

The salt in their wounds

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too ill to work. “I cried quietly through the pain but kept going. We had to raise our daughter.”
She also had to have her uterus removed four years ago, with her son-in-law helping cover the cost. “The water we drink is salty; the ponds are salty. It feels like we’re fighting salt in every part of life.”

Across Satkhira and Khulna, hundreds of women and girls, like Sima and Sita, suffer skin diseases, UTIs and reproductive health problems linked to rising salinity. Sea level rise, cyclones, tidal surges and unregulated shrimp farming have pushed salt water deep into rivers, canals and soil, eroding both livelihoods and women’s health.

CAUGHT IN SALTY WATERS AND ILLNESS

Daily life in coastal villages is inseparable from saline water.

Women wash, bathe, collect drinking water and work in it. The constant exposure, along with consuming salty water, gradually takes a toll, causing chronic irritation, infections, menstrual disorders and gastrointestinal diseases, said doctors and experts.

Prof Dr Ferdousi Begum Flora, gynaecologist and former president of the Obstetrical and Gynaecological Society of Bangladesh, said, “While there is no comprehensive scientific evidence, available literature shows prolonged exposure to saline water – through prolonged contact, drinking or soil – can aggravate common reproductive infections.”

She added that long-term exposure may increase hypertension risk, including during pregnancy, which can affect the next generation.

There is no central government study on how many women suffer these illnesses. But several scientific studies show clear patterns linking salinity to health complications along the coastal belt.

A 2024 study in the Journal of Migration and Health found reproductive and skin-related illnesses widespread among



women in Shyamnagar and Mongla.

According to the study, 64.8 percent of women in Mongla and 53.8 percent in Shyamnagar reported infections or inflammation in the vagina, uterus, fallopian tubes and ovaries. Many earn a living by wading waist-deep in saline water to collect shrimp fry.

Over a third of them struggled with menstrual hygiene, and 92 percent in Shyamnagar and nearly 70 percent in Mongla suffered severe skin problems.

An icddr,b analysis from 2012–2017 documented 12,867 pregnancies across hill and coastal regions.

It showed that women living within 20km of the coastline and as high as seven metres above sea level were 1.3 times more likely to miscarry than those in higher land.

MENSTRUATION AMID SALINITY

For coastal women and girls, menstruation becomes a monthly struggle shaped by poverty, saltwater and sanitation challenges.

With limited access to clean water or sanitary products, many rely on old cloth, washing it in saline ponds

Women collecting shrimp fry spend hours standing in saline water

Long exposure leads to UTIs, skin diseases and reproductive infections

Some women had their uterus removed after years of untreated illness

Studies show over half of coastal women suffer gynaecological problems

Girls wash menstrual cloths in salty ponds due to lack of safe water



and rivers before reuse.

“My period is irregular, and I have to keep it secret. We can’t afford napkins, so we wash the same cloth in salty water again and again,” said 14-year-old Shumi (name withheld) from Burigoalni.

In many families, school-going girls may get sanitary napkins, but adult women continue using cloth. Experts say this exposes them to infections and long-term complications.

Prof Sharmind Neelorme, an expert on climate change and gender justice, said limited access to fresh water forces women to drink less and compromises hygiene during menstruation, heightening risks.

She noted that reused cloth often becomes stiff and can cause wounds that lead to infections.

A medical officer in Shyamnagar Health Complex, seeking anonymity, said most female patients come with reproductive issues such as UTIs caused by poor menstrual hygiene and lack of care.

Shyamnagar Upazila Health and Family Planning Officer Dr Ziaur Rahman said there is no conclusive research directly linking uterine

diseases to salinity but confirmed frequent UTI cases among women working long hours in saline water.

A study in the Palgrave Handbook of Ecosystems and Wellbeing this year found 87.3 percent women in four Satkhira upazilas reported problems with menarche, while 68.3 percent suffered UTIs. It also found 41.67 percent experienced irregular menstrual cycles.

Amena Khatun, 27, from Khulna’s Koyra upazila, said some girls begin menstruating unusually early, while others bleed heavily or fall ill. “Some families marry off their daughters early thinking it will fix the problem,” she said, adding that many women also struggle to conceive.

“Apart from salt, the tube wells also contain arsenic and iron. If we had safe water, half our suffering would disappear.”

Poor sanitation, limited healthcare and delayed diagnosis deepen the crisis. Many women avoid treatment because of stigma, distance, cost or lack of awareness, often normalising

symptoms until they become severe.

Shampa Goswami, executive director of PRERONA, an NGO working on women’s health and rights, said many women – especially shrimp fry collectors – are remain unaware of the available government or NGO health services. “At the same time, the stigma keeps them silent.”

She noted that nearly 90 percent of women in Shyamnagar and Munshiganj unions do not know about VIA screening, a low-cost cervical cancer test.

“In our focus group discussions, many women reported early menopause, some as early as 35. Untreated uterine infections can progress to cancer,” she said.

Experts called for targeted interventions, including access to safe water, more health facilities in remote areas, awareness campaigns and alternative livelihoods for women in saline-prone regions.

