

A tragic recurrence of fire safety lapses

Uttara fire another reminder that much remains to be done

The death of six people—including two minors and one two-year-old—in a fire at a residential building in Uttara is a painful reminder of our persistent negligence regarding fire safety. The incident occurred around 7:50 am on Friday, when the blaze broke out on the first floor of a seven-storey building at Sector II. Although two units of firefighters arrived promptly and brought the fire under control by 8:25 am, six precious lives were lost.

Firefighters found the rooftop door locked, which may have been a major factor in the deaths, as residents were reportedly trying to reach it to escape. According to our report, roof doors in most buildings in the area are routinely kept locked for "security" reasons, preventing their use during emergencies. The building in question did have fire extinguishers on each floor, but according to officials, none had been used. Officials believe the fire may have originated from an electrical short circuit, or a gas leak in the pipelines, or a kitchen. Only a thorough investigation will reveal the actual cause.

Over the years, we have seen countless fire incidents in which the causes often included electrical faults, unsafe gas lines, and poorly maintained kitchens. Yet the broader issue remains unchanged. Despite innumerable fire tragedies in high-rise buildings—including residential ones—few have even basic fire safety mechanisms such as smoke detectors, sprinklers, and functional fire extinguishers. Fire drills are practically nonexistent in most buildings. Proper investigations will determine whether the Uttara building violated building codes by lacking a proper fire safety mechanism, but Friday's tragedy, in which the victims reportedly died of asphyxiation rather than burns, must prompt strict enforcement of fire safety measures.

The Fire Prevention and Extinguishing Act, 2003 defines high rises as buildings with seven storeys or more and sets out several prerequisites for compliance with the Bangladesh National Building Code. But how many buildings are actually compliant? Every high-rise, for instance, must have a fire exit and control panels to detect the precise origin of a fire. Owners must ensure that basic firefighting equipment is installed in accessible locations. The fire service, together with building owners, should train a portion of residents in the use of firefighting equipment and conduct regular fire drills. All buildings are required to have fire alarms and sprinkler systems installed in all flats. Rooftop doors must also remain unlocked. Moreover, building owners and tenants should routinely check gas pipelines for leaks, as well as faulty wiring and overloaded multiplugs, which often lead to fires.

Most importantly, the authorities must carry out regular monitoring of buildings to ensure that fire safety measures are in place and equipment is properly maintained. If rules exist only on paper and are routinely flouted because of poor monitoring and weak enforcement, it will inevitably lead to more such tragedies.

Revive the Ishwardi Silk Seed Farm

Govt must solve funding and manpower crisis, restart production

It is shocking to learn of the fate of the state-owned Ishwardi Silk Seed Farm in Pabna. Established in 1962 on 107 bighas of land, the farm once played an important role in our silk industry. It produced silkworms, cocoons and yarn, created jobs, and supported rural livelihoods. Today, much of that legacy lies buried under weeds, dilapidated buildings and institutional apathy.

Reportedly, the farm's decline began in 2018 after staff salaries were stopped. What was once a fully functioning complex with rearing houses, laboratories, weaving sheds and ponds has remained largely abandoned since then. Activities have shrunk to a single room manned by just two officials, while one night security guard struggles to protect a vast, deteriorating property. Currently, the facility only plants mulberry trees to supply saplings to other silk farms across the country, with no production work taking place on the site. The infrastructure has crumbled, equipment has gone unused, and theft has occurred in the absence of proper monitoring. Around 50,000 mulberry trees have reportedly been lost due to neglect. Silkworm rearing has also remained suspended for seven years because of a lack of manpower and funding. This once-profitable facility has been left to incur losses simply because no timely intervention was made to stabilise operations and address governance failures.

The condition of this farm exposes how important state assets, including public-sector industrial and agro-based institutions, are often allowed to decay through prolonged neglect. Sericulture is a labour-intensive and environmentally friendly industry with the potential to generate rural employment, particularly for women, while also reducing dependence on imported yarn. Allowing such a facility to fall into ruin raises serious questions about the government's economic and development priorities.

We urge the government to urgently revive the farm for the greater benefit of the silk sector. It must address the funding and manpower shortages that were the key reasons behind the farm's decline. This will require a clear revival plan. The government should immediately allocate emergency maintenance funds, settle legitimate salary arrears, restore essential facilities, and deploy trained technical staff in the facility. Beyond this, it should reassess the business model of state-run silk farms by exploring public-private partnerships, decentralised management, and stronger accountability mechanisms to prevent a repeat of such wastage of public assets.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Sierra Leone's civil war ends



On this day in 2002, the civil war in Sierra Leone was officially declared over; more than 50,000 people are estimated to have died in the fighting and some 2,000,000 were displaced.

