

## A recipe for more migration fraud?

Migrants need accountability from existing recruiting agencies, not more of them

Migrant workers remitted a record \$33 billion last year, a vital cushion for a nation navigating political turbulence. Yet the machinery that sends them abroad remains largely broken, with prohibitive costs and middlemen who treat human beings as commodities. Against this backdrop, the interim government's decision to approve 252 new overseas recruiting agencies is baffling. This expansion pushes the total number of licensed recruiters to 2,646—the highest in South Asia—dwarfing India's 1,988 and Pakistan's 2,537. Clearly, it flies in the face of economic logic and expert advice as, just months ago, a government-commissioned white paper explicitly recommended a "reasonable" reduction in agencies to curb endemic fraud. To our surprise, the expatriates' welfare and overseas employment ministry has done the opposite.

A senior secretary has reportedly argued that more agencies will break the stranglehold of powerful syndicates, and that even if each new firm sends just one worker, numbers will rise. This is based on a rosy assumption that more competition automatically leads to better behaviour. In reality, it merely fuels a race to the bottom: illicit costs permeate every layer of the labour market and ultimately trickle down to aspiring migrants, forcing them to pay a higher price than anyone else in the region.

The white paper's findings were quite damning. Over the past decade, it revealed, nearly one in five workers who paid advances failed to migrate at all, resulting in annual losses of roughly Tk 31,660 crore. That is why we stress that the system needs cleaning, not cluttering. The priority should be a rigorous audit to weed out unfit agencies, not the issuance of fresh licences that will stretch an already overstretched regulator to breaking point. The Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET) is drowning in complaints, with over 2,200 last year alone. Having to police more agencies would be almost impossible.

This decision comes as the global market for Bangladeshi labour is shrinking. Malaysia halted recruitment amid corruption allegations during the tenure of the Awami League government. The UAE has suspended visas, and traditional markets like Oman and Bahrain are largely closed. Even Saudi Arabia, the destination for 70 percent of migrants, is becoming less hospitable, with rising costs and fewer jobs. When legal routes narrow, the temptation for irregular migration grows. Already, Bangladeshi topped the list of irregular sea crossings to Europe last year.

The interim government has a mandate to dismantle prevailing syndicates, yet it appears to be replicating the mistakes of the past. Issuing licences is easy; ensuring that a village labourer is not bankrupted by a predatory broker is hard. The government seems to have chosen the easy part. But our migrant workers deserve better.

Going forward, we urge the authorities to enforce strict legal and ethical standards and negotiate bilateral agreements that eliminate middlemen altogether. Agencies with proven records of fraud must be stripped of their licences, and this clean-up must be paired with strengthening the BMET. Establishing a centralised, digital payment gateway for migration fees would also be a critical step in eliminating opaque cash transactions that fuel the syndicate system and drive up costs for the poorest workers.

## Regulate battery-run rickshaws

Safeguard the interests of both drivers and passengers

Rickshaws—both pedal-driven and battery powered—remain an indispensable part of Dhaka's urban mobility, especially for short trips. They provide livelihoods to hundreds of thousands and fill gaps left by inadequate public transport. A new study, however, shows that the largely unregulated nature of these rickshaws is creating serious problems for road safety, drivers' welfare, and the environment. According to the study, 97 percent of battery-powered rickshaws and nearly 86 percent of pedal rickshaws operate without registration, which is alarming.

The study shows that around 30 percent of passengers using battery-powered rickshaws have experienced accidents, compared to 18 percent for pedal rickshaws, with injuries being more severe in the former. Faster speeds, inexperienced drivers, and poorly built vehicles together make rickshaws risky on Dhaka's already crowded roads. The study has also found that battery-powered rickshaws are attracting younger and mostly new drivers, many of whom have no prior experience driving pedal rickshaws. While the battery-powered vehicles generate higher gross daily income, high rental fees and dependence on microfinance loans leave most drivers financially vulnerable. In fact, drivers who rent battery rickshaws often earn less than pedal rickshaw drivers, increasing the risk of debt and exploitation in this informal system.

However, from the passenger perspective, the appeal of battery-run rickshaws is understandable. Most trips in Dhaka are under two kilometres, and more than 80 percent of users prefer these rickshaws for their speed and lower cost. Although these vehicles are often blamed for traffic congestion, experts point out that congestion is mainly caused by poor traffic management, roadside encroachments, and a lack of proper investment, which have reduced average traffic speeds to near walking pace. Still, allowing millions of unregistered rickshaws to operate freely adds to the disorder on the roads and makes coordinated planning difficult. More importantly, convenience cannot come at the cost of safety and environmental health. Improper disposal and recycling of rickshaw batteries threaten soil, water, and even the food chain, a serious issue that demands attention.

