

MY DHAKA



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## Vanishing hilsa and price we're paying

RBR

It was my friend's birthday, and I forgot to wish him. As penance, I treated him to a hilsa dinner.

The lightest of untoasted shona moong lentil soup, with loads of julienne ginger and cumin tempered in ghee, sides of aubergine and pointed gourd fritters, potato mash seasoned with roasted dry red chilli and mustard oil, and piping hot Kataribhog steamed rice.

Of course, the highlight of the menu was the lightly fried hilsa steaks in mustard oil, served with onions and dry chilli deep-fried in ilish oil, and slices of Kagoji lebu.

What a grand, and expensive, way of saying sorry. Hilsa this season can cost you an arm and a leg, but for a dear friend, it is worth the missing limbs.

For a Bangladeshi, hilsa is festival food. It is a special dish prepared for loved ones, and soul food too. A simple fish fry can lift your spirits when you are

low. But why is hilsa so elusive this year, and why does it cost a fortune?

"In the previous hilsa season, we saw a supply of 10,000 tonnes, whereas this year the supply so far is around only 2,000 tonnes," says

Muhammad Bachu Miah, a seasoned fishmonger who has been in business for 30 years. He procures the fish from New Market and sells to regular clients. Bachu says he normally earns a profit of Tk 7.8 lakh

from hilsa sales each season, but this year the figure is around Tk 2 lakh.

Hilsa season continues till Kartik in the Bangla calendar, but this year storms and heavy rains during the full moon of Bhadra lowered water flow in

the rivers, disrupting fish migration. This adverse weather, coupled with overfishing of young hilsa, has hit the catch badly, he explains.

Shahana Huda Ronjona, owner of catering service Bistro on the Go, says

seasonal sellers who once hawked hilsa pairs or quartets are no longer seen.

"I used to buy from my fishmonger Chan Miah and from random sellers for Tk 1,700 per kg. Last week, I paid Tk

4,000 for one and a half-kilo hilsa. Customers who order hilsa polao, hilsa in mustard sauce, or steaks wrapped in banana leaves are now very few," she says.

She charges Tk 750 for hilsa polao and Tk 500 for other dishes.

A friend of mine was disappointed when 'Koshturi', a reputed restaurant for local cuisine, told her they were not serving ilish this season.

So how do you know which fish is worth the high price? Always look for hilsa from the Padma, prized for their taste and broad size.

An adult can reach 60 cm and weigh 2.5 kilogrammes. The rich, oily flesh and marbled fat give it a distinct scent that sets it apart.

"You can smell the fish frying in mustard oil from your staircase, that's the one to look out for. The Chandana hilsa from the ocean is narrow, dry and without the unique hilsa smell," says Chan Miah.

Climate change and the netting of jatkas have worsened matters. Will Bengalis be deprived of chewing on the hilsa head this puja? Will Durga be greeted with carp or ayer instead?

For now, prices of Tk 3,000 to Tk 4,000 for a one to one and a half-kilo fish seem unfair, but inevitable.



## Bangladesh still locked out of key labour markets

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UAE RESTRICTIONS

The UAE, Bangladesh's second-largest labour market after Saudi Arabia in the Middle East, has remained largely closed since 2013.

Unofficial estimates suggest 1-1.2 million Bangladeshis currently work there.

Although migration picked up after 2021, with 101,000 workers going in 2022 and 98,000 in 2023, the number dropped to 47,000 last year, according to data from the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training.

The UAE quietly curbed visit and work visas for Bangladeshis in July 2024 after some migrants demonstrated in solidarity with the quota reform movement back home.

BM Jamal Hossain, then consul general in Dubai, confirmed that visa applications had been restricted since July 22, 2024.

During the World Governments Summit in Dubai earlier this year, Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus urged UAE ministers to lift the ban, but no progress is visible.

The uncertainty has left aspiring migrants like Ziaul Haq (pseudonym) of Barguna in limbo. "I've been waiting for 13 months after submitting my passport for the visa. Because of the restrictions after the protests, my visa is still not processed," he said.

Adding to the confusion, a website called UAE Visa Online claimed on September 17 that Bangladeshis, along with citizens of eight other countries, would not be allowed to apply for visit or work visas in 2026, citing security concerns, geopolitical issues, and possible COVID-19 spread.

Ambassador Tareq Ahmed at the Bangladeshi Embassy in Abu Dhabi, UAE, and Chief Adviser's Envoy for International Affairs Lutley Siddiqi did not respond to repeated calls and text messages for comments.

Tareq dismissed the report while

talking to local reporters. He said the embassy received no such official notice from the UAE government, according to media reports.

