

Port tariff hike must be cost-based

Govt must open dialogue with all stakeholders

A 41 percent hike in service charges at Chattogram Port is a deeply concerning move. Business leaders warn that it will significantly erode Bangladesh's competitiveness. At a time when the nation's vital export sector is already under strain from global headwinds and additional US tariffs, this precipitous increase—scheduled to be effective from October 15—is poised to make Chattogram the costliest port in the region. This comes as Bangladesh prepares to graduate from the Least Developed Country (LDC) category in November 2026. Business leaders in Chattogram have expressed frustration over what they view as the interim government's undue haste and lack of accountability in pushing through such a major policy shift. They argue that the move bypassed a fundamental prerequisite of sound economic governance: comprehensive consultation with all stakeholders.

Adding to the controversy is the business community's suspicion that the hike is strategically timed to pave the way for foreign operators—an allegation that demands immediate and transparent clarification. The issue of port profitability lies at the heart of this debate. As Salim Rahman, first vice-president of the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), pointed out, the port has not incurred losses in recent memory. If the goal of the hike is not to recover costs but to maximise revenue, it risks distorting the market and undermining the principle that port charges must be cost-based. The government, therefore, owes the public a transparent cost-revenue analysis to justify this decision.

The immediate and most serious consequence will be the impact on Bangladesh's exports. The country's cost of doing business is already higher than that of regional competitors like Vietnam, India, and Malaysia. As the backbone of the economy, the port serves as the crucial artery for foreign trade, and a sharp increase in logistics and shipping charges will directly translate into higher prices for Bangladeshi goods, especially garments. This will inevitably make these products less attractive to international buyers. The warning from Nasir Uddin Chowdhury, former BGMEA first vice-president, that buyers will shift orders to competitor nations, is not hyperbole—it is economic reality. Frequent policy shifts only deepen uncertainty, raise costs, and make the business environment unpredictable—precisely when competitors are focused on cost reduction.

This tariff hike is, in essence, a direct tax on trade. The burden will not only fall on businesses but will also trickle down to consumers through inflation.

To prevent further damage, the government must immediately initiate a transparent, inclusive dialogue with all stakeholders. If an increase is deemed necessary, it should be incremental and marginal, as proposed by the Bangladesh Shipping Agents Association, which suggested a 10 percent cap, not a sudden, massive shock. Proceeding with such an ill-timed and ill-conceived hike risks undermining years of export-led growth. The government must prioritise the nation's global competitiveness over opportunistic revenue generation.

Make LPG affordable to users

Its increased use can reduce the ongoing gas crisis

At a time when the country has been facing a severe gas crisis, it is worth reiterating that liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) has the potential to act as an alternative energy source. Admittedly, our natural gas reserves are limited, and although the government has taken some measures to increase local gas production, they have not yielded much result. Therefore, while domestic gas production has decreased, dependence on imported liquefied natural gas (LNG) has increased for electricity generation, in the industrial sector, and household use. However, there are also limitations in LNG imports due to infrastructural weaknesses, making it difficult to supply gas as per demand. Against this backdrop, LPG can be a viable alternative to meet our gas needs.

According to experts, LPG is a highly competitive energy source compared to the price and availability of other fuels. Due to its cost-effectiveness, cleaner burning, ease of transportation, and secure supply, its industrial use has increased in recent years. At present, only 12 percent of total LPG is used for industrial and commercial purposes, while around 80 percent is used in households. However, given the ongoing crisis in piped gas supply, if LPG use can be promoted in industries, they can have a smoother supply of energy. Up until now, the LPG sector has grown on its own, without any subsidy. Sector operators have pointed out many barriers facing the industry, such as high licence fees (Tk 1 crore per year), difficulty in company registration, and the absence of pipelines to ensure smooth supply.

Moreover, the entire LPG sector is currently controlled by private companies, which is why the price of LPG remains high. At present, a 12-kg cylinder is sold for more than Tk 1,200, which should be below Tk 1,000, as our energy adviser has recently suggested. Moreover, illegal selling of LPG cylinders and refilling smaller cylinders from larger ones (a likely cause of accidents) remain rampant. These issues need to be addressed to promote LPG use.

We urge the government to ensure fair pricing of LPG through proper policy support and infrastructure development for import and distribution. Energy experts have also raised concerns over unsafe practices, which caused 580 accidents in 2025. LPG operators must therefore maintain safety and transparency in their operations. The Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission (BERC) should also play the role expected of it: better regulate prices, and properly investigate complaints against operators. With the country's LPG demand projected to rise by 60 percent within the next five years, effective government policies are essential to make LPG affordable to consumers.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Martin Luther King Jr. wins Nobel Prize

On this day in 1964, African American social activist Martin Luther King, Jr., was named the winner of the Nobel Prize for Peace.

