

FBCCI needs its voice back

Apex trade body failing to serve private sector sans elected leadership

Trade bodies exist for a reason. They are the loudest voices of the private sector, pushing for lower tariffs, clearer rules, and sympathetic policies. Yet, the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI) has gone strangely quiet of late. It is not because the country's business community is content, but because their apex body has been decapitated.

Since the political changeover last year, the FBCCI's boardroom has been empty of actual business leaders. Instead, the interim government has installed bureaucrats to keep the seat warm. First came a retired bureaucrat; now sits a serving additional secretary. This is a routine adherence to outdated rules. Asking a bureaucrat to represent the sheer dynamism of the private sector is a disservice to the economy. And its consequences are potentially severe.

Bangladesh boasts a \$500 billion economy with the private sector commanding 85 percent of it. The FBCCI typically advises the government on export-import policies and assists in setting prices for essential commodities. Without elected leadership, that system is broken. The government, deprived of genuine consultation, seems to be flying blind. To be fair, the rot set in long before the arrival of the current administration. Under the previous regime, the FBCCI became a patronage mill. Leadership elections were often theatrical shams. The institution was hollowed out by politicisation.

So, restoring credibility will require a new system, not just an election. The reforms currently on the table are promising. The most consequential shift is at the top: the president and three vice-presidents will now be directly elected rather than chosen by nominated and elected directors. That will end an opaque tradition in which directors selected the leadership from among themselves. The board itself is being downsized. The previously bloated assembly of 80 directors—comprising 34 nominated and 46 elected representatives—will be reduced to 44. Under the new rules, 30 directors will be chosen through direct ballot, split evenly between chamber and association groups. The remaining 14 seats will be nominated, again divided equally, with a new decision to ensure female representation in both categories. This is the right direction, as the new rules may dismantle the old syndicates.

However, the deadline has been missed. Legal squabbles over membership fees and powers of the election commission have been allowed to fester. A promised September poll date came and went. This drift must end. The interim government's new appointee, Abdur Rahim Khan, has 120 days to hold the vote. He should treat this timeline as sacrosanct. Bangladesh is navigating a fragile economic transition, and so needs a vocal, perhaps even prickly, partner in the private sector. The FBCCI must function as a robust counterweight as well as an adviser to the government. The economy needs a voice, and that voice must belong to the private sector.

Stop the rise in secondary dropout

Govt must take proper policy measures to keep students in school

While Bangladesh has over the years achieved notable success in attaining high completion rates at the primary level, the situation appears to be the opposite at the secondary level. Our report on the recently conducted Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2025 shows a steady decline in completion rates as students move from primary to lower secondary and then to upper secondary across all divisions. Although around 84 percent of children complete primary school nationwide, less than half manage to finish secondary education. The survey further reveals that children from low-income households—particularly girls—are more likely to drop out before completing secondary school. Experts attribute this situation to socio-economic conditions and structural weaknesses within the education system.

The survey divides secondary education into two levels—lower (classes six to eight) and upper (classes nine and ten)—and reveals a sharp fall in completion rates at each level. While 83.7 percent of children complete primary school, only 69.3 percent complete lower secondary, and a mere 43.9 percent complete upper secondary. The rich-poor divide in secondary education is particularly alarming: only 21 percent of children from poor families finish upper secondary, compared to around 66 percent from wealthier households. An urban-rural divide also persists, with 49 percent of urban students completing upper secondary against 42 percent of rural students. Additionally, certain divisions are performing worse than others. Sylhet, for instance, reports the lowest completion rates at both lower and upper secondary levels.

Early marriage remains a major reason for girls dropping out, particularly outside Dhaka. Meanwhile, many low-income families are forced to prioritise immediate household income over education, pushing boys into work instead of keeping them in school. This partly explains why only 63 percent of boys complete lower secondary, compared to 76 percent of girls. Educationists also note that the teaching-learning process in mainstream schools often fails to engage students, further contributing to dropout rates.

Therefore, we urge the government to address the underlying causes of high dropout rates at the secondary level. While existing laws aimed at preventing child marriage and labour must be strictly enforced across all divisions, targeted interventions are needed for the more vulnerable groups and regions. Measures such as inflation-adjusted stipends and free or subsidised educational materials should be considered for secondary students. The government must also expand vocational training opportunities for students who are unable to continue in mainstream education. Equally important is the need to make classroom teaching more engaging and to improve the overall standard of education. Finally, increased investment in both primary and secondary education is essential to ensure quality learning and prevent dropouts.

EDITORIAL

A second chance for Pangaon, but can it unlock its potential?



Ahamedul Karim Chowdhury
is adjunct faculty at Bangladesh Maritime University and former head of the Kamalapur Inland Container Depot (ICD) and the Pangaon Inland Container Terminal under Chittagong Port Authority.

