

Is our city waiting to collapse?

After Friday's earthquake, authorities must start urgent preparation

The enemy is no longer at the gates; it is already on our doorstep. It is now anyone's guess when it will finally breach the door. In the wake of Friday's 5.7 magnitude earthquake, a terrifying question has emerged: is the capital built to stand, or merely waiting to collapse? The answer was grimly illustrated in the chaotic warrens of Old Dhaka. There, a railing collapsed, killing three people and raising the total death toll to 10.

The proximity of the earthquake changes the calculus of survival. With an epicentre in Madhabdi, a mere 13 kilometres from Dhaka, the geological threat is no longer distant. It was shallow, releasing its energy close to the surface. Such tremors wreak particular havoc on mid-rise structures—the four-to-eight-storey residential buildings that make up most of Dhaka's urban sprawl, according to experts. These buildings, often constructed on filled wetlands with scant regard for engineering codes, are potential coffins. Historical trends suggest that 7.0 magnitude earthquakes recur in this region every century, and it has been over 100 years since the last one. As a BUET professor has suggested, the geological clock is ticking. A major rupture now could flatten a third of Dhaka city and kill thousands of people.

The tragedy is that this fragility is engineered. RAJUK, the agency tasked with regulating the capital's development, has long functioned more as a facilitator of real-estate chaos than a guardian of public safety. Wetlands have been concreted over. Building rules remain fluid, bent to accommodate the commercial whims of developers who squeeze square footage out of narrow plots. As an expert at the Bangladesh Institute of Planners points out, even the minimum space between buildings is often erased from the final plans.

During a visit to Old Dhaka on Saturday, the chairman of RAJUK offered a dismal diagnosis of urban development. He admitted that developers treat enforcement as a minor inconvenience: when authorities cut utility lines to halt illegal construction, builders simply switch to generators or stolen connections. But his threat to seal the earthquake-damaged Armanitola building if papers are not produced within seven days rings hollow against a backdrop of decades of loose governance. RAJUK's strategy remains reactive, its enforcement porous.

To minimise devastation after another strong earthquake, the government must embrace both economics and rigour. The RAJUK chairman's suggestion that owners of tiny plots should build joint, legal structures seems to be sound urban economics. Larger plots allow for the necessary engineering tolerances that are physically impossible on smaller parcels of land. But good economics requires good policing. The proposal by experts to introduce third-party verification of building designs, following the model of Indonesia and Thailand, is an essential stopgap for a regulator that has lost its way.

History offers a grim footnote to this urgency as Bangladesh is bracing for something far worse. By a cruel coincidence, Friday's quake occurred on the exact anniversary of the 1997 Chittagong earthquake, which killed several people. But looking back is a luxury. If Friday's was indeed a foreshock, with two subsequent tremors on Saturday, the window for action is closing. The government must immediately mandate inspections of all mid-rise buildings and enforce the "Red-Yellow-Green" safety coding system. To ignore the warning is to be complicit in the disaster to come.

Salinity is poisoning our water and soil

Stop unregulated shrimp farming, take other necessary steps

A recent *Daily Star* report once again highlights the devastating impact of salinity in Bangladesh's southwestern districts, particularly Satkhira and Khulna. Across the country's 19 coastal districts, high salt concentrations in soil and water are disrupting lives and livelihoods. Salinity has become one of the region's most severe environmental challenges, one that the government must treat as an urgent health, economic, and social crisis.

While climate change is a major cause for reduced upstream flow, rising sea levels, and cyclones, the reckless and unbridled shrimp industry has created a human-induced environmental disaster. Agricultural land has lost fertility and can no longer produce rice and vegetables. Much of it has been converted into shrimp enclosures, allowing saltwater to seep into the groundwater. According to a government report, around 62 percent of coastal land is now affected by salinity.

Embankments built to protect soil from salinity and tidal surges have, in many cases, caused more harm than good by blocking natural tidal flows. This has led to waterlogging and weakened the natural flushing mechanisms that push saltwater back into the sea, resulting in further soil and water degradation. But it is the unregulated shrimp farming since the 1980s that has deepened the crisis. It has benefited only a handful, while the majority of small farmers have lost their land to excessive salinity. These small farmers and day labourers are now forced to survive on meagre wages, pushing them further into poverty.

The health cost of this crisis is also dire. Procuring safe drinking water has become a major challenge, with women and girls often having to travel miles to fetch potable water. Prolonged exposure to saline water and its consumption are causing a range of health conditions, including preeclampsia among pregnant women. What is most shocking is that successive governments have allowed shrimp farming to expand without any regulation or enforcement of environmental laws to protect the soil and water.

