

# The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

## Release detained Gaza flotilla activists

### Govt must take steps to get Shahidul Alam freed from Israeli prison

The waters off the coast of Gaza—already stained by endless conflict—witnessed another disturbing chapter this week with the brazen interception of the Conscience, a vessel carrying humanitarian aid. The detention of renowned Bangladeshi photographer Shahidul Alam, along with more than 140 journalists, doctors, and activists, at Israel's Ketzioz Prison in the Negev Desert is a flagrant blow to the principles of international law and humanitarian action.

Israel's claim of enforcing a "legal naval blockade" in international waters rings hollow when applied to an unarmed civilian flotilla carrying vital medical supplies for Gaza's collapsing hospitals. The seizure has shaken the very notion of a neutral space for aid delivery and free expression. What's concerning is that Israel carried out a similar action last week against the Global Sumud Flotilla, comprising more than 40 vessels and nearly 450 activists, including climate activist Greta Thunberg. While most of the Global Sumud activists have since been deported, six of them, hailing from Norway, Morocco, and Spain, remain detained in Israel, highlighting both the severity and arbitrariness of these actions.

In this context, Bangladesh's diplomatic response must therefore be swift and unequivocal. The fact that Dhaka is having to rely on an unnamed "friendly Middle Eastern country" to secure Alam's release reveals the complex, often uncomfortable geopolitical tightrope that nations walk when confronting the Gaza crisis. The strong domestic reaction in Bangladesh, with widespread demands for Alam's immediate freedom, who left a prerecorded message declaring that he had been "kidnapped by the occupation forces of Israel," underlines the gravity of the situation.

Yet this outrage at sea unfolds against a fragile backdrop of hope on land, with the news that Israel and Hamas have signed off on the first phase of a US led peace plan. According to a Reuters report, Israelis and Palestinians rejoiced after US President Donald Trump announced a ceasefire and hostage deal as part of his initiative to end a war in Gaza that has killed more than 67,000 people and reshaped the Middle East.

Still, euphoria must be tempered by caution. The limited details of the agreement—particularly the lack of clarity on its timing and on a post-war administration for Gaza—leave vast potential for collapse, as has happened with so many peace efforts before. The cessation of fighting is not peace; it is only the precondition for it. Even as the ceasefire plan was underway, Israeli strikes continued overnight and into Thursday morning on three Gaza City suburbs. Witnesses reported lines of smoke rising over Shejaia, Tuffah, and Zeitoun, though there were no immediate reports of casualties.

While we welcome the positive news of a potential ceasefire, it must not eclipse the grim reality of the detentions. The release of all detained activists—particularly Alam and the remaining six from the earlier flotilla—should be treated as a diplomatic priority.

## Time to end medical oxygen crisis

### A robust strategy for oxygen production, distribution essential

The government's decision to declare medical oxygen an essential drug is a commendable move, but it must be seen for what it is: a preliminary gesture, not a solution. The declaration will ring hollow if it does not translate into a tangible, uninterrupted supply of this life-sustaining gas reaching every patient who needs it, from the capital's premier hospitals to the most remote clinics in rural areas.

Severely limited or unreliable oxygen services have long been an issue in Bangladesh, the acute nature of which was exposed during the pandemic. Around 74 lakh people in the country require 84 million normal cubic metres of oxygen annually. However, we don't produce enough medical oxygen. The government therefore must adopt a multi-pronged strategy to ensure a resilient supply chain. It must increase production by expediting the establishment of government-owned medical gas plants so that dependency on private companies and imports can be reduced. It is a waste of resources to keep most of the Pressure Swing Adsorption (PSA) oxygen plants, installed during the pandemic, inactive while the demand remains so high.

Centralised oxygen systems, also known as Vacuum Insulated Evaporators (VIEs), must also be expanded, especially in remote areas, to ensure uninterrupted oxygen flow, which is more efficient and safer than relying on cylinders. Moreover, without investing in human resources and training medical staff properly, this crisis cannot be addressed. This training must extend to all hospitals and clinics across the country.

Investing in expanding our oxygen capacity is not merely a health expenditure; it is a fundamental investment in our nation's well-being and its future. It is essential to recognise medical oxygen as both a citizen right and a national priority, underscoring its critical role in Bangladesh's preparedness for future health emergencies. The pledge to "ensure healthy lives" under SDG-3 cannot be met with policy declarations alone. It must be fulfilled with the steady flow of oxygen to every citizen in need.

The harrowing memories of the pandemic, when thousands of healthcare workers and families experienced the desperation of trying to find oxygen for severely unwell patients and family members, must fuel a relentless drive to build a resilient oxygen ecosystem, from production and storage to distribution and delivery.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY



### Malala wins Nobel Peace Prize

On this day in 2014, Pakistani girls' education activist Malala Yousafzai won the Nobel Peace Prize at the age of 17 and became the youngest-ever Nobel laureate in history.