“Investing in them is not only for their well-being but also for the next generation,” Prof Neelorme said.

(Our Satkhira and Khulna correspondents contributed to this story)



BNP opens doors to expelled leaders

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extortion (5 percent), party indiscipline (7 percent), campaigning for AL candidates (4 percent), internal clashes (4 percent), and violent incidents (3 percent).

Political analysts say bringing back controversial figures does not send a strong message to party supporters.

Senior BNP leaders, however, say the initiative is part of a broader effort to reorganise the party ahead of the polls and mobilise experienced activists familiar with their localities.

BNP Standing Committee member Khandaker Mosharraf Hossain told The Daily Star, “Those who worked effectively for the party during tough times are being reconsidered. Their return will help strengthen the grassroots before the polls.”

According to sources at the Nayapaltan office, several thousand BNP leaders have applied for reinstatement.

REINSTATEMENT

Over the past two years, the BNP expelled a large number of leaders for taking part in four city corporation and upazila parishad polls that the party had boycotted.

Of them, 164 have been reinstated so far, including 96 city-level leaders, 58 upazila-level leaders, nine municipality-level leaders, and one union parishad level leader, according to the documents.

Sylhet topped the list with 41 reinstated leaders, followed by Gazipur with 31, Rajshahi with 17, and Cumilla with seven.

Most were ward-level organisers or women councillor aspirants expelled in mid-2023 for defying party directives.

ABM Zillur Rahman, a BNP leader from Sylhet City Corporation’s ward-18, said he regretted joining the last city polls and was “grateful to the party leadership for bringing him back”. Another seven Sylhet leaders

expressed similar sentiments.

In Gazipur, several former councillors and metropolitan secretaries were welcomed back on November 17.

In Rajshahi, leaders such as Mirza Ripon and Shamsun Nahar also regained their posts.

Ripon, general secretary of ward-22 BNP in Rajshahi city, said he was pleased to return after more than two years. “I was expelled because of a mistake. Now the party has forgiven me.” Shamsun, senior joint secretary of Rajshahi metropolitan BNP, echoed the view.

The BNP also reinstated 58 leaders removed during the May-June 2024 upazila parishad polls, including 21 from Sylhet division, nine from Barishal, eight from Chattogram, seven from Rangpur, six each from Dhaka and Rajshahi, and one each from Khulna and Mymensingh.

DISCIPLINE VIOLATION

Documents show that 46 reinstated leaders had faced disciplinary or criminal allegations after the July uprising.

Of them, 37 percent were accused of land or pond grabbing, sand extraction, or extortion from markets; 19.6 percent of kidnapping; and 17 percent of violating other party disciplines.

Thirteen percent were linked to violent incidents, including attacks on journalists, women leaders, and factory officials.

For example, Nazmul Fakir, member secretary of a Jubo Dal union unit in Gazipur, who was expelled on September 11 for alleged factory extortion, was reinstated just 70 days later. “I was hurt because I sacrificed so much for the party. Now the party has understood and given my post back,” he said.

Two other leaders – Kausar Talukder of Munshiganj’s Kumarbhog union and Shamim

Mollah of Dighirpar – were reinstated 15 months after being expelled in August 2024 for illegal sand extraction and extorting money from the Mawa ghat.

Contacted, Munshiganj BNP Convener Mizanur Rahman Sinha said, “Nothing was decided among us regarding his reinstatement. The central leadership did whatever they thought was best for the party.”

Iqbal Hossain, general secretary of BNP’s Siddhirganj thana unit, who was removed in December 2024 for assaulting a bus driver and a journalist, was also reinstated. “I thank Tarique Rahman for it,” he said.

On May 22, 2024, eight leaders lost their posts for allegedly abducting and beating an army member in Barishal. All were reinstated six months later, on November 22.

Similarly, Abdul Halim Molla, member secretary of Gazipur Metropolitan Swechchhasebak Dal, expelled on July 6 this year for extortion, regained his post on October 29.

The BNP also reinstated 10 leaders who had campaigned for Awami League candidates in the last national polls.

Speaking to this newspaper, AI Masud Hasanuzzaman, former professor of government and politics at Jahangirnagar University, called the move “a contradictory step” that could “discourage discipline and send a wrong message to party leaders and activists”.

“If the party acting chairman [Tarique Rahman] were in the country, he might have reviewed these cases more closely,” he added.

Dhaka University teacher Mojibur Rahman said, “Perhaps BNP sees the expulsions of those who took part in local government polls as mistakes. But reinstating those accused of serious misconduct is alarming.”

and refined peace framework” to end the war in Ukraine and will discuss it next week, the Kremlin confirmed yesterday.

Russian President Vladimir Putin said on Thursday that outline draft peace proposals discussed by the United States and Ukraine in Geneva could become the basis of future agreements to end the conflict, but that if not Russia would fight on.

5yrs on, no building regulatory body yet

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The current government has now formed an interim committee, led by the housing and public works secretary, Rajuk chairman, PWD chief engineer and other development authorities, to begin the formal process of establishing the BBRA.

