

Take decisive action to curb air pollution

Greater caution needed before dry season suffocates Dhaka air

It is unfortunate that the arrival of the dry season in Dhaka has become synonymous with the collapse of air quality, even going by our usual dismal standards. The current readings are already alarming, with the Air Quality Index (AQI) in the capital and surrounding areas hovering between 150 and 200, well above the healthy threshold of 50. It is not surprising then that the Department of Environment has advised people to wear masks when outdoors. These warnings and health risks are not just seasonal inconveniences, however. They align with the findings of a just released State of Global Air report that reveals that over 271,000 people in Bangladesh died from air pollution in 2023, with over 90 percent connected to non-communicable diseases. Let that sink in.

The numbers point to a single conclusion: air pollution is now the country's deadliest external health risk, slicing five and a half years off an average citizen's life. The economic cost, estimated at 8.3 percent of the national GDP, also shows how it has become a massive drag on productivity, healthcare expenditure, and overall national development. Yet, the threat continues to be met with inertia. Decades of promises—to phase out polluting brick kilns, control construction dust, and curb waste burning—have yielded little outcome as implementation remains abysmal, even during the tenure of a so-called environment-friendly interim administration. As a result, Dhaka's PM2.5 concentration now exceeds the World Health Organization's guideline by more than fifteenfold.

Officials are sometimes quick to refer to the transboundary nature of the pollution problem, but this deflection cannot hide their chronic governance failure. While external drift contributes, the majority of the problem—at least 56 percent of emissions—is generated right within the greater Dhaka area, fuelled primarily by thousands of non-compliant traditional brick kilns. The recent declaration of Savar Upazila as a "degraded airshed" to finally shut down conventional kilns is a warning that degrading air quality and policy failure have both been persistent. The government must understand that its environmental policy is failing to deliver on even core obligations, including protecting lives.

To break this deadly cycle, it must elevate the pursuit of clean air to a national priority, and act with the urgency that it demands. The time for symbolic gestures and advisory warnings is long over. A pollution czar, if you like, must be empowered with executive authority to enforce compliance across all government agencies, from holding city corporations accountable for waste management to mandating dust control on all public works. Furthermore, the closure of illegal brick kilns and other major sources of pollution must be pursued ruthlessly, not just in Dhaka but across all major cities, backed by severe financial and legal penalties. We cannot remain trapped in a cycle of toxic air and empty promises when the cost is so great.

Zero pass rate a sign of bigger problems

Address teacher shortage and other chronic issues behind the HSC debacle

We are concerned about the zero pass rates recorded in this year's HSC exams across many colleges. Reportedly, a total of 202 colleges has recorded zero pass rates, a sharp rise from 65 such institutions last year. The Dinajpur board topped the list with 43 zero-pass colleges, followed by Rajshahi (35), Dhaka (34), Mymensingh (15), and smaller numbers in Cumilla, Sylhet, and Barishal. Additionally, 37 technical institutions and 22 madrasas also saw all their students fail. Surprisingly, in one college, only two students appeared in the exams, and both failed, raising questions about whether this institution is functional at all.

According to an official, some colleges do not even conduct classes and are only discovered during the result publication process. That education boards remain unaware of the existence of such colleges demonstrates how poorly regulated the sector in general is. Of course, teacher shortage is a major contributing factor behind the debacle. For example, at Narayanganj's Naba Kisholoy High School and Girls' College, where all 25 examinees failed, there was no English teacher at the higher secondary level, and the ICT teacher was also unable to take classes. In Mymensingh's Trishul Ideal College, there are very few full-time teachers, and most classes are conducted by part timers. This is a serious issue that needs proper attention from the authorities. Moreover, irregular or poor salaries lead many teachers to frequently leave these colleges. For instance, at Kurigram's Rashed Khan Menon College, teachers have reportedly not received salaries for seven years, which is unthinkable.

Another major issue is that most of the colleges are non-MPO institutions, meaning teachers do not receive any government support. The 43 zero-pass colleges in Dinajpur and 15 in Mymensingh fall under this category. These institutions rely on small, irregular tuition fees, making it difficult to retain qualified teachers and carry out academic activities efficiently. Furthermore, child marriage, particularly in rural and low-income areas, contributes significantly to the problem. In Narayanganj's Naba Kisholoy college, for example, 13 of the 25 examinees were married off during the academic session.

We urge the authorities to address these issues urgently. The prevailing teacher crisis must be resolved, with proper measures to ensure regular salary payment. The respective education boards also must strengthen their supervision and provide necessary support to struggling colleges. As the Inter-Education Board Coordination Committee has directed all boards to submit reports on these institutions, we hope that the respective boards will take meaningful action based on the findings and address the root causes of this alarming situation.

EDITORIAL

Ports for private profit or national progress?



