

## Bangladesh's gut-healing food among Time's Best Inventions of 2025

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Time magazine yesterday named the MDCF-2, a gut-restoring complementary food for undernourished children developed through a long-standing collaboration between icddr,b and Washington University in St Louis, one of its prestigious Best Inventions of 2025 in the Social Impact category.

This year's list features 300 groundbreaking innovations worldwide.

Microbiota Directed Complementary Food (MDCF-2) is an affordable food formulation that repairs gut microbiomes to treat malnutrition, the International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh (icddr,b) said in a press release issued last night.

MDCF-2 contains a precise mix of chickpea flour, soybean flour, peanut flour, and green banana. These ingredients were selected for their ability to nourish beneficial gut bacteria that support healthy growth, immune function, and neurodevelopment in malnourished children.

Supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, MDCF-2 has shown promising results in improving growth and immune recovery among undernourished children. Major studies are now underway in India, Pakistan,

Mali, and Tanzania.

The idea originated from discussions between Dr Tahmeed Ahmed, executive director of icddr,b, and Dr Jeffrey Gordon, director of the Edison Family Center for Genome Sciences and Systems Biology at Washington University. The collaboration merged Dr Ahmed's decades of work on malnutrition in Bangladesh with Dr Gordon's pioneering research on the human gut microbiome.

Despite progress in recent decades, undernutrition remains a major threat to child survival and development, contributing to nearly half of all under-five deaths. The global burden continues to worsen due to wars, displacement, and natural disasters, leaving millions of children at risk of stunting and wasting.

"This recognition is deeply encouraging," said Dr Tahmeed. "It shows how science and compassion can come together to solve one of the most persistent global health challenges. MDCF-2 gives us new hope that locally developed, affordable solutions can help millions of undernourished children not only survive but thrive."

"The next step is to get the treatment to larger populations of children where acute malnutrition is rampant," Dr Gordon was quoted as saying.



Six-year-old Alaina Islam lies quietly on a bed at Mugda Medical College Hospital yesterday after being admitted with dengue fever the day before. In the 24 hours till 8:00am yesterday, four people died and 781 were hospitalised, while 2,452 patients remained under treatment nationwide.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

## Shapla or no registration

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two options -- either cancel symbols like Dhan (paddy), Tara (star), and Sonali Aash (golden fibre) or allocate Shapla. We do not want the symbols of any fraternal political parties to be cancelled."

At the meeting, the NCP leaders sought the EC's explanation for not giving them the Shapla symbol.

The party will continue its fight for the Shapla symbol through democratic means.

"The election will not be halted over the issue of a symbol. But if someone is trying to stop the election by denying us the symbol and our rights, we will not compromise on that right."

Some influence or force may be affecting the EC, or perhaps they are planning a new election-related conspiracy by keeping the issue of the Shapla symbol unresolved, he said.

"This will become clear to the nation within this month, and we will wait until then," he added.

At the meeting, the three-member NCP delegation also discussed the issue of voting rights for expatriates.

NCP leader Zahurul Islam Musa, referring to delays in launching the expatriate voter app, said: "Expatriates are eager to vote. We urged the EC to explain why the app launch is being delayed. Such apps typically require trial and error phases, but we are concerned that the EC is heading in a direction where a significant portion of expatriate voters might be deliberately excluded."

The EC informed the NCP delegation that they plan to launch the app within October, he added.

## All DSA cases

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and 31 of the DSA will be cancelled, and no further action can be taken on them. All convictions will be annulled as well.

These sections pertain to offences involving speech and online expression, including defamation, dissemination of false or offensive information, hurting religious sentiments, identity misuse, and digital content considered harmful to the Liberation War, national symbols, or social and communal harmony.

However, the amendment does not mention those facing charges under similar sections of DSA's successor, the Cyber Security Act (CSA), which was repealed by the interim government.

The decisions of yesterday's meeting were announced at a press conference at the Foreign Service Academy by Faiz Ahmad Taiyeb, chief adviser's special assistant for information and communication technology affairs; Shafiqul Alam, CA's press secretary; and Shish Hayder Chowdhury, ICT secretary.

