



DHAKA AT DAWN

Borrowed hours of a restless city

NUSRATH JAHAN

There is a Dhaka most people never meet. A city wrapped in pale light, where the air feels gentler, where time seems to pause before its daily sprint. Dhaka at dawn is not the usual picture to complain about, nor the one you brace yourself for every weekday – it is something else altogether, fleeting and almost secret.

If you happen to wake before the city does, you'll notice the silence first. It's not the stillness of midnight – the cars are still honking, and the night air still carries a buzz of gatherings. The familiar roar of traffic is absent, and suddenly, the roads stretch out wider than usual; unhurried, like an empty theatre waiting for actors to arrive.

Flyovers that are usually burdened with endless cars and buses stand empty, their expanse startling in its openness.

What makes these early hours so different from night time is not the absence of traffic – but the presence of light. At night, Dhaka may be quieter, but it never truly rests. But with the first rays of sunlight, the calmness spreads like a blanket over



PHOTO: SAZZAD IBNE SAYED

the city.

Only a handful of people claim this hour.

The early risers, walking briskly in parks or running along empty sidewalks, seem to belong to a different city altogether. They breathe in cleaner air, watch the sky shift from charcoal to rose-gold, and carry on their morning rituals while the rest of Dhaka sleeps. There are tea stalls too – though far rarer now

– whose kettles rattle before sunrise, offering warmth in tiny glasses to rickshaw pullers who begin their day early, or to old men who gather for a few moments of conversation before the noise swallows everything.

A streetlamp flickers off, a shopkeeper yawns as he rolls up his shutters, a rider pedals through the quiet streets with a bag that is soon to be filled with packages awaiting delivery. Even the stray dogs seem calmer at this hour, stretched out

lazily on sidewalks, unbothered by the absence of people to chase.

And then, of course, there are the night guards – figures who belong to both night and day but not quite in the ways we notice.

You'll often find them pacing slowly outside gates, wrapped in shawls during winter, or leaning on their sticks in the humid stillness of summer. By dawn, their eyes carry the fatigue of sleepless hours, but also a strange calmness that only comes from keeping watch while the city rests. Some sit on rickety chairs sipping the first tea of the day, others hum softly to themselves to stay awake, their shadows long and solitary under fading streetlights.

As joggers begin to arrive and shutters creak open, they stand as quiet sentinels of the in-between hour – reminders that while most of Dhaka sleeps, someone has been awake all along, guarding its silence. It is as if the city exhales before the day's demands begin. And then the city starts to wake up. The same roads that feel wide and generous at six, shrink beneath traffic by eight; the crisp air thickens with heat and dust in hours. But isn't that the magic of it all? A fleeting gift for walkers, runners, tea drinkers, and newspaper boys – a quiet inheritance most of us overlook, as though Dhaka's most delicate secret hides in plain sight.



We aim to be a key bridge between Saarc, Asean: Yunus

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus has said Bangladesh is working to revive Saarc and is actively pursuing Asean membership.

He made the comments while responding to a query of the interim government's foreign policy direction by Finnish President Alexander Stubb.

"We envision Bangladesh as a key bridge between Saarc and Asean. Our application for a Sectoral Dialogue Partnership with Asean is a step towards eventual full membership," Yunus explained.



Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus at a meeting with Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni in New York yesterday.

PHOTO: PTI

The two leaders held a meeting on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly at its headquarters in New York on Wednesday.

In another meeting, Yunus and Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif discussed alternative avenues to enhance regional cooperation, with Saarc largely inactive in recent years.

During the meeting with Stubb, Yunus said major political and institutional reforms were underway in Bangladesh.

The chief adviser said trials of Sheikh Hasina and her cronies are a top priority of his government. He stressed that the trials were being conducted in accordance with international legal standards.

"Despite facing trial, she continues to make incendiary and destabilising remarks," he said.

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Justice eludes women, children as trials drag on

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The partial 2025 data on convictions in women and children repression cases already point to a decline. The figures underscore how thousands of cases remain stuck in investigation or trial, often ending in acquittals or out-of-court settlements.

