

## A promising pledge, but execution is key

### Political backing of child rights manifesto raises hope

The endorsement of a child rights manifesto by a dozen political parties now preparing for the ultimate contest for popular mandate is a welcome development at a time when child-focused indicators reveal a worsening situation. We commend the leadership of these parties for backing the manifesto that contains 10 commitments, pledging to embed them in their policies and election agendas and acting on them if elected.

It was an encouraging moment to witness rival political forces—often accused of endless bickering over governance, heritage, and the nation's future direction—come together for a shared cause. This convergence of commitments to safeguard children's futures by the BNP, Jamaat e Islami, National Citizen Party, Jatiya Party, Amar Bangladesh Party, Bangladesher Samajtantrik Dal, Communist Party of Bangladesh, Ganob Forum, Ganosamhati Andolon, Gono Odhikar Parishad, Khelafat Majlis, and Nagorik Oikya rightly deserves appreciation. UNICEF's role in convening these parties is equally laudable.

We hope these parties genuinely recognise the gravity of the challenges children face in relation to nutrition and health, quality education and skills development, an enabling environment for creativity, protection from physical and mental abuse, violence and exploitation, the persistence of child labour, and the growing threats posed by climate change.

According to the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2025, conducted by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics and UNICEF, one in eight children under five is "wasted," a life-threatening form of malnutrition. The rate has risen to 12.9 percent in 2025 from 9.8 percent in 2019, while nearly 700,000 babies are born with low birth weight. Child labour has increased from 6.8 percent to 9.2 percent, and 3.4 million school-age children remain out of school. The survey also shows that nearly half of all girls marry before turning 18. In terms of climate and environmental risks, 20 million children are directly exposed to climate hazards, 87 percent of drinking water is contaminated with E. coli, and 15.8 percent contains unsafe levels of arsenic.

These alarming indicators underscore the urgent need to prioritise development and strengthen governance. The child-focused manifesto, formulated by children and young people themselves, calls for allocating five percent of GDP to education and primary healthcare—in line with global recommendations—compared with the current allocations of two percent for education and one percent for health. As the manifesto rightly notes, every dollar (or taka) spent on child protection yields a ninefold social and economic return. We, therefore, hope politicians across the aisle will support aligning national budgets with these priorities. Since the commitments have been described as "non-negotiable," we remind the signatories that any deviation from their pledged actions will not only erode the trust and respect of young people, but also inflict lasting harm on the nation's future.

## A warning for our health system

### Chronic diseases, high costs, antibiotic resistance threaten public health

The latest Health and Morbidity Status Survey 2025 gives a stark warning about the nation's health. According to the survey, hypertension now affects 78 out of every 1,000 people, making it the most prevalent disease in the country. Not far behind are peptic ulcers (64 per 1,000) and diabetes (43 per 1,000). These chronic conditions require consistent monitoring, reliable diagnostics, and long-term treatment. Their rising prevalence points to a population increasingly burdened by non-communicable diseases at a scale our current health system is not prepared to manage.

The survey covered 1.9 lakh people from 47,040 households between November and December last year, and found that one-third of respondents experienced some form of illness in the 90 days preceding the study. Another troubling finding is that 51.2 percent of respondents relied on self-treatment or local pharmacies, while around 20 percent sought private healthcare, and only 11 percent went to government facilities. Such high dependence on informal care reflects a severe lack of accessibility to public healthcare. It also fuels antimicrobial resistance (AMR) as antibiotics—often dispensed without proper diagnosis—are frequently misused. Experts warn that AMR is no longer a distant threat; it is a growing reality, making common infections harder and more expensive to treat.

Another finding deserving the government's attention is the higher illness rates among women, both young and elderly, compared to men. Moreover, the persistent burden of out-of-pocket expenditure on the population, which averaged Tk 2,487 in the three months preceding the survey, is another serious concern. Such high healthcare costs are crippling for low- and middle-income families. The alarming trends underscore the urgency of health sector reforms.

The Health Sector Reform Commission had already made crucial recommendations with urgency to address the challenges exposed by the survey. It is, however, concerning that out of its 33 key reform proposals, the government has halted implementations of 15 following the Cabinet Division review. Notably, the excluded recommendations include VAT and tax exemptions on essential antibiotics and medicines for cancer, diabetes, and hypertension, along with proposals for a permanent health commission and a separate public service commission for doctor recruitment. Pushing back these reforms at a time when our health sector is already facing major challenges such as inadequate funding, a shortage of health workers, unequal access to services, and weak governance is most unfortunate.

