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Why are vital labour markets still closed?

Govt must address the migration crisis as a priority

It is disheartening to see Bangladesh's labour migration to some major overseas markets remaining stalled for years. According to a report by this daily, the country has yet to reverse or recover from the restrictions imposed by destination countries such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Malaysia, Oman, and Bahrain, with no clear timeline for reopening. This is despite repeated assurances and high-level engagements from the authorities in recent times.

The situation in the UAE and Malaysia, both major markets for Bangladeshi workers, highlights the depth of the crisis. The UAE has remained effectively closed since July 2024, when some migrants demonstrated in solidarity with the quota reform protesters at home. This is reflected in the fact that no visit or work visas have been issued over the past year, although there has been no official confirmation. Moreover, there is some talk that the ban or restriction may extend to 2026 as well. The stalemate, which has left aspiring workers stuck in limbo, has persisted despite efforts by the interim government, including during the World Governments Summit held in Dubai earlier this year where Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus urged UAE ministers to lift the ban.

The Malaysia situation remains equally bleak. Despite recent efforts put by the governments of both countries in reopening the market—leading to Expatriates Welfare and Overseas Employment Adviser Asif Nazrul announcing in mid-May the "imminent" deployment of 7,926 workers in the first batch—there has been no tangible progress yet. Of particular concern is the protracted uncertainty over the future of the 18,000 or so workers left stranded after missing the May 31, 2024 departure deadline, when the market last closed. Any recruitment drive post-reopening is supposed to prioritise those stranded, who paid hefty sums to recruiting agencies—far above the official fee—but to no avail so far. The question is, what's stalling the progress?

Over the past decade, Oman, Bahrain, Iraq, Libya, Sudan, Egypt, and Brunei have also closed their doors to Bangladeshi workers at various times. Among them, Bahrain closed its labour market in 2018, Oman in September 2024, and the Maldives last year; they have yet to be reopened. The picture that emerges from this reality of market closures and visa suspensions is deeply troubling. Over the years, we have repeatedly warned about the long-term consequences of our recruitment practices. We have highlighted the widespread irregularities in recruitment as well as the stranglehold of syndicates. The continuation of these systemic flaws has not only driven up costs for aspiring migrants but also eroded the confidence of destination countries, which is now evident.

This situation must be reversed. Our overdependence on Saudi Arabia against the backdrop of shrinking access to other labour markets is totally unsustainable. We urge the government to address this crisis as a key priority. The lack of progress or breakthrough in reopening closed markets is proof that diplomatic efforts alone are not enough. We must overhaul the entire labour recruitment system to ensure the welfare of our workers and steady economic progress for the nation.

Palestine recognition must follow action

Four Western nations' recognition of a Palestinian state raises cautious hope

We cannot stress enough the significance of the decision by Britain, Canada, Australia and Portugal to formally recognise a Palestinian state. For decades, Palestinians have been denied their right to self-determination, with their lives and livelihoods steadily eroded by Israeli occupation and brutalities. Coming against this backdrop, the recognition aligns these Western states with more than 140 other countries also backing Palestinians' aspiration to forge an independent homeland free from Israeli oppression. Britain's move carries particular weight, given its pivotal role in Israel's creation through the Balfour Declaration. But symbolism alone will not stop the carnage in Gaza.

As it is, the latest recognition has come far too late, and without immediate measures to halt Israel's continued assaults, its impact will be minimal. In the latest war in Gaza, more than 65,000 Palestinians have been killed, famine has spread, and displacement has become near total. Even as the recognition was announced, Israel continued its bombardment and daily raids across the occupied West Bank, advancing annexation plans that undermine the very notion of a viable Palestinian state. What, therefore, is required now is concrete action to end the war. This means exerting maximum pressure for an immediate and permanent ceasefire, opening corridors for humanitarian aid, and stopping Israel from annexing more Palestinian territory. Crucially, Israel must be held accountable under international law for its genocide in Palestine.

Another question related to the recognition is: why have these Western powers still not suspended their military cooperation with Israel, including the sale of arms and technology that are being used to commit atrocities? The continued provision of weapons undermines the very principles of human rights that Western leaders like to talk about. True justice for Palestinians cannot be achieved while the machinery of war is still being supplied.

This week's recognition should, therefore, be the start of a broader shift. Global leaders who have joined the move must follow up with impactful measures including arms embargoes, sanctions on individuals responsible for war crimes, and support for international investigations into Israel's crimes. They must also help rebuild Gaza and ensure that Palestinians can exercise sovereignty over their own land, free from occupation and apartheid. Palestinians themselves have welcomed the recognition but stressed, rightly, that it must translate into changes on the ground. After decades of dispossession, the international community owes them more than symbolic gestures; they must help create the path to a genuine statehood.

