The Daily Star
FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

We must protect our remittance heroes

Provide ethical recruitment standards, better skills

Today, we are observing International Migrants Day, recognising the enormous contribution of migrant workers in driving growth, enriching societies and shaping economies. For Bangladesh, this could not be truer: Bangladesh received a record remittance of $30.32 billion in the last fiscal year. Remittances form the bulk of our foreign exchange reserves, stabilise the balance of payments and sustain millions of households. Yet while we glorify the importance of remittances, we cannot ignore the reality that migrant workers are among the country's most vulnerable citizens, exposed to exploitation, unsafe migration pathways and continued neglect.

Many aspiring migrants have been at the mercy of recruitment syndicates, which are powerful networks involving middlemen, sub-agents and in some cases, licensed agencies. These syndicates charge exorbitant fees that are much higher than the government-set ceilings, which result in these workers becoming mired in huge debts. Once they reach the destination countries, many discover that they have been duped, receive wages lower than promised, face harsh working conditions, or the jobs they had been promised simply do not exist. This paper has reported many times on the high number of deaths of both male and female workers, along with cases of abuse by the employer, lack of access to medical care or places where they can seek help. Migrants are also lured by trafficking cartels to take hazardous journeys by sea, often to be tortured and held hostage by gangs forcing families of the victims to pay exorbitant sums for their release. Many end up dying at sea.

Most migrant workers are low-skilled or semi-skilled and so are restricted to low-paying jobs. Often, countries hosting the highest number of Bangladeshi workers are not always the top remittance sources. Higher remittances come from destinations where migrants are better skilled, even if the number of workers is smaller. Besides, an over-reliance on a few Gulf markets makes labour demand and remittance flows vulnerable to policy shifts, economic upheavals, or geopolitical tensions in these regions. Destination markets have to be diversified and include East Asia and Europe. This requires sustained investment in skills and language training and certification that will be recognised globally.

Government policies must focus on workers' welfare and improving their opportunities. The chief adviser has recently stated that the priority has to be on building a broker and fraudulence-free system. This means breaking the grip of broker syndicates and punishing illegal sub-agents. Human trafficking cases must be disposed of quickly and the perpetrators brought to justice. Skills development, moreover, must be ramped up by the government so that workers can earn more and are less at risk of abuse. Finally, those migrants who return home unemployed and with hardly any savings must be supported through employment schemes, access to credit and social protection. Our migrant workers have proven their value many times over, during economic crises, currency shortages and global uncertainty. It is time Bangladesh truly honoured its migrant workers and provided the support that they deserve.

End the brick kiln menace in the hills

Court orders must not be reduced to empty words

The continuing operation of illegal brick kilns in Bandarban, despite a clear High Court directive and repeated enforcement drives, is deeply concerning. According to a report in this daily, kiln furnaces flare back to life as soon as inspection teams leave. This reveals how deeply entrenched this menace has become, while also showing that sporadic crackdowns, however well intentioned, are failing to deter violators.

Brick kilns are entirely prohibited in the hill districts as per the HC directive, yet a total of 70 kilns reportedly operate in Bandarban. The Department of Environment and the district administration have conducted mobile court drives, imposing fines, filing cases, and demolishing several illegal kilns. However, due to manpower shortages and dependence on multiple agencies to organise drives, continuous monitoring has not been possible. Moreover, according to locals, new kilns are being constructed by cutting hills and burning forest wood as fuel. Such illegal practices are accelerating deforestation and ecological degradation in one of the country's most environmentally sensitive regions. Alarmingly, some kiln operators have even attempted to attack government inspection teams, openly challenging the authority of the state.

The suffering of the local communities is also immense. In Thanchi, for instance, an illegal kiln has been found operating close to schools, government offices, a Buddhist temple, and an indigenous village. Students have complained of smoke entering classrooms and dust disrupting lessons, while residents say daily life has become unbearable. That similar complaints raised a decade ago went unheeded speaks volumes about institutional neglect, particularly towards Indigenous and hill communities.

What is at stake here is more than environmental compliance. Hill cutting, forest destruction, and unregulated emissions threaten biodiversity, public health, and social harmony in the hill tracts. Allowing illegal kilns to operate with impunity sends a dangerous message that laws and court directives can be ignored with little consequence.

The government, therefore, must move beyond reactive drives and adopt a permanent, coordinated enforcement mechanism in Bandarban and other hill districts. Kilns that restart after closure must face immediate sealing, confiscation of equipment, and criminal prosecution of owners. Adequate manpower and logistical support for enforcement agencies are essential, as is accountability for local-level inaction. Environmentally sensitive regions like the hills must be strictly protected from such destructive industries at all costs. Finally, the government must accelerate the transition from traditional brick kilns to environmentally friendly construction alternatives. Otherwise, illegal brick kilns will continue to undermine the environment and public health.