The government must urgently act to regulate the battery-powered rickshaw sector. What is needed is a comprehensive framework that ensures mandatory registration, vehicle fitness standards, driver training, and strict enforcement of traffic and environmental rules. At the same time, regulation must be accompanied by broader employment strategies so that battery rickshaws are not treated as a default solution for unemployment. Rickshaws will continue to play a big role in Dhaka's transport ecosystem for the foreseeable future. Only through proper regulation can the interests of both drivers and the public be safeguarded.

# EDITORIAL

## What voters expect when parties speak of a 'New Bangladesh'



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As the 13th national election approaches, calls for building a "New Bangladesh" have once again taken centre stage in political campaigning. The phrase appears regularly in speeches and rallies, accompanied by promises of good governance, an end to corruption, the restoration of democratic norms, equal rights for citizens, etc. Such commitments, however, are familiar to voters. Similar assurances have featured in election after election over the decades, only to fade once power changed hands. This long history of unfulfilled commitments has left many voters deeply sceptical.

Against this backdrop, it is important to focus on some key issues that ordinary Bangladeshis really expect the winning party or coalition to address if the promise of a "New Bangladesh" is to move beyond slogans and take on real meaning.

One of the most pressing expectations is decisive action against *chandabazi*, or extortion, and bribery. These practices affect almost every sector of society and have become a daily burden for citizens. Businesses of all kinds, from street hawkers to factory owners, from transport operators to developers and landowners, and from schools to public service offices, suffer badly from this system and are desperate for relief. Street vendors, for instance, face constant harassment and are forced to pay police, corporation officials, and political musclemen simply to keep their spot and avoid eviction or seizure of their goods. Those who resist often face threats, false cases, or unlawful detention. The Bangladesh Hawkers Federation claims that vendors on Dhaka's footpaths are extorted for around Tk 3,000 crore annually, which amounts to more than Tk 8 crore every day.

In the transport sector, almost every commercial vehicle, including trucks, buses, and microbuses, is routinely forced to pay extortion money to local political cadres. Markets, transport stands, and launch terminals operate under a so-called "token" system, which in reality is nothing more than organised extortion controlled by powerful syndicates. A report by Transparency International Bangladesh, published on March 5, 2024, revealed that private buses and minibuses alone pay nearly Tk 1,059 crore every year in extortion money.

Moreover, there is hardly any public or private project that can move forward without paying bribes or extortion money. According to the committee that prepared the "White Paper on the State of Bangladesh Economy," during the 15 years of the Sheikh Hasina regime, of the Tk 7.20 lakh crore invested in development projects through the Annual Development Programme, an estimated Tk 1.61 lakh crore to Tk 2.80 lakh crore was lost to corruption, including political extortion, bribery, and inflated project costs. The report further estimates that between Tk

and 500,000 crore is lost annually to corruption.

Several recent incidents further

highlight the seriousness of the problem. In August 2025, two men were beaten to death in Sirajganj over alleged cattle theft. Hindu homes were vandalised in Rangpur in July 2025 following a Facebook post. In Lalmonirhat, a 70-year-old barber and his son were attacked in June 2025 following accusations of hurting religious sentiments. In Bhola, a man had his eyes gouged out by a mob in March 2025. In the same month, an Uber driver in Dhaka was beaten to death after being mistaken for a mugger.

Disturbing still is the rise of so-called "moral policing," with groups of men harassing young girls and women over their clothing, lifestyle choices, or behaviour. At the same time,

women who speak up for their rights increasingly face severe online and offline abuse. This includes character assassination, being labelled immoral or promiscuous, body shaming, and threats of violence against them and their families. Such attacks are often coordinated efforts to silence women and discourage their participation in public life. Police data show that 21,936 cases related to violence against women and children were filed in 2025.

Together, these developments show how mob violence and aggression, both online and offline, is eroding Bangladesh's social fabric, fuelled by rumours, unaddressed anger, and the rapid spread of misinformation through social media, while weak law enforcement has fostered a culture of impunity. This breakdown of the rule of law has also become a major obstacle to doing business in Bangladesh, disrupting supply chains, increasing operating costs, keeping prices high, fuelling inflation, and discouraging both local and foreign investment.



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

As insecurity and uncertainty grow, citizens and businesses alike are left to bear their cumulative costs.