Md Sazzad Hossain, public prosecutor of Women and Children Repression Prevention Tribunal-3, said victim families' reluctance to pursue trials is a major reason for delays – which ultimately leads to fewer convictions.

"Witnesses move away, forget details, or stop showing up when a case drags on for eight or 10 years. Doctors retire, complainants remarry, and families no longer want to revisit the past. Defence lawyers then argue there is no ground for conviction, and the court is left with no option but to acquit."

He said police delays in submitting charge sheets and producing witnesses further weaken cases. According to the Women and Children Repression Prevention Act 2000, charge sheets must be submitted within 60 days and trials completed within 180 days.

Sazzad added that when families cooperate and cases are supported by medical evidence and consistent witnesses – especially in child victim cases – convictions are usually secured and acquittals are rare.

According to PHQ data, in the first eight months of this year, 2,698 cases were filed over child rape, murder, abduction, and torture, naming 5,048 accused. Only 14 cases produced conviction, while just 15 of the accused were punished.

In 2024, a total of 2,996 cases were filed, resulting in 22 convictions.

Only 27 of the 5,178 accused were punished. The previous year saw 2,731 cases filed, but only 13 led to convictions, with just 14 of the 4,415 accused punished.

The picture is similar for crimes against women. Of 10,475 cases filed so far this year, 273 (2.61 percent) ended in conviction and 331 accused were punished.

"Rape cases often fail as witnesses retract statements or stop coming when proceedings drag on for years. The absence of a victim-friendly courtroom also discourages testimony."

Khondokar Rafiqul Islam,
AIG (crime and operations) at PHQ,

Last year, 14,636 cases were filed, with 856 convictions. Just 1,488 of the 32,166 accused were punished. In 2023, 16,214 cases were filed, with 820 convictions. That year, 1,216 of 34,401 accused were punished.

Khondokar Rafiqul Islam, additional inspector general (crime and operations) at PHQ, said weak laws and prosecution contribute to poor outcomes.

He added, "Rape cases often fail as witnesses retract statements or stop coming when proceedings drag on for years. The absence of a victim-friendly courtroom also discourages testimony."

Rafiqul called for fast-track trials. "If such cases could be disposed of within a year, conviction rates would rise significantly. We've already instructed investigators to prioritise genuine rape cases and file charge sheets promptly so trials can be

completed within a year."

He, however, added that conviction rates will remain low until family disputes and consensual-relationship cases are separated from genuine rape cases.

On the other hand, many cases collapse when families withdraw mid-trial, said public prosecutor Sazzad. "While filing a case, emotions run high, media attention is intense, and families seek justice. But later, they compromise – sometimes for financial settlement or to avoid social stigma. As a result, acquittals outnumber convictions, even in cases with scope for punishment."

He called for witness protection and fixed trial timelines. "If witnesses can be protected and motivated to stand by their testimony, and if trials are concluded within a fixed timeframe, conviction rates will certainly improve."

According to Supreme Court sources, around 99 Women and Children Repression Prevention Tribunals across the country are working for the quick disposal of cases filed over crimes against women and children.

Salma Ali, human rights lawyer and adviser to Bangladesh National Women Lawyers' Association, said proper oversight is crucial. "Every criminal case involves three key actors – police, prosecutors, and judges. But in Bangladesh, proceedings often depend on who holds the power. If it lies with the accused, cases drag on unnecessarily."

"This is why proper monitoring is crucial. The law ministry must ensure oversight, while the home ministry coordinates – especially when police are accused. Otherwise, delays will persist."

Country sees rise in HIV infections, deaths

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number of HIV-positive cases stood at 12,422 till last year. Of them, 2,412 died.

DECLINING GLOBALLY BUT RISING IN BANGLADESH

The detection of the first HIV case in the US in 1981 prompted a global public health response.

Efforts of communities and governments brought down HIV infections by 40 percent and AIDS-related deaths by 56 percent globally since 2010, according to UNAIDS Global AIDS Update 2025.

