Sonadia where lush mangroves once stood.

The process of destruction is systematic: canals are blocked to cut off water flow, trees are felled, roots are dug out, then the cleared land is set on fire to prepare it like farmland. This industrial-scale clearance can cost up to Tk 1 crore per project, showing that only well-funded, influential actors are involved. Reports show that shrimp projects bring crores of taka in annual profit, but this private gain comes at the expense of public safety. Experts recall how the 1991 cyclone claimed countless lives in Moheshkhali, and how the mangroves were planted precisely to prevent such tragedies. Today, by destroying this shield, coastal communities are once again being put in harm's way.

What is equally alarming is the collective silence among influential quarters across the political spectrum. Cases against mangrove grabbers date back to 1989, yet the main beneficiaries—politically connected investors—escape accountability, while only labourers are made scapegoats. In recent years, ruling party and opposition leaders alike have been named in Forest Department cases, but encroachment continues unabated. From 2010 to May 2025 alone, 196 cases have been filed, naming around 930 accused, yet enforcement remains weak. Even High Court orders have been ignored on the grounds.

The administration has recently identified 45 kilometres of illegal embankments and requested Tk 4.2 crore for their removal. The interim government has also cancelled BEZA's allotment of Sonadia land, which may reduce future destruction. But unless strong, sustained measures are taken—including establishing permanent Ansar or forest camps in Sonadia, prosecuting influential investors, and replantation of the mangroves—these gains will be temporary. The destruction of Moheshkhali's mangroves is not just an environmental crime, but a national security threat. The government must treat this as an urgent priority and stop all new shrimp and salt projects inside the forest areas, demolish illegal embankments, and hold the powerful encroachers accountable.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

US troops leave Afghanistan

On this day in 2021, following a chaotic withdrawal, the last US troops left Afghanistan, ending a 20-year war in the country in response to the September 11, 2001 attacks in the US by Taliban allied al-Qaeda.



EDITORIAL

INTERNATIONAL DAY OF THE VICTIMS OF ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCES

When will there be justice?



Monorom Polok
is a member of the editorial
team at The Daily Star.

MONOROM POLOK

For Sheikh Hasina's Awami League government, enforced disappearance was not just a tool to suppress or remove critics, political opponents, or anyone deemed a threat to them—it also served as a chilling warning to everyone else. During her 15-plus years in power, Bangladesh witnessed this egregious crime on a scale whose full extent is still unknown.

Before my father, Shafiqul Islam Kajol, was disappeared in March 2020, we had heard the term "enforced disappearance" a few times. My mother would sometimes caution him at the dinner table, "You're doing too much; you might disappear." But once that fear became our reality, I witnessed its impact firsthand: even people with no ties to politics, activism or journalism were afraid of criticising the government, even in their own circles, in what should have been their safe spaces. This revealed just how deeply the fear of disappearance penetrated, affecting not only those in politics or human rights advocacy, but also ordinary citizens. How many thoughts were left unspoken? How many voices were muted in the name of survival?

When the interim government came to power last year, it took a few positive steps to address the menace of enforced disappearance. It signed the UN instrument of accession to the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearances on August 29, 2024, established the Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearance, and the chief adviser visited Aynagar, the secret detention cells where the victims of enforced disappearance used to be confined.

The inquiry commission submitted its second interim report to the chief adviser on June 4 this year. The report mentions that the commission received 1,837 complaints and were able to verify 1,350 of them. It also states the total number of complaints could exceed 3,500. The commission found 16 secret detention centres across the country till the submission of that report.

However, somewhere along the way, progress in this regard stalled. First, it must be acknowledged that dealing with something as sensitive as enforced disappearance was never

going to be easy. Preventing state-sponsored human rights violations or holding to account those responsible has frequently proved to be a Herculean challenge. And when we consider that the police and other security and/or intelligence agencies were involved in carrying out enforced disappearances and other such crimes, it is not difficult to understand why progress has been disappointing. Still, the interim government should have made some headway by now.

The first priority should have been confirming the number of victims of enforced disappearance, alive or deceased. It is essential to disclose the full list to the public as a primary measure of accountability. While our justice system has always been slow, the interim government has only itself to blame for failing to accomplish this most basic task.

Second, some form of recognition for the victims should have been established. Many of the families of the disappeared need official documentation to address various legal matters, including those related to banking and property transfer. Such documents should have been issued to the victims' families by now. These families have already endured immense suffering since, in many cases, the victims were the primary breadwinners whose responsibilities or liabilities they have been forced to shoulder alone. An official document confirming disappearance—or, where applicable, a death certificate for those confirmed dead or missing for, say, over seven years—would give these families the legal basis to resolve some of the issues.

Unfortunately, this has not been addressed in the draft Enforced Disappearance Prevention and Redress Ordinance, 2025 either. Perhaps it was not addressed partly because to issue a death certificate, the death would have

to be confirmed, for which the time and place of the death (killing) would also need confirmation. While these issues would likely feature in the investigation about the perpetrators, the need for some sort of documentation cannot be disregarded either.

Next, some sort of compensation for the victims should have been introduced by now. These victims were oppressed and persecuted by state agencies that were meant to protect citizens and uphold the rule of law, but instead they participated in this severe violation of human rights. As such, the government should have already implemented a compensation mechanism.

The draft ordinance, it should be mentioned, was approved in principle on Thursday. It is reassuring that under the ordinance, the National Human

faith in these institutions, justice must be served without delay.