Therefore, restoring the rule of law and dismantling the entrenched systems of bribery and extortion must be central to any claim to build a "New Bangladesh." Political parties must understand that without a credible commitment to curb mob violence, protect citizens from arbitrary intimidation, and enforce the law impartially, their slogans will remain hollow and public trust will continue to erode. The party or coalition that wins the upcoming election will be judged not by what it says about change, but by whether it finally demonstrates the political will to deliver it.

## ASHISH BARUA



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Bangladesh is once again featured prominently in the latest Climate Risk Index (CRI), a report widely cited by global media, policymakers, and international funders to assess countries' exposure to climate impacts. Over the years, Bangladesh's position in this index has shifted, improving in relation to other highly exposed countries. For many, this is read as a sign of progress: better preparedness, fewer deaths, stronger resilience.

But the more important question is not where Bangladesh ranks, but how that ranking is interpreted at a time when climate impacts are only deepening, not receding. The CRI, produced annually, measures climate-related losses based largely on extreme weather events, including fatalities and economic damage. By these indicators, Bangladesh has indeed made notable strides. Early warning systems, cyclone shelters, and disaster preparedness have significantly reduced mortality from sudden-onset events like cyclones and floods. This is a success story worth acknowledging. However, climate risk today is no longer defined only by sudden disasters. The CRI captures what can be

counted easily: deaths, damages, and disasters that occur within a defined timeframe. What it does not capture fully are the slow-onset, compounding, and deeply structural impacts that define climate vulnerability.

Salinity intrusion is rendering farmlands unproductive in coastal districts. River erosion is displacing thousands every year, often permanently. Heat stress is undermining labour productivity and public health. Climate-induced migration is reshaping cities and social systems. Cultural loss, psychosocial stress, and the erosion of livelihoods rarely appear in global indices, but they are very real for affected communities.

Global indices like the CRI are increasingly used as proxies for need, readiness, or resilience. Countries that show "improvement" may be perceived as less urgent priorities for climate finance, even as adaptive limits are being reached and loss and damage accelerate. In other words, progress in disaster response can paradoxically mask growing vulnerability.

The situation is critical because climate finance is becoming increasingly scarce. Adaptation

funding remains inadequate, and most available support is offered as loans rather than grants, worsening the debt burden on vulnerable nations. While the landmark Loss and Damage Fund has finally opened for applications, its current resources are a mere fraction of the actual global need and its implementation remains a subject of intense political debate.

In this context, global assessments influence how decisions are made. Policymakers and funders look for signals: Which countries are "most at risk"? Which has "capacity"? Which are seen as "success stories"?

Bangladesh risks falling into a dangerous grey zone: no longer framed as an emergency, but not yet supported for the long-term structural losses it is facing.

This is particularly concerning because many of the impacts Bangladesh faces today are not easily reversible through adaptation alone.

Global indices do not exist in a vacuum. They rely heavily on national data systems, reporting mechanisms, and official statistics. What countries track, report, and prioritise inevitably shapes what becomes visible internationally.

In Bangladesh, while disaster losses are relatively well documented, slow-onset impacts, non-economic losses, and displacement-related costs remain undercounted. Informal economies, unpaid care work, and cultural losses rarely appear in national accounts—let alone global indices. This creates a feedback loop: what is not counted is not prioritised; what is not prioritised is not funded. As a result, global

assessments may reflect not only climate realities, but also institutional blind spots.

If indices like the CRI continue to dominate narratives of vulnerability without adequately capturing loss and damage, there is a real risk that funding gaps will widen precisely when needs are intensifying. Bangladesh may appear more "resilient" on paper, while communities face irreversible losses on the ground.

This is not an argument against the CRI. It is an argument for using it more carefully and complementing it with deeper, context-sensitive analysis. The Government of Bangladesh can play a critical role through strengthening national systems to track slow-onset loss, displacement, and non-economic impacts; integrating these into climate reporting; and ensuring that international narratives reflect lived realities. Civil society organisations, researchers, and local institutions are equally vital. They document what statistics overlook, amplify community voices, and challenge simplified narratives of success or failure.

At a global level, funders and policymakers must resist the temptation to treat rankings as shortcuts. Climate vulnerability is not a league table. It is dynamic, uneven, and deeply human. Bangladesh's shifting position in global indices should prompt deeper questions, not complacency. The real measure of progress will not be where the country ranks, but whether climate-vulnerable communities receive the support, justice, and resources they need as climate impacts continue to unfold.