Taiyeb said that 95 percent of those accused under the DSA have already been relieved.

Prior to the repeal of the CSA, the law ministry calculated last year that there were 1,340 cases involving speech-related offences. A majority of those, 879, were being tried at cyber tribunals, while 461 were under investigation. Of them, 786 cases were filed under the Digital Security Act and 275 under the Cyber Security Act.

According to data collected by the Centre for Governance Studies, at least 3,208 named and 2,080 unnamed people have been sued under the DSA for online expression between October 2018 and August 2024. Another 372 people have been prosecuted under the CSA.

These figures do not include the cases filed for sexual harassment, blackmail, and fraud.

Of those accused, nearly half were prosecuted for social media posts deemed critical of the government, office holders, or elected representatives.

One in every three of those accused under the DSA and one in every four of those accused under the CSA were journalists.

## Hope for peace in Gaza

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However, Israel said the release of the captives would "bring the end to this war".

US envoy Steve Witkoff said Trump would travel to Egypt next week for an event celebrating the conclusion of the agreement, with Trump himself saying: "I'm going to try and make a trip over... We're working on the timing, the exact timing."

Despite celebrations and a flood of messages from world leaders hailing the deal, numerous issues remain unsettled in the negotiations.

Senior Hamas official Osama Hamdan said the Palestinian Islamist movement rejected the planned transitional authority as proposed in the Trump plan.

"No Palestinian would accept this. All the factions, including the Palestinian Authority, reject this," Hamdan told Qatar-based broadcaster Al Arabiy.

Trump said the issue of Hamas surrendering its weapons would be addressed in the second phase of the peace plan.

"There will be disarming," he told reporters, adding there would also be "pullbacks" by Israeli forces.

A ceasefire was to take hold in devastated Gaza within 24 hours of Netanyahu convening his security

cabinet for a meeting that was scheduled to begin at 1400 GMT, the government said.

Speaking at a cabinet meeting yesterday, Trump said the agreement between Israel and Palestinian militant group had "ended the war in Gaza" and would lead to broader Middle East peace.

"We secured the release of all of the remaining hostages, and they should be released on Monday or Tuesday," Trump told his assembled cabinet secretaries at the White House.

However, Trump said that the bodies of some of the dead hostages would be "hard to find." At least 47 hostages remain in Gaza, including 25 the Israeli military says are dead.

A source within Hamas told AFP the group would exchange 20 living hostages all at the same time for nearly 2,000 Palestinian prisoners as part of the deal's first phase.

The deal also envisions a surge of aid into Gaza, where the UN has declared famine.

The announcement sparked joy in Gaza, much of which has been flattened by bombardment and most of whose residents have been displaced at least once over the past two years.

"Honestly, when I heard the news, I couldn't hold back. Tears of joy

flowed. Two years of bombing, terror, destruction, loss, humiliation, and the constant feeling that we could die at any moment," displaced Palestinian Samer Joudeh told AFP.

In Israel, thousands of people gathered in a Tel Aviv square to celebrate, some holding photos of hostages still in Gaza and waving Israeli and US flags.

Many wore stickers reading: "They're coming back."

Countries around the world welcomed the deal, with UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres saying: "The fighting must stop once and for all."

In a statement yesterday, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs said Bangladesh believes that diplomacy and dialogue are the only means to resolve any conflict and commended all stakeholders for their efforts in facilitating the diplomatic initiative to end the crisis.

"By ending the ongoing war in Gaza, this diplomatic process would pave the way for the realisation of an independent and sovereign State of Palestine," read the statement. Dhaka also said it wants to take part in the post-war peace efforts and the reconstruction process in Gaza.

The deal was thrashed out in indirect negotiations behind closed doors in a conference centre in the Red Sea resort town of Sharm El-Sheikh.

will be another meeting or a signing ceremony that day," Salahuddin said.

Hamidur Rahman Azad, assistant secretary general of Jamaat, said his party participated sincerely in the reform talks.

