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Intelligence agencies' reform is a must

They need protection from misuse and a clearly codified mandate

Given our past experiences, intelligence agencies, including the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI) and the National Security Intelligence (NSI), need urgent reform as recommended by the Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances, which demands the immediate attention of both the interim government and political actors vying for power in the forthcoming election. The assessment by the commission's chief, Justice Moyeenul Islam Chowdhury, requires urgent consideration.

For decades, successive governments—both elected and military-backed—have misused intelligence agencies to meddle in politics, directly and indirectly. This abuse reached unprecedented levels during the previous Sheikh Hasina regime. Intelligence agencies were allegedly tasked with fragmenting opposition parties, bribing compromised politicians to form splinter groups, controlling the media, and intimidating or eliminating prominent dissenting voices. Such practices have hollowed out democratic institutions and eroded public trust in the state.

It is therefore imperative that the mandates of these agencies be clearly codified to prevent their involvement in political affairs on behalf of any ruling party. Equally important is providing legal protection for intelligence bodies and officials who refuse to carry out unlawful orders, shielding them from retaliation or punitive measures for upholding the law.

The commission's recommendation against the routine engagement of armed forces in policing duties must also be heeded. The armed forces should be deployed only under extraordinary circumstances, such as when national security is genuinely at risk. The practice of seconding military personnel to civilian law enforcement bodies—most notably the Rapid Action Battalion (Rab)—has proven deeply problematic. The commission's finding that Rab accounts for 25 percent of enforced disappearances lends strong support to longstanding demands from both national and international human rights advocates for the force to be disbanded.

The commission has also rightly highlighted the widespread misuse of the Anti-Terrorism Act, 2009, recommending its fundamental overhaul or outright abolition. We commend its progressive approach to counterterrorism, including proposals for community-based preventive strategies, mandatory human rights training for law enforcement agencies, and the establishment of a victim-centred justice framework.

We share the commission chief's view that the country requires an intelligence apparatus, but one that operates within a robust legal and ethical framework. Comprehensive organisational reforms, coupled with strong legislative safeguards, are essential to ensure accountability. We also fully endorse the commission's call for enacting the Enforced Disappearance Prevention and Redress Ordinance, 2025, and for amending the National Human Rights Commission Ordinance, 2025, to prevent the recurrence of such grave abuses.

The interim government must seriously consider these recommendations in full and initiate the reform process without delay by introducing the necessary ordinances. At the same time, all political parties must unequivocally commit themselves to implementing these reforms. Without such collective resolve, the cycle of abuse will persist, undermining democracy, the rule of law, and fundamental human rights. We want highly efficient intelligence agencies guided and protected by law, and not one that can be politically misused by the ruling party of the day.

Cold wave demands urgent govt response

Lives and livelihoods at risk as fog and falling temperatures persist

We are deeply concerned by the persistent cold spell across the country, which has been taking a heavy toll, particularly on children, the elderly, and low-income communities. This year, La Niña has lowered temperatures and increased the frequency and intensity of cold waves in the country, making the winter harsher than usual. Experts warn of the possibility of severe cold waves later this month. With dense fog lingering since late December and temperatures plunging far below the seasonal norms, daily life has slowed dramatically in Dhaka and across northern districts. The situation is no longer a matter of discomfort; it has become a public health concern that demands urgent and coordinated action.

According to data from the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), at least 48 people have died from cold-related illnesses since November. Hospitals across the country are under growing strain as cold-related ailments surge, particularly among children and the elderly. Admissions for acute respiratory infections have risen sharply, with thousands seeking treatment daily, and children's hospitals reporting that up to 40 percent of outpatients are suffering from cold-induced conditions. Health officials warn that the number of patients may continue to rise, placing further pressure on already stretched public healthcare facilities.

Day labourers across the northern districts are facing acute hardship as dense fog and biting cold severely disrupt daily work opportunities. Many wait for hours at hiring spots without being employed, while others, such as rickshaw pullers, are earning only a fraction of their usual income as people stay indoors. With no savings to rely on, even a single day without work makes it difficult for these workers to meet basic needs, including food for their families.

The government cannot afford to treat this biting cold as a routine seasonal event and must take urgent measures to address both cold-related health risks and the loss of livelihoods. Emergency distribution of warm clothing and blankets should be intensified, particularly in cold-prone districts and urban slums. At the same time, the private sector should step forward to support the most vulnerable. Strong coordination between health authorities, local administrations, and community organisations is essential. Public hospitals must be adequately prepared to handle the surge in patients, while health authorities should run awareness campaigns. With timely planning and decisive action, much of the suffering of the people during this harsh winter can be mitigated.

Why we must better use our off-docks



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AHAMEDUL KARIM CHOWDHURY

Bangladesh's logistics system is under strain from pressures it was never designed to absorb. Chittagong Port, the country's principal maritime gateway, continues to grapple with chronic congestion as container volumes grow much faster than yard capacity and systemic efficiency improvements. The consequences are familiar but increasingly costly: vessel delays that disrupt supply chains, long dwell times that inflate logistics expenses, and hundreds of millions of dollars paid annually in demurrage and storage charges, much to foreign shipping lines. These inefficiencies ultimately undermine the competitiveness of Bangladesh's exporters, importers, manufacturers, and consumers alike, although the solution, to some extent, already exists. Bangladesh has a network of private inland container depots (ICDs), commonly known as off-docks, that remains chronically underused due to outdated policies and limited regulatory flexibility.

