

## We must confront unseen hunger

Govt needs to escalate efforts to lift 1.6 crore people from severe hunger

A new report on food security in Bangladesh offers a lesson that managing a crisis is not the same as solving it. While the number of people facing high levels of acute food insecurity has dropped from 2.35 crore in 2024 to 1.6 crore this year, the figure is still an indictment of a system that continues to fail the most vulnerable. Among them are 3.61 lakh people who are in “emergency” conditions, a technical term that belies the brutal reality of empty stomachs and fading hope. This is a crisis unfolding in slow motion.

The report, prepared by the Bangladesh government in concert with United Nations agencies and humanitarian partners, is commendable for its clarity and rigour and leaves little room for ambiguity. The epicentre of this food insecurity crisis is Cox’s Bazar, where the confluence of two vulnerable populations—Rohingya refugees and their host communities—creates a perfect storm of need.

The drivers of food insecurity are depressingly familiar. Climate shocks, such as the widespread flooding in 2024, have devastated agrarian livelihoods, washing away crops as well as the means of recovery. Economic shocks, in the form of persistent inflation and market volatility, have also eroded the purchasing power of the marginalised. Perhaps most damning of all is the man-made crisis of neglect. As needs intensify, the international community is reducing the humanitarian funding that is a literal lifeline for hundreds of thousands. This is a failure of the international community’s resolve. The world rallied with promises when the Rohingya fled genocide; it is now quietly reneging on those promises, leaving Bangladesh to shoulder a burden that is rightfully the world’s.

Compounding the food crisis is a parallel nutrition emergency that threatens a generation. The projection that 16 lakh children under five will suffer from acute malnutrition this year should set off alarm bells. Malnutrition in early childhood causes irreversible physical and cognitive damage, crippling a nation’s future potential and locking children into a cycle of poverty before their lives have truly begun.

The Bangladesh government has rightly acknowledged the “sobering picture” and committed to action. But the government cannot do it alone. The report’s key recommendations—life-saving assistance, shock-responsive safety nets, agricultural support—are a clear roadmap. The government’s political will must be met with a sustained financial and technical commitment from the international community.

Bangladesh’s progress in food security, however hard-won, is fragile. The reduction in food insecurity from 2024 shows what coordinated effort can achieve. But allowing donor fatigue or global indifference to undermine this momentum would be a moral and strategic failure. Millions of people facing severe hunger are the final test of our conscience. They reflect a grim reality that can no longer be ignored.

## Prevent air pollution-related deaths

Political will and coherent policy needed to tackle the crisis

Two new global reports have once again laid bare Bangladesh’s worsening air quality crisis—and the political inertia sustaining it. The Lancet Countdown 2025 report attributes 2.25 lakh deaths in 2022 to human-caused air pollution, while the State of Global Air 2025 report raises the 2023 toll to a staggering 2.7 lakh. Both reports rank Bangladesh among the world’s most polluted countries, with PM2.5 concentrations exceeding even the World Health Organization’s least stringent limit. Yet, despite this mounting death toll, successive governments have failed to treat air pollution as the public health emergency that it is.

What makes this inaction particularly indefensible is the policy contradiction at its core. In 2023 alone, Bangladesh spent \$8.2 billion subsidising fossil fuels—more than it earned from carbon pricing—effectively rewarding the very industries driving these deaths. Coal’s share in energy generation has quadrupled since 2016, while the share of renewables remained below one percent. This is a glaring case of economic misalignment: public money is being poured into polluting energy while citizens pay the price through diseases, lost productivity, and premature deaths. According to the Lancet report, heat-related labour losses in 2024 cost the economy \$24 billion, or five percent of GDP, which is nothing short of an economic and moral failure rolled into one.

Equally troubling is the government’s fragmented approach to air pollution control. While authorities occasionally shut down brick kilns or announce plans to remove unfit vehicles, these are reactive gestures, not sustained strategies. We do not have an enforceable clean air act, binding emission standards for industries, or centralised monitoring or accountability mechanism. This lack of coherence has allowed multiple sectors, including transport, construction, brick production, and power generation, to operate with impunity.

The human toll extends beyond respiratory illnesses. The State of Global Air report found that three out of four chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) deaths and one in three heart disease deaths in Bangladesh are linked to air pollution, alongside over 5,000 dementia deaths in 2023. The government’s failure to integrate air pollution control into its noncommunicable disease (NCD) strategy thus represents a serious gap in public health planning. These issues demand a unified health-environment framework that addresses both prevention and treatment.

Bangladesh’s policymakers must recognise that the air pollution crisis is no longer an environmental issue. We must prioritise reducing fossil fuel dependence, enforcing emission limits, investing in clean energy, and creating an independent air quality monitoring authority. Without these systemic reforms, the “development” we boast of will remain fatally compromised.