"Reforms are necessary for the people and the country. Those who refuse to change their stance for the greater good are against reforms," he said.

Asked if Jamaat would sign the charter, he replied, "We are positive about the government and hope it will hold a referendum before the next parliamentary election and implement the necessary reforms beforehand."

Javed Rasin, joint convener of NCP, said his party supports the key reform proposals but will decide on signing after reviewing the commission's implementation plan and its decision on notes of dissent from parties.

## Parties to decide

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The meeting discussed implementation of the charter based on feedback from five rounds of dialogues with political parties and opinions from experts.

The commission said it would finalise the charter and submit it to the government alongside implementation recommendations after analysing the parties views.

Formed in mid-February to build consensus on reforming state institutions, the consensus commission drafted 84 proposals, half involving constitutional reforms.

The final round of dialogue ended in a deadlock on Wednesday.

The commission earlier asked 30 political parties and alliances to send two representatives each for the signing ceremony. Most have already submitted names, and commission sources said major parties, including

BNP, Jamaat and NCP, have responded positively about attending.

Monir Haider, special assistant to the chief adviser, told reporters after yesterday's meeting that the commission is in touch with the parties on their participation and "they are giving positive responses".

Speaking to The Daily Star last night, BNP Standing Committee member Salahuddin Ahmed said it would be appropriate to comment on the matter only after reviewing the recommendations.

He said that before making a decision on the signing, parties are supposed to be informed about what recommendations the commission will send to the interim government on the charter's implementation.

However, the BNP was not informed about the fixing of the date for the signing. "We don't know whether there

## Bangladesh not ready for upper house: CPD

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Instead of improving accountability, the think tank warned, an upper house might deepen political deadlock, intensify power struggles and further centralise authority.

It stressed that "without structural and cultural change, institutional reforms alone cannot guarantee accountability".

To make the current system of parliament functional, CPD proposed appointing opposition MPs as chairs of parliamentary standing committees and ensuring transparency in political funding.

It recommended increasing local government's financial autonomy, expanding women's political participation, and reforming anti-defection laws.

It said the ruling party should have the powers to make key executive and constitutional appointments, but these appointments should be subject to parliamentary scrutiny.

CPD also proposed establishing an independent legislative commission, modelled after the Venice Commission of the European Union, to review draft laws and evaluate enacted legislation. It suggested naming the body the Commission on Democracy, Legislation, Executive, and Parliamentary Affairs.

During the presentation, Moazzem urged the consensus commission to focus on reforms related to the judiciary, local government, electoral system, and political parties for the final list of reforms.

He said reforms must start with the electoral system.

"Ensuring free, fair and transparent polls through an empowered Election Commission is the starting point," he said, adding that parliamentary boycotts and lack of legitimacy stem from "rigged elections".

Political leaders present at the dialogue were sharply divided over the upper house concept.

BNP Organising Secretary Shama Obaid backed bicameralism, calling for "political change and stronger parliamentary accountability".

She said an upper house could make parliament "more transparent, inclusive and balanced", with representatives from civil society, academia, journalism and youth, but clarified that BNP does not support proportional representation.

In contrast, Akhter Hossen, member secretary of the National Citizen Party supported both bicameral parliament and PR in the upper house.

He said the country faces a political crisis because the majority party in parliament can change the constitution without a broader consensus.

"The upper house is a way to create a constitutional check and balance," he said. "If representatives are not chosen proportionally, then the purpose of the upper house will be lost," he added.

He argued that PR would give a voice to even small parties with 1 percent of votes.

Ruhin Hossain Prince, former

## Shahidul Alam, others taken to Israeli prison

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human rights defenders, and crew members aboard the freedom flotilla fleet, was forcibly taken to the Israeli port of Ashdod before being transferred to Ketziot Prison, located in the Negev desert.

The detainees informed Adalah's legal team that they had been subjected to various forms of violence since the seizure of the ships by Israeli forces, according to the Drik statement.

Stating that Palestinians face similar and often more severe forms of violence on a daily basis, Drik noted that approximately 10,000 Palestinians are currently imprisoned by Israel in Ketziot Prison.