However, an official at Bangladesh's Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment, speaking on condition of anonymity, told The Daily Star, "The fact that no visit or work visas have been issued in the past year proves that the ban is still in place."

**MALAYSIA: ONLY PROMISES**

After another crucial destination, Malaysia, had reopened its market in 2021, nearly 4.5 lakh workers migrated between August 2022 and April 2024.

However, over 18,000 workers were stranded after missing the departure deadline.

Several visits and meetings, including Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's Dhaka trip in October 2024, produced promises but no breakthrough.

In May this year, Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment Adviser Asif Nazrul visited Kuala Lumpur. Malaysian officials assured him of prioritising Bangladeshi's issue, but no tangible progress followed.

Later that month, Dhaka hosted the third Joint Working Group meeting with Malaysia, focused on safe migration. However, concrete results are yet to come.

Anisul Islam of Manikganj, one of the 18,000 stranded, said he had paid Tk 5.3 lakh to agencies and brokers to secure a job in Malaysia.

"If the government refunds only Tk 79,900 as the official fee, I will be ruined. We've been hearing promises for months, but how long are we supposed to wait?" he said.

**SHRINKING MARKET**

Over the past decade, Oman, Bahrain, Iraq, Libya, Sudan, Egypt, Brunei, and Malaysia have closed their doors to Bangladeshi workers at various times.

In August 2018, a Bangladeshi national in Bahrain murdered an

imam, following which the oil-rich country shut its labour market to Bangladeshi workers and also deported a significant number of Bangladeshis.

Oman closed its labour market for Bangladeshi workers in September 2024 due to an oversupply of workers and visa issues.

The Maldives also suspended visas last year citing irregularities.

"Instead of expanding, our labour market is shrinking day by day," said Shariful Hasan, associate director of BRAC's Migration and Youth Initiatives Programme.

He blamed fraud, visa trading, and over-recruitment, adding that Bangladesh should have built a comprehensive, digitalised recruitment system.

Shariful cautioned that overdependence on Saudi Arabia, now the dominant employer, could deepen economic risks. Without urgent reforms and breakthroughs, remittance inflows may erode further.

"Unless bold steps are taken, we will keep losing opportunities to others," he said.

He stressed that stronger diplomacy, transparent recruitment, and action against syndicates are crucial. "Real progress will come only when costs are reduced, medical care ensured, embassies support workers in distress, and returnees get reintegration support," he said.

Fakhrul Islam, former joint secretary of the Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies (BAIRA), echoed the concern. "The Middle East is our largest market, yet the UAE, Bahrain, and Oman remain closed. Malaysia was one of our biggest, but even after a year, it is still shut," he said.

He urged the government to use Chief Adviser Yunus's global stature more actively in diplomatic efforts. "If he engages directly, there is a chance to reopen some of these markets," Fakhrul said.

## 87% support holding polls in February

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People's Thoughts on the Election

Conducted by consultancy firm Innovision Consulting, the second round (first phase) of the survey was carried out from September 2 to 15.

Based on interviews with 10,413 citizens eligible to vote across Bangladesh, the survey explored public perceptions on the government's performance, election timing, law and order, and electoral reform.

Rubaiyat Sarwar, managing director of Innovision Consulting, presented the findings at The Daily Star Centre in Dhaka yesterday.

It is part of a broader initiative called People's Perceptions on Election Survey, conducted in collaboration with Voice for Reform and the Bangladesh Research Analysis & Information Network (BRAIN).

According to the findings, over 77.5 percent think they will be able to vote safely and without fear, while 56 percent expressed concerns over law and order, saying extortion has increased in the past six months.

The survey also shows that younger generations are more aware and positive about the PR system compared to older generations. But on the issue of neutrality of police and administration during the election, Gen Z respondents were less

optimistic than the elderly.

About 78.7 percent of respondents evaluated the interim government's activities positively.

Still, more educated people were less satisfied than less educated groups, pointing to a rise in extortion. Educated respondents were also more aware and supportive of the PR system.

University students, compared to the general public, showed less interest in voting and more disagreement about election timing. They also reported concerns about growing extortion.

The survey further found that religious minority communities are less confident about the interim government's ability to conduct a neutral election.

Speaking at the event as the chief guest, the Chief Adviser's Press Secretary Shafiqul Alam said the findings of the survey showed the February election timeframe has received a "clear and thumping yes" from citizens.

It is also an indication of public trust in the interim government's ability to hold a fair election, he said. "This will be one of the best elections in our history. People across the country are eager to vote, and no one will be able to question the legitimacy of this election if 95 percent of voters expect it to be fair."

Alam criticised the rise of YouTube and online platforms as the main source of information.