Bangladesh's flag belongs on the world's shipping lanes

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

AHAMEDUL KARIM CHOWDHURY

Bangladesh is a maritime nation by location, heritage and workforce, yet its maritime policy remains anchored to a framework designed for another era. While nearly 90 percent of global trade moves by sea, Bangladesh continues to operate a closed ship registry that restricts foreign participation and limits the growth of national tonnage. In contrast, countries with fewer natural advantages—Panama, Liberia and the Marshall Islands—have turned their registries into global economic and strategic assets. Bangladesh's registry, by comparison, remains small and inward-looking, with only 95 vessels flying the national flag as of 2023. For a country with a 700-kilometre coastline, established marine academies and one of the world's largest ship-recycling industries, this marginal presence on global shipping lanes is not inevitable. It is the result of policy choices and a condition that can be changed.

At the heart of the matter lies a legal and structural constraint: under the Merchant Shipping Ordinance of 1983, only ships with majority-ownership held by Bangladeshi entities may register under the national flag. This rule, a vestige of protectionist thinking, has inadvertently weakened the very capacity it was meant to preserve. Local shipowners often bypass the Bangladeshi flag entirely, choosing instead to register in Panama, Malta, or the Cook Islands, where taxes are lower, documentation is minimal and global service networks operate round the clock. Foreign owners, who control the overwhelming majority of world tonnage, have no pathway to register in Bangladesh even if they wished to. As a result, our flag appears rarely on global shipping lanes, relegated to coastal vessels and a small group of domestic operators. The consequences are severe: lost revenue and visibility, diminished diplomatic influence at the International Maritime Organization, and perhaps most painfully, lost opportunities for Bangladeshi seafarers.

It is here that the crisis becomes personal. Bangladesh produces a large number of competent maritime cadets each year—young men and women who complete rigorous academic programmes and meet international standards. Yet many of them cannot obtain the mandatory sea time required to qualify as officers because the national fleet is too small to accommodate them. This mismatch between talent and opportunity causes thousands of cadets to remain unemployed or underemployed, even though global shipping periodically faces shortages of trained officers. Bangladesh has yet to solve this issue because it lacks the tonnage necessary to anchor a sustainable pipeline of maritime employment.

A path forward exists, and it is both practical and proven. Bangladesh can establish an international open ship registry under a public–private partnership model, allowing foreign-owned vessels to register under the Bangladeshi flag while maintaining strong regulatory oversight. Under such an arrangement, the state retains sovereignty, legal authority and control over standards, while a private partner—typically an experienced international registry operator—handles marketing, global customer service, digital certification and compliance support. This structure mirrors the Liberia registry, the Marshall Islands registry and the modern Panamanian model. It is efficient, profitable and globally accepted. Most importantly, it is fast. Rather than spending decades building overseas offices, technical capacity and marketing channels, Bangladesh could leapfrog directly into the global registry market by leveraging a partner with existing infrastructure.

But revenue, while important, is not the primary motivation for such reform. The strongest national interest lies elsewhere: expanding employment and training opportunities for Bangladeshi cadets and officers. When a country operates a substantial fleet under its own flag—whether domestically owned or foreign-owned, it gains leverage to require or incentivise shipowners to employ its citizens. India has understood this better than perhaps any other country in the region. In 2025, MSC, the world's largest container carrier, agreed to re-flag twelve vessels to the Indian registry following high-level discussions in New Delhi. This outcome did not occur by chance. India tightened cabotage rules, reformed its merchant shipping law, offered targeted incentives for Indian-flagged vessels and used its vast domestic cargo base to make Indian registration commercially attractive. The results were immediate: more ships under the flag and more jobs for Indian seafarers.

That initiative marked only the beginning. India has since announced an ambitious target to re-flag at least 300 foreign-owned ships by 2030. This drive is part of a broader strategic vision—to reduce the country's massive annual freight bill, enhance logistical resilience, strengthen its maritime industrial base and position itself as a global supplier of seafarers. Above all, it seeks to create employment for its maritime workforce. Re-flagging is viewed not as a narrow fiscal instrument, but as a national development strategy. Through tax incentives at Gujarat International Finance Tec (GIFT) City, simplified digital registration, broader ownership eligibility, bareboat charter registration and favourable cargo policies, India has made its flag commercially compelling. The lesson for Bangladesh is not about scale, but about intent: a nation that controls more tonnage creates more opportunities for its people.

For Bangladesh, a modern, well-regulated international ship registry would generate revenue, enhance global stature and expand maritime services, but its most meaningful contribution would be resolving the long-standing bottleneck in cadet training and officer progression. By embedding seafarer employment requirements into the registry framework—through mandatory cadet berths, officer development quotas, financial incentives or reduced fees for compliant vessels—Bangladesh can convert each newly registered ship into a training platform. Liberia, Cyprus and the Marshall Islands already employ such mechanisms, and they work.

Critics often argue that open registries primarily benefit foreign shipowners. They misunderstand the nature of the modern registry business. It is not about subsidising trade; it is about exporting a sovereign service—legal order, regulatory reliability and compliance infrastructure. Panama and Singapore have demonstrated how such models can strengthen national capacity rather than dilute it. The greater risk lies in inaction. Maintaining a closed, outdated system means forfeiting revenue, influence and human capital while neighbours move ahead. We cannot afford to remain a spectator.

