

Public spaces under siege in Bangladesh

Amirul Rajiv and Naim Ul Hasan
are coordinators at the Bangladesh Tree Protection Movement.

AMIRUL RAJIV and NAIM UL HASAN

The scarcity of open spaces in Dhaka has long been a serious concern for its residents. Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC) has only 23 parks across its 54 wards, while there are 27 parks in the 75 wards of Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC). Moreover, far from creating new spaces for residents to relax, exercise, or socialise, the existing parks and playgrounds have increasingly come under threat, with public access often restricted. The last few years have seen protests erupt against attempts to encroach or dilute Suhravardhi Udayan, Shaheed Anwara Udayan, Osman Udayan, Khilgaon Chowdhury Paara Shishu Park, Panthakunja Park, and Hatirjheel Lake by both government and non-government entities.

In other parts of Bangladesh, smaller-scale protests—often barely making headlines—have also emerged. For instance, the defence of Gokul Mathura playground in Rajshahi, Bolai Shimul playground in Netrokona, and Linear Park in Khulna demonstrated the persistent grassroots efforts to preserve open spaces. Though such efforts may not always make national news, their environmental and social significance is undeniable.

Authorities often cite their inability to prevent illegal activities surrounding parks and open spaces, or to run them properly, as justification for leasing or repurposing them. One might assume that in more affluent urban areas such as Gulshan, the situation would be different. But the reality tells a far different story: encroachment in these areas is largely carried out by powerful, profit-driven corporate clubs, often with little fear of legal consequences.

Take the case of Shaheed Tajuddin Ahmed Smriti Park, formerly known as Gulshan Central Park, an 8.87-acre park situated in Gulshan 2. In 1990, the park was leased out, leading to the establishment of the Wonderland Children's Park. This marked

resulting in the demolition of its structures in 2012.

In March 2013, following Rajdhani Unnayan Kartripakkha's (Rajuk) notice to remove illegal structures, the Gulshan Youth Club—which by then had already



This photo is from June 23, 2025, depicting a local player lying down in front of the excavator to save the 100-year-old Gokul Mathura playground from illegal construction work at Tanore, Rajshahi.

PHOTO: PROTHOM ALO

the beginning of the commercialisation of the park, even though it was located in a residential area. A writ petition filed in 1995 challenged this commercial use, and the High Court ruled against Wonderland,

encroached on more than half the park—challenged the notice in High Court (HC). On August 31, 2022, the HC ruled against the club, reaffirming that plot 130A was legally designated as a "park" in the Gulshan Model

Town layout plan. The court explicitly stated that no structures could be built there and that all unauthorised constructions must be removed to restore the park. Surprisingly, despite the clear court orders, only 3.33 acres of the park were renovated and reopened to the public, leaving the remaining 5.54 acres under the control of Gulshan Youth Club. DNCC permitted it to continue operating illegally, defying the court's instructions.

The park's renovated portion included children's rides, diverse plant varieties, and open grounds. According to news reports, there were two play zones, catering to children and differently abled individuals, with 22 rides. The open field allowed anyone to come and play, offering a rare breath of fresh air for local residents.

In January 2023, DNCC issued a call for expressions of interest from private operators to manage five of its parks and playgrounds, including Tajuddin Park. On January 17, 2024, Gulshan Youth Club was appointed operator for the entire park. This decision is particularly alarming, considering that DNCC appointed the same entity that had already occupied more than half the park in violation of court orders. After assuming management, the club removed children's rides, erected wired fencing around the open field, and laid artificial turf. It also restricted entry for children and began charging hourly rental fees for turf use.

On September 30, 2025, a group of environmental activists, lawyers, and academics served DNCC, Rajuk, and Gulshan Youth Club with a legal notice challenging the park's management agreement. The court has yet to issue a ruling on this. But it is evident that DNCC acted in contempt of court by handing over park management to an entity that restricted public access and profited from it. Moreover, the agreement between DNCC and Gulshan Youth Club violated several legal provisions, including the Playground, Open Space, Park and

Natural Water Body Conservation Act, 2000, and a Rajuk-Dhaka City Corporation agreement. Handing public property to a private entity for profit also arguably constitutes corruption under the anti-corruption law. Despite the blatant illegality, little action has been taken against the occupiers.

The battle for open spaces is not limited to Dhaka or elite areas, however. In c, a century-old playground called Gokul Mathura came under threat from a madrasa planning to construct a building there. In June 2025, local youth physically blocked construction by lying in front of the excavator, temporarily halting the work. Despite several letters sent to district and upazila authorities, the matter remains unresolved, with a court case filed by locals still ongoing.

