

# The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

## Let's not fill wetlands to build campuses

### Proposed site for Sunamganj university warrants environmental scrutiny

It is unfortunate that despite having strong environmental laws, Bangladesh continues to see water bodies, forests, and wetlands being threats. Dekhar Haor in Sunamganj is currently at risk of being degraded as a proposal to build a 125-acre campus of Sunamganj Science and Technology University, covering a portion of this haor, was recently sent to the education ministry for approval. Though the university obtained environmental clearance from the Department of Environment (DoE) in 2023, activists are rightly concerned that the haor area, which remains flooded for nearly seven months a year, would be compromised if that portion was filled. It would disrupt the Nainda River's flow and affect the haor's seasonal agricultural use and biodiversity.

Nearly 100 acres of Dekhar Haor are used for rice cultivation during the dry season, while the rainy season sees an influx of fish, birds, and aquatic mammals. Why, then, did the DoE give its clearance despite the environmental risks? Ironically, it was only two weeks ago that the government finalised the draft haor protection order (under the Water Act, 2013). Does the decision to build a university on a haor not contradict the draft order? Unfortunately, this is not the first time that public infrastructure has been allowed in ecologically sensitive areas. Last month, Ecenc approved the construction of Rabindra University despite concerns that it would block the water discharge path of the Chalan Beel. Although Ecenc conditioned the approval on further evaluation by the DoE, the question about the latter's integrity remains as questionable as before.

Interestingly, in both cases, the reason for selecting sites near or at wetlands is not a lack of alternative locations. Rather, arbitrary reasons have been used to defend the chosen sites. While we understand the need for permanent campuses for universities, that should not come at the cost of irreparable environmental damage. It will be an even greater irony to build a science and technology university on a site that disregards the very principles of sustainability and ecological conservation that science itself teaches.

Bangladesh has already lost over 2,500 kilometres of haor land in just 32 years. Do we want to continue this destruction, or will we finally use our laws to protect the water bodies, haors, and other vital ecosystems? Before any government body approves such projects, this is a question they must answer. We especially expect the interim administration to take a stricter stance in this regard as several advisers have been vocal environmental advocates for years. Protecting our natural resources must be a top priority.

## Enforce science-based dengue control

### Rising infections show outdated strategies are failing to contain it

The dengue situation is once again taking a worrying turn. With over 34,000 infections and 137 deaths recorded so far this year, the urgency cannot be overstated. In the first week of September alone, more patients were admitted to hospitals compared to the first weeks of July and August. At least 13 people have already died, while 2,383 were hospitalised during this period. Experts warn that August's rain, unchecked mosquito breeding, and weak anti-mosquito drives have contributed to this surge. If this trend continues, the coming weeks could see another deadly outbreak.

Particularly troubling is the sharp rise in cases outside Dhaka. Surveys by the DGHS, IEDCR, and CDC have all confirmed the widespread presence of *Aedes albopictus*, or the Asian tiger mosquito, in districts such as Khulna, Chattogram, Barishal, Jashore, and Faridpur. Unlike *Aedes aegypti*, the principal dengue carrier that mostly breeds in urban settings, *albopictus* thrives in natural and man-made containers alike, making control far more challenging. Its growing dominance in rural and semi-urban areas has made the spread of dengue increasingly unpredictable. Meanwhile, Dhaka's mosquito-control efforts remain largely ineffective despite spending around Tk 707 crore in the last nine years. Both city corporations continue to rely heavily on fogging and insecticide spraying, though entomologists have long warned that these methods bring little long-term benefit. A significant portion of annual budgets is spent on insecticide purchases, while sustainable strategies such as integrated vector management, biological larvicides, and coordinated community drives receive little attention. As a result, annual outbreaks persist.

Experts have repeatedly stressed the need to treat dengue as a year-round public health threat. This requires continuous mosquito surveillance, accurate reporting of infections, and stronger district-level health facilities. Currently, DGHS data comes from only a fraction of hospitals, leaving the true scale of infections unclear. Making dengue a notifiable disease, with mandatory reporting from all healthcare providers, is therefore essential. High incidence areas also need sustained drives to destroy adult mosquitoes and breeding sites. Construction sites, drains, and water storage containers must be monitored regularly, while communities should be mobilised through awareness campaigns to do their part properly. Climate change is shifting the timing of peak infections and expanding mosquito breeding grounds. Unless outdated measures are replaced with science-driven, long-term strategies, Bangladesh will remain trapped in this cycle of preventable tragedy every monsoon.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

### Mao Zedong dies

On this day in 1976, Marxist revolutionary Mao Zedong died. He had emerged as the undisputed Chinese Communist Party leader following the Long March (1934-35) and dominated China in the period after the communist takeover in 1949.