# Why Upper House PR makes sense in today's political climate



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In Bangladesh's context, proportional representation (PR) is viable only for an Upper House (UH) within a bicameral legislature, with the first-past-the-post (FPTP) system retained for Lower House (LH). This would ensure historical continuity, voter-MP linkage, and electoral simplicity. With an Upper House allocated by PR based on a pre-disclosed party list, Bangladesh can create an inclusive oversight body on lawmaking that gives the opposition a tangible stake in parliament. However, this is not a cure-all for our governance woes, but it would pave the way for a much-needed check-and-balance mechanism in parliament.

Bangladesh's political trajectory vividly illustrates FPTP's distortions. Since 1991, small vote differences have produced huge seat gaps: in 2001, BNP won about 41 percent of votes but 193 of 300 seats, while Awami League (AL) won around 40 percent but only 62 seats; in 1991, a near tie (30.81 percent vs 30.08 percent) still gave BNP a 52-seat advantage; and in 2008, a 15-point vote lead resulted in an overwhelming parliamentary supermajority for AL (230 seats versus 30 for BNP). This dominance was later used to amend the constitution unilaterally, which led to the abolition of the non-party caretaker government through the 15th Amendment in 2011—plunging Bangladesh into an era of electoral authoritarianism that lasted until 2024. Time and again, FPTP has magnified the victory of the largest party far beyond its actual support, sidelining both voters and opposition parties.

These skewed outcomes led to political tensions and deadlocks. When pluralities turn into landslides, "losers" feel shut out, and "winners" often govern with little regard for opposition voices, reinforcing zero-sum politics. The stakes under FPTP are so high that even a one-percent vote swing can flip a seat, encouraging desperate measures such as vote rigging, ballot stuffing, intimidation, and other electoral code violations. In this winner-takes-all duopoly, both major parties (Awami League and BNP) resorted to extreme tactics, including nationwide hartals, blockades, or

election boycotts, rather than playing the role of a loyal opposition. FPTP also wasted a large portion of votes and fuelled violence and conflict in an already volatile country.

There are legitimate concerns that prevailing political opportunism could also lead to a UH being co-opted by the majority party. Over the past three decades, we witnessed how co-opted civil and police administrations have undermined neutral arbitration mechanisms of the state. Bangladesh's entrenched patron-client system also makes it difficult to hold free and fair



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elections, especially with the culture of vote-buying on the eve of polling. Moreover, executive encroachment into the judiciary and legislature has repeatedly thwarted prospects for good governance. Parliament has often reflected the executive's will rather than the people's.

The root of Bangladesh's governance issues lies in the ruling party's capture of state apparatuses owing to weak institutions. This, combined with the lack of institutional avenues for parliamentary grievance redress, forces the opposition to take to the streets frequently. Politics has thus become inseparable from violence and turmoil. To shift politics from agitation to legislation and proper governance, the opposition must have

real influence within parliament. If they feel the "winner" does, or can, not take it all, incentives for extra-parliamentary confrontation—and the disruptions it brings to citizens' lives—will diminish.

Israel's case is often cited as a cautionary tale for PR in Bangladesh, but its instability stems from design choices that are not being proposed here. Israel's Knesset uses a unicameral, single nationwide district with closed-list PR—features that encourage party fragmentation and fragile coalitions. By contrast, the debate here concerns a bicameral model that retains FPTP for the Lower House and introduces PR only for a limited power Upper House with a published party list, no role in money bills or no-confidence motions, and at most a time-limited suspensive veto on specified subjects. That architecture seeks inclusion, balanced voter representation, and legislative scrutiny without making governments hostage to micro-parties.

Israel's coalition volatility is not an indictment of PR itself; it is a warning to design PR carefully—precisely what a PR UH layered over an FPTP LH aims to achieve.

Evaluating counterfactuals, if we use simple arithmetic or the Sainte-Lagué method to project Upper House seats for the 2001 elections, then BNP would have won 44 seats (193 in LH), the AL 43 (62 in LH), Jamaat 5 (17 in LH), and Islami Jatiya Oikya Front 8 (14 in LH)—assuming a 100-seat chamber and a three-percent entry threshold. In this hypothetical scenario, no party holds a majority in the UH. All parties, including BNP and AL, would have UH representation proportionate to their total vote share, putting them on near-equal footing. BNP would likely have

partnered with IJOF to pass bills. Either major party would need allies, creating built-in incentives for negotiation. This avenue for democratic cross-party negotiation has been missing for decades. In 2026, this will be more important than ever before, as it marks the first election after a revolution that fought for democracy.

It goes without saying that an electoral system cannot, by itself, transform a country's governance overnight. But it can certainly aid in fostering greater accountability, fairer representation, and political stability. FPTP has historically amplified Bangladesh's governance weaknesses. A mixed system offers a way forward: it maintains government stability (as laws and budgets depend primarily on the LH) while introducing a check through the UH's review role and veto. That said, it is crucial that this is paired with enforceable guardrails that work in tandem, including an independent Election Commission (EC), an empowered Anti-Corruption Commission, and merit-based, transparent civil service recruitment to keep the administration neutral.

