

The Daily Star

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Human rights reforms cannot wait

NHRC must be revived and reformed urgently

We share the concerns raised at a citizens' dialogue in Dhaka about the interim government's inaction on critical steps needed to promote and protect human rights. Foremost among these are the long-overdue reconstitution of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) and amendments to the NHRC Act to ensure the body's independence and authority to hold both civil and military security agencies accountable. Equally troubling has been the government's disregard for repeated calls from national and international rights groups to disband the Rapid Action Battalion (Rab), accused of crimes against humanity including enforced disappearances.

It may be recalled that the recent fact-finding report by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) on violations related to the July-August 2024 protests recommended amending the NHRC Act of 2009 to bring the commission into full compliance with the Paris Principles, thereby strengthening its independence and restoring public confidence in it. This was not the first time the OHCHR urged reforms to make this institution capable of promoting and protecting citizens' rights; rather, this was a repetition of its observations made in the last two Universal Periodic Reviews. The Paris Principles, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1993, set minimum standards for national human rights institutions, including broad mandates, independence, and pluralism.

According to a report published in this daily, the interim government has finalised a draft ordinance in line with the Paris Principles. While this development offers cautious optimism, we urge the government to move swiftly towards enactment and implementation, well before the country enters an election phase. The OHCHR has further recommended that any amended law must ensure an independent commission, with members appointed through a transparent and participatory process involving genuine engagement with all relevant stakeholders, including civil society.

Bangladesh first established the NHRC in 2008, under pressure from civil society organisations and development partners, amid rising cases of rights violations and denial of justice. The commission was initially set up by the then caretaker government and later reconstituted under the Awami League government, which unfortunately weakened the institution, reducing it to what many describe as "a rehabilitation centre" for retired bureaucrats.

Civil society leaders also continue to warn that surveillance persists and that key security agencies—including the DGF, NSI, and NTMC—have been excluded from any reform agenda. This is deeply inconsistent with the government's stated commitment to democratic reform and the rule of law. In this context, we stress the importance of adopting the OHCHR's recommendation that the commission's mandate explicitly include investigating allegations against military, police, paramilitary and intelligence agencies. It is troubling to see violations of human rights continuing with impunity to this day. Hence, the government should urgently reconstitute the NHRC.

Finally, provisions must be made to equip the NHRC with adequate financial and human resources to fulfil its mandate effectively, impartially, and independently. Without these guarantees, reforms will remain cosmetic, and the people's faith in democratic governance will continue to erode.

Pollution is killing our children

Comprehensive strategy needed to prevent further damage

Unicef's new handbook on Children's Health and the Environment reminds us of a devastating cost of environmental pollution: the lives of our children. It highlights some grim facts—in 2021, air pollution caused more than 235,000 deaths, 19,000 of them children under five. Between 2018 and 2021, Dhaka repeatedly ranked as the second most polluted city in the world, while in 2023 Bangladesh was ranked the most polluted country globally.

Multiple sources of pollution are currently putting our children at risk. Because their organs and immune systems are still developing, children are particularly vulnerable to air pollution, which at high levels can cause pneumonia, asthma, childhood leukaemia, and neurodevelopmental disorders. Noise pollution also harms children, leading to hearing loss. The risk is particularly grave in Dhaka, one of the noisiest cities in the world, but other major cities do not lag far behind.

Another serious health threat comes from e-waste. According to a study by Buet, an estimated 2.81 million tonnes of e-waste are generated annually in the country, a figure projected to rise to 4.62 million tonnes by 2035. Children living near e-waste recycling sites are exposed to toxic air that can impair lung function, damage the immune system, affect growth, and even alter DNA. Exposure of expectant mothers to such toxins is linked to stillbirths and premature births.

Given this reality, it is reassuring to learn that the interim government has taken some steps to reduce air pollution. For instance, the Department of Environment (DoE) conducted drives across the country, shutting down 462 brick kilns and imposing heavy fines on others. It has ordered a halt to brick-making in Savar, one of the most polluted areas, from September—allowing only kilns that use cleaner technology to operate. The DoE also reported 598 mobile courts and 1,363 cases filed against polluters, including vehicles, brick kilns, steel mills, hazardous waste disposal units, lead-acid battery recycling factories, tyre pyrolysis plants, and charcoal factories. The list goes on.