AHAMEDUL KARIM CHOWDHURY

Bangladesh's container-logistics landscape has just crossed a defining threshold. What has long been discussed as a likely outcome is finally a signed reality: the operating contract for the Pangaon Inland Container Terminal (PICT) has been formally awarded to the Swiss-based Medlog SA, the logistics arm of the Mediterranean Shipping Company (MSC). The 22-year concession agreement between the Chittagong Port Authority (CPA) and Medlog Bangladesh Private Ltd will shape how Dhaka connects with global maritime supply chains. For Pangaon, long criticised for its underutilised potential, this is more than a change of operator; it is a second chance to become the inland gateway we once envisaged.

That ambition dates back to 2013, when PICT was built at a cost of about Tk 157 crore and designed to handle 116,000 TEUs (Twenty-foot Equivalent Units) annually. In practice, the terminal has consistently struggled, sometimes operating below 20 percent of its capacity. The reasons for the failure remain familiar: operational bottlenecks, inconsistent scheduling, weak multimodal integration, and policy gaps that failed to match the rhetoric of shifting cargo from road to river. In the concession process, Medlog emerged as the sole technically qualified bidder, receiving a perfect technical score, while the competing bid from HR Lines was deemed non-responsive. When the government extended the proposed tenure from 12 years to 22 years in July 2025, it cleared the way for this transition.

A report by The Daily Star has added further details about the deal. Medlog reportedly plans to increase Pangaon's annual handling capacity by 160,000 TEUs—a substantial boost that, if executed properly, could redefine Pangaon's role in Bangladesh's logistics chain. To strengthen multimodal connectivity, Medlog will also charter inland barges from PICT to link Pangaon with other river terminals and seaports. The project, as per the company, aims to stimulate trade, enhance supply-chain resilience, and elevate Bangladesh's logistics sector to globally competitive standards. These commitments go beyond earlier public disclosures and

signal a more ambitious operational roadmap.

The timing of this concession aligns with Bangladesh's gradual efforts to modernise its logistics ecosystem. Medlog has previously expressed interest in major inland and coastal terminal investments, with estimated upgrades of around \$400 million. This mirrors a global trend where ocean carriers invest in inland logistics to



Since its inauguration in 2013, the Pangaon Inland Container Terminal (PICT) has consistently struggled, sometimes operating below 20 percent of its capacity.

PHOTO: ASHRAF KARIM CHOWDHURY

secure network reliability. PICT offers such an opportunity, provided that the surrounding infrastructure supports, rather than constrains, it.

This perspective connects with arguments from my previous article where I emphasised the potential synergy between Pangaon and the Matarbari Deep-Sea Port. Pangaon serves as Dhaka's inland gateway, while Matarbari offers the deep water needed for large vessels that Chattogram and Mongla cannot accommodate. Together, the two could form a corridor supporting triangular service models—such as Pangaon-Matarbari-US/Europe—reducing reliance on transhipment hubs and deepening Bangladesh's integration into global shipping networks. The concession agreement keeps that

exporters, especially in the time-sensitive RMG sector. Systemic barriers such as limited jetties for inland vessels at both Pangaon and private terminals have seen only incremental progress.

Riverine constraints further compound the challenge. The Buriganga-Shitalakshya corridor, for instance, suffers from insufficient draft of around four metres, sharp bends near Fatullah, and vessel-length restrictions of roughly 83 metres. These limitations prevent typical 350-TEU feeder vessels from accessing Pangaon. Overcoming such barriers requires proper river dredging and training as well as modern navigational aids.

Connectivity by road remains another bottleneck. Although Pangaon lies only 13 kilometres or so

from central Dhaka, poor road links blunt its geographic advantage. The incomplete Middle Circular Road—particularly the crucial Kalakandi-Hemayetpur stretch—continues to restrict integration with industrial zones across Savar, Tongi, and Gazipur. Completing this link could significantly reduce transit times and support a meaningful modal shift to inland waterways.

The economic case for such reforms is compelling. Moving a container between Dhaka and Chattogram costs \$800-1,000 per TEU, which is among the highest inland logistics costs in Asia. In comparison, India's inland waterways operate at \$250-300 per TEU. Efficient utilisation of Pangaon could reduce Bangladesh's logistics cost per TEU by up to 30 percent, strengthening export competitiveness at a time when margins for key sectors like RMG are tightening.

A long-term concession offers a realistic path forward, but success hinges on close cooperation between Medlog and government agencies. The authorities must introduce fixed berthing windows at Chattogram, ensure scheduled dredging, complete the Middle Circular Road, and accelerate digitisation of customs and port processes. Medlog can bring global best practices, but only a supportive ecosystem will translate those capabilities into measurable gains.

Concerns about foreign involvement in strategic national assets are understandable and merit attention. These can be addressed through transparency, proper tariff oversight, regular performance audits, and robust regulatory safeguards. But the goal should not be to automatically dismiss foreign operators but to align any concession with national interests.

So if the recently inked agreement delivers even part of its potential, the impact could be transformative. A revitalised Pangaon could ease pressure on highways, offer exporters predictable alternatives, and lay the foundation for an integrated Pangaon-Matarbari corridor. This could ultimately support direct Bangladesh-US/EU services through a triangular model.

