

## Is this a path to more invasive surveillance?

NEIR launch has raised safety and livelihood concerns

The launch of the National Equipment Identity Register (NEIR) has created more panic and confusion than the security the government promises it will deliver. The government has stated that the main objectives of making mobile handset registration mandatory are to prevent tax evasion, stop the entry of illegal and counterfeit mobile phones into the country, and support crime control. Experts, however, believe that, as seen in the past, the system creates greater scope for a government to expand surveillance of citizens since both SIM cards and handsets will be registered against individuals.

In 2016, the Awami League government made biometric registration, including fingerprints, mandatory for mobile SIM cards, citing crime prevention as a justification. But instead, fingerprints of citizens were misused to register SIM cards, leading to numerous incidents of mobile phone fraud and crime. After the NEIR system went live on January 1, 2026, many people received a rude shock when they discovered that 30 to 40 mobile phones had been registered in their name using their National Identity Card (NID). This exposes individuals to the risk of being implicated in criminal activity if phones have been registered under their NID without their knowledge. One can only imagine the legal complications and harassment such individuals may face to extricate themselves from this kind of situation.

The government's assurances, moreover, are not very convincing. According to officials from the telecom and IT ministry, this is a temporary technical glitch involving the inclusion of historical data of handsets linked to active SIMs or devices. The Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) and mobile operators are reportedly working together to resolve the problem. But given the country's poor track record in protecting private data and preventing major breaches, public concern is hardly misplaced.

Experts have pointed out that the NEIR should not have been launched without proper testing. The BTRC, moreover, has failed to clearly explain the nature of these glitches to the public, further fuelling anxiety. That mobile phone traders—whose livelihoods are at stake—resorted to protests that ended in vandalism at the BTRC headquarters reflects the government's lack of foresight and strategic planning before implementing such a drastic measure. The government has since announced that total duties on handsets will be reduced from 61.8 percent to 43.4 percent, but this has failed to satisfy traders.

So why was it so necessary to launch the NEIR at this moment? At a time when it was evident that the move, however well-intentioned, would adversely affect small traders, introducing a system that effectively renders their businesses illegal or uncertain overnight seems quite imprudent. From the consumer's perspective, many may no longer be able to afford to buy smartphones due to rising prices, while all mobile phone users will understandably worry whether the new system could become a gateway to more intrusive surveillance.

## A long-overdue urban roadmap

National Urban Development Policy-2025 should guide planned urbanisation

After more than two decades of delays, the approval of the National Urban Development Policy-2025 is a welcome step. As rapid urbanisation continues to reshape Bangladesh's economy and society, the absence of a comprehensive national framework has long hampered efforts to manage cities in a planned, equitable, and sustainable way. The policy's approval, therefore, offers hope for better-managed, more liveable cities in the years ahead.

Although only about 32 percent of our population lives in urban areas, they generate over 60 percent of the national output. However, this growth has largely been unplanned, placing severe pressure on housing, transport, water supply, waste management, and the environment. Congestion, pollution, loss of open spaces, and rising climate risks have been continuously eroding urban liveability. In this context, the policy's stated aim of building climate-resilient, inclusive, and liveable cities is appreciable.

The policy classifies cities into four categories—megacities (population of one crore and above), metropolitan cities (population of 5,00,000 to one crore), medium or district towns (50,000 to 5,00,000), and upazila or small towns (20,000 to 50,000). By classifying urban centres into these categories and assigning distinct economic functions to each of them, the policy recognises that balanced urban development requires differentiated strategies. Discouraging industrial establishments in megacities while encouraging investment elsewhere is particularly important for easing population pressure on Dhaka and reducing long-standing regional disparities. The emphasis on decentralisation is equally encouraging. Envisioning metropolitan cities as regional hubs, district towns as centres for agro-processing and trade, and small towns as service centres, which will provide administrative and professional services and facilitate the exchange of farm products, offers a more balanced model of growth. If implemented effectively, this could create jobs beyond major cities and slow the continuous migration that continues to overwhelm core urban areas.

However, as experts have noted, the policy is indicative rather than legally enforceable. Without supporting laws, regulations, and strong institutions, its impact will be limited. While forming a National Urban Development Council under the policy is a good idea, it must be empowered with real authority, resources, and coordination capacity.