We urge the government not to downplay the issues plaguing our health sector and to urgently implement the reforms to make healthcare delivery pro-people.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

### Gas leak in Bhopal, India

On this day in 1984, a gas leak from a Union Carbide plant in Bhopal, India, resulted in 15,000 to 20,000 deaths and leaving some half million survivors with chronic ailments.

# EDITORIAL

## How NEIR exposes our lazy journalism



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It is disheartening to see that, as journalists, we are losing both our inquisitiveness and our capacity for critical thinking. Instead, our work is increasingly tilting towards relaying and amplifying pre-processed information—much like the growing fascination with processed foods. Laziness may be partly responsible for this habit. Cooking requires thought, preparation, and labour; processed food, by contrast, sits on shelves or in freezers waiting to be consumed with minimal effort. Lazy journalism is just as convenient: communication experts package information that advances their employers' political or commercial interests and deliver it to journalists—often to familiar faces—through digital communication or courtesy visits.

Professional training and ethics require journalists to examine such processed content critically, rigorously analyse it, ask pertinent questions, verify both current and historical facts, and then reprocess the information for publication or broadcast. In doing so, misinformation, untruths, and unsubstantiated claims should be filtered out, and necessary context added. Unfortunately, the current trend in the media industry appears to abandon these basic principles of a profession fundamentally rooted in public service.

The reporting on the government's new mandatory registration of mobile handsets and the protests by sellers illustrate our waning curiosity and failure to ask critical, public-interest questions.

Bangladesh's telecom regulator, BTRC, is set to launch the National Equipment Identity Register (NEIR) on December 16, under which every mobile phone must have its International Mobile Equipment



VISUAL: MONOROM POLOK

Identity (IMEI) registered. One would naturally ask why the authorities are making this registration mandatory 32 years after mobile phones first appeared in the country.

According to reports, BTRC Commissioner Mahmud Hossain told a Dhaka seminar that the registration drive is intended "to restore market discipline and enhance security." Citing a flood of cloned handsets, BTRC's director general, Brig Gen Md Aminul Hoque, claimed that around 50 lakh devices are active under only five valid IMEI numbers.

The idea of mandatory IMEI registration was originally floated during the previous autocratic regime of Sheikh Hasina in 2020. The justification was the same even then: curbing cloned, or fake devices, allegedly used in crimes. Authorities

also claimed that unscrupulous traders smuggle refurbished or low-quality phones, and even top-tier brands, by evading taxes. But facing some resistance, that initiative was then frozen.

It is evident that NEIR is being imposed on consumers for two reasons: (i) to mask the failures of agencies responsible for combating

Officials claim that NEIR is a global practice. A simple check of open-source information would show otherwise. In most of Europe, NEIR is not mandatory, just as SIM registration is not required. One can buy a phone at duty-free upon arrival at Heathrow or Vienna airport, and upon exiting immigration, can pick up a SIM with a data or voice package from any convenience store—no questions asked, no ID required. If the government insists on enforcing NEIR, existing mobile subscribers will again face identity verification, similar to when purchasing SIM cards.

We all know the government's poor record in safeguarding citizens' personal data. In 2015, BTRC compelled biometric SIM registration, claiming it would prevent SIM cloning and related crimes. Not only did the scheme fail, but it also exposed users' personal information through repeated data breaches. Misuse of subscriber data became so rampant that BTRC had to issue a directive to mobile operators to ensure data protection. Breaches were not limited to telecom operators; the NID database was also compromised.

It can also be argued that the NEIR is an expansion of the government's surveillance capabilities—a power that has long been a cause of concern for its abuse, violating fundamental privacy rights, particularly against dissenting voices. Investigations into abusive and criminal behaviours by members of security agencies during the previous regime have shown that surveilling mobile phones was a common practice to crack down on opposition activists.

Now, as the government attempts to impose yet another unnecessary scheme to conceal the incompetence of enforcement agencies—BTRC, police, customs—citizens are once again expected to bear the burden. Is this not déjà vu?

A final curiosity: why would a group of journalists, under the banner of the Telecom and Technology Reporters' Network Bangladesh (TRNB), organise a seminar on NEIR without questioning its risks or relevance? Why provide a platform for BTRC officials and industry representatives to promote NEIR rather than subject their claims to scrutiny?