We urge the interim government to begin addressing this crisis without delay. Environmental experts have already outlined clear steps. The most urgent is regulating shrimp farming to stop the conversion of cropland and the intrusion of saltwater. Other key measures include expanding infrastructure to bring in more freshwater, promoting rainwater harvesting at household and community levels, deploying desalination technology for drinking water, introducing climate-smart agricultural practices such as salt-tolerant crops and water-efficient methods, and designing gender-sensitive water policies to help women and girls in particular. Our policy must reflect the urgency of addressing salinity in these regions, as millions of lives and livelihoods are at stake.

Dhaka's earthquake danger ignored for too long



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Did you ever hear about the earthquake epicentre in Narsingdi prior to the November 21 incident? On Friday, at least 10 people, including two children, were killed and several hundred injured after a 5.7-magnitude earthquake shook Dhaka, nearby districts, and other parts of the country, cracking buildings, sending debris crashing down, and driving panicked residents into the streets. Narsingdi alone recorded five deaths. For many, this was the first real experience of the earth's raw power. While the shaking lasted only a few seconds, its impact revealed just how vulnerable even near-urban areas are to seismic disasters. It was also a wake-up call for us to identify the blind faults, among other priorities.

A blind fault is one that leaves no visible scars on the landscape and does not fracture the surface. These faults can cause large earthquakes but are obscured by conventional geological surveys. Unlike well-known fault lines, their very invisibility makes them uniquely dangerous. The odds that such hidden structures exist beneath densely populated areas are increased by recent tremors in central Bangladesh, which is far from the well-mapped Dauki or Madhupur faults. Because Bangladesh is situated on soft alluvial soils and between tectonic boundaries, experts have long cautioned about the country's vulnerability to earthquakes.

Numerous experts and public voices had expressed concern about our lack of preparedness even before the Friday earthquake and the tremors that followed. Dhaka's building stock is particularly vulnerable due to weak inspection systems, construction on reclaimed wetlands, and non-compliance with the Bangladesh National Building Code (BNBC).

In a megacity like Dhaka, an earthquake would not occur in isolation but would rather set off a chain of cascading disasters, rendering the catastrophe far deadlier than the initial tremor. Dhaka exemplifies a multi-hazard risk environment due to its high population density, unregulated urban expansion, soft soil issues, outdated infrastructure, and constrained road networks. A quake could quickly initiate fires from ruptured gas lines, structural failures, obstructed roads, hazardous spills, electrical failures, water supply breakdowns, and urban flooding from broken pipelines. These secondary risks can quickly intensify, burdening emergency responders and ensnaring inhabitants.

Worldwide experience demonstrates that the highest mortality rates typically result from the cascading events following an earthquake, rather

than from the quake alone. In Japan, the lethal firestorms and fire whirl that devastated Tokyo and Yokohama after the 1923 Great Kanto earthquake claimed more lives than the violent shaking itself, highlighting how swiftly urban disasters can escalate into overwhelming calamities. Dhaka encounters similar threats—a single peril can trigger numerous others, escalating a significant earthquake



Rescuers in action after an earthquake hit Dhaka and other districts on November 21, 2025.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

into a complex, multi-dimensional catastrophe that surpasses our existing readiness level.

Against this backdrop, what's most worrying is that planning at the national level has not kept up. Despite the existence of seismic zoning maps, their enforcement is still lax, and some older but densely populated neighbourhoods have never had their risk looked at. This lack of readiness is not hypothetical. A significant earthquake could turn Dhaka into a "death trap" if prompt action is not taken. In the meantime, experts in urban planning advise decentralising the capital to lower the risk of catastrophe.

Although blind faults cannot be avoided, their harm can be lessened if Bangladesh can take decisive action. To identify blind-fault activity early, we need to increase seismic monitoring by installing a denser network of seismometers throughout Dhaka, Narsingdi, and other high-risk areas. Strict enforcement of the building code is necessary to

or low-frequency EM disturbances. These gaps do not mean total absence, but rather insufficient coverage and integration, which exacerbates the preparedness deficit at a time when hidden faults and urban vulnerabilities demand enhanced alertness.

Our earthquake vulnerability is rooted in unsafe, non-compliant buildings and fragile urban systems, especially in Dhaka, Old Dhaka, Narayanganj, Gazipur, and other industrial zones, making structural safety the first national priority. This requires forming a dedicated Building Regulatory Authority (BRA) to enforce the BNBC nationwide, conducting city-wide structural surveys to classify buildings as safe or risky, retrofitting critical public infrastructure such as hospitals, schools, police and fire stations, enforcing a National Seismic Design and Retrofitting Roadmap, installing automatic gas and electric shutoff systems to prevent post-quake fires, and decentralising lifelines like blood banks, fuel reserves, and medical

with INSARAG-compliant rescue protocols, and regularly updating laws, regulations, SOD, and contingency plans based on new scientific insights.