EDITORIAL

Time to open railway tracks to private freight operators



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

AHAMEDUL KARIM CHOWDHURY

Bangladesh's export economy now moves faster than its railways can carry it. Factories, ports and private logistics firms have modernised to meet global demand. However, rail freight remains stuck in a system designed for a smaller, slower economy. Container trains bound for Chattogram are delayed, cancelled or pushed aside for passenger services. Inland container depots (ICDs) clog up. Highways choke. Ports feel the strain.

In an earlier article, I argued that ICDs cannot become engines of export growth unless freight trains are reliable, predictable and commercially driven. That warning has only grown more urgent. Bangladesh Railway is expected to support a rapidly expanding export economy while operating under rules that prioritise passenger trains, tolerate chronic locomotive shortages and treat freight as expendable. A container train booked for tonight must not vanish because a passenger locomotive failed elsewhere or the train was politically prioritised. Yet, freight guarantees are impossible under the monopoly system, as Bangladesh Railway lacks dedicated locomotives for freight and prioritises passengers over cargo.

This is why the debate must move beyond procurement delays and management shortcomings to a deeper reform: opening Bangladesh's railway tracks to private freight train operators.

There is no compelling reason why Bangladeshi logistics firms, exporters or foreign investors should not be allowed to run their freight trains—using their own locomotives, wagons and crews—on tracks owned and maintained by Bangladesh Railway. This would operate under transparent, regulated access agreements. The railway would retain ownership of infrastructure, control safety and manage traffic. What it would give up is its monopoly over freight operations.

This may sound radical, but globally, it is routine. India opened container train operations to private companies nearly two decades ago. Today, multiple firms run their own trains on Indian Railways' tracks, paying access charges while investing billions in wagons, terminals and networks. Across Europe, public and private freight operators compete on national rail systems. In the United Kingdom, all freight trains are privately operated even though the tracks remain state-owned.

Russia and parts of China allow private ownership of locomotives and wagons on public corridors. Even Pakistan—once as closed as Bangladesh—now permits private freight trains in exchange for track access fees.

None of these countries privatised

their railways. They separated infrastructure from operations.

That distinction matters. Bangladesh does not need to sell its tracks or stations. It needs to use them more intelligently. Allowing third-party freight operators would transform Bangladesh Railway from a cash-strapped monopoly into a network manager earning revenue from every train that runs, regardless of ownership.

The economic logic is straightforward. Bangladesh Railway struggles to procure enough locomotives for both passenger and freight services. Purchases take years. Maintenance backlogs grow. Every new passenger train further erodes freight

revenue. For ICDs, the impact would be decisive. Whether Kamalapur,

that happens only when regulation is weak. In every successful system, the state sets the rules: track access charges, safety standards, scheduling priorities and dispute-resolution mechanisms.

Companies compete on speed, cost and service quality—not political influence. Bangladesh already regulates airlines, ports and telecommunications. Railways do not require immunity from modern governance.

There is also a persistent fear that Bangladesh Railway would lose revenue or control. The opposite is more likely.

Instead of relying on erratic freight volumes and subsidies, the railway would earn stable income from track access, signalling, yard use and workshop services. Each additional private train would generate revenue without requiring new locomotives or staff. These funds could be reinvested in tracks, signalling and bottleneck removal, thus improving the network for both passengers and freight.

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Private operators would have strong incentives to capture this traffic, invest in modern wagons and build integrated rail-based supply chains.

The transition must be carefully designed. The draft Bangladesh Railway Act, allowing private ownership of rolling stock and train operations, is a promising start. But it must be backed by clear rules on access, safety, liability and pricing. Safeguards against cartelisation are essential. Regulation must be strong enough to withstand pressure from all sides.

A sensible approach would be to begin with pilot corridors—especially the Dhaka-Chittagong route, which carries most container traffic. Selected private operators could run trains under strict safety and performance conditions, while Bangladesh Railway retains full control over dispatching and network management. Results would be quickly visible, as they have been elsewhere.

The real risk lies not in reform, but in inertia. As long as freight depends on spare locomotives left over from passenger services, Bangladesh will



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'Bangladesh does not need to sell its tracks or stations. It needs to use them more intelligently.'

capacity. When private operators bring their own engines, national capacity expands almost overnight—without a single taka of public investment in rolling stock, i.e., locomotives, carriages, wagons, etc.

Under this system, risk shifts from taxpayers to investors. Efficiency and innovation are rewarded. Reliability will improve even more dramatically. Private freight operators live and die by performance. A shipping line or garment exporter will not tolerate missed schedules. A private company that fails to deliver loses customers and revenue. A monopoly, particularly a government entity, does not face the same discipline.