While the draft ordinance outlines how justice will be pursued in this regard, it also contains some flaws. The minimum punishment upon conviction has been set at ten years' imprisonment. Experience shows that when the minimum punishment for any violent crime is set too high, conviction rates often remain low. For example, in the context of rape, which can carry the death penalty, the conviction rate is below three percent. The draft ordinance also allows for the possibility of capital punishment. To align the law with international standards, this provision must be reconsidered; otherwise, it is unlikely to gain international support. Several human rights bodies have already raised this concern. We need to keep



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

Rights Commission (NHRC), and not any law enforcement agency, was made responsible for investigating the cases related to enforced disappearances. But given the limited investigative capacity of the NHRC, which has to rely on the cooperation of state agencies, the provision raises concerns about whether the commission can do its job properly.

We must also talk about the prosecution of those responsible for carrying out enforced disappearances, a process that should have begun long ago. The interim government, formed with the mandate of citizens desperate for justice and truth in the aftermath of the July uprising, had a unique opportunity to pursue these cases free from political bias. More than a year has passed since its formation, with less than six months left before the planned general election in February 2026, and yet the process of holding those responsible to account has not even started. Many of those who committed or benefited from abducting and torturing citizens, denying them their constitutional and basic rights, are still actively working within our law enforcement and intelligence agencies. This is unacceptable. To restore any

These measures are vital not only for rectifying past mistakes and injustices but also for preventing future violations. So the interim government must address these issues with priority, and justice for enforced disappearances must be served sooner rather than later.

Transforming our agricultural policies for future economic success



K.M. Arshad
is an undergraduate student of the Department of
Economics at the University of Dhaka.

K.M. ARSHAD

Bangladesh's agriculture sector, which employs 40 percent of the society and generates 11 percent of GDP, now stands at a crossroads.

With growing global economic instability, climatic stresses piling up, and the nation poised to graduate to Least Developed Country (LDC) status in 2026, agricultural policy sustainability is under unprecedented pressure. Budget increases and high-profile global programmes demonstrate government resolve, but further analysis exposes structural deficits that continue to endanger food security and rural livelihoods against growing economic pressure.

FY2025-26 budget outlay has allocated Tk 39,620 crore (approximately \$3.5 billion) to agriculture, food, fisheries, and livestock—a 3.6 percent year-over-year nominal increase over FY25. But that expansion is offset by rising input prices and inflation. Worse, sectoral contribution to the overall Annual Development Programme (ADP) has fallen from 5.0 percent in FY25 to 4.7 percent in FY26. The severe underfunding of areas essential for long-term productivity, such as research and mechanisation, directly contradicts the government's stated strategic priorities. In the view

of Naziba Ali of LightCastle Partners, such steps are "insufficient to drive transformative change."

Internal weakness includes industry vulnerability to volatile global and domestic fiscal pressures and ubiquitous markets. The US tariff policy imposing 20 percent additional duties worsens an already strained trade scenario. While garment exports bear the immediate brunt, secondary pressure lands on farm producers. Bangladeshi imported \$2.2 billion worth of US goods (including cotton and grains) against \$8.4 billion export proceeds in 2024. Such a deficit forebodes coercion-indexed opening up of markets to subsidised US farm produce that can overrun non-price-competitive domestic producers. Locally, agriculture is also funded, as 46 percent budget deficit is covered by bank borrowings at the expense of crowding out funding of smallholders and liquidity-starved Agri-SMEs.

At the same time, climate change widens production uncertainties. Analyst projections place potential yield loss at 14 percent for rice and 76 percent for wheat by 2050, and prices for staple foods are being revealed to be extremely volatile, particularly for rice—the lynchpin of food security. Despite increased

processing zones. An 89 percent market share is achievable with affordable Indian/Chinese machinery; large, expensive US machinery has poor spare networks and is ill suited to smallholder farms. Diminishing ADP investment overlaps with other successful high-return investment prospects—the seed industry target of 25 percent certified production by 2030, and 5.64 percent GDP per annum contributed by horticulture.

Keeping these challenges in mind, various kinds of work are in motion. The most ambitious is the "Technical Support to Sustainable and Resilient Investment Towards Agriculture Sector Transformation Programme (AsTP)" with unprecedeted tripartite support of \$25 million involving the Government of Bangladesh, Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), and the Gates Foundation, signed in July 2025.

Under this programme, evidence-based planning aims to leverage FAO's Monitoring and Analysing Food and Agricultural Policies (MAFAP) programme to improve monitoring of public expenditure and policy alignment.

To relieve near-term pressures, steps are being taken to cut advance income tax (AIT) paid by raw commodities to agro-processors, slash withholding tax paid by major crops (paddy, wheat, potatoes, jute) from one to 0.5 percent, and exempt cold store plant and equipment from duties to minimise post-harvest losses.

However, there are still critical contradictions. Despite VAT exemption for LNG, the power and industry sector competes with the agriculture sector for limited gas. Restrictive supply directly jeopardises fertiliser production and prices, driving direct outputs from crops into already high food inflation. Policy campaigns fail to consider the feasibility of lobbying for agro-

Renewable energy targets (20 percent by 2030) must explicitly prioritise decentralised solar power for irrigation and cold chains, moving beyond fossil fuel dependence. In addition to production hikes, implementing real-time price monitoring and strategic stocks, along with import policies, can reduce fluctuations.

As Dr Marco V. Sánchez of FAO's MAFAP programme asserts, "transformative change requires not just spending more, but 'optimizing this government spending, so that every taka is spent more effectively.'" Whether policy will advance from fragmented response to holistic resilience will come into focus in the forthcoming years.