

The weight of a green passport



BLOWIN’ IN THE WIND

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Once upon a time, we watched a bespectacled John Lennon in white with his Japanese wife by his side, singing, “Imagine there’s no countries; it isn’t hard to do.” Then we came across words like “globalisation,” “glasnost,” “fall of the Berlin Wall,” and “end of apartheid” and thought Lennon was probably right, a borderless world can be imagined. Then came Brexit, like another brick in the wall, and fences became fashionable to keep illegal intruders out, like infected zombies in the movie *World War Z*.

Migration is a natural human propensity; controlling it is a logical consequence. The “not hard” imagined world of a global village is fast becoming a gated community with many grumpy gatekeepers. Some of them have particularly developed allergic reactions to our green passport, as is evident in this year’s Henley Passport Index report.

Little does it matter that we have a Nobel laureate at the helm and foreign-trained experts behind the drive for good governance restoration; the weightage of our passport has dropped to 100 from last year’s 97th slot. As we peer through the rabbit hole of passport rankings, we find ourselves in the league of North Korea, Libya and Afghanistan. Only 38 countries offer us visa-on-arrival privileges.

Travelling to the remaining countries for Bangladeshi citizens, however, is far from pleasant. I have seen travellers being pulled away for further interrogation or overheard

the fear of being refused entry at immigration despite having valid visas. The sceptical scan, the little phone call to the supervisor, and the restlessness of the crowd queuing up behind are all part of our experiences of travelling with Bangladeshi passports.

Many economists may equate this phenomenon with “demand drag.” Simply put, our travellers are not in demand. Other countries do not want us to show up in theirs. Even when we have valid documents, their data tells them to be wary of us. In a growing political climate of insularity and jingoism, many countries are twitchy about refugees and migrants. They look at Bangladeshi visa applicants through the spreadsheet of risks that include high asylum applications, illegal migration routes through Libya or forged documents.

In 2024 alone, tens of thousands of Bangladeshis applied for asylum in Europe. Frontex, the European Union’s border and coast guard agency, labels Bangladesh as the “most detected nationality” on irregular migration routes. And then there are horror stories: migrants chained in Malaysian jungles for ransom, passports confiscated by traffickers in Libya, and Rohingya refugees posing as Bangladeshis getting into criminal acts in the Middle East. Western countries find these tales of modern-day slavery compelling, using them as justifications to tighten their borders. The white man’s burden of being

humane is thereby relieved, while every Bangladeshi applying for a visa continues to carry the invisible burden of those who didn’t come back.

The weakness of our passport is evident when we, as Bangladeshis, are even denied passing through a country as transit passengers. Imagine you want to fly from Toronto to Cancun via America or from Dhaka to Toronto via Frankfurt; your airline

employment letter from a company that exists only on Facebook. Every fake document chips away at collective credibility.

Bangladesh’s international image is like a bad student project: a few pupils cheat, and everyone gets punished. When a Bangladeshi student enters Eastern Europe only to use it as a gateway to go west, a Balkan university rethinks its quota next year. When a migrant worker jumps a visa and “games” the system

ranking shows how bruised our national identity is. The world doesn’t subscribe to our hollow promises, not because they hate us, but because our paperwork has cried wolf too many times. The appointment of a few international darlings to cabinet positions has visibly failed to melt hearts abroad.

Foreign governments look at long-term data, not short-term optics. Visa liberalisation is based on treaties, reciprocity, and trust metrics, not on who made the best speech at the UN. Political instability, caretaker uncertainties, or transitional headlines don’t inspire the confidence needed for mobility deals. We need consistent diplomacy. We need to give a strong signal of reforms to fix the backend. We need data integrity audits to stop the leaks and the forgery pipelines. The actions must be transparent and visible. Cancelled fraudulent passports must also act as deterrents. Such actions must be complemented by our missions abroad. Embassies can take smaller steps to attain small, practical facilities like medical travel and student exchanges instead of grand visa-free fantasies for all workers.

Our overseas consular services need to be proactive in curbing irregular migration and improving documentation. Unless we adopt “perception-change” as a policy, other countries will keep us on probation. Sometimes our glorification of remittance adds to the problem. We sell unrealistic dreams to unskilled workers. And once these dreams are unmet, they long for more and bend the rules to harm our national image on the international stage.

