

Why have we failed to end migrant workers' abuse?

A sinister nexus has been allowed to thrive

A recent Bloomberg investigation confirms what reports in *The Daily Star* and other media have been trying to establish: that a deliberately engineered system exists through which Bangladesh's migrant workers are recruited, resulting in horrendous exploitations. It is a business model in which workers are charged up to \$6,600 for jobs that are often nonexistent, benefitting everyone in the nexus, including recruiters, political elites, and those working the digital system. Only the worker gets the raw end of the deal, left with huge debts to pay, losing dignity, and in some cases, life itself.

The shocking case of Shofiqul Islam, a Bangladeshi migrant worker who borrowed \$4,400 to get a construction job in Malaysia, only to end up dead in a derelict building outside Kuala Lumpur, is a stark example of the tragic consequences of this nefarious system. Shofiqul, like hundreds of others, reached Malaysia but found that there was no job. His employer disappeared, and he was left stranded in a building.

Over the past decade, more than 800,000 Bangladeshis went to Malaysia, and many of them have fallen into crippling debt, paying for recruitment fees that are far higher than those charged to workers from other countries. Many become victim to debt bondage, forced labour, and human trafficking. Shockingly, all this is happening under the noses of the Malaysian authorities, who seldom do anything meaningful to stop these abuses.

The recruitment process, moreover, is tightly controlled. With a small number of agencies involved, it is facilitated by the introduction of a digitised system under Bestinet, which has actually centralised the corruption. The Bloomberg investigation has identified a Bangladeshi living in Malaysia as allegedly a major player in this system and the founder of Bestinet, who has apparently used political connections in both countries to perpetuate this exploitation.

Even though these abuses were well known and internal discussions about reform had taken place, contracts were extended during the AL regime. Strangely, despite the gravity of Bloomberg's findings, the governments of both countries did not respond to its queries. Even the current government's inaction in ending this exploitation is disturbing. This raises the question: are the remittances that migrant workers send home more important than their rights and their lives? Why have these sinister networks not been dismantled despite all the evidence at hand? In fact, even during the interim government's tenure, official visits of high officials on both sides and promises of solutions have not yielded any change.

There is no denying that workers need to be able to find jobs abroad and that our economy is highly dependent on the remittances they send home. But the state must put an end to this blatant exploitation by breaking the syndicates, enforcing ceilings on fees, and bringing politically connected actors and criminal brokers to book. For the next elected government, these are priority tasks—ensuring that migrant workers pay affordable recruitment fees through legitimate systems, guaranteeing their dignity and safety.

Alarming decline in fish stocks in the Bay

Authorities must take steps to reverse the situation

It is alarming to see the persistent decline in fish stocks in the Bay of Bengal, as well as its effects on the lives of coastal fishing communities. According to an analysis citing the findings of a comprehensive fisheries survey published recently, the stock of small pelagic species—the mainstay of coastal fisheries—has fallen by 78.6 percent in just seven years, from 158,100 tonnes in 2018 to 33,811 tonnes in 2025. The rate at which this is happening is astonishing. Clearly, the crisis goes beyond any temporary or cyclical downturn, with experts pointing to a multidimensional failure rooted in years of overfishing, climate change, pollution, and weak marine governance that has allowed depletion to proceed largely unchecked.

A fall of this magnitude will have serious implications for Bangladesh's food security. Presently, the Bay of Bengal accounts for about 12-15 percent of the country's total fish production, according to a Department of Fisheries report dated June 26, 2025. Fish provide nearly 60 percent of national animal protein intake, while also playing a significant role in blue economy exports. Therefore, if the current trend holds, it is not just the fishing communities that will suffer; the consumers, exporters, and the broader economy will also be affected. While talking to this daily, members of fishing communities spoke of facing debt burdens as catches become unreliable, even during peak seasons, and operating costs rise. Higher market prices do help offset losses to some extent, but not enough to make up for the depleting source of revenue.

The question is, what's causing the crisis? Experts say that no single factor is to blame. Excessive fishing over years has been a major factor, of course, but other reasons including climate change, warming temperature, and the decline in oxygen levels in coastal waters have also disrupted the marine ecosystem in ways that are favouring opportunistic species such as jellyfish, which prey on fish eggs and fry. The decline of natural predators like sea turtles has also upset the predator-prey balance that once kept jellyfish in check. Another factor causing the decline in commercially valuable fish is continued pollution of water.