The global number of HIV infections was 29 lakh and AIDS-related deaths 18 lakh in 2000. The numbers declined to 13 lakh and 6.3 lakh respectively last year, shows UNAIDS report.

But the caseload and deaths saw a gradual rise in Bangladesh over the last few decades, said officials of National Tuberculosis, Leprosy, and AIDS/STD Programme (TB-L & ASP) under the DGHS.

One of the officials said the expansion of HIV screening in many districts has led to an increase in case detection in recent times.

Over the last decade, the number of HIV tests rose to 16.12 lakh from 83,356 in 2016. Besides, another 10.34 lakh people underwent HIV tests as part of standard health screening during the period.

DGHS data shows that 77 percent of those potentially living with HIV were aware of their health status as of last year.

According to UNAIDS's target set in 2014, 95 percent of people living with HIV are supposed to know their status by 2030.

SERVICES DISRUPTED

As the time frame for the TB-L & ASP ended in June last year, DGHS now has to rely on foreign donors to continue tests and medication for HIV patients at dedicated centres.

However, the preventive services are seeing disruptions due to a

shortage of funds, a DGHS official said, adding that key populations remain out of coverage in 25 districts.

When asked, Zubaida Nasreen, deputy director of the AIDS/STD Programme, said there is a gap between the actual number of HIV-positive people and those who are potentially living with HIV.

"These people were always there, but a rise in testing is now making them visible," Zubaida, also the immediate past line director of the TB-L and ASP Programme, told The Daily Star on September 25.

Replying to a question, she said the expiry of the programme caused some disruptions in preventive services, but it would be inaccurate to claim that 25 districts are without coverage.

A development project proposal prepared by the DGHS now awaits approval. Once approved, preventive services will be provided seamlessly, she added.

CEC rules out PR

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CEC Nasir's comments came amid a division between parties over the PR issue.

Most political parties at National Consensus Commission meetings backed a 100-member upper house elected through PR, but the BNP and like-minded groups filed a note of dissent, arguing the chamber should reflect seat shares in the lower house.

BNP Standing Committee member Salahuddin Ahmed yesterday reiterated the party's opposition, calling PR a recipe for "permanent restlessness" that would destabilise Bangladesh.

Speaking at a seminar at the Supreme Court Auditorium, he said governments under PR often took a year to form, only to collapse within months. "The purpose of PR is not just to increase seats but to create frequent instability. The groups who want the country to stay in uncertainty all the time will benefit from this," he said.

He added that the constitution clearly mandates direct voting for public representatives. Salahuddin also criticised surveys on PR, saying many respondents did not understand the system. He warned PR could produce "another fascist or weak government like Sheikh Hasina's".

The Jamaat-e-Islami and six other parties – Islami Andolan Bangladesh, Bangladesh Khelafat Majlis, Khelafat Majlis, Nezame Islam Party, Bangladesh Khelafat Andolon, and Jatiya Ganatantrik Party (Jagpa) – have staged protests since September 18 demanding the PR system. They also announced fresh district- and upazila-level programmes for today.

The National Citizen Party supports PR for an upper house of parliament.

Despite the debate, Nasir said the EC was preparing in full swing to hold the next polls in February. "We will not favour anyone. We will work with complete neutrality. We will ensure measures so that no one can play foul," he said.

On talks with all registered parties, including the Jatiya Party amid a call to ban it, he said the discussions with the parties would take place in the late phases of discussions. "There is ongoing political debate. Let's see how things evolve. Please wait a little."

About the NCP's demand that the party be given the "Shapla" (Water Lily) symbol, the CEC said Mahmudur Rahman Manna-led Nagorik Oikya had previously applied for the same symbol.

"There was no discussion then. I don't understand why there is so much talk about it now," he said, adding that the matter would be decided collectively in the commission.

He also said they were yet to finalise the number of new political parties for registration.

The EC had begun steps to ensure expatriate Bangladeshis' voting rights through postal ballots, he added.

'Delhi didn't like what our students did'

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"And that creates a lot of tension between India and Bangladesh. Also, lots of fake news is coming from the other side. This is a very bad thing," Yunus said at an event on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York.