Just transition is key to our pledge to cut emissions

MACRO MIRROR

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FAHMIDA KHATUN

In the run-up to the 30th UN Climate Change Conference (Conference of the Parties-COP 30), Bangladesh is preparing its third Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC 3.0). This is part of the country's commitment under the Paris Agreement, a legally binding treaty adopted by 195 countries in 2015 to address climate change. Initially, in its Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDC), Bangladesh committed to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions in the power, industry and transport sectors by 15 percent below the business-as-usual levels within 2030. Of this target, five percent was unconditional, meaning it would be achieved without any external aid, and 10 percent was to be achieved with international technical and financial support.

In its second NDC (NDC 2.0), Bangladesh committed to reducing GHG emissions by 6.73 percent below the business-as-usual levels by 2030 without any external aid. With international support, it committed to a steeper reduction of 15.12 percent. This implies that it offered a potential reduction of GHG emissions by 21.85 percent within 2030. This is equivalent to 89.47 million tonnes of carbon dioxide (MtCO2e). The sectors set to contribute to such emission cuts include energy, cement and fertiliser, agriculture, livestock and forestry, and municipal solid waste and wastewater.

NDC 3.0 should not limit the focus to carbon reduction targets only. How climate action can transform Bangladesh's economy and society in ways that are not only environmentally friendly but also equitable, inclusive, and sustainable should be at the core of the NDC 3.0 framework. Just transition should be at the centre of it; it should provide a comprehensive development pathway that ensures that decarbonisation also generates employment and social justice.

To understand why a just transition must be central to Bangladesh's climate strategy, it is important to place it within the NDC frameworks. Under the Paris Agreement, every country is required to submit an NDC, which outlines its commitments to reduce GHG emissions and adapt to climate impacts. These NDCs are revised every five years, with the expectation that each time countries will announce more ambitious targets and provide clearer strategies for achieving said targets. However, NDCs should not be viewed as merely technical reports for submission to the UN. These are indeed part of the national development strategy that will have implications for our economic and social outcomes.

Bangladesh has been showing progress in meeting its emission reduction pledges, but challenges in implementation are evident. Its economy still relies heavily on RMG exports. The RMG industry is facing increasing pressure from international buyers who now demand higher compliance with climate and sustainability standards. The energy and power sectors depend on imported fossil fuels, which pose environmental and financial risks. In the case of agriculture, while the effects of climate change increasingly threaten the sector, it also needs to adopt climate-resilient and low-emission practices.

Therefore, stakeholders, particularly climate activists, are calling for a more ambitious NDC 3.0. Bangladesh is expected to raise its renewable energy targets much higher and decarbonise other sectors at a much bigger rate. There is also a demand for aligning the country's emissions reduction targets with international best practices. Since Bangladesh is integrated into the global economy, it cannot avoid its responsibility in reducing emissions. Integrating just transition into NDC 3.0 is thus about ensuring that Bangladesh's economy remains competitive in a rapidly changing global landscape.

There are several reasons for embedding just transition into NDC commitments. First, climate action must align with the country's development priorities. Decarbonisation without just transition will have a negative impact on employment, deepen inequality, and obstruct poverty reduction. Within the framework of just transition, climate policies should be designed to create new opportunities for green growth, industrial upgrading, and skills development. Second, the scale of employment vulnerabilities should be taken into consideration. Millions of workers in the RMG, transport, agriculture and energy sectors will be directly affected by policy changes towards a green transition. If these workers are not reskilled and redeployed into new, climate-friendly industries, the transition could generate economic and social instability.

VISUAL: **ANWAR SOHEL**

Third, social justice must be in consideration. Bangladesh is already among the most climate-vulnerable countries in the world, with millions living on the margins. A transition that neglects regional balance within the country, gender sensitivity, and the needs of rural communities who are most at risk, will risk leaving the country further behind. Fourth, as global trade rules become stricter on the carbon content of goods and services, industries must not only decarbonise but also transform their whole production systems. A just transition framework would enable industries not only to adapt, innovate, and remain competitive, but also to manage their workforce challenges in a fair and equitable manner.

What might this look like in practice? An NDC 3.0 that includes just transition would need to prioritise job creation and skills development. Bangladesh needs to update its employment strategy to prepare workers for jobs in renewable energy, energy-efficient industries, digital services, green construction, climate-resilient agriculture, and other related sectors. Technical and vocational institutions would need to adapt their curricula to meet these demands. Industries should be incentivised to invest in workforce training in view of the green compliance requirements.

Integrating just transition principles into various policies, including industrial, trade, agricultural, energy and employment, is equally important, as climate change is a cross-cutting issue. These policies must be aligned with NDC 3.0 so that climate targets are not isolated commitments but part of a broader economic strategy. Just transition also requires small and medium enterprises to have access to concessional finance to adopt cleaner technologies. Besides, supply chains must be diversified to respond to changing global markets.