Considering the gravity and complex nature of this problem, it is vital that the authorities adopt a comprehensive response. They must ensure stricter regulation of fishing activities, protection of critical breeding habitats, and serious action to curb water pollution. Investment in scientific monitoring and enforcement mechanisms is also essential. Equally important is providing support to fishing communities so that any fish conservation effort does not come at the cost of their survival.

EDITORIAL

Chattogram port needs a coherent land-use strategy



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For more than three decades, one critical weakness has quietly shaped the development of Chattogram Port Authority (CPA): the absence of a comprehensive and transparent land use plan. This is not a minor administrative lapse. It is a strategic failure that has persisted across governments and reform agendas, and it now threatens Bangladesh's ambition to develop Chattogram as a competitive regional port.

As the Bay Terminal project moves forward and international operators prepare to play a greater role in Bangladesh's port sector, the consequences of this long-standing omission are becoming increasingly evident. Decisions involving some of the country's most valuable land assets are being taken without a publicly articulated framework explaining how port land is prioritised, what uses are preferred, or how present choices serve long-term national interests. In a modern port system, land use determines capacity, efficiency, and future growth.

During the 1990s, as containerisation in global trade expanded, and throughout the 2000s, as shipping and logistics became increasingly integrated and time-sensitive, Bangladesh failed to establish a guiding spatial vision for its principal port. Prime waterfront parcels—scarce and irreplaceable assets—were leased for long periods without competitive tendering or strategic reassessment. Facilities that could have evolved into customs-bonded logistics zones or export supporting clusters instead became general purpose rental spaces, renewed routinely and rarely reviewed against changing trade patterns.

These decisions shape the choices facing the CPA today. The ongoing discussion surrounding the Laldia area illustrates this challenge. Laldia is a vacant waterfront site that the CPA has considered for a greenfield concession involving a global operator. Engaging reputable international firms is not, in itself, problematic. Bangladesh needs foreign expertise and capital to expand port capacity and modernise operations.

The concern lies elsewhere: there is no publicly available land-use framework explaining why this specific parcel is being considered, how it fits into a wider spatial plan, or what alternative uses were evaluated. Without such clarity, debate becomes project-specific rather than strategic, and institutional credibility suffers. This is not how major ports communicate decisions involving nationally strategic assets.

Past land allocations highlight

the cost of operating without a plan. Some non-waterfront areas—such as the old X and Y shed zones—were at least partially aligned with off-dock or support functions. At the same time, prime waterfront locations with direct channel access were also used for similar purposes. What planning logic differentiated between these parcels? Why were waterfront and non-waterfront lands treated as interchangeable?

In any world-class port, proximity to the water defines land value and purpose. Using waterfront land for

finally allocated through a structured, competitive tender. The facility is now operational, supporting lighterage activities and generating revenue. This example demonstrates that reform is not theoretical. Where clarity and competition replace informality, the port benefits, and public interests are served.

However, isolated successes cannot compensate for the broader absence of a coherent land-use strategy. Without a masterplan, the CPA faces three serious risks.

First, strategic waterfront assets are being fragmented and gradually lost to suboptimal uses. Once committed under long-term leases, these parcels are extremely difficult to recover without costly disputes and compensation. Bangladesh risks trading the "front porch" of its economy for short-term convenience.

Second, the lack of planning weakens Bangladesh's position with foreign investors. Global terminal operators

a framework, even well-intentioned collaborations may fall short of their potential.

What is needed now is a structured, forward-looking approach to port land management. The CPA should develop a professional, publicly accessible land-use masterplan that identifies all port land, classifies it by strategic function, and outlines intended uses over the coming decades. This process should involve consultation with port users, shipping lines, logistics providers, customs authorities, and exporters to ensure that the plan reflects operational realities as well as policy goals.

In parallel, existing land leases, particularly long-standing ones, should be reviewed to establish a transparent pathway toward competitive, value-based allocation as contracts expire. Waterfront land must be reserved for activities that genuinely require maritime access, while non-waterfront areas can be better utilised for logistics,



FILE PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN

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activities that could be located several kilometres inland is not merely inefficient; it permanently erodes strategic potential. Once such land is misallocated, reclaiming it becomes legally, politically, and financially difficult.

Globally, major port authorities—from Singapore to Rotterdam—anchor land decisions in long-term masterplans, updated regularly to reflect changing economic realities. By contrast, Bangladesh has largely operated on a piecemeal basis, an approach ill-suited to a country aspiring to middle-income status and deeper integration into global supply chains.