Finally, to save lives after impact, the country must develop Light, Medium, and Heavy USAR teams, pre-position rescue and medical resources nationwide, expand field hospitals and mobile surgical units, establish a robust mass casualty and dignified dead body management system, enforce a National Debris Management Policy to reopen mobility corridors within hours, and secure emergency restoration of water, electricity, and gas lines through bypass systems.

The fate of a megacity facing a potential major earthquake depends on its level of preparation, scientific insight, and coordinated action. Without these, an earthquake could escalate into an unprecedented human tragedy, but with them, it can be transformed into a manageable emergency, saving countless lives and preserving critical infrastructure.

Gaza tragedy and a mockery of a ceasefire



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Day after day, it becomes clear that the announcement of the Sharm El Sheikh summit in October 2025 "to stop the war" was not intended to save civilians in Gaza Strip, but was instead a new episode in a series of political games played at the expense of the Palestinians' humanitarian tragedy. The Trump administration did not seek to save the people of Gaza from genocide; it wanted to ensure that Israel was saved from international isolation and to rebuild its regional and global image after its racist crimes were exposed. The announcement of a "ceasefire" was more like a political cover to shield the Tel Aviv government than a genuine attempt to protect civilians in Gaza. Since the announcement, neither the raids nor the killing of innocents have stopped. The Palestinian Ministry of Health in Gaza has recorded the deaths of at least 312 people, most of them children, in addition to thousands wounded, while the entire strip remains under direct fire.

Thousands of wounded people are still prevented from travelling for treatment outside Gaza. Partially functioning hospitals can barely cope

with the huge and growing numbers of critical cases, including life-altering injuries and the deaths of patients who have been denied even the most basic medicines. About 25 percent of the injured now face permanent disabilities due to a lack of medical equipment and the inability to treat complex injuries.

While international media attention is focused on a limited number of recovered Israeli bodies, the fate of the Palestinians is being ignored. Some Palestinian bodies have been returned bearing signs of torture; others have been robbed; and the bodies of many who have been missing for decades are still held in secret graves or occupation refrigerators. At the same time, reports of torture prisons continue to emerge, going beyond even the horrors already exposed in Sde Teiman prison, where systematic violations have been committed against Palestinian detainees, including rape.

With the onset of winter, the suffering of the people is worsening. Camps for displaced families have been flooded with rainwater, and tents have become inundated and largely uninhabitable. The severe cold,

combined with these dire conditions, has claimed the lives of children, the sick, and the elderly. Thousands of families now live without any form of protection, amid the continuation of the siege and the frequent obstruction of humanitarian aid.

Despite the tight siege, media and diplomatic reports have revealed systematic displacement through the so-called Ramon Airport, facilitated by fake and intelligence-linked companies. Dozens of Palestinians have suddenly arrived in South Africa, and there are reports of other shadowy agencies connected to Estonia flying Palestinians out. These "mystery flights" indicate Israel's intention to continue silent ethnic cleansing, which explains its insistence on maintaining the siege and denying Gaza even the most basic elements of life.

In this context, I have issued several statements to various Bangladeshi media outlets about the seriousness of this displacement through Ramon Airport, warning against exploiting the close relations and fraternal sympathy that bind the people of Bangladesh to Palestine. The most recent of these warnings came during my press conference regarding female students from Gaza, held on August 14, 2025.

In the West Bank, settler terrorism against the people in Palestinian villages and towns continues. Settlers, backed by the official support of the Israeli government and army, carry out frequent attacks on civilians, burn homes, and gradually displace residents, while Israeli security services cooperate with them, entrenching a

policy of slow demographic cleansing. Washington has pushed a draft resolution through the United Nations Security Council, calling it a "Comprehensive Plan to End the Gaza Conflict," but in reality it only aims to satisfy Israel by deploying international forces to complete what the occupation has failed to achieve. It is not designed to protect civilians from continuous crimes. The resolution also entrenches the division of Gaza into a besieged and destroyed west and east, where reconstruction is conditional and politically manipulated. Moreover, it further cements the separation of Gaza from the West Bank and Jerusalem, undermining the Palestinian national entity, deepening political division, and further fragmenting Palestinian representation.

Here we must emphasise the essential role played by Saudi Arabia and France as sponsors of the conference on implementing the two-state solution, held at the United Nations Headquarters in New York in September 2025 and supported by the majority of the world's countries—with the exception of the United States and Israel. What offers Palestinians a degree of reassurance is the Kingdom's firm stance on the two-state solution. During a joint press conference with President Trump two days ago, the Saudi crown prince reaffirmed his country's firm stance on the matter. Though hope is an existential necessity for the present and the future, caution is also essential until Palestine and its people achieve real freedom and independence.