The signing of the concession therefore brings cautious optimism. The true measure of its success will lie in how quickly Pangaon begins to handle meaningful volumes, how reliably it links with Matarbari, and how transparently its benefits reach shippers. With Medlog's capability and coordinated national support, Pangaon can still evolve into an important pillar of Bangladesh's next-generation logistics system.

WORLD CHILDREN'S DAY

The children who work while we look away



Nazifa Raidah
is a journalist, researcher, and development practitioner. She can be reached at nazifa0419@gmail.com.

NAZIFA RAIDAH

On the traffic-stricken streets of Dhaka, we all come across a scene that is too depressingly familiar: children moving like shadows between rickshaws and stalls. They never tell us their names, but we all know them. It's that little boy, maybe nine or 10, who knocks on the car window with the gentle insistence and the practised smile of someone who has done this thousands of times. When the light turns green, he jogs alongside the car for a few steps before giving up. In seconds, he is at another window, rehearsing the gesture again. Or it could be the little girl who sits beside her mother on the pavement, making flower garlands, or the small boy who washes cups in tea stalls with his fingers chapped from hot water and detergent. All of them, from the second they perceived this world, were taught survival before they could even utter a full sentence.

These are not rare sights in Bangladesh. They take place within the daily texture of the city. It is baffling how normalised we all are to child labour, and sometimes, I wonder if we even notice them anymore. Over the years, through our reluctance to acknowledge them and their tenacity to live, these children tragically have become permanent features of our lives that we have learned to manoeuvre around, to ignore.

Recent surveys by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) and Unicef revealed that 9.2 percent of children aged between 5 and 17 are engaged in child labour, an increase of 1.2 million since 2019. Many of these children are engaged in hazardous sectors like mechanical garages, workshops, and leather factories. They are exposed to industrial fumes, long hours and death, as seen in the fatal factory fire in Mirpur last month. The study also found that lead poisoning, a silent predator, affects 38 percent of young children nationwide. In Dhaka, 65 percent of children are affected. The consequences of lead poisoning are irreversible: stunted cognitive development, reduced academic potential, and lifelong health problems.

One could go ahead and argue that part of the reason behind the normalisation of child labour is linked to our collective acceptance of poverty. According to estimates by Power and Participation Research Centre, poverty in Bangladesh has soared to 28 percent. More often than not, when poverty increases, so does the exploitation of children.

This opens up a debate on child labour in Bangladesh that is rather multifaceted and uncomfortable and the crux of it is rooted in affordability.

Although social safety net allowances exist, they do not keep pace with the rising costs. As a result, poor families are often forced to choose labour over education for their children. In this circumstance, if the state cannot radically lift families out of poverty, demanding that children not work becomes just a strictly moralistic stance.

Sadly, the majority of child labourers are employed in the informal sector—small factories, workshops, street vending, home-based businesses and domestic work—which makes eliminating child labour by 2025 a fever dream.

It's not like the Bangladesh government has not taken any steps—it has ratified international conventions, drafted national plans, and proposed a Tk 25 billion programme to eliminate child labour and rehabilitate those children—but all of these stumble at the implementation stage. In 2023, the Bangladesh Department of Inspections for Factories and Establishments identified 3,459 child labour violations, but the lack of routine monitoring and enforcement of safety standards still claims the lives of children like 13-year-old Asma Akter or 14-year-old Mahira Akter and Abdul Alim. These teenagers were working in the garment factory, which was engulfed by an adjacent chemical warehouse fire last month in Mirpur.

The situation is worse for children working inside Export Processing

Zones, as the government continues to obstruct unannounced inspections there. Moreover, enforcement remains nearly impossible in informal sectors, since the Labour Act of 2006 is primarily restricted to formal sectors. Sadly, the majority of child labourers are employed in the informal sector—small factories, workshops, street vending, home-based businesses and domestic work—which makes eliminating child labour by 2025 a fever dream.

Change in this area requires more than legislation. It requires a shift in belief and a culture that values children as children, not as miniature labourers. Strong social safety net programmes must be created so that families are not forced to rely on child labour income. Evidence from Latin America shows that well-targeted conditional cash transfers reduced child labour significantly in Brazil under its Child Labor Eradication Program (PETI). Similar programmes reduced child labour by nearly 20 percent in Honduras, while simultaneously improving school attendance and health outcomes. However, for such a programme to work in Bangladesh, inspections and interventions must reach the workshops, markets, and other places where exploitation hides in plain sight, as exemplified by India's Bachpan Bachao Andolan, Brazil's PETI after-school programmes, and Ecuador's Working Boys' Center.

On this World Children's Day, perhaps the most honest thing we can do is not celebrate but pause. We need to call a spade a spade and recognise that the children we see working in our streets, in our factories, workshops and homes, were never given a choice. Let's try to ensure they have that—a chance to live their childhood as children, not labourers.