For decades, Bangladesh has operated with a structural imbalance in its cargo-handling architecture. While exporters have long relied on over twenty private ICDs for stuffing, handling, and clearance, import containers have largely been confined to the port yard under restrictive rules imposed by the National Board of Revenue (NBR). This asymmetry has forced the full burden of import congestion onto Chattogram port, limiting competition and suppressing system-wide efficiency. Meanwhile, off-docks—equipped with trained manpower, modern handling equipment, digital systems, and substantial unused yard space—have operated far below capacity. Globally, ports function as high-speed transit points rather than long-term storage yards. Bangladesh, unfortunately, has remained an exception.

In recent years, incremental reforms have begun to shift this paradigm. In 2025, the NBR approved 15 to 16 additional categories of imported goods for delivery through private ICDs, expanding eligibility to roughly 65 product categories. A directive was also issued requiring containers destined for ICDs to be transferred from the port on the same day of discharge, or by the following day if

immediate transfer is not possible. These steps were meant to speed up cargo flow and relieve pressure on congested port yards.

Still, congestion at Chattogram port remains acute. In calendar year 2025, the port handled a historic high of 3.41 million Twenty-foot Equivalent Units (TEUs), alongside 13.82 crore tonnes of cargo and 4,273 vessel calls—the highest in its nearly five decades of container operations. The port continues to handle around 92 percent of Bangladesh's total import-

exports, off-docks are still classified merely as service providers rather than as part of a formal logistics industry. This classification excludes them from industrial loans, tax incentives, and policy protections routinely extended to logistics operators in comparable economies. In contrast, major public logistics projects—such as Laldia Char Container Terminal or the Pangaon Inland Container Terminal—have benefited from generous fiscal support, including long-term tax exemptions and regulatory concessions. Private ICDs receive no such support, not even duty exemptions on essential equipment like reach-stackers, trailers, or container scanners. The result is an uneven playing field that discourages private investment and modernisation.

The scanner issue illustrates this policy misalignment clearly. While scanners at public ports and state-owned terminals are procured and operated by the government, private

became evident during the recent tariff controversy. After sharp increases in ICD handling charges prompted government intervention in 2024, a fresh dispute emerged in 2025, ultimately resolved through a temporary 20 percent tariff increase for six months following negotiations among exporters, ICD operators, and the Chittagong Port Authority. While the compromise averted operational disruption, it once again exposed the absence of a transparent, institutional mechanism for cost-based tariff determination.

This is where the idea of a national logistics commission deserves serious consideration. Such a commission could provide cross-ministerial coordination, harmonise tariff frameworks, align customs processes, and serve as a neutral referee among ports, off-docks, transport operators, and regulators. Bangladesh's logistics sector continues to suffer from fragmented decision-making that delays reform and inflates costs. Coherent oversight is long overdue.

The economic cost of inaction is substantial. Bangladesh loses hundreds of millions of dollars annually through avoidable demurrage, excess storage charges, and lost efficiency. If even half of all import containers were moved to off-docks within 24 hours of discharge, demurrage costs could fall by as much as 70 percent. Over time, the savings would strengthen foreign exchange reserves, lower the cost of doing business, improve export competitiveness, and stabilise consumer prices.

Recent reforms suggest growing recognition that outdated logistics practices are no longer sustainable. But partial measures will not be enough. Fully integrating off-docks into the national logistics architecture will require liberalising import access, ensuring scanner parity, recognising ICDs as an industry, establishing transparent tariff oversight, and adopting digitally enabled bonded-zone systems modelled on successful international examples. Off-docks, in turn, must commit to transparency, efficiency, and technological modernisation.

The recent tariff disputes, record-high container volumes, persistent congestion, and slow ICD expansion all point to the same conclusion: Bangladesh's logistics challenges are structural, not incidental. Continuing with outdated practices will only prolong inefficiencies and erode competitiveness. Embracing comprehensive reform offers a clear path forward. If Bangladesh is serious about sustaining its growth and competing in an increasingly demanding global market, the time to act is now.



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export cargo and nearly 98 percent of containerised trade. Despite these impressive throughput numbers, yard density frequently hovered between 83 and 88 percent, well above optimal safety and efficiency thresholds. Vessel berthing delays persisted, particularly for gearless vessels, underscoring that record volumes alone do not translate into smooth operations.

At the same time, the off-dock sector itself—limited to only about 21 ICDs over nearly four decades—now faces mounting pressure from rising export volumes and incremental import flows. While national trade volumes have surged, ICD capacity expansion has lagged far behind, reinforcing congestion rather than easing it.