He alleged that some senior journalists spread a "barrage of misinformation" through these platforms while seeking protection under freedom of expression.

"Law and order problems exist in some places, and we are not denying that. But the way television and social media portray the country as if it is collapsing is largely a matter of perception," he said.

He also said the interim government continues to enjoy strong public support, with nearly 80 percent of citizens satisfied with its performance.

Political analyst Saimun Parvez called on all parties to move away from violence and blame-based politics. They should focus on presenting clear, data-backed policies on issues like environment, health, agriculture, and employment, he said.

He supported further discussion on using the PR system in the upper house, but opposed introducing it in the lower house, saying it would weaken the connection between lawmakers and local constituencies.

Supreme Court lawyer Rasheda Imam, Bdjobs.com CEO AKM Fahim Mashroor, and BRAIN Executive Director Shafiqur Rahman, among others, also spoke at the event.

## Try AL for crimes against humanity

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and the 14-party alliance."

Tajul added that while no formal decision had been made, the prosecution might act if families or victims submit complaints against organisations. "The law also allows the investigation agency to initiate inquiries on its own if credible information is available."

During cross-examination, Nahid dismissed the claim of state defence counsel Amir Hossain, representing Hasina and Kamal, that the movement was influenced by "domestic and foreign forces".

The lawyer argued they proposed Prof Muhammad Yunus as the head of an interim government since the movement was driven by the "domestic and foreign forces". Nahid said, "It is not true."

Amir also argued that Hasina had not ordered the use of helicopters or lethal weapons, and that state forces had sought to protect lives and property. Nahid rejected the claim outright.

The lawyer further said no crimes against humanity were committed during July-August 2024. Nahid said, "It is untrue."

Jonad claimed that more than 100 protesters were killed and hundreds wounded in the Jatrabari-Chittagong Road area, with 134 buried as unclaimed bodies in Rayer Bazar graveyard, during the uprising.

He demanded justice not only for Hasina and Kamal, but also for the Awami League, Chhatra League, Jubo League, police, and other forces involved in the killings.

He said that hours before the army chief announced Hasina's resignation on August 5, protesters in Jatrabari were targeted by sniper fire. "I saw at least 15 protesters taken to hospitals with bullet wounds to their heads," he testified.

He suggested a community-driven mosquito control initiative, including the distribution of Insect Growth Regulator tablets and public involvement, as municipal measures alone are inadequate.

Delayed hospital admission is a leading factor behind the increasing death toll, said HM Nazmul Ahsan, associate professor at Shahed Suhrabdy Medical College Hospital.

"We don't have proper sero-surveillance, so we cannot confirm the exact reasons. But if the Den 2 serotype remains dominant, severity and fatalities will remain high."

Sero-surveillance provides estimates of antibody levels against infectious

diseases and is considered the gold standard for measuring population immunity.

The dengue virus exists in four serotypes: Den-1, Den-2, Den-3, and Den-4.

Last year, 70 percent of dengue cases

were linked to the Den 2 strain, Nazmul said.

This year, most patients are suffering from secondary dengue infections, which are graver and carry a higher risk of death.

Nazmul recommended early admission for high-risk groups such as the elderly, pregnant women, and people with comorbidities.

He also warned about the dangers of cross-infection from different serotypes, which can worsen outcomes if treatment is delayed.

For those in home care, he advised consuming plenty of fluids such as oral saline, coconut water, rice starch, soups, and homemade fruit juices.

He stressed that the 48 hours after recovery from fever is the most critical period, requiring close monitoring.

Across the country, Barishal Division continues to bear the highest dengue caseload, with 12,170 cases recorded until yesterday and 27 deaths so far.

Of the 12 deaths recorded across the

country yesterday, five were reported from Barishal, five from Dhaka, and one each from Mymensingh and Chattogram divisions.

Barguna recorded 6,631 cases, the highest of any district. Recently, the southern district reported several deaths, taking its toll to 11, DGHS data show.

Meanwhile, Dhaka South City Corporation has recorded 85 deaths and 6,456 cases to date.

Officials said deaths at Dhaka Medical College Hospital and several other hospitals contributed significantly to the high numbers in the area.

Dhaka North City Corporation has reported 22 deaths and 4,470 infections so far, according to DGHS data.

Many of the patients who died from dengue in Dhaka were from outside the capital, increasing the city's death toll compared to other divisions.

After Dhaka and Barishal, Chattogram Division too has seen a sharp rise in deaths and cases over the last two months.

As of July, it had recorded 12 deaths and 3,013 infections, which have risen to 23 deaths and 6,412 infections until yesterday.