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Bangladesh's port privatisation debate has entered a decisive phase as global operators express strong interest in managing the New Mooring Container Terminal (NCT), the under-construction Matarbari Deep Sea Port, and the proposed Bay Terminal. Supporters view this as an opportunity to enhance efficiency, attract technology and capital, and integrate Bangladesh into global logistics chains. But critics warn that premature concessions without a robust governance framework could jeopardise economic sovereignty, transparency, and control over critical infrastructure.

The NCT, built in 2007 at a cost of nearly Tk 2,000 crore, remains Chattogram port's most profitable facility, handling over 40 percent of container throughput and generating steady revenue for the Chittagong Port Authority (CPA). Despite the record, the government's plan to lease NCT to a foreign operator has sparked widespread concern. Originally designed for a landlord model concession, NCT's operation was assumed locally after the 2007-08 political transition. The CPA later self-funded ten ship-to-shore cranes and proved that domestic expertise can deliver competitive results. Some stakeholders question why such a high-performing terminal must now be handed over when inefficiencies stem largely from customs clearance delays, channel depth, and inland connectivity, rather than port yard operations.

In this regard, it should be mentioned that following a writ petition challenging the legality of NCT management handover to a foreign operator, the High Court on July 30 issued a rule asking why the handover process should not be declared illegal, and why fair and competitive public bidding should not be ensured before appointing any operator. However, despite the writ being pending, the government has reportedly continued the process of the planned handover.

Internationally, port reforms succeed when sequencing and regulation are right. Governments typically invite foreign operators to develop greenfield terminals, demanding heavy capital, not to take over running and revenue-earning assets. Malaysia's Port of Tanjung Pelepas and India's Jawaharlal Nehru Port illustrate that privatisation works only within transparent regulatory frameworks. As Dr Peter de Langen, during a class at Erasmus University Rotterdam that I attended, noted, sustainable maritime reform requires political consensus, clear concession law, and an enforceable

competition policy.

India's example also offers a lesson here. After allowing private operators in major ports, India enacted a competition law specifically covering port concessions to prevent monopolistic control by a few global terminal operators. No single company is allowed to operate adjacent terminals within the same port complex, ensuring competitive pricing and performance. Bangladesh, however, lacks such protection. Without a competition act tailored to terminal operation, a dominant foreign operator could gain

The CPA's recent tariff hike—reportedly advised by the International Finance Corporation (IFC)—has added fuel to the controversy. While pricing reforms are necessary, the rationale should reflect service efficiency and local competitiveness, not investor appetite. Tariffs must be linked to measurable service delivery benchmarks such as berth productivity, crane moves per hour, and ship turnaround time. Without those, rate increases risk burdening exporters and importers without improving performance.

A more balanced framework is therefore urgently required. Bangladesh needs a comprehensive port reform act to define concession models, competition rules, and accountability mechanisms. This should include mandatory disclosure of concession contracts, an independent tariff setting authority, and periodic performance audits. Such measures are not barriers to private investment—they are the very foundations of credibility.

However, Bangladesh should not view foreign operators as adversaries. Global firms such as DP World, PSA International, or Hutchison Ports bring advanced automation, larger ship-handling capacity, and international connectivity networks. Their participation can accelerate Bangladesh's aspiration to become a South Asian logistics hub. But partnerships must remain transparent, time-bound, and reciprocal. Concession durations should be reasonable, revenue-sharing clearly defined, and mid-term reviews built into every agreement. Contracts must be published online, and citizen access to key performance data must be guaranteed.

The challenge lies not in whether Bangladesh should privatise but in how and when. If reforms proceed without governance, competition law, and regulatory oversight, the nation risks surrendering strategic control. Conversely, if Bangladesh builds



FILE PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN

Ports are not mere commercial assets; they are extensions of national territory and instruments of trade diplomacy.

excessive leverage over tariff setting, berth allocation, and even cargo prioritisation, undermining both fair trade and national interest.

The Matarbari Deep Sea Port, financed by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), is the country's most strategic maritime investment. CPA has already spent a considerable amount developing its access channel and related infrastructure. Yet, even before Matarbari begins operation, the government has advanced the World Bank-supported Bay Terminal Marine Infrastructure Project. Experts fear that parallel megaprojects, planned without coordination of dredging depth, hinterland connectivity, and cargo forecasts, could lead to duplication and under-utilisation. Bangladesh must prioritise a unified national port master plan integrating Matarbari, Bay Terminal, and Chattogram port under one logistics vision rather than allowing overlapping concessions driven by external financiers.

Privatisation should serve as a means to modernisation, not an end pursued for short-term fiscal or political gains. Global partnerships can help upgrade equipment, digital systems, and logistics know-how—but only within a framework where national interest remains non-negotiable. Technology transfer clauses must be explicit, requiring foreign operators to train Bangladeshi professionals and share operational software and maintenance know-how.