Infrastructure constraints, however, tell only part of the story. A deeper issue lies in policy recognition and incentives. Despite handling roughly 93 percent of Bangladesh's containerised

ICDs must finance both procurement and operation on their own. This has produced a stalemate: off-docks hesitate to invest without guaranteed increases in import allocation, while authorities hesitate to allocate more imports without adequate scanning capacity. Countries such as Malaysia and Thailand resolved similar deadlocks through shared-scanner models or government-backed financing schemes. Bangladesh will need a comparable approach if it wants to expand ICD participation while maintaining regulatory compliance.

Tariff setting has become another persistent source of friction. Despite having very different cost structures, off-dock tariffs often mirror those of Chattogram port, even though the port deliberately maintains high storage charges to discourage long dwell times—an incentive ICDs do not share. The fragility of this arrangement

The interim's unfinished conservation business



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On June 7, 2008, Syeda Rizwana Hasan, then the director of the Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association (BELA), wrote a strong piece in *The Daily Star*. In that article, she highlighted the failure of the previous governments to formulate a village forest rule under the Bangladesh Forest Act, 1927. That rule, if formulated, was supposed to describe which piece of a reserved forest would be allocated to a village community as a "village forest," and how the community would enjoy forest products or pasture, and protect and improve the forest. The rule, however, was also not materialised in the next 16 years, at the end of which Syeda Rizwana Hasan became the environment advisor of Bangladesh following the July uprising. On January 28, 2025, she declared the interim government's plan to enact the village forest rule. One year on, it remains elusive. This shows that, in Bangladesh, despite having the authority, one may not succeed in doing what they advocated for a long time.

Nevertheless, the stories of success still exist. In November 2025, the interim updated the 31-year-old

forest policy as the *National Forest Policy, 2025*, which I support for three reasons. First, it extensively upholds inclusive and participatory management of forests and protected areas, appreciating Bangladesh's 30-year experience of community-based natural resource management, which involves forest-dependent local communities and Indigenous peoples. Second, by focusing on an expansion of coastal forests and marine protected areas (MPAs), the new forest policy expects to actively contribute to the blue economy. Third, the policy also expects to explore carbon trading to channel funds for ecosystem conservation and management. All these highlight that the new forest policy is very advanced.

December 2025 saw some important developments in enacting two forestry-related ordinances: the Forest and Tree Conservation Ordinance, 2025 and the Wildlife (Conservation and Security) Ordinance, 2025. If gazetted before February 12, 2026, these ordinances could become two environmental milestones for Bangladesh. The new wildlife ordinance is supposed to fill in certain gaps in the Wildlife

(Conservation and Security) Act, 2012, by including several new and updated provisions. I want to touch upon two issues based on the publicly available draft version of November 16, 2025.

First, the ordinance authorises the government to establish a Wildlife Trust Fund for wildlife conservation. The Ecologically Critical Area Management Rules, 2016, the Protected Area Management Rules, 2017, and the Bangladesh Biodiversity Act, 2017, all already have provisions to create separate conservation funds. Since none of these has been materialised, there was no reason to be optimistic about the new fund. Second, like the Wildlife Act of 2012, the new wildlife ordinance includes the provision of declaring MPAs. The Marine Fisheries Act, 2020, also has detailed provisions for the same. The tension between the Forest Department and the Department of Fisheries over declaring MPAs has been going on for a long time. The Swatch of No Ground (2014) and the St Martin's Island (2022) MPAs were declared under the Wildlife Act, whereas the Middle Ground and South Patches Marine Reserve (2000, now an MPA), the Nijhum Dwip (2019), and the Naf (2024) MPAs were declared under the Fisheries Ordinance/Act. The new wildlife ordinance doesn't indicate any resolution of the inter-ministerial conflicts over MPAs.

Despite these legal progresses, the Bangladesh government is still inadequate in conservation actions. The 20-year-long Bangladesh Wildlife Conservation Master Plan has remained on paper since 2015. The

same fate is looming for the National Conservation Strategy (2021-2036), which took Bangladesh an excruciating 40 years to prepare. There are many national species conservation and management plans, namely for the vulture (2016-2025), the gharial (2016-2025), the elephant (2018-2027), the tiger (2018-2027), the dolphin (2021-2030), and the sharks and rays (2023-2033). Indeed, some planned actions were implemented, and impacts have been seen. The Bengal tiger number, for example, increased from 106 (in 2015) to 125 (in 2024) due to several projects in the Sundarbans involving local people, researchers, and law enforcement agencies. A vulture rescue centre has been in operation in Singra National Park, Dinajpur, since 2016. In April 2025, the country's first gharial breeding centre was opened in Rajshahi. From sporadic media coverage, we also learn about some commendable conservation initiatives by national NGOs, local groups, and individuals. But, do we really have any idea where we stand in terms of implementing the long-term conservation plans, especially since some plans' timelines have already expired or will expire soon?

With the upcoming parliamentary election, I wonder how many of Bangladesh's political parties are talking about nature conservation in their manifestos. How many are going to put the unfinished conservation actions on their priority list? Will we vote for a rejuvenated Bangladesh with healthy, resilient ecosystems, or without?