We, therefore, urge the government to move swiftly from policy to practice. This means enacting enabling legislation, strengthening local governments, and integrating the policy into city plans, transport strategies, and climate actions. The policy provides a long-awaited roadmap. Whether it leads to more liveable and resilient cities will now depend on political will and effective implementation.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

### Trains collide in Pakistan

On this day in 1990, two trains collided in Sangi, Pakistan, killing between 200 and 300 people and injuring an estimated 700 others. This was the worst rail accident to date in Pakistan.

# Education reform: Too little, too late under the interim regime



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MANZOOR AHMED

The tenure of the interim government (IG) since August 2024 has not been particularly comforting for the country's education community. It is a sad irony that a student-led uprising sparked by discontent about discriminatory educational outcomes brought about a regime change, but led to no significant education reform initiative. At least 11 high-level reform commissions were established in the political, economic, and social spheres, but there was no commission on education.

As it turned out, the long-accumulated Augean stable of problems and grievances in education spilt onto the streets. Students, teachers and parents joined marches and hunger strikes, with numerous complaints and demands. We witnessed the unsightly spectacle of police using water cannons and batons to suppress protesting teachers and students. The government took various decisions on an ad hoc basis, in fire-fighting mode, under pressure, without due and adequate consideration of broader consequences and implications. Such steps were partial solutions or no solution at all, and would potentially create even more serious problems down the line.

Responding to pressure from the education community, the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education (MoPME) formed a "consultation committee" in November 2024 for recommendations on student learning, teachers' performance and inequality in education. The nine-member committee, with this writer as the convener, was given a three-month deadline. The committee, consulting major stakeholder groups and visiting schools in 11 districts, presented its report, which the chief adviser received in person on February 10, 2025.

The report consisted of over a hundred recommendations for actions in eight categories. Key points included shifting focus to mastery of foundational skills of reading with comprehension and basic arithmetic at the primary stage; adjusting pedagogy and student assessment to this focus; and each school and its teachers, led by the headteacher, ensuring that all children learn. Short, medium and long-term measures were

indicated to carry out the reforms. Specific proposals regarding teachers' and headteachers' incentives, status and career path were made to be implemented in phases, recognising that teachers are the pivot of change. Moving towards a decentralised and responsive governance of schools by piloting an upazila-based planning and management mechanism was suggested as a major strategy.



FILE VISUAL: SHAIKH SULTANA JAHAN BADHON

Disappointingly, the reform recommendations have not yet received a serious and systematic consideration by the government. In fact, there appears to be no mechanism for deliberating on and initiating a comprehensive reform effort. Some of the reforms proposed for primary education—teachers' and headteachers' status and career path, or decentralised upazila-level planning and management trial—require policy decisions by the government, not just by MoPME. Apparently, at the high political and administrative level, there has been no champion for the transformative change in primary education. MoPME leadership also did not or could not make a strong enough plea in favour of the reforms to persuade the cabinet of advisers, the highest decision-making body that could direct various agencies to take the necessary steps to implement the reforms.

Meanwhile, in October 2025, the Ministry of Education (MoE) appointed a consultative committee on secondary education. The ten-

member committee, again headed by this writer, was allowed a three-month timeframe. MoE also set up another interdisciplinary committee led by Dr Abed Chowdhury, a reputed gene scientist with a deep interest in education, to produce a "vision document" for qualitative change in education. These actions convey the intention of the MoE adviser to engage in a serious dialogue about education reform.

A legitimate question, however, is whether this is not too late and too little, as the tenure of the IG will end soon, and the committees' work cannot be considered a comprehensive education sector reform initiative. The response of the education authorities, as conveyed to the committees, is that while various exigencies have prevented a broader education reform

prevail in professional education.

Does the history of political leadership and decision-making in education over more than five decades of independent Bangladesh give us ground for optimism about the next government's stance on education? The political statements of the likely contenders for power are broad promises that do not specifically indicate what changes, if any, can be anticipated. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) in its 31-point outline of state reform, promises "need-based education at the lower and mid-levels and knowledge-based education at the tertiary level." However, what is meant here is not clear, because all stages of education should be both need-based and knowledge-based. BNP also pledges five percent of the GDP as government allocation for education. Jamaat-e-Islami, yet to publish its manifesto, speaks about a religion-based redesigning of education and six percent of the GDP for public education. However, neither can keep these allocation promises unless the GDP ratio of public revenue is at least doubled from the present level of under eight percent. More important is to figure out how the public resources can be better used by reprioritising objectives and strategies and ensuring much stronger accountability for results in the education sector. Change and reform in the complex and multifaceted education sector call for a holistic approach to defining problems and designing change without ignoring the distinctive features of the sub-sectors.