The urgency of a central authority heightened after a recent 5.7-magnitude earthquake killed at least 10 people in Dhaka, Narsingdi and Narayanganj, injured several hundred, and damaged around 300 buildings in Rajuk areas, exposing how vulnerable the country remains without coherent oversight.

Urban planner Mohammad Abu Sadeque, a member of the revised BNBC drafting team, said the code offers a “life-saving system” if implemented properly, with fire safety measures, earthquake resilience, and safeguards against the electrical faults that fuel most urban fires.

He noted that while Dhaka, Chattogram, and municipalities have development authorities, outside these areas, especially in upazilas and rural regions, there is no responsible authority.

Prof Mehedi Ahmed Ansary of Buet’s civil engineering department echoed these concerns, saying enforcement in major cities is limited and “almost non-existent” elsewhere.

“A dedicated authority is essential because the building code, despite being robust, is barely enforced,” he said.

Rajuk’s own estimates paint a stark picture: a 6.9-magnitude quake could collapse 865,000 buildings and kill 210,000 people in Dhaka, with Old Dhaka especially exposed due to its narrow lanes and century-old structures. In Chattogram, 70–75 percent of more than 380,000 buildings are at serious risk, Bangladesh Earthquake Society assessments show. A magnitude

7.5 quake could devastate major installations including the port and refineries.

Sylhet, sitting atop the active Dauki Fault, faces rising micro quakes, with over 70 percent of buildings lacking seismic design.

The housing and public works ministry has only recently begun drafting documents and gathering stakeholder opinions on forming the BBRA, officials said.

Adviser Adilur Rahman Khan and Secretary Md Nazrul Islam did not respond to repeated calls for comment.

Rajuk Chief Town Planner Md Ashrafur Islam said the interim committee is now overseeing preparatory work and expects the BBRA to be formed by December.

Sadeque, however, doubts the timeline, warning that the interim government’s term is ending and the next administration may not prioritise the issue.

Under BNBC 2020, in areas without development authorities or city corporations, the district PWD executive engineer is designated as the “building official”.

But in 2022, the previous government bypassed this provision and created DC-headed committees, raising questions about how officers with little technical background, and burdened with over a hundred committees, could lead building safety oversight.

“This approach has crippled building-code enforcement nationwide,” said Sadeque, who heads the Centre for Housing and Building Research.

He argued that the PWD executive engineer should convene the BBRA at district level, with upazila engineers as member secretaries, as they are better placed to monitor construction.

He suggested including engineers

mosques across the country after Juma prayers for Khaleda’s speedy recovery.

In a statement last night, Professor Yunus said that during this crucial phase of the nation’s democratic transition, Khaleda Zia remains a source of inspiration for many, and her good health is of great importance for the country.

He instructed the authorities concerned to remain fully prepared and maintain coordination to ensure uninterrupted support for her care.

Around 11:00pm, BNP leaders and activists gathered in front of the hospital to learn about her condition and waited for updates.

Khaleda’s sister Selina Islam, her nephew Saiful Islam, and other family members visited her around 7:00pm.

Senior BNP leaders, including Fakhrul, Abdul Moyeen Khan, Amir Khosru Mahmud Chowdhury, and several others, also visited the hospital last night.

from public health and disaster-management departments to strengthen enforcement.

Prof Munaz Ahmed Noor, another teacher of Buet’s civil engineering department, said the BNBC outlines a full safety process: architectural, structural, electrical, mechanical and fire-safety designs must be submitted to the authority before construction; agencies lacking expertise must hire third-party professionals; and construction must be monitored for compliance.

“None of these mandatory steps are followed in Bangladesh,” he said, adding that land-use policies are equally essential and the BBRA must be given real authority.

Adil Mohammed Khan, president of Bangladesh Institute of Planners, said the BBRA must be established without delay.

Earthquake preparedness, he noted, must be nationwide, soil-sensitive, and grounded in micro-zoning that determines where development can safely occur.

“Bangladesh needs a comprehensive physical plan. Earthquake risk, topography, and geological attributes must guide development. Otherwise even a moderate earthquake could cause severe damage,” he said.

Meanwhile, Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus on Thursday instructed authorities to explore creating a separate national body to approve all buildings and oversee construction works.

“The chief adviser directed the housing and public works ministry to examine whether a separate authority can be created for approving buildings across Bangladesh,” Press Secretary Shahiul Alam told reporters at the Foreign Service Academy.

Law Adviser Asif Nazrul went there as well.

The day Khaleda was admitted, Professor Dr FM Siddiqui, a member of the medical board, said several of her health complications had appeared simultaneously.

“She has a chest infection, which has affected both her heart and lungs at the same time, causing respiratory distress,” he said.

He said the BNP chief has long been suffering from heart conditions, including mitral stenosis, and has a permanent pacemaker and previous stenting.

Her family members, including Tarique Rahman and Zubaida Rahman, have been in close contact with the doctors.

Since returning from London on May 6 after receiving advanced medical care, Khaleda has been undergoing regular check-ups at Evercare Hospital.