Youth and gender dimensions must also be central to a just transition. Bangladesh's demographic dividend can only be harnessed if young people are given opportunities in areas such as climate innovation, start-ups, and green digital platforms. Women, who are heavily concentrated in RMG, agriculture, and informal employment, must be included in the transition. Designing programmes with a gender lens would ensure that women gain access to new skills and jobs in the green economy.

A just transition necessitates robust governance. Clear monitoring indicators should be established by the government to track progress towards a just transition. This is essential for creating green jobs, reskilling workers, and ensuring the fair distribution of benefits.

The road ahead is challenging. Climate change is already transforming Bangladesh's economy and society. The choice we face is not whether to transition, but how to do so. A transition lacking justice risks deepening inequalities and weakening social cohesion. A fair transition would ensure that climate action benefits are broadly shared, workers are protected, and industries are enhanced rather than harmed. Ultimately, our future must be judged by not only how quickly we reduce our emissions, but also how fairly and inclusively we achieve it.

Social protection is a necessity in Asia and the Pacific

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Asia and the Pacific is navigating multiple disruptions, both positive and negative. Economic restructuring, green transitions, intensifying climate change, demographic shifts and digital transformations are posing a critical question: how do we ensure that large numbers of people are not left behind?

One response is indispensable: social protection for individuals and households must be recognised not just as a safety net, but as an economically and socially empowering instrument that brings stability, prosperity and resilience.

Across the region, many workers are already experiencing disruptions caused by intensifying climate risks, shifting job markets, and deepening inequalities. These are not abstract threats; they frame existential livelihood challenges for hundreds of millions of people in the region.

This makes social protection imperative. Smartly designed and delivered, it can enable more inclusive economic progress in the short and medium terms, leading to more resilient societies that can respond faster and more effectively to shocks. Effective social protection mechanisms keep households afloat for extended periods, allow workers to transition smoothly from brown to green jobs, support caregiving and old-age security, and give people the confidence to pivot to new skills, jobs and business ventures.

While over 50 percent of the region's population is covered by at least one social protection benefit, slightly above the global average, coverage remains uneven and protection is patchy. Work-related benefits remain critically low, with just 13.5 percent covered by unemployment insurance and only 30.5 percent of workers having workplace injury protection.

At the recent Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development in Sevilla, global leaders called for an increase in investment in social protection by at least two percentage points annually.

However, in some countries, social protection is still viewed as a cost rather than a strategic investment. This mindset must change. Social protection that is comprehensive and guided by updated, connected data systems delivers high returns and must be seen as a plus on the balance sheet.

Modelling and AI-driven social protection systems can now help reduce the rising costs of unemployment, pressure on health systems, and negatives associated with societal dissatisfaction. This was evidenced during the pandemic, for example, when digital technologies helped support measures to reach the target groups. Today, AI is increasingly being used to obtain valuable insights from beneficiaries' inquiries and enhance service delivery.

Governments must not wait for a crisis to act. Investing early in universal, inclusive and adaptive social protection systems makes for good economic, political and social policy and practice.

We are already seeing promising impacts of improved social protection systems. In the Philippines, the Barangay Bay Environmental Cash for Work programme compensated crew members of commercial fishing vessels who lost income during a fishing ban aimed at restoring fish stocks. To compensate, these workers received a wage in exchange for environmental protection work such as cleaning up beaches and canals. In Indonesia, the government provided cash transfers to low-income households. These transfers work to disincentivise the consumption of forest-sourced goods while encouraging purchases of goods in the market. India's pioneering Rajasthan Platform-Based Gig Workers Act of 2023 targets the gig economy, establishing a welfare board and a dedicated social security fund financed by a levy on platform-based transactions.

Social protection and climate adaptation policies share the common goal of reducing vulnerability and building resilience. Governments can address both poverty and environmental goals by aligning social protection measures with the ongoing green transition. Countries moving towards this integration all count on sustained political will and leadership that sees the investment in people as central to their nations' progress.

International partners can play a vital role in helping countries achieve these twin goals. Multilateral development banks and UN agencies can help governments design, finance, and scale social protection systems, especially in low-income and climate-vulnerable contexts.

Our 2025 Asia-Pacific SDG Partnership Report highlights the need for targeted solutions to promote inclusive workforce development, emphasising that expanding social protection systems is essential to enabling just transitions to green and blue economies, particularly for the region's most vulnerable populations facing complex and disruptive challenges.

These actions will help ensure the region does more than simply survive disruption. Prioritising social protection as a strategic investment for development will allow everyone to thrive as challenges are overcome.

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