While these initiatives are commendable, their outcomes remain far from satisfactory. The DoE and other relevant state agencies must enforce all existing environmental laws, including removing unfit vehicles from the streets, implementing no-honking zones, enforcing stricter construction rules to curb dust pollution, and ensuring cleaner technologies in brick kilns. The government should also expand public awareness campaigns on the dangers of pollution and the importance of adopting cleaner practices. All this must be done as part of a coordinated, long-term strategy involving the government, civil society, and international partners. We must protect not only today's children but also future generations from this entirely preventable crisis.

The interim government's troubling continuity



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When the interim government took office in the aftermath of the mass uprising last year, the people of Bangladesh hoped to see a genuine change in perspective—a visible shift in certain areas. For instance, we expected a transition from irregularities in government administration to a system governed by rules; from secrecy and opacity to transparency and accountability. We hoped for financial discipline in place of corruption and waste. We expected institutional initiatives for the protection of human rights instead of continued violation. We also believed this government would refrain from entering into agreements that conflict with national interests, as previous governments had done, and that it would seek to create policies or institutional frameworks to prevent such harmful deals in the future.

But it is unfortunate that, after more than a year, in almost every single area where we expected betterment, this government has demonstrated not merely incompetence but something that cannot even be explained as inefficiency. It is not clear whether this government is truly serious about these issues, or if it simply lacks the intention to address them. Perhaps that is why we continue to see widespread human rights violations, violence, financial irregularities, waste of resources, and corruption.

Even more troubling is the fact that the government seems more focused on areas where it should not be undertaking any initiatives, such as making agreements that are not aligned with the country's interests. A major example of this is the case of the Chattogram port. During Sheikh Hasina's regime, an initiative was taken to hand over the port's main terminal to DP World, a state-owned company from the UAE. We heard that Hasina faced certain complications and needed to make compromises with Abu Dhabi, which served her specific political interests. The project was pushed via irregular means, without any tender or public consultation.

Naturally, we expected that once the interim government took power, it would begin by investigating why such a serious breach of public interest had taken place under the previous regime. The long-discussed reforms related to Chattogram port should have focused on expanding

the domestic capacity for port management, including improvement of customs process and bureaucracy. That would have been the logical and expected course of action for this government.

Instead, there is now a striking insistence that the port's operations must be handed over to DP World. In other words, the "Sheikh Hasina project" must be implemented.



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Port workers, political groups, and experts have raised objections, backed by analysis and argument, and articles have been published in newspapers arguing against it, yet the government has offered no response or explanation. The chief adviser has made it clear that the port's operations must go to a foreign company.

It is remarkable that some of the government's current advisers, who once spoke eloquently about rules, regulations, and transparency before assuming office, are now supporting this move. They have not explained why a project conceived during the Hasina era must be implemented without a tender. A responsible official even mentioned making it "like the Singapore model." Yet, there is no example in Singapore of handing over national assets in such an opaque manner, without a tender, to a foreign entity. This government claims to be

emulating the Singapore model, but its actions are the opposite: instead of building national capability, it is intent on transferring it to foreign companies, whereas, Singapore's state-owned national institutions are highly competent. It seems that the interim government is incapable of seeing any prospect for Bangladesh to develop its own capability as other countries have.

Several other questionable activities are unfolding in the Chattogram area. For instance, we have been witnessing corporate lobbies moving around and recent joint military exercises by Bangladesh and the US. These developments are raising questions due to the government's lack of transparency. Similar exercises took place during Hasina's regime, and many secret standing agreements

disaster if the project becomes operational. The government offers no explanation as to why such a dangerous project is still proceeding. Instead, it appears eager to continue with these projects and even sign new agreements.

This troubling tendency is evident elsewhere, too: in the fragile law and order situation amid rising mob violence; in the dominance of looters and grabbers seizing small parks, playgrounds, and rivers; in hill cutting; and in the extraction of sand and stones from rivers. Harmful projects identified by experts are continuing unabated, such as the construction of a Dhaka Elevated Expressway ramp at Panthakunja Park and Hatirjheel. The project risks damaging the park's biodiversity and harming Hatirjheel. Despite countless arguments, expert

since 1990s remain unexplained.

Furthermore, the government has failed to review, amend, cancel or even question the harmful or environmentally destructive projects initiated by the previous government. Take the Rampal coal-based power plant, for example, a project that poses grave threats to the Sundarbans and will significantly worsen climate change impacts across Bangladesh. It was widely expected that this project would be reviewed and scrapped. Yet, the interim government has taken no action whatsoever.