### THIS DAY IN HISTORY

#### American bombing ends in North Vietnam

On this day in 1968, US President Lyndon B. Johnson ordered an end to American bombing in North Vietnam.

# How the consensus commission jeopardises the July charter



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The recommendations made by the National Consensus Commission regarding the implementation of the July National Charter have failed to resolve the divisions surrounding its execution. In fact, the commission’s recommendations have been criticised as being contradictory to the charter itself and undemocratic in nature. As a result, the overall implementation of the July charter now appears to be in jeopardy.

Determining the method for implementing the charter was never part of the National Consensus Commission’s original mandate. However, following demands from several political parties—including Jamaat-e-Islami and the NCP—the commission began holding both formal and informal consultations with political parties and experts after July 31 to discuss how the charter could be implemented. Those discussions produced a general consensus in favour of holding a referendum. Yet, divisions remained over the legal basis, timing, and procedure of such a referendum.

It was expected that the National Consensus Commission would work with political parties to bridge these differences and offer a broadly acceptable recommendation. Instead, in its proposal submitted on October 28, 2025, the commission recommended that the constitutional reform proposals under the charter be implemented through a “July National Charter (Constitutional Reform) Implementation Order,” based on which a national referendum would be held. If the referendum approved the proposals, the next parliament would act as a constitutional reform council to amend the constitution within 270 days, along with other normal legislation tasks. The commission, however, left it to the interim government to decide whether the referendum would be held before or on the day of the next parliamentary election.

Among the 84 reform proposals of the charter, the commission made two alternative recommendations concerning the 48 proposals related to constitutional reforms. Under the first option, the interim government would

draft a constitutional amendment bill in line with those 48 proposals. If the referendum is passed with a “yes” vote, the Constitutional Reform Council would implement the proposals within 270 days. If it fails to do so within that time, the bill would automatically be deemed passed.

Under the second option, the commission did not suggest an automatic constitutional amendment. A referendum will be held on the 48 constitutional reform proposals, and if the outcome is positive, the Constitutional Reform Council will



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implement them accordingly.

Significantly, under both options, the dissenting opinions of political parties (notes of dissent) on the reform proposals would not be taken into account. Once the referendum passed, the constitutional reform proposals prepared by the commission would go to the reform exactly as drafted—irrespective of any dissent.

This recommendation by the National Consensus Commission has raised several serious questions and concerns about the future of the charter’s implementation.

First, the commission’s proposal directly contradicts the charter itself. The charter explicitly recognised the dissenting opinions of political parties, stating that these differences would be reflected in their electoral manifestos so that the public could express their preference through the ballot box,

thereby giving the winning party a popular mandate to act on its stance. Yet, the commission’s proposal ignores these dissenting opinions altogether. Instead of all 84 proposals—complete with differences—it has narrowed the package down to 48 proposals without mentioning any dissent by the political parties. If the referendum yields a “yes,” those 48 reforms would be implemented exactly as the commission drafted them, with no room for variation. This directly contradicts the spirit and substance of the charter, which was painstakingly negotiated and signed after eight months of dialogue among the parties. In effect, the commission has disowned its own eight months of work.

Second, if the intention was to go directly to the people for approval, bypassing the political parties’ consensus, why limit the referendum to only the 48 constitutional proposals? Why not hold a referendum on the recommendations of all eleven

yes or no? Moreover, have citizens been adequately informed about the details, implications, and trade-offs of these reforms? Isn’t this rather like putting students into an exam without teaching them the syllabus?

Fourth, the recommendation that the constitutional amendments would automatically take effect if not implemented within 270 days is fundamentally undemocratic. Such a top-down, automatic imposition is unacceptable, especially coming from a body formed to promote democratic transition and consensus-based reform.

Fifth, by excluding the dissenting opinions from the charter, the commission may have jeopardised the entire reform process. Political parties may now campaign against the referendum package in its entirety, using their disagreements as justification. For example, suppose Party A strongly opposes proportional representation in the upper house. If the referendum passes, that system would become binding. Hence, Party A might urge its supporters to vote “no” to block the entire package. Party B might oppose changes to the constitution’s founding principles and therefore campaign against the referendum. Party C might reject the mandatory increase of female candidates by five percent per election and take a similar stance. Thus, each party, to safeguard its particular objections, could oppose the entire reform package—and they could hardly be blamed for it.

Had the referendum included the dissenting opinions, those same parties could have voted “yes” and then pursued their specific commitments once in power. Now, because of the commission’s reckless recommendation, not only have the dissenting views been discarded, but even the agreed reforms are at risk.