Why Pubail makes better sense for Dhaka's next rail ICD



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Dhaka's only rail-linked inland container depot (ICD) at Kamalapur was built in 1987, when the city was far smaller, trade volumes were limited, and containerised transport was only beginning to emerge. Four decades later, the situation has changed entirely. The depot now sits at the heart of one of the world's most crowded capitals, surrounded by traffic congestion, inadequate access roads, and virtually no room for expansion. Bangladesh Railway can operate only two container trains daily between Chattogram and Kamalapur due to capacity or path clearance limitations on the Tongi-Kamalapur line.

To address this, Bangladesh Railway has long planned to shift its container operations to a new ICD at Dhirashram, near Tongi. The project aims to handle 400,000 TEUs (20-foot equivalent units) of containers a year—five times Kamalapur's capacity—and to transform rail freight logistics for the capital. On paper, it seems ideal. In practice, however, Dhirashram comes with major challenges. To connect the site, a new seven kilometre rail link must be built from Pubail, which alone requires costly engineering works and extensive land acquisition.

The project's cost is staggering: the government has already approved over Tk 3400 crore just for land and the new rail link, while the total estimate stands at \$774.56 million under a public-private partnership model. Land prices in Gazipur, a dense industrial zone, continue to rise, and relocation issues are unavoidable. The Planning Commission itself has expressed concern that placing an ICD inside the Gazipur City Corporation area could worsen congestion and has advised exploring alternatives farther out, such as Kaliganj.

One alternative deserves renewed attention: Pubail. Located along the existing Dhaka-Chattogram rail line, the site offers the same strategic proximity to Dhaka without the associated congestion or cost burden. A few years ago, a group of railway officers, including myself, conducted a preliminary study in Bangla on the feasibility of developing an ICD

adjacent to Pubail station. Although the report was never signed or formally submitted, its findings remain highly relevant. The railway already owns 10-15 acres of land near Pubail station. If another 90 acres were acquired, a 100-acre ICD could be developed at



The Kamalapur inland container depot now sits at the heart of one of the world's most crowded capitals, surrounded by traffic congestion, inadequate access roads, and virtually no room for expansion. FILE PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQ

far lower cost and with less disruption than Dhirashram.

Pubail's road connectivity is another major advantage. It lies close to Mirer Bazar, which connects directly to the Dhaka Eastern Bypass (Middle Circular Road)—a newly opened expressway linking Joydebpur to Bhulta and Madanpur. This means container trucks could move between the ICD and the national highway network without entering Dhaka's core. Such seamless road-rail integration is critical to easing congestion and making the capital's logistics more efficient.

Additionally, land acquisition around Pubail would be simpler and cheaper, affecting fewer families and businesses, while the environmental footprint would be smaller. Compared with Dhirashram's

230-acre requirement, Pubail could operate effectively on about 100 acres, combining existing railway land with newly acquired plots. The financial savings from avoiding a new rail link and a massive urban land purchase could easily reach hundreds of crores of taka. Those funds could instead be invested in modern yard technology, which could also be implemented by the private operator.

A newly built port or ICD often takes considerable time to become fully operational due to user adaptation, operational learning, and market alignment. However, if Bangladesh Railway relocates the entire Kamalapur ICD setup—along

more likely to support a project that is technically sound and socially responsible than one facing urban opposition later.

A Pubail ICD could be developed more efficiently and brought into operation faster than the Dhirashram project. With efficient yard planning, high-density stacking, and digital systems, even a smaller footprint could match Dhirashram's capacity. The site's location on the main line would allow direct train access, reducing both operational complexity and energy costs. Most importantly, it would prevent the creation of yet another congested logistics hub inside an urban area.

The lesson of Kamalapur is clear. The depot was built with the right intent but, in hindsight, in the wrong place as Dhaka's expansion has turned it from an asset into a constraint. Bangladesh cannot afford to repeat that mistake.

The time has come for the Ministry of Railways, the Planning Commission, and development partners to take a second look at Pubail through a transparent, evidence-based process. If technical and economic assessments confirm its viability, the government should move quickly to secure the land and begin development before urban expansion makes it too late. The logistics industry, too, has a role to play; shipping lines, freight forwarders, and exporters all stand to gain from a more efficient, rail-based ICD that is accessible and sustainable.

Dhaka's container logistics need a long-term solution, not another temporary fix. Pubail provides that possibility—a practical, forward-looking location that aligns with national transport priorities and urban realities. Choosing it would mean not just building another terminal but reshaping how Bangladesh handles trade for decades to come. The question is not whether we can afford to rethink the plan, but whether we can afford not to.