To be fair, the CPA has shown that when transparent processes are followed, outcomes improve dramatically. The Sadarghat Lighterage Jetty is a case in point. After lying unused for years, it was

make long-term commitments based on clarity, expansion potential, and regulatory predictability. When these elements are unclear, investors price in institutional risk, and the country risks receiving weaker proposals than its assets deserve.

Third, unplanned land use undermines the competitiveness of the entire port ecosystem. Without designated logistics zones, customs-controlled areas, and value-added clusters, Chattogram cannot match the efficiency of regional competitors such as Colombo or Chennai, let alone emerging hubs in Southeast Asia.

This is not an argument against foreign participation. On the contrary, international operators are essential to Bangladesh's maritime development. But foreign partnerships must operate within a clear planning framework that prioritises long-term value over short-term expediency. Without such

warehousing, and export support.

The Bay Terminal project offers Bangladesh a major opportunity to strengthen its position in regional supply chains. But new terminal capacity alone will not deliver the intended benefits if surrounding land use remains unplanned. A modern terminal cannot compensate for an under-structured hinterland.

Bangladesh's port sector now operates in a far more competitive environment than it did three decades ago. Expectations of transparency are higher, competition is more intense, and strategic missteps carry greater cost. This makes disciplined land-use planning essential. Before further long-term land concessions are finalised, a clear and credible land-use framework must be put in place. This will shape Chattogram Port's role in Bangladesh's development for decades to come.

Fair pay cannot be left to corporate 'goodwill'



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In the air-conditioned classrooms of our universities, we are fed an expensive lie. Many of us spend four years burying our noses in books on marketing theories from the West and human resources philosophies from global conglomerates, which teach us one fundamental truth: human resources are the most valuable asset of an enterprise.

It sounds beautiful. It sounds logical. But when a fresh graduate steps into the corporate reality of Dhaka's offices, that theory doesn't just dissolve; it is ripped apart. The reality we have cultivated in Bangladesh is not just inefficient; it is despicable. We have allowed a culture to fester where employees are not treated as assets, but as liabilities to be tolerated. The corporate elites have weaponised the one thing we have in abundance: our youth. Because of the surplus of graduates, companies know they have the upper hand. They know that for every person asking for a dignified wage, there are 50 others

desperate enough to accept half that. This reserve of the unemployed allows corporations to abuse talent with pay structures that are insulting and treatment that is dehumanising.

The tragedy is that these organisations are shooting themselves in the foot. You cannot bully an employee into productivity. When a person feels unwanted and realises that they are viewed as a burden rather than an asset, their motivation collapses.

We are currently sitting on a goldmine of bright young minds capable of transforming industries. But they are instead suffering, unable to perform adequately because their employers are too stingy to honour their loyalty.

But the true cost of Bangladesh's corporate culture isn't reflected on companies' balance sheets. It is evident in the living rooms of our homes.

Consider the "officer." In our society, this title carries weight—they must look the part, wear the suit, maintain the facade, and keep up an "officer-level"

lifestyle. But with payment structures that haven't kept pace with inflation, many of these professionals are living a lie. They have no savings and are drowning in unpayable liabilities. Most of these high-up professionals are one medical emergency away from ruin.

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The offspring of these underpaid executives are passive victims of corporate greed. They grow up deprived of opportunities and witnessing profound injustice. They see their parents follow the rules, work hard, and still get crushed by

the system. This implants a trauma in them that is hard to undo, and teaches them that the "straight path" leads to misery.

We are inadvertently pushing our youth towards an unsocial—or rather, anti-social—lifestyle. When the system fails to provide dignity, the path of crime and corruption becomes an attractive alternative.

This must be fixed now. We cannot rely on the "goodwill" of capitalists to solve a problem they profit from. Fair pay cannot be left to the "goodwill" of corporations; it must be a non-negotiable legal mandate. We must establish a mandatory salary floor for professionals, scaled to the size and resources of the employer. This shouldn't be a polite suggestion, but rather a law of the land. Any company that chooses to exploit talent by ignoring these minimums must face swift and severe disciplinary action.

The Ministry of Labour and Employment can no longer remain a passive observer. It needs to launch genuine research and investigations to see if this crisis is accidental or if it is deliberated by powerful lobbies for unethical gain.

We need a higher level of inclusion and transparency. We need to stop pretending that this is just "how the market works." It is time to admit that our culture of employee marginalisation is not just bad business—it is a social crime.