John Lennon can sing his utopian tune, but in the real world, imagination isn’t an acceptable travel document. The reality is that Bangladesh’s passport will only rise when both the state and the citizens act like partners in credibility, not co-conspirators in chaos. A stronger passport isn’t a gift from the powerful; it’s a slow accumulation of trust.



VISUAL: ALIZA RAHMAN

Mirpur fire is a lethal alliance of corporate greed and state negligence



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The recent incident of fire in a chemical warehouse in a densely populated area in Rupnagar, which killed at least 16 people, once again exposes Bangladesh’s chronic failure to regulate hazardous industries. Testimonies reveal that the blaze originated from an adjacent chemical warehouse, before rapidly spreading through the building, trapping workers behind locked exits and engulfing the structure in minutes. The tragedy is not merely an accident; it is a foreseeable legal wrong. Under the principles of absolute liability, as established in South Asian jurisprudence, this incident demands uncompromising accountability.

Absolute liability of the chemical warehouse

The landmark Indian Supreme Court decision in *M.C. Mehta v. Union of India (Oleum Gas Leak Case)*, pioneered the rule of “absolute liability” in environmental jurisprudence. Introducing the doctrine, Justice P. N. Bhagwati—one of the most visionary chief justices of India—held that any enterprise engaged in a hazardous or inherently dangerous activity is absolutely liable for harm caused, regardless of fault, negligence, or unforeseen circumstances. Closing the door to traditional defences, including “third-party fault,” the court declared that such enterprises have an absolute and non-delegable duty to ensure that no harm results from their operations, and that if harm occurs, they must compensate victims automatically. The rationale is clear; those who earn profit from hazardous activities

must bear the costs of their risks. They cannot externalise danger to workers, communities, or the environment at large.

Comprehensively, in the Mirpur fire, storing volatile chemicals in a congested urban building constitutes precisely the kind of “hazardous activity” as in the case of *M.C. Mehta v. Union of India*. Even if the fire’s precise trigger remains under investigation, the very operation of a chemical warehouse in a residential commercial block without safety clearance suffices to attract absolute liability. No defence can exonerate the operators, owners, or lessors (the person who leased out the property) involved. Their duty was to prevent harm, not to explain it after the incident.

Moreover, Article 32 of the Constitution of Bangladesh guarantees that “no person shall be deprived of life or personal liberty save in accordance with law.” Our Supreme Court in *Dr Mohammad Farooque v. Bangladesh* (1997), the first major environmental public interest litigation, interpreted Articles 31 and 32 to encompass the right to a healthy environment and allowed environmental protection lawsuits under public interest litigation. Thus, such judicial interpretations, echoing both Indian and global human rights jurisprudence, have expanded this to include the right to live with human dignity, safe working conditions, and a healthy environment. The right to life cannot be reconciled with the existence of “chemical houses” beside living quarters and garment factories employing hundreds of

low-income workers. Thus, when the state allows unregulated hazardous industries to flourish within residential zones, it fails this constitutional guarantee.

Under the current legal framework related to chemical hazards, including the Factories Act, 1965, the Bangladesh Environment Conservation Act, 1995, and the Fire Prevention and Extinction Act, 2003, both factory and warehouse owners and the state have non-delegable duties to ensure safety, obtain licences, and prevent environmental and occupational hazards. Accordingly, the absence of a fire safety licence, locked emergency exits, and improper chemical storage are flagrant violation of Sections 22, read with 41-42 of the Factories Act 1965. The violation of these duties constitutes negligence per se, engaging civil tortious liability.

Environmental liability and the state’s duty to act

Beyond losing human lives, the fire also inflicted environmental harm. The burnt chemical fossils released toxic fumes, ash, and chemical residues into the air and water—a direct assault on Dhaka’s already fragile environment. As such, in such incidents, environmental harm is closely interconnected with human rights violations.

Upholding this interactive framework, the International Court of Justice (ICJ), in its 2025 Advisory Opinion on Climate Change Obligations, has affirmed that states have positive obligations to protect individuals from environmental harm, including industrial pollution, under the umbrella of human rights law. Comprehensively, the advisory opinion’s underlying principle, which acclaimed that environmental protection is a condition of human survival and dignity, is directly related here.