The agreement with India's Adani Group is another highly damaging contract, and again, the government shows no sign of withdrawing from it. Regarding the Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant, media reports, citing international surveys, have warned that due to inadequate institutional preparation, insufficient training, and questionable equipment quality, Bangladesh could face a catastrophic

opinions, a public hearing, and a sit-in that lasted more than 160 days, the government has refused to amend the project.

When the High Court issued an order halting all construction following a writ petition, the government not only challenged the order but also sided with the company to resume work. The company continues construction in defiance of the High Court's order. This means the government is directly opposing the public and siding with corporate interests.

This is deeply troubling and serves as an example of how the expectations of the people have been betrayed again. It is profoundly objectionable. The people had hoped that this government would break with the past tendencies and chart a new course. In the face of this failure, the people must surveil the government's work and raise their voice when necessary. This is the only way forward now.

From Dhaka to Denmark: A united front against food waste

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In Dhaka's bustling markets, trade begins at dawn. Sacks of rice are carried on shoulders through the crowds, mangoes are loaded onto trucks, and fish are sold on ice blocks already melting in the sun. But as the day draws to a close, the scene is all too familiar: fruit too soft to sell and fish no longer fresh to eat. Food that could have fed families is wasted. But food waste does not only happen at the market. Households and restaurants also waste perfectly edible food.

In Bangladesh, the greatest losses occur early due to the lag of infrastructure and technology. Rice is lost during production and handling, and mangoes and lentils spoil mainly during transport and storage. Fish, the country's primary protein source, deteriorates rapidly without cold chains.

We recognise the problem also in Denmark, where food is wasted at alarming levels. According to Food

Nation, approximately 2,000 tonnes of food are discarded every day in Denmark. If we include all stages of the supply chain—from production to processing—the total food waste reaches over 1.2 billion tonnes per year.

To combat this, both public and private sector actors in Denmark have taken action. For example, supermarket giants have made their Food Loss and Waste (FLW) data public. Additionally, with the recent launch of Denmark's first food waste strategy, the Danish Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Fisheries is taking a significant step toward addressing this enormous loss.

A recent report by the World Bank—Bangladesh Food Loss and Waste Diagnostic—puts numbers to what many witness every day. It shows that nearly 34 percent of Bangladesh's key foods are lost: rice by 23 percent, lentils 27 percent, mangoes 29 percent, and fish as much as 36 percent. Which means more than one in three fish never reaches a plate. It is not merely a statistic; it represents lost livelihoods, diminished access to nutrition, and added strain on our climate.

At the same time, household food waste is on the rise. According to the UN's Food Waste Index Report 2024, a Bangladeshi wastes 82 kg of food per

year at home; in total, this amounts to 14.1 million tonnes of household food waste annually in Bangladesh.

The crisis will not go away by itself, and climate change worsens the problem. The rising of soil salinity, flooded fields, and cyclones along the coast damage both harvests and storage capacity. The effects ripple outward: farmers lose income, consumers face higher prices, and greenhouse gas emissions rise from the food that goes to waste.

A global problem requires global solutions. Denmark and Bangladesh have a strong government-to-government cooperation in food and agriculture, supporting food safety and sustainable and efficient food production in Bangladesh. The joint work includes raising awareness, giving technical support, and transferring innovation and technology.

Raising awareness is key when it comes to reducing FLW through campaigns and other relevant activities. Denmark is collaborating with partners such as the World Food Program, Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN, World Bank, and Bangladesh's Centre for Policy and Dialogue for discussions aimed at creating global change.

Danish and Bangladeshi experts

can together provide advice on policies, regulations, and standards to reduce food loss, including incentives for private sector compliance and reporting.

The Danish food cluster supplies solutions such as cold chain technologies, storage systems, and digital platforms that connect producers directly with buyers. The Danish Embassy is facilitating new contacts and cooperation projects between Bangladeshi and Danish companies to help reduce food loss at the farm, transport, and retail levels.

Through such cooperation, both countries can not only reduce food waste locally but also contribute to global solutions for food security, resource efficiency, and sustainability. That way, everyone can be a winner.

Reducing food loss and waste enhances sustainability, strengthens global competitiveness, creates jobs, saves money, and reduces environmental impact. It is one of the most direct and cost-effective ways to feed more people using fewer resources while lowering emissions.

The harvests lost today do not have to mean a lost future tomorrow.

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