The July Charter's move to repeal Article 70 is similarly pivotal, allowing UH members to deliberate without the fear of automatic party expulsion. In this conception, the UH would operate as a serious revising chamber on vital legislation, including those related to constitution, rights, large procurement, and mega infrastructure. When LH majorities reject UH amendments, they should be required to issue reasoned public explanations. To preserve governability and avoid slow policymaking, not every bill should pass through the UH; its mandate must remain narrow and clearly defined. Party lists should also undergo rigorous EC vetting to ensure the chamber leans technocratic rather than patronage-driven.

The priority now is political stability and accountability so that the country has a chance to flourish. A mixed system gives the opposition a tangible stake in lawmaking and reduces the urge to topple governments from the streets. It is vital that the majority party not enjoy total certainty in parliament, for that undermines democracy itself. We must move beyond strawman arguments rejecting PR for the LH when the proposal concerns only the UH. We have already seen what happens when one party monopolises power, and we cannot afford a repeat of that. Bangladesh must dare to reimagine a new political reality that paves the way for true democratic consolidation.

# Global South should lead the ethical AI drive



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Jensen Huang, the CEO of NVIDIA, recently stated in an interview, "Nobody needs atomic bombs. Everybody needs AI," and presented a moment of clarity in a world increasingly clouded by technological arms races, algorithmic governance, and geopolitical anxiety. Yet, beneath the applause lies a deeper question: who owns the intelligence? Is it a shared inheritance of humanity, or is it becoming a private empire—coded, patented, and monetised?

This question is no longer philosophical. It is civic, economic, and existential. Artificial intelligence is no longer a laboratory curiosity; it is the infrastructure beneath our hospitals, classrooms, courts, and cities. From predictive policing to automated diagnostics, AI is shaping how decisions are made, who gains access, and what futures are possible.

But this infrastructure is not neutral. It is built on data often extracted without consent, trained on language frequently biased by history, and governed by corporations largely beyond the reach of democratic oversight. In this context, Huang's message is both urgent and ironic. While urging nations to invest in intelligence over weaponry,

he represents a company whose chips power the very systems that concentrate intelligence into private hands.

Historically, intelligence was communal. Farmers shared seasonal knowledge, healers passed down herbal wisdom, and poets encoded civic memory. Intelligence was not a commodity; it was a commons. Even in the digital age, open-source movements, academic research, and public education systems have sought to preserve this ethos. The internet itself was born from a vision of decentralised access to information. However, today, that vision is under threat. Large language models are trained on public data, yet their outputs are locked behind paywalls. National AI strategies prioritise economic competitiveness over ethical inclusion. Intelligence is being fenced off, turned into a gated estate.

Consider the current landscape. A handful of companies—OpenAI, Google DeepMind, Anthropic, Meta—control the frontier models. These models require billions of dollars in computing power, access to proprietary data, and elite talent pools. The result is a concentration of power unprecedented in the

history of science. When intelligence is privatised, it reshapes the social contract—citizens become users, teachers become content moderators, doctors become data annotators. The algorithm becomes the arbiter, not just of truth, but of possibility.

In the Global South, the stakes are even higher. Countries such as Bangladesh face a double bind: they

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must adopt AI to remain competitive, yet they lack the infrastructure to shape it. Without strategic investment, they risk becoming consumers of intelligence, not co-authors. Bangladesh has made strides in digital transformation. From mobile banking to e-governance, the country has embraced technology as a tool for inclusion. But AI presents a new challenge—one that requires not just adoption, but authorship. To invest in intelligence is not merely to buy servers or train engineers. It is to address what kind of intelligence we want, whose

values it will shape and what languages it will speak. This is where Bangladesh must lead—not by replicating Silicon Valley, but by offering a plural vision of intelligence, rooted in civic ethics, linguistic diversity, and generational memory.

If intelligence is to remain a shared inheritance, we must reimagine its architecture. First, we need public AI infrastructure: models trained on local languages, civic data, and ethical frameworks that are open, auditable, and accountable. Second, we need plural participation—not just engineers, but poets, teachers, farmers, and elders must shape the datasets and design principles. Third, we need ethical guidelines that go beyond privacy and bias to ask deeper questions about dignity, agency, and inclusion. Finally, we need transmission strategies to teach AI literacy in schools, communities, and workplaces.

Around the world, the debate is intensifying—the European Union is passing AI regulations, the US is investing in frontier models, China is building state-aligned intelligence systems. Yet, few are asking the civic question: what kind of society does this intelligence serve? This is where Bangladesh, and other nations in the Global South, can offer leadership by building the most ethical model and cultivating plural memory.

We stand at a crossroads. One path leads to an algorithmic oligarchy, where intelligence is owned, monetised, and weaponised. The other leads to civic intelligence, where knowledge is plural, ethical, and inclusive. The choice is ours. And the future will remember what we chose.