These incidents illustrate that commercialisation or occupation of parks and open spaces is widespread across the country. While the actors vary from area to area—from elite commercial institutions in Gulshan that can defy multiple court orders to local entities that can leverage political influence—the struggle remains similar. Citizens have had to continuously fight to preserve the few public spaces left for recreation, community, and the environment.

These stories of parks, playgrounds, and open spaces reflect a broader societal challenge: the tension between public interest and private profit, between legal mandates and political influence. It is a struggle that demands vigilance, activism, and accountability at all levels of governance. Ultimately, the preservation of these spaces is not just about protecting greenery or playgrounds; it is about safeguarding the social, cultural, and environmental fabric of communities. The question is: will citizens, authorities, and institutions rise to the challenge, or will public spaces continue to be sacrificed for private gain?

WORLD FOOD DAY

The fight for safe food production in Bangladesh



Mostafa Shabuj
is a journalist at The Daily Star.

MOSTAF A SHABUJ

As the world observes World Food Day today under the evocative theme, "Hand in Hand for Better Foods and a Better Future," its resonance echoes profoundly in Bangladesh. While the nation has undeniably achieved considerable milestones in food production since its independence in 1971, the pace of progress has not been enough. The bedrock of Bangladesh's food security faces systemic challenges, primarily stemming from a critical lack of synergy among key stakeholders.

Sustainable food security for Bangladesh requires moving beyond mere calorific sufficiency to ensure safe, non-toxic food that is environmentally sustainable. However, the production rate lags, leading to the reliance on imports of millions of tonnes of food annually. Key hurdles include the shrinking of arable land due to urbanisation, declining soil fertility from excessive agrochemical use, and significant post-harvest wastage due to poor management and inefficient market structure. Furthermore, natural disasters regularly destroy vast amounts of crops in our country.

However, producing safe food is arguably the most critical and challenging reality

we are currently facing in Bangladesh. Global data further emphasises the gravity of foodborne illness. According to a report by the World Health Organization, 60 crore people fall ill and 420,000 die worldwide each year from contaminated food. The South-East Asia region, including Bangladesh, accounts for a tragic 175,000 annual fatalities for the same reason.

In Bangladesh, food contamination usually occurs at the production stage. Application of chemicals for ripening and preservation, and the indiscriminate use of chemical fertilisers, pesticides, even in processing dried fish, are widespread.

A recent seminar hosted by the Centre for Agriculture and Biosciences International (CABI) highlighted an alarming trend: pesticide use in Bangladesh has soared by 81.5 percent over the last five years, making its market worth Tk 5,000 crore. Disturbingly, 64 percent of cancer patients in the country are farmers, largely due to unsafe pesticide application practices, said the speakers at the seminar.

During a recent conversation on food nutrition and contaminated food in

Bangladesh, Zakiah Rahman Moni, a nutritionist and principal scientific officer of Bangladesh Agricultural Research Council, noted from various national and international studies that 30-40 percent of marketed vegetables in Bangladesh contain high pesticide residue levels, with unacceptable amount of pesticide residues found in 10-12 percent of vegetables and 8-10 percent of fruits. Beyond pesticides, dangerous heavy

metals, such as arsenic, lead, cadmium, and para-sulfur, have been detected in vegetables in some regions of the country. The ingestion of these toxic chemicals can cause us to suffer from long-term health risks, including kidney disease, neurological disorders, and cancer, the nutritionist said.

Now the main questions are: Why are farmers spending extra money to use an unhealthy amount of chemical fertiliser and pesticides? Why are heavy metals present in our daily diets? Why is the government

unable to effectively ensure a market for unadulterated food?

My field-level experience as a journalist suggests that even decades after independence, Ministry of Agriculture and Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE) officials have failed to make a robust, trusting partnership with the farming community. Awareness among farmers remains critically low. When pest outbreaks occur, farmers often resort to a desperate, unguided cycle of pesticide application. The first and most trusted advisor for the majority of farmers is not the agricultural officers, but the local fertiliser and pesticide dealers. In most of the northern districts, I have seen farmers relying solely on dealers' advice, leading to the excessive and often inappropriate use of agrochemicals.

On the other hand, the physical absence of agricultural officials from the field is a common lament. Their expectation that farmers will invariably visit their office for guidance contrasts sharply with the rural reality, where farmers turn to the most accessible source of advice, mirroring how villagers consult pharmacy shopkeepers for purchasing medicines instead of going to a doctor.