# Managing our external debt needs a balanced strategy

## MACRO MIRROR

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FAHMIDA KHATUN

The global public debt has reached an unprecedented level, raising concern among all stakeholders. The amount stood at \$102 trillion in 2024, a \$5 trillion increase from 2023, according to a recent report by the UN Trade and Development (UNCTAD). Several factors, such as government borrowing during the Covid pandemic, rising interest rates, and a slowing global economy, drove this surge. For low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) and least developed countries (LDCs), which are already grappling with limited fiscal space and development challenges, a rising public debt has far-reaching consequences.

High levels of debt constrain a government's capacity to invest in essential development areas, such as



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

**Bangladesh's external debt, which has been around \$100 billion in recent times, may not seem extraordinary when compared with other developing countries. But the challenge emerges when this debt is compared against the country's earnings.**

healthcare, education, infrastructure, and climate adaptation. Debt servicing, which encompasses the cost of paying back the interest and principal amounts, is consuming an increasing share of national budgets. This constricts spending on public services, which is already limited in poor countries. Interest payments account for a significant portion of government revenue in developing countries. The net interest payment on public debt made by developing countries reached \$921 billion in 2024, a 10 percent increase compared to 2023.

The composition of debt is changing over time. Developing countries are increasingly borrowing from private

creditors and international capital markets, rather than relying on concessional loans from multilateral institutions. This allows access to larger sums of finance. However, it comes at higher interest rates and shorter maturities. This increases these countries' vulnerability to global financial shocks.

For countries like Bangladesh, which aspires to the upper-middle-income status while preparing for graduation from the LDC category in 2026, this trend presents both challenges and opportunities. In Bangladesh, debt levels have risen steadily over the past decade, becoming a pressing issue in recent years. Although the debt situation is manageable as per the international benchmark, the rising cost of repayments is worrying. Foreign borrowing has become more expensive due to higher interest expenses, a larger share of non-concessional loans, and tougher lending conditions. Due to limited foreign exchange reserves, the strain of repayment is felt more. The cost of debt servicing is rising due to an increase in global interest rate and currency volatility. Since Bangladesh borrows mostly in US dollars, repayments become more expensive when the taka depreciates.

Bangladesh's external debt, which has been around \$100 billion in recent times, may not seem extraordinary when compared with other developing countries. But the challenge emerges

when this debt is compared against the country's earnings. Nearly 80 percent of the debt belongs to the public sector, while the rest to the private sector. In 2016, the country's foreign debt was equal to just over half of the value of annual exports. Now the debt amounts to more than the full value of exports. Debt compared to government revenue has also increased significantly. With a

domestic source of funding.

For Bangladesh, adopting a balanced strategy is crucial. The government needs to be careful in financing development while maintaining debt sustainability. It must expand concessional borrowing from multilateral development banks. Such funding is critical for infrastructure, climate adaptation, and social protection programmes at low cost. At the same time, the country should also explore innovative funds. For example, debt-for-climate swaps where a portion of external debt is forgiven in exchange for investments in climate-resilient projects. Such mechanisms can reduce debt burdens, while also helping reduce climate vulnerabilities.

Another critical avenue is domestic revenue mobilisation. While external debt remains significant, Bangladesh can reduce its reliance on borrowing by improving tax collection and broadening the tax base. Clearly, countries with stronger domestic resource mobilisation are better positioned to sustainably manage debt and invest in long-term development. Higher tax collection should be coupled with efficient public spending. That requires transparency in borrowing and investment so that debt translates into tangible benefits rather than creating fiscal pressure.

In a world of economic pressure and uncertainty, characterised by trade protectionism and currency fluctuations, Bangladesh must diversify its sources of financing and build financial resilience to withstand global shocks. It needs to adopt sustainable financing strategies to avoid debt crises. Debt is not inherently bad, unmanaged and excessive debt can erode growth, social welfare, and resilience. With prudent policies, careful planning, and innovative financing strategies, Bangladesh can harness debt as a tool for sustainable development rather than a source of vulnerability. While the government should follow a more cautious borrowing policy, structural reforms in revenue collection, public expenditure, and project execution must be pursued simultaneously. Strengthening institutions to improve these areas is critical for easing debt repayment pressures and maintaining macroeconomic stability. External borrowing will remain important for development financing. However, its management will determine whether it becomes a growth enabler or a looming burden.