Thus, we urge that this responsibility extends not only to large-scale climate impacts but also to localised industrial disasters. Comprehensively, Bangladesh, as a

party to international environmental treaties, such as the Basel Convention on Hazardous Wastes (1989), the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants (2001, revised in 2025), and the Paris Agreement (2015), bears obligations to regulate, monitor, and manage hazardous substances. Allowing chemical factories to cluster within Dhaka’s dense neighbourhoods runs counter to these commitments and aggravates cumulative environmental risks. In this light, the government’s inaction in regards to chemical factories within densely inhabited areas violates its international environmental obligations, e.g., Article 5 of the Stockholm Convention; in addition to the guiding principles under soft laws, like Principles 11-16 of the Stockholm Declaration.

Regrettably, despite repeated tragic incidents, including the Nimtoli fire (2010) and the Chawkbazar blaze (2019) and the government’s pledged to relocate chemical warehouses outside Dhaka, the Mirpur fire shows how these pledges remain unfulfilled. The city remains a patchwork of unregulated, often unlicensed chemical storage facilities—potential bombs in waiting.

Relocation is not simply a policy option; it is a legal and moral imperative grounded in the doctrines of absolute and environmental liability. The state must treat unregulated chemical storage as a violation of the constitutional right to life and environmental protection. As such, formulating a stronger policy to remove chemical warehouses from densely populated areas—paired with financial incentives for compliance, strict zoning enforcement, and criminal liability for violations—is urgently needed. The state’s duty, under both domestic and international law, is preventive, i.e., to anticipate risk, not merely to compensate after catastrophe.

Corporate and state responsibility: Shared but unequal

The Rupnagar tragedy brought a broader ethical and legal truth; while both corporations and the state share

responsibility, their burdens differ. Corporations owe duties of care and safety; the state owes a duty of governance to ensure that these duties are enforced. The ICJ’s opinion reminds us that states cannot hide behind corporate autonomy. Failure to regulate private entities that pose environmental or human rights risks constitutes a breach of international obligations as well. As such, criminal investigation, civil compensation, and environmental remediation must all follow—not as charity, but as its obligations under the constitution and international law.

On the other hand, corporate entities cannot hide behind the regulatory gaps of the state. Their corporate social responsibility (CSR) extends beyond philanthropy, requiring active compliance with safety and environmental standards and remediation for harms caused. Additionally, under the doctrine of absolute liability, those who engage in hazardous activity must bear the full consequences of the harm they cause.

Therefore, the government must treat this fire incident not as an isolated event but as a symptom of a chronic disease, i.e., the dangerous cohabitation of chemical depots, garment factories, and residential areas in Dhaka. The government must implement an immediate relocation policy for chemical factories. Additionally, the state should establish a national industrial safety tribunal empowered to apply absolute liability in cases of industrial accidents, ensuring speedy compensation to victims and preventive oversight for future operations.

Every fire that engulfs our factories burns away another layer of public faith in governance and justice. The Rupnagar tragedy should be a turning point—a call to reaffirm the principle that human life and environmental safety are non-negotiable. Thus, Bangladesh stands at the convergence of its constitutional and international obligations, now echoing a single message: industrial negligence is not fate—it is failure, and failure must bear a cost.

CROSSWORD

BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Antlered animal

5 Employee group

10 Gigantic

11 Sealed with pitch

13 Med. sch. subject

14 Gaming center

15 Say inadvertently

17 Salt, in France

18 Quakes

19 Nest egg acct.

20 TV spots

21 New driver, often

22 Woodard with four Emmys

25 Ken of “F Troop”

26 Role

27 Animated sitcom “American -!”

28 Egg: Prefix

29 Navy people

33 “My word!”

34 Ship in 1912 headlines

35 Kovacs and Hudson

37 Sonic the Hedgehog’s company

38 Salad green

39 Uttered

40 Snaky shapes

41 Early carmaker

DOWN

1 Commandments verb

2 Old TV dial

3 Banded rock

4 Emmy-winning Don Adams comedy

5 Steps

6 Diamond covers

7 Curved path

8 Emmy-winning Kelsey Grammer comedy

9 Tennis star Roger

12 Dana of “China Beach”

16 Ore source

21 Emmy-winning Jason Sudeikis comedy

22 Orbital point

23 Shirley’s TV pal

24 Emmy-winning Lisa Kudrow comedy

25 Lure

27 Speakers’ stands

29 Carell of “The Office”

30 Cager Shaquille

31 Unbending

32 A lot

36 Sue Grafton’s “- for Innocent”

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9-11

THURSDAY’S ANSWERS

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