Other major gaps include the neglect of soil testing, which is vital for balanced fertiliser use and soil nutrition. The lack of farmer education and training on pre-harvest intervals (PHIs), the necessary time lag to ensure a toxin-free crop harvesting, is another gap.

Finally, while the government has established the Bangladesh Safe Food

Authority to combat adulteration, its operational capacity and manpower are currently inadequate to effectively monitor and regulate the country's vast and complex food market.

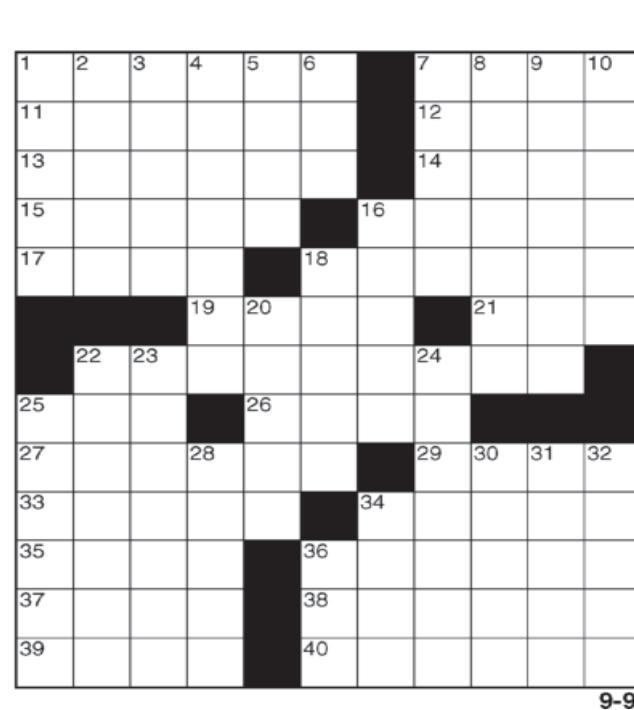
A matter of hope is that the government has launched a five-year (2023-2028) programme to promote safe crop production through the Good Agricultural Practice (GAP) certification scheme. This initiative aims to train approximately 10 lakh farmers and 14,000 sub-assistant agricultural officers, and bring 300,000 hectares of land under GAP standards.

GAP is a voluntary operational guideline that farmers implement to prevent contamination, ensure food safety, and promote sustainable and ethical practices in agriculture, covering aspects from land preparation to post-harvest handling. Experts agree that Bangladesh's GAP initiative is a new beginning for safe food production, but it is a small start that is insufficient in scale and risks failing in the future without sustained policy support.

The bottom line is that to revolutionise food safety demands moving beyond conventional, toxic farming, the government needs to patronise policies to create the highest awareness in farmers, traders, and consumers, framing safe food as a matter not only for marketing but also for personal and familial health. Essential steps include re-establishing farmer-official coordination, rigorously monitoring the market, and implementing the GAP standards at the field level across the country to conquer this crisis and secure public health gains.

ACROSS
1 Sign of prestige
7 Second letter
11 Wear down
12 Manipulative one
13 Combined
14 Sports figure
15 Moses of the track
16 Sculpting medium
17 Sailing hazard
18 Car from a repair shop
19 China setting
21 Frozen over
22 LOL, BRB, FWIW, etc.
25 Approval
26 Tampa Bay team
27 Old counter
29 Train units
33 Full range
34 Custom
35 Striker's foe
36 Ness nemesis
37 High point
38 Reluctant
39 Low digits

40 Wobble
DOWN
1 Crime outing
2 Dwelling
3 "Gladiator" star
4 Nova Scotian port
5 Perfect place
6 TV's Danson
7 Rhymes of rap
8 Latvia neighbor
9 New Jersey city
10 Blood line
16 Melodramatic
18 Kudrow and Bonet
20 Walk with pride
22 Snuff stuff
23 Green soybeans
24 Manhunt target
25 Worries
28 Dice, essentially
30 Cancel a mission
31 Free of suds
32 Ranch animal
34 Possess
36 Purr producer



TUESDAY'S ANSWERS

M	A	S	T	S		G	A	P	E	S
A	T	E	A	T		U	S	U	R	P
D	E	C	O	R		L	I	B	R	A
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U	S	E			D	A	S		I	N
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D	I	C	E	R		R	A	C	E	R
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