To put it briefly, the Pubail alternative makes better use of existing rail assets, demands less land, avoids city congestion, and promises lower costs. Above all, it aligns with the government's vision to move a larger share of containers by rail, cutting road traffic and emissions. Bangladesh cannot afford another infrastructure decision that becomes a long-term burden. As Dhaka expands and trade grows, site selection today will shape logistics for decades, and we must choose better and smarter, not just larger.

Military officers, civil charges, and the future of democratic rule



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In the modern international politico-security system, maintaining a balance between democracy and the military is crucial, despite the inherent tensions between democratisation and militarisation. The greater the military's interference in domestic politics, the higher the risk of democratic fragility. In developed democracies, this understanding guides the military to remain detached from political affairs while upholding national security.

The history of Bangladesh, however, is fraught with ambiguity, marked by both active and passive interventions of the military in politics, and by violent, often conflicting, relationships among political parties striving to gain or retain power. Last year, the country witnessed an unprecedented mass uprising that toppled Sheikh Hasina's 15-year-long dictatorial regime—one long perceived as supported by the military—only for the latter to ultimately realign itself with public sentiment and play a stabilising role during the transition. And recently, in another rare set of circumstances, we saw the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) of Bangladesh bring formal charges against 25 current and former military officers in three cases for their alleged involvement in enforced disappearance, secret detention, torture, and crimes against humanity.

This marks a unique moment in our history. Since Bangladesh's independence in 1971, the armed forces have largely operated under a de facto shield of immunity from civil jurisdiction. Grave allegations were often dealt with internally, with serving officers rarely, if ever, tried in a civil court. But since the uprising, there has been tremendous pressure on the interim government to ensure justice for the crimes committed under the Hasina regime, including those involving military officers. The recent development may thus reshape perceptions of civil-military relations and how Bangladesh holds power to account. Already, the army has declared that the 15 accused serving officers were taken into custody.

But how did this development come to be, and what lessons can be drawn from it? Several factors seem to have converged to make this moment possible.

The bloody protests that ousted the Awami League government last year forced political accountability into the spotlight. On the military front, as Adjutant General Md Hakimuzzaman has affirmed at a press briefing, those accused by the ICT were charged for their actions while working at the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI) and the Rapid Action Battalion (Rab). The accusations

have not been vague. Investigations have reportedly produced credible evidence that strengthens the legal case. Victims' testimonies, secret detention facility envelopes, and the naming of specific officers reflect an evidence-based framework hard to ignore.

Since the uprising, the demand for justice and accountability has only grown louder within both civil and military circles, as well as among our international stakeholders. The UN report on atrocities committed during the uprising also called for ensuring accountability of the members of security agencies. The report also recommended disbanding Rab and restricting the functions of the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) and the DGF. These recommendations were part of efforts to address and slow the pace of the "militarisation of policing".

Amid national and international pressure, and after prolonged hesitation by the military to investigate the alleged secret underground detention centres, the authorities eventually launched an inquiry with spot visits (although both investigators and victims reported tampering and destruction of evidence). Equally importantly, a documentary released by the Chief Adviser's Office—revealing the involvement of certain military officers in acts of torture, maiming, and enforced disappearances of both civilians and soldiers—has opened a crucial space for justice through ICT charges.

Finally, alongside the armed forces' positive gestures towards justice, a recent amendment to the ICT Act—barring individuals formally charged from holding public office or government service—reflected the government's commitment to ensuring that formal charges have real

and enforceable consequences.

The challenge now lies in ensuring that the trials are fair and any reform of the security agencies is enduring. Otherwise, those may backfire, portraying the system as biased and eroding trust in justice. Bangladesh's long journey towards democratic governance has often been hindered by the politics of vengeance and the uneasy balance between force and law. Yet, by bringing military officers under civil legal accountability, the nation signals that its institutions are maturing. The road ahead, however, is difficult. The temptation to misuse power is still a serious concern. If Bangladesh learns from this moment, it can strengthen civilian control, build a more professional and rights-respecting military, and develop a judiciary that commands legitimacy and trust. If not, this episode risks becoming a historical footnote—another unfulfilled promise.

The lessons here are not only for the military or a single government, but for the entire nation. Let us hope this chapter is remembered not merely for its accusations, but for genuine justice, meaningful reforms, and a renewed faith in the rule of law. Ultimately, without a whole-of-society consensus—especially among political parties, civil society, religious groups, and the media—the goal of sustainable democracy will remain elusive. The police and other civilian institutions must be both empowered and held accountable so that the state does not routinely rely on the armed forces and intelligence agencies in civil matters. Such reforms would reduce dependency and potential abuse of power. But if mishandled, this moment will only revive old fears of impunity and democratic fragility.