An early task of the post-election government may be to develop an education sector plan, taking from the work on the two stages of school education. Sub-sector analysis of general higher education, technical and professional higher education, mid-level vocational and technical education and training, madrasa education and lifelong learning will be essential parts of the total sector planning—bringing them within a common framework of inclusive, equitable and quality-driven human development.

The experience with the primary education reform recommendations and the ongoing work of the other committees suggests that deciding how the plan would be implemented is as important as identifying and planning the objectives, strategies, and targets. Firm political commitment to reform and high-level champions in political and administrative decision-making forums are necessary to ensure that reform steps are taken and results materialise.

# Will the next government deliver truth and healing for victims?

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As Bangladesh moves towards the much-awaited election in February, the central question confronting the country is no longer whether grave abuses occurred during Awami League's rule of 15 years, but whether the next government will address the needs of victims of those abuses or repeat the mistakes seen in other transitional societies, where political compromise and selective justice weakened accountability, leaving victims without meaningful redress.

The past year or so saw important conversations in this regard. Victim consultations in Dhaka, involving survivors of the last regime, were held across political party lines and in the presence of various stakeholders. These engagements sought to build consensus around the need for a truth, justice, and healing process grounded in lived experiences. Political parties were encouraged to reflect on victims' healing, justice, and accountability needs in their election manifestos,

recognising that transitional justice is not a peripheral concern but a core democratic obligation. Representatives from BNP, Jamaat-e-Islami, NCP, AB Party, and other parties also expressed willingness to incorporate these issues into their manifestos.

Building on these discussions, on December 12, the International Institute of Law and Development (IILD) and Bangladesh 2.0 Initiative organised a consultation with victims, their families, and relatives from the Rangpur division. It was structured around compassionate listening to understand the victims' diverse needs

healing.

Many victims also spoke of exhaustion. They described being asked repeatedly to recount their experiences in gatherings and programmes, which they found to be uncomfortable and re-traumatising. While recognising the importance of sharing their stories, they expressed frustrations that the government and wider society listen without caring, and document suffering without acting upon it. This feeling only adds to their overall sense of uncertainty.

What victims shared in Rangpur closely echoes narratives that

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and justice aspirations. The participants shared their experiences and insights regarding enforced disappearances, custodial torture, extrajudicial killings, false cases, medical neglect, economic dispossession, and long-term psychological trauma. Families spoke of the fear that displaced them from their homes, of loved ones killed in so-called crossfire, of permanent disability, and of a justice system that repeatedly failed to respond. This process of sharing can contribute not only to documenting truth but also to

have emerged from earlier victim-led consultations held elsewhere. Suffering is acknowledged rhetorically, yet accountability is consistently deferred in the name of stability, order, or political transition. These recurring testimonies, across regions and victim groups, underscore why a truth and healing commission is urgently needed, and why it must be designed with integrity and a decolonial framework. As victims have repeatedly made clear, healing cannot occur if they are asked to forgive while

perpetrators remain unidentified, unpunished, or shielded by political power. Reconciliation, however desirable as a national aspiration, cannot be forced upon victims without credible justice processes and enforceable accountability mechanisms. When reconciliation is prioritised over justice, it ceases to heal and entrenches silence.

The consequences of unhealed trauma since the birth of Bangladesh in 1971 are still being borne today. Political expediency and compromises made in the name of stability did not bring lasting unity. Instead, they embedded cycles of violence, politicised institutions, and normalised abuse by state actors.

With the next election approaching fast, the risk is that restorative transitional justice may once again be reduced to an unmet commitment. History is not only observing whether a new government takes office, but whether it chooses to break with the past. A credible Truth and Healing Commission—grounded in victim participation, linked to prosecutions where evidence exists, and accompanied by proper institutional reform and reparations—would signal a decisive departure from the "forget and forgive" approach.

The victims do not demand vengeance. They demand recognition, truth, accountability, and assurance for non-recurrence. If the next government fails to address those needs, it will only be repeating the cycle of injustice, perpetuating the suffering of those who have already endured so much.