One may disagree with some of the political parties’ dissenting opinions in the charter. But that does not justify forcing or manipulating the reforms. Reforms imposed through coercion or technical manoeuvring never endure and such top-down reforms inevitably fail. Sustainable reform can only be achieved through genuine political will and broad-based consensus.

Therefore, the focus should be to prioritise and implement those reforms on which political consensus already exists. Any attempt to impose or shortcut the process from above only endangers the entire reform project and undermines the democratic spirit that the July National Charter was meant to uphold.

# Why road safety designs need people’s voices



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Road safety is not merely a matter of engineering; it is a matter of understanding human behaviour, context, and the daily experiences of those who use our streets.

In Bangladesh, pedestrians remain the most vulnerable road users. Every day, children walk to school along busy streets, people run errands, and workers cross highways to reach factories or offices. Their journeys, often short in distance, can nonetheless carry enormous risk. Zebra crossings fade under dust and wear, signals malfunction or go unnoticed, and footpaths are blocked by vendors, parked vehicles, or are poorly maintained. Even when crossings exist, their placement and design often fail to match natural pedestrian routes, forcing people to take unnecessary risks. Despite awareness campaigns and ongoing infrastructure improvements, pedestrian deaths continue to rise—a grim reminder that road safety requires more than well-intentioned plans; it requires solutions designed around the realities of human behaviour and the experiences of users.

A recent Bangladesh Road Safety Project (BRSP) study surveying 108 pedestrians and 41 drivers at high-risk

crossings revealed notable differences in safety perceptions. Pedestrians, particularly students, were divided between fencing and green separation along footpaths, balancing safety and comfort, while commuters and workers prioritised fencing for protection. They overwhelmingly favoured raised crossings, better lighting, and clear markings over police or signal enforcement, showing trust in design-based interventions. Drivers, however, preferred fencing and active controls, such as signals or police presence, with large vehicle operators emphasising enforcement and smaller vehicle drivers placing less weight on comfort or greenery. In short, pedestrians favour design-focused safety measures, whereas drivers lean towards control-based interventions.

This divide highlights a deeper disconnect between road design and use, as pedestrians often ignore designated crossings that are inconvenient or unsafe, while drivers hesitate to yield when crossings appear disorganised, pedestrians behave unpredictably, or signals fail. In many cases, infrastructure itself creates risk. Decades of top-down road safety planning in Bangladesh have focused on technical standards,

expecting users to adapt. Closing this gap requires a people-centred approach—co-designing—involving pedestrians, drivers, engineers, and community representatives to identify problems and develop solutions that are technically sound, contextually relevant, and practically usable.

This participatory philosophy aligns closely with the globally recognised Safe System approach, which acknowledges that humans make mistakes and that the transport system must be designed to prevent these mistakes from resulting in serious injuries or fatalities. It focuses not only on infrastructure but also on behaviour, institutional coordination, and shared responsibility. In Bangladesh, where multiple agencies—including the Roads and Highways Department (RHD), Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA), police, and Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS)—share overlapping roles, collaboration is essential. International experience, including guidance from the World Bank, shows that sustainable safety outcomes emerge when strong policy leadership from the top is paired with meaningful participation from communities at the ground level.

Behavioural insights further strengthen this perspective by helping to explain not just what people do, but why they do it. Findings from my research reveal that drivers are more likely to yield to children, women, or elderly pedestrians out of empathy, and more likely to slow down for groups crossing together rather than individuals. Pedestrians, on the other hand, often prioritise convenience over safety when crossings are poorly located or when footbridges

require significant effort to use. Such behaviour is shaped more by necessity and habit than by negligence. Understanding these behavioural motivations is essential for designing interventions that reshape habits and perceptions, rather than merely changing road geometry. Blaming road users will not solve the problem; instead, recognising gaps in service delivery, system design, and infrastructure placement is fundamental to creating a forgiving and user-friendly road environment.

Building on these insights, I propose a practical framework known as UPLIFT (Upgrade, Provide, Leverage, Improve, Focus, Target) to guide co-created and behaviourally informed road safety interventions—(i) upgrade the visibility, accessibility, and usability of existing crossings for all users; (ii) provide physical features like raised crossings, barriers, and lighting are to guide safe behaviour; (iii) leverage communities, schools, and workplaces to reinforce safe practices through social influence; (iv) improve awareness campaigns with visible environmental changes so that education and infrastructure mutually reinforce safety; (v) focus on shared priorities between drivers and pedestrians to reduce conflict and build trust; (vi) target both emotional and conscious motivations using visual cues, empathetic messaging, and consistent design to encourage safer crossing behaviour.

Bangladesh’s journey towards safer roads demands a cultural shift. Safety will be ensured when road users see themselves as partners in a shared system by combining behavioural science, participatory design, and institutional accountability.