Expressing solidarity with all inmates, Drik demanded the immediate release of all Palestinian political prisoners and the unconditional release of all detained Freedom Flotilla activists.

The statement concluded with the declaration, "Palestine will be free."

As part of the FFC, Shahidul's ship, the Conscience, along with eight other smaller vessels, was sailing toward war-ravaged Gaza to challenge Israel's blockade and deliver humanitarian aid to Palestinians in the besieged enclave.

This was the second interception,

after Israel last week stopped about 40 vessels and detained more than 450 activists in an aid convoy, the Global Sumud Flotilla, that was also attempting to deliver supplies to Gaza.

According to the FFC, an international network of pro-Palestinian activist groups, all nine boats in the Thousand Madleens to Gaza campaign -- Abd Elkarim Eid, Alaa Al-Najjar, Anas Al-Sharif, Gaza Sunbird, Leila Khaled, Milad, Soul of My Soul, Umm Saad and Conscience -- were intercepted.

It said Israeli forces "hijacked the humanitarian fleet," adding that the ships were "illegally intercepted", and that a total of 150 unarmed participants, including humanitarians, doctors and journalists from across the world, have been "taken against their will and are being held in unknown conditions".

"The Israeli military has no legal jurisdiction over international waters," it said. "Our flotilla poses no harm."

The ships carried aid worth more than \$110,000 in medicines, respiratory equipment and nutritional supplies intended for Gaza's starving hospitals, it added on its Instagram account.

## 'Anti-terror law being abused for repression'

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partisan behaviour that Bangladeshis had to endure under Sheikh Hasina, whether it is stuffing the prisons with political opponents or shutting down peaceful dissent," said Meenakshi Ganguly, deputy Asia director at Human Rights Watch.

"The UN's human rights office has been invited by the government to support the protection of human rights in Bangladesh, and it should monitor developments and urgently intervene to discourage politically motivated arrests," she added.

"Thousands have been arrested under the interim government, many on dubious murder allegations, while scores are being held under the Anti-Terrorism Act. Several have alleged mistreatment in custody, including lack of access to medical care, a chilling reminder of similar allegations under the Sheikh Hasina government," the HRW statement said.

Police detained 16 people, including journalists and academics, on August 28 at a discussion organised by Mancha '71, a platform that celebrates Bangladesh's independence from Pakistan in 1971, HRW said.

At the public meeting, a mob surrounded and heckled the participants, accusing them of being loyal to the Awami League because the party promotes its role in the freedom struggle, it added.

The statement said one of the participants, Monjurul Alam Panna, a journalist, called the police for protection. Instead of arresting the disrupters, the police detained 16 participants in the event, some of them in their 70s and 80s.

Among those arrested are a Dhaka University professor, Sheikh Hafizur Rahman, and Abdul Latif Siddique, a former minister who was later expelled by the Awami League.

After initially telling family members and lawyers that they were holding the detainees for their safety, the police arrested them under the anti-terrorism law, HRW said.

Two more people were later arrested in the same case. The police complaint claims that those arrested had incited violence against the interim government, which was denied by witnesses.

"It was a discussion, not even a political event, so how can it be considered terrorism?" a family member of one of those arrested told HRW.

The Anti-Terrorism Act was enacted in 2009 under the Awami League government. Officials said the 2025 amendments were needed to hold Awami League party members accountable for their abuses while in power, and that they were acting on demands from political parties and student organisations.

The statement said the Bangladesh Editors' Council had warned that the amendments to the Anti-Terrorism Act would "curtail people's freedom of expression and limit the wide scope of freedom of the mass media, which is worrying and it would threaten freedom of the press".

Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus, however, has denied any restrictions on freedom of expression.

"The government has also been unable to contain conservative Muslim interest groups that have engaged in violence to press their demands, ranging from targeting alleged Awami League supporters to opposing women's rights," HRW said.

"The Bangladeshi government should stop abusing the anti-terrorism law, which is just becoming political repression by another name," Ganguly said. "The interim government should instead focus on creating conditions for safe and participatory elections."