To move forward, a political endorsement is essential. An international registry must be treated not as a bureaucratic extension but as a core pillar of the country's Blue Economy strategy. Legislative reform should allow dual registries: a closed national registry for domestic vessels and an open international registry for foreign-owned ships. A transparent and competitive tender should select an experienced global registry operator to manage day-to-day operations under state supervision. Compliance must be strict, with recognised classification societies authorised to inspect and certify vessels on Bangladesh's behalf. Digitalisation must be mandatory, ensuring fast, paperless and globally accessible services.

Bangladesh's maritime future does not depend on building more ships; it depends on building smarter policy. With a well-structured, PPP-run international ship registry, Bangladesh can honour its past while claiming its place in the future. The Bangladeshi flag can fly across the world—not as a flag of convenience, but as a flag of confidence, capability, and national aspiration.

The Bangladeshi flag appears rarely on global shipping lanes, relegated to coastal vessels and a small group of domestic operators. PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN

INTERNATIONAL MIGRANTS DAY

High labour migration cost burdens Bangladesh

Max Tuñón
is country director at International Labour Organization (ILO) Country Office for Bangladesh.
Lance Bonneau
is chief of mission at International Organization for Migration (IOM) in Bangladesh.

MAX TUÑÓN *and* LANCE BONNEAU

When Shafiqul boarded a plane to Saudi Arabia last year, he carried two things: a small bag of clothes and a debt his family had never imagined. To secure a modest construction job, he borrowed nearly $5,000—around Tk 5 lakh—demanded by brokers in his village.

His plan was simple: work hard, send money home, and repay the loan quickly. That did not happen. Earning $300–350 a month, close to the average wage for a low-skilled migrant worker, Shafiqul spent almost his entire first year abroad repaying debt. His migration journey did not move him forward; it barely brought him back to zero debt. His story is not an exception. It is all too common.

Labour migration remains one of Bangladesh's strongest engines of employment and growth. More than 1.3 crore Bangladeshi workers support economies across the Gulf, Southeast Asia, and beyond. In 2024, they sent home an estimated $26.9 billion, around six per cent of national GDP.

Yet this success masks a troubling reality. Bangladeshi workers pay some of the highest recruitment fees in the world. The Labour Force Survey 2024 shows that the average cost of migration exceeds $3,500 (Tk 462,000), which takes roughly ten months of work to recover.

Heavy debt forces workers to accept lower wages, unsafe conditions and excessive working hours, while limiting their ability to negotiate or complain. Families back home face financial strain, and many returnees without savings feel compelled to migrate again through riskier channels, being trapped in a cycle of debt-driven migration.

Excessive recruitment fees are not only exploitative for the workers, but they also affect Bangladesh's competitiveness in the labour markets it depends on. Bangladeshi migrants to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and Malaysia pay two to three times more than Indian or Nepali workers for the same jobs. This disparity is well known to employers and governments abroad and affects Bangladesh's reputation. Workers remain under pressure to earn quickly, contributing to disputes, frequent employer changes, overstays, and irregular work. These outcomes are not choices; they are consequences of debt.

Heavy debt forces workers to accept lower wages, unsafe conditions and excessive working hours, while limiting their ability to negotiate or complain. Families back home face financial strain, and many returnees without savings feel compelled to migrate again through riskier channels, being trapped in a cycle of debt-driven migration.

Global expectations are also shifting. As human rights and due diligence laws tighten in major markets, companies are increasingly accountable not just for working conditions, but for fair recruitment practices, pushing employers to source workers from countries with transparent, regulated recruitment systems.

High recruitment fees cannot be explained by demand alone. Many countries with large underemployed populations do not face costs at this scale. Fees rise when oversight is weak, unethical practices go unchecked, intermediaries operate without accountability, and enforcement fails across migration corridors.

The Labour Reform Commission has rightly prioritised recruitment fees. While steps such as digital verification and stronger welfare support are welcome, they must be matched with bolder action, including tighter regulation of recruiters, effective complaints mechanisms, and clear liability for excessive fees.

Overseas employment remains critical to easing Bangladesh's job crisis. Reducing recruitment fees must therefore become a national priority, alongside investing in workers' skills. Migration should not begin with debt and desperation. To protect workers' dignity and secure future labour market opportunities, Bangladesh must confront one of the greatest barriers to safe and sustainable migration: the cost of migration itself.

The Daily Star
Reg. No. DA 781

EDITOR & PUBLISHER: Mahfuz Anam
Printed by him on behalf of Mediaworld Ltd at Transcraft Ltd, 229, Tejgaon Industrial Area, editor@thedailystar.net

Registered & Head Offices: The Daily Star Centre
64-65 Kazi Nazrul Islam Avenue, Dhaka-1215
Phone: 09610222222

Newsroom: Fax- 58156306
reporting@thedailystar.net

Advertisement: 01711623910
advertisement@thedailystar.net
GPO Box: 3257

Subscription:
01711623906

thedailystar.net
bangla.thedailystar.net/