The event, arranged by Asia Society and the Asia Society Policy Institute in New York on Wednesday, was moderated by Dr Kyung-wha Kang, president and CEO of Asia Society.

He flagged a piece of fake news claiming that the youth who brought about change in Bangladesh are Taliban. "They even said I'm a Taliban too. I don't have a beard. I just left it at home," he quipped.

Talking about the regional economy, the chief adviser said cooperation is key to development.

Yunus said SAARC is supposed to be a bloc of very close family members, and the idea was born in Bangladesh.

"You can invest in Bangladesh. Bangladesh is going to invest in your territory. That's the whole idea of SAARC," he said. "All of us benefit from that... This is what we should be doing. We have problems with India right now because they did not like what the students have done."

Yunus said SAARC's idea was to bring all the countries in South Asia together so that young people can get in touch with each other.

He said it is important that they visit each other, make friends, study in colleges and universities across the region, and do business.

The chief adviser said, "Our history gave us the opportunity to make that happen, but somehow it didn't fit into the politics of some one country, so it had to stop. We feel very sorry for that."

However, Yunus said Dhaka is

willing to make SAARC work. "We want to make sure that we open it up and bring people together. That is the only way to solve our issues."

While acknowledging limitations, he said a country's economic activities can extend beyond its boundaries and benefit the region.

"Look, Bangladesh's economy is defined by the boundaries of Bangladesh... This is a very narrow way of looking at yourself," Prof Yunus said.

"I said, why don't you look at neighbours, like Nepal, Bhutan, and also the seven states of India. In the eastern part of Bangladesh, there are seven states that don't have any access to the ocean. These are landlocked regions," he said, hinting at possible fields of cooperation.

On Asean membership, the chief adviser said Bangladesh can become an informal member of the bloc, and there is a provision supporting it.

"We can do that. Asean would be a good place to go, and you can build it up with regional harmony and regional interconnectivity," he said.

However, he acknowledged the challenges. "It is not easy to get everybody's 'yes' right away, particularly Myanmar, which has a problem with the Rohingyas."

"So they may not come forward, but we'll work on it. We don't see this will start a permanent trouble between Myanmar and Bangladesh," he said.

Yunus said they will have a good relationship with Myanmar. "Having this kind of conflict with each other doesn't help anybody. So, we have to resolve that."

He hoped that Rohingyas would be able to go back to their homes, businesses, and professions in Myanmar.

Rice goes out, yaba comes in

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broke out in November 2023 between Myanmar's junta and ethnic groups, the Arakan Army has seized nearly 80 percent of the Rakhine State.

Myanmar's military then cut off supply lines, creating near-famine conditions. "To fill the shortages, the AA now depends heavily on supplies from Bangladesh, offering drugs in exchange."

At a press briefing in Cox's Bazar last week, BGB's Ramu Sector Commander Colonel Mohiduddin Ahmed said, "The Naf River, Ukhiya-Teknaf border, and sea routes through Maheshkhali, Banshkhali, Kutubdia, Anowara and Kuakata are now major corridors for trafficking yaba, crystal meth and other narcotics."

He alleged that the AA is directly involved in yaba trafficking, with smuggling increasing also through remote areas of Bandarban's Naikhongchhari.

"Rohingyas are the main traffickers. They move very fast, which makes it difficult to catch

them. Some unscrupulous people here, driven by profit, are bringing yaba from the AA."

According to official data, 98 lakh yaba pills and 40kgs of crystal meth were seized in 2024. In the first four months of 2025 alone, 53 lakh yaba pills and 2kgs of crystal meth have been recovered.

Since August, Coast Guard operations in the waters off Saint Martin's, Cox's Bazar, Kutubdia, Chattogram's Banshkhali, Patenga and Halishahar have led to around 67 arrests. Goods seized during the raids included cement, construction materials, potatoes, lentils, garlic and medicines, along with yaba consignments.

Coast Guard officials said traffickers admitted to trading essential goods with the AA for drugs but often pretend they were captured. "They secretly return and hand over narcotics to local dealers. Several such networks are involved," they said in a statement.