# Rent control: A law that exists only on paper

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SHILAJIT KUMAR ROY

Picture this: your landlord knocks at the door and casually announces that the rent is going up starting next month. No discussion, no explanation. Or maybe your landlord tells you to leave within days without any prior notice. Perhaps you've been asked to pay two or three months' rent in advance just to move in.

For many tenants across major cities and towns, these situations are quite normal. On paper, the Premises Rent Control Act, 1991 promises protection from such abuses. In reality, landlords often ignore the law, tenants do not know their rights, and enforcement is almost nonexistent, creating a crisis that underlines not just tenants' rights but also the stability of the housing sector. The act, for example, prohibits sudden rent increases except when the landlord has made genuine improvements to the property and the increase is approved by the Rent Controller. Section 23 of the act also makes it illegal to take more than a one-month deposit without the controller's approval. However, many tenants report paying far more than that. Likewise, eviction without prior notice is also barred, which is often

ignored, forcing families to move out.

Researchers thus find a significant gap between the law and its implementation. Many tenants remain unaware of their rights, or even the law itself. A 2017 BIGD study found that only 15 percent of renters in Dhaka knew about the existence of a rent controller, the official responsible for resolving disputes over rent or eviction cases. In Chattogram and Sylhet, as per another study, about half of the tenants had no knowledge of the act, and even those who knew were mostly unaware of their rights. These renters, typically from middle- or lower-income households, are often victimised by their landlords, highlighting how legal protections can come undone by the lack of awareness or enforcement.

The lack of legal awareness is manifested in other ways. The BIGD study, for instance, found that only 27 percent of tenants signed a formal rental contract. Among those who did not, only six percent asked for a contract. Worse, 85 percent of Dhaka tenants paid rent without getting any receipt. Without a contract or receipt, tenants have no evidence to support their rights in court. In Chattogram

and Sylhet, the situation is more or less similar.

With little documentation and limited awareness, any legal case can drag on for years. As the 2016 study on Chattogram and Sylhet shows, only about 100 rent cases were filed each year, and fewer than 15 percent were resolved. Many cases take three to four years to decide, and some stretch on for over a decade. Meanwhile, tenants continue to face unauthorised rent hikes. In Dhaka, 75 percent of renters reported annual increases, often without any justification being provided, apart from vague references to inflation or market demand.

The financial burden thus imposed on tenants is significant. According to one study, 82 percent of households in Dhaka spend more than 30 percent of their income on rent. Half of these families have to cut back on other essential expenses to cover their rent. With property prices and home loans increasingly out of reach, many have no option but to rent under any conditions. Tenants often accept unfair terms and pay higher rents simply to remain close to their workplace or their children's school.

The question is, why is the government failing to regulate this vital sector, when, by all indications, it is clear that average house rent is rising faster than the average income growth? One may recall that a High Court ruling in 2015 ordered the government to address arbitrary rent increases. It also recommended forming a commission to set area-

wise rent ceilings. These rulings are being rendered ineffective because of the lack of enforcement.

The Legal Aid Services (Amendment) Ordinance, 2025, which came into effect in July this year, now requires landlords and tenants in rent-control cases to try mandatory mediation before going to court. The government thinks such mediation will help settle disputes more easily and quickly. Experts also believe many rent issues can be resolved through discussion, which could reduce court backlogs. However, critics warn that with few legal aid offices and limited staff, routing every case through mediation might overwhelm the system and delay urgent help, such as in case of tenant evictions. Given the rent control act's history of weak enforcement and slow proceedings, mediation alone is unlikely to make justice faster or fairer.

Against this backdrop, it is important that the relevant law is further strengthened and updated. Activists want local rent offices staffed with trained employees, official rent charts for neighbourhoods, and an easy registration system. Many also call for a national rent commission to regulate the sector. It is also important that tenants receive written contracts and rent receipts to help them defend their rights in court. Faster dispute resolution, real penalties for offenders, and proper enforcement of rent rules are crucial to address the plight of tenants in Bangladesh's expanding urban landscape.