That difference alone would turn rail freight from an unreliable afterthought into a professional logistics service.

Critics often warn that private trains would create chaos or profiteering.

Dhirasram, Ghorasal or future terminals, inland ports cannot function without dependable rail links. Exporters do not care who owns the locomotive. They care whether containers reach ports on time.

Under an open-access system, an ICD could contract directly with a private operator for daily—or multiple daily—block trains, backed by penalties for non-performance. Such commercial certainty is impossible under a monopoly.

There is also a broader national interest at stake. Bangladesh's highways are increasingly clogged with container trucks, fuel tankers, and bulk cargo. Every ton shifted to rail reduces congestion, accidents, fuel consumption, and emissions. Rail is inherently more efficient for long-distance freight, yet its share keeps shrinking because service is unreliable.

never have a dependable rail logistics network. Exporters will continue shifting to roads. ICDs will remain underused. Public rail investments will deliver diminishing returns.

Opening railway tracks to private freight operators is not an ideological debate. It is practical. Bangladesh's economy has outgrown a 19th-century model in which one state agency tries—and fails—to do everything. The modern world runs on networks, partnerships and regulated competition. If ICDs, ports and exporters are to thrive, they need a railway that delivers, not one that apologises.

Bangladesh has already transformed ports, power and telecommunications through public-private partnership. Rail freight should not be the last sector left behind.

Bangladesh's renewed democratic chance



S.Y. Quraishi is former Chief Election Commissioner of India and author of *Democracy's Heartland: Inside the Battle for Power in South Asia*.

S.Y. QURAISHI

The road to Bangladesh's next general election, due on February 12, could decide far more than who governs next. It could determine whether the country restores its democratic soul or slips further into polarisation.

When I began researching my new book, *Democracy's Heartland: Inside the Battle for Power in South Asia*, I thought I knew the Bangladesh story—partition, language struggle, liberation war, military rule, the long duel between Awami League and BNP. But what I discovered in the process was more hopeful: a people who, time and again, have reclaimed democracy from those who tried to close it off.

Bangladesh's democratic instinct runs deep. The 1952 language movement, when students gave their lives defending Bangla, turned a linguistic demand into a national awakening, so much so that the world now marks February 21 as the International Mother Language Day. The 1971 Liberation War, triggered by the denial of an electoral mandate, produced a constitution that spoke the language of secularism, social

justice, and people's sovereignty. For a moment, the world saw a poor, war-torn, Muslim-majority nation proving that democracy and faith could coexist.

The decades that followed were uneven—coups, military rule, and political revenge scarred the system. Yet each time it seemed sealed shut, people forced it open again: against Ershad in 1990, during the caretaker crisis of 2007-08, and most recently in 2024, when students and young job seekers poured into the streets demanding fairness and dignity.

From an election manager's perspective, Bangladesh has been both a warning and an inspiration. Few countries have experimented so boldly with electoral design. The caretaker government system, introduced in the 1990s, was an ingenious attempt to ensure credible polls when parties distrusted each other. It worked for a while. The 1991, 1996, and 2001 elections are still cited as the fairest in memory. But the very need for such a mechanism was also a warning that when politics becomes a zero-sum war, no legal framework can compensate for its founding promise of inclusion.

Bangladesh's economic story has been extraordinary. From famine to food security, from "basket case" to global garment hub, it is now the world's second largest garment exporter and a regional leader in female employment and social progress. But "development first, democracy later" is a risky bargain. Authoritarian efficiency works until

suddenly, it does not. Growth without accountability creates brittle success.

What makes Bangladesh remarkable is that the demand for change came from its youth. A generation raised in an era of growth and global connection is now insisting that prosperity without dignity is not enough. They are the true heirs of the language martyrs and freedom fighters; their protest is democratic renewal in action.

South Asia, as I argue in *Democracy's Heartland*, is not a democratic periphery; it is the democratic core of the world. Nearly 40 percent of all people living in democracies are South Asian, and Bangladesh lies at the heart of that story. From the ballots that delivered independence in 1970-71 to the ballots that must now restore trust in 2026, it has shown that democracy here is not imported. It is indigenous and hard-earned.

The path ahead will be difficult. The temptation to return to one-party dominance will persist; political vendettas may return. But Bangladesh has a rare advantage: it has overthrown authoritarian rulers before without descending into civil war. That memory can be its compass again.

If it can now combine economic dynamism with fair elections, stronger institutions, and an inclusive national identity, Bangladesh will not just repair its own democracy; it will also inspire a region struggling with democratic fatigue. For a country born of language, liberation, and people's power, there could be no better second act.

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