## INTERNATIONAL DAY OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

## Bangladesh must enforce the disability rights



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The paradox of disability in Bangladesh is stark: we are a country that legislates compassion on paper but constructs hostility in concrete. Bangladesh's disabled population stands at over 36 lakh. They are, at least nominally, protected under the constitution, the Rights and Protection of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2013, and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which the country ratified in 2007. Yet, the lived reality for these citizens is one of structural abandonment. Accessibility is rare, dignity is conditional, and rights exist largely as bureaucratic artefacts. As we approach the International Day of Persons with Disabilities, we must confront an uncomfortable truth: the state has mastered the art of acknowledging disabled people while simultaneously excluding them.

The constitutional framework is unequivocal. Article 15(d) obliges the state to provide social protection; Article 19 ensures equality of opportunity; and Article 27 guarantees equality before the law. Parliament responded with the Rights and Protection of Persons with Disabilities Act, which, in theory, promises accessibility, education, and employment. However, the subsequent Rights and Protection of Persons with Disabilities Rules, 2015, exposed the system's fatal weaknesses—the very instrument meant to operationalise this act—by prioritising form over function, focusing on committee compositions

and certification timelines while remaining silent on technical accessibility standards. They prescribe 30-day windows for issuing certificates but fail to mandate ramp gradients, tactile paving specifications, or minimum door widths.

This regulatory hollowness is etched into Dhaka's urban landscape. The majority of public buildings, courts, and hospitals remain inaccessible. Sidewalks are not just difficult; they are death traps for wheelchair users and the visually impaired. Even modern triumphs like the Metro Rail become islands of exclusion when the footpaths leading to them are broken or blocked. These are not mere infrastructural oversights; they are daily violations of Section 34 of the act. Without mandatory technical standards tied to building approvals, "accessibility" remains a subjective favour rather than an enforceable right.

The administrative failure is equally stark. The national registry, resulting in the Suborno Nagorik Card (Golden Citizen Card), which is a unique identification card for persons with disabilities, has made millions visible on a ledger but invisible in life. An identification card should be a passport to services; in Bangladesh, it has become a paper talisman. Holders of the card still queue for inaccessible services and are turned away from recruitment drives. The card grants identity but not access. This stands in sharp contrast to functional systems abroad. India's Unique Disability

ID (UDID) pairs identification with municipal one-stop centres; Brazil's Beneficio de Prestação Contínua (Continuous Cash Benefit) under the Organic Law of Social Assistance (LOAS) ties identity to means-tested cash benefits; and the UK's Access to Work programme links registration directly to workplace adaptations. These countries succeed because they

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treat the ID card as a trigger for funded services, not merely a statistic.

The human cost of this failure is currently visible on Dhaka's streets. In recent weeks, educated, degree-holding disabled graduates have staged sit-ins and hunger strikes. These are citizens who did everything the state asked: they obtained education, registered for their cards, and applied for jobs. Their exclusion represents a tragic waste of human capital, potentially costing the national economy millions in lost GDP and productivity. Yet, they remain shut out because the quota systems and

"reservations" mentioned in the act lack enforcement mechanisms. There is no statutory compulsion for public institutions to fill reserved posts, and no financial penalty for those who ignore them. The committees tasked with oversight are housed within the very ministries they are supposed to monitor, lacking both independence and the teeth to impose sanctions.

To shift from symbolic inclusion to operational reality, the government must move beyond vague directives. Legislative reform is required to mandate detailed technical accessibility standards, linking building occupancy certificates strictly to compliance. The Suvarna Nagorik Card must be transformed into a service-linked instrument, where issuance automatically triggers eligibility for assistive devices, transport concessions, and social safety net payments. Furthermore, the fragmented bureaucracy needs to be replaced by ward-level one-stop centres that bundle certification and benefits, sparing families the indignity of navigating a hostile administration.

Most urgently, the state must establish an independent enforcement authority with the power to audit ministries and impose penalties for non-compliance with employment quotas. The graduates on Dhaka's streets are not pleading for charity; they are demanding what the constitution and the CRPD already promise—equal opportunity. The right to be counted cannot substitute for the right to participate. As the interim government champions a comprehensive agenda of state reform, it faces a fundamental test of its sincerity: whether it will build a fair system for all citizens. Until enforceable standards, independent oversight, and remedial powers are established, Bangladesh will remain what it has always been for 36 lakh of its people: a nation built without us.