Employment provisions have to secure local jobs rather than displacing CPA's skilled workforce, while performance bonds and KPI-based bonuses or penalties should ensure consistent standards. Moreover, oversight must evolve from passive supervision to active regulation. An independent national logistics commission could monitor concession compliance, publish benchmarking reports, and prevent conflicts of interest, along with its other responsibilities.

institutions first, then invites global players under fair rules, the result can be transformative. Efficiency, innovation, and private investment would then complement—not compromise—sovereignty.

Ultimately, ports are not mere commercial assets; they are extensions of national territory and instruments of trade diplomacy. Chattogram, Matarbari, and the Bay Terminal can together redefine Bangladesh's role in regional supply chains. Privatisation should align with a long-term maritime strategy that protects the public purse, nurtures domestic competence, and welcomes global expertise on Bangladesh's terms.

If done right, Bangladesh can create a model of public-private partnership rooted in accountability and competition—one that mirrors global best practice while defending its own economic sovereignty. If done wrong, it risks replacing state inefficiency with private monopoly. The choice is ours.

The dilemma triangle of tertiary education



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As soon as our HSC, A-Level, or equivalent examinations come to an end, a vast ocean of possibilities opens before us. However, the majority proceed to pursue higher education without much clarity of mind or thought about their future career paths, even in their late teens. Sometimes, we wander away for a while to explore entrepreneurship, but most of us eventually fall back on education, hoping that the next degree will bring us closer to stability. If not, there are Master's programmes at our disposal—avenues through which we can even change disciplines while cluelessly derailing our twenties.

Despite being largely regarded as a gateway to prosperity and social mobility, tertiary education is in profound crisis. This crisis is especially visible in developing nations, where the pressure to don a graduation cap outweighs the pursuit of knowledge. The core challenges facing higher education today—often described as the "dilemma triangle"—collectively undermine the quality, purpose, and value of university degrees, impeding genuine socio-economic development and the realisation of individual potential.

To begin with, the first corner of this dilemma is inflated "status symbolisation." In many societies, including ours, a university degree has tragically mutated from a mark of intellectual achievement into a social commodity. It has become a prerequisite for familial reputation, a good marriage, or a comfortable seat in the corporate hierarchy. This societal pressure ensures that the act of enrolment and the possession of the certificate become the primary goals, relegating the actual educational experience to a secondary concern.

The second vertex of the triangle represents the systemic flaw of "oversimplified access." Due to rapid and largely unregulated expansion, tertiary education has been compromised in terms of academic quality. Driven by political agendas to increase enrolment rates and by institutions' thirst for maximum revenue—without balancing service delivery to appropriate standards—access to higher education has become remarkably easy in certain contexts. While democratising education is a noble goal, when access is expanded without corresponding investment in quality control, faculty

development, or infrastructure, the entire system stands on precarious ground.

Admission criteria are sometimes designed to enrol large numbers of students. Consequently, oversized class sizes hinder meaningful student-teacher interaction, and compressed curricula leave little room for purposeful learning. For many universities, particularly private and profit-oriented ones, the incentive leans more towards retaining students than fostering their tenacity. This also results in grade inflation and lenient assessments, allowing students to progress through the system without mastering foundational concepts.

The final, and arguably most insidious, aspect is "guided ignorance." Systemic failure is embedded within the educational process itself, where institutions actively guide students towards compliance and superficial knowledge rather than encouraging independent thought. It is the by-product of "status symbolisation," which creates the demand for easy credentials, and "oversimplified access," which makes those credentials attainable through convenient shortcuts.

A lack of emphasis on critical analysis, coupled with curricula that are often outdated or disconnected from modern industry needs, provides fertile ground for "guided ignorance" to hide in plain sight. Students are often taught what to know, but seldom how to learn, evaluate, or adapt. The educational environment discourages intellectual risk-taking, complex problem-solving, and cross-disciplinary thinking—qualities that should ideally serve as

the cornerstones of genuine innovation and leadership. Unfortunately, the focus remains on passing standardised exams that test memory retention rather than conceptual application.

On a broader note, the glorification of the leadership mindset and the pursuit of high status positions are quietly eroding the fundamentally important sense of personal responsibility and accountability among the younger generation—an especially harmful trend for a developing nation like ours. Overcoming this inertia requires a fundamental rewiring of both the purpose and infrastructure of tertiary education, as well as a shift in socio-economic perspectives. Institutions must move their focus from credentialling to capability-building, while the younger generation should be able to chart futures that make them work-ready and resourceful much earlier in life. This calls for reforming curricula to emphasise critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and entrepreneurial skills.

Furthermore, the demand extends to investing in a highly qualified and dedicated teaching force at all levels. Most importantly, society must collectively attain the maturity to challenge the perception that an academic degree is an assured status symbol, and instead insist that it represents genuine intellectual and professional preparedness. Only by systematically dismantling the entire dilemma triangle can we restore the integrity and value of higher education for the next generation of nation-builders.