

The Daily Star

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## Crisis at Chattogram port must end

Let the elected government decide on new deal

We cannot emphasise enough the punitive impact of the stalemate at Chattogram port, with protesting employees announcing an indefinite resumption of their strike from Sunday after a two-day break. The strike, which began on February 3, was triggered by the interim government's decision to hand over the port's management to DP World, paralysing export and import activities. Losses to traders are expected to run into millions.

The RMG sector being the most vulnerable, businesspeople are justifiably worried. Bangladesh competes with Vietnam and India in this sector and without a functional port, we lose our competitive edge. Besides, continued stalemate will also lead to higher consumer prices due to import bottlenecks. As things stand, the lack of transparency surrounding the deal with DP World, a hardline stance towards workers, and delayed negotiations have brought operations at one of the country's most vital economic hubs to a complete halt.

During the first 28 hours of the strike, cargo delivery from yards, vessel movement to and from the port, and loading and unloading at the jetties remained suspended. Workers had earlier postponed their strike after assurances from the shipping adviser that their demands would be addressed. Later, instead of easing tensions through dialogue, the government moved to clamp down on employees, seeking travel bans and asset probes against protest leaders. This only worsened the situation, leading to the declaration of an indefinite strike at the time of writing this column.

Leasing a terminal is standard global practice and does not amount to selling the country. However, a deal of this magnitude must be transparent and concluded after consulting stakeholders. That this apparently did not occur has led to a predictable crisis. The Supreme Court has observed that the government cannot proceed with signing the contract until an appeal against the High Court verdict is filed. A coordinator representing the striking employees has also alleged that senior government officials "forcefully" obtained signatures from port officials who are members of the contract negotiation committee.

The shipping adviser has assured that no jobs will be lost and that recruitment will be done locally, with no foreign workers brought in. This only strengthens the case for making the contract public to allay workers' fears. The adviser has also stated that, contrary to prevailing perceptions, the deal was not rushed and was based on a project dating back to 2022. Negotiations, he said, had been ongoing for the past three months and were interrupted midway due to a High Court case. A Supreme Court hearing on the deal is scheduled for February 9.

With the election only days away and mounting losses from the strike, prudence demands that the government leave the decision to the next elected administration. The deadlock at Chattogram port must be resolved.

## A rights record that weakens confidence

Govt must acknowledge, address violations outlined in HRW report

The annual Human Rights Watch (HRW) report on Bangladesh, released last week, provides a rundown of the various forms of human rights abuses that took place within the country throughout 2025. It gives us a stark picture of how poorly the interim government performed in delivering sustained justice and reforms during its nearly ended tenure. This may likely erode trust in institutions, and, most relevantly, weaken confidence in security preparedness ahead of Thursday's election. Taken together, the HRW report demands scrutiny and answers.

The interim government's most glaring failure in separating itself from the last regime's operations is the stacks of arbitrary cases and arrests it has allowed to take place, unchallenged. As the HRW report states, hundreds of Awami League leaders, activists, and supporters remain in jail, with courts routinely rejecting bail petitions. Under the so-called Operation Devil Hunt, headed by the home affairs adviser, at least 8,600 people were arrested last year, while many others were detained using the Special Powers Act and Anti-Terrorism Act, the report reads. Additionally, restrictions on freedom of expression and association remained in 2025. Numerous attacks were carried out on journalists, often by non-state actors such as political party members and violent mobs, and a "temporary" ban was imposed on the Awami League's activities, going so far as prohibiting online speech in support of the party.

The HRW report also highlighted instances of violence against religious and ethnic minorities, and the continued plight of Rohingya refugees, many of whom reported a near total lack of access to protection, legal assistance, and medical care. Global cuts to foreign aid and the influx of new arrivals exacerbated these threats to the Rohingyas' livelihoods. The report cited a damning statistic since the interim government took charge in August 2024: at least 40 people killed by law enforcement, including 14 who allegedly died due to torture. During the last year, around 8,000 people had also been injured due to political violence, while 81 were killed, the report adds. When the interim government was formed, we hoped for a fair and accountable administration. But as months passed, we observed with disappointment a general attitude of denial and situational unawareness among multiple advisers and representatives of the government. With the country's most-awaited national election just days away, we urge that the interim government realises its role in maintaining law and order and actively ensures the safety of all stakeholders, including voters, candidates, polling officers, and journalists. Conflict surrounding such a high-stakes election may seem inevitable, but the government must fulfil its utmost obligation to prevent bloodshed and foster a democratic environment on Thursday.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

### Mary, Queen of Scots, beheaded

On this day in 1587, after 19 years of imprisonment, Mary, Queen of Scots, was beheaded at Fotheringhay Castle in England for her involvement in a plot against Queen Elizabeth I.

# The interim's last-minute deals and the economic perils ahead



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Many of my high school teachers in Nalitabari, Sherpur used to say that good students never burn the midnight oil on the eve of an exam. Serious students distribute their efforts evenly and consistently throughout the term, so they feel confident about their results without needing last-minute cramming. However, the interim government, despite being teamed with a group of well-known experts and economists, seems to be behaving like a group of poor students frantically trying to study the whole book overnight just before the test (read: election). That rarely produces good results, nor is it practicable.

The government, crowned with no less than a Nobel laureate, raised massive hopes among the public following the student-led uprising in August 2024. Most expectations regarding reforms, justice, and economic upliftment have since nosedived, while social peace and sense of security have eroded sharply. Not only did the government fail on most economic fronts, but it also escalated risks and fear among depositors, investors, and low-income groups, thus throwing banks, capital markets, and investments in the doldrums.

While the interim failed to create new jobs for the youth who fought for change, the rate of job losses due to the closures of many factories over the past 18 months has been particularly precipitous. Still, people chose to downgrade their expectations and wait for the election before things could hopefully improve. But the interim's sudden rush to ink new deals just before its transfer of power has not only created valid concerns for the next elected government but also raised questions about how a non-elected government can so hurriedly seal or pursue multiple strategic deals with foreign counterparts.

Foremost among these is a prospective deal with UAE-based DP World to manage cargo operations at the New Mooring Container Terminal in Chattogram Port, an endeavour that has ignited protests including an indefinite strike by port employees scheduled to start today. Earlier, in November 2025, the authorities decided to grant Denmark's APM Terminals a 33-year concession to build and operate the \$550 million Laldia Container Terminal. Additionally, Switzerland's Medlog SA has been

allowed to run Pangaon River Port under a 22-year contract.

These deals engage the long-term interests of the nation, and thus deserve to be scrutinised and debated in parliament before approval. The interim, which took an oath to usher in civilised avenues of democracy, is clearly downplaying the role of democratic discussion and civic engagement. Its last-minute moves seem not only impulsive, but also largely designed to misrepresent the economic future of the nation. Thus, the interim is making the incoming government's journey treacherous, toying with the nation's sensitive, long-term interests without demonstrating adequate legitimacy and transparency.

There are other examples. Take Bangladesh Biman. Like many other public enterprises, it is also deeply troubled by inefficiency and corruption. One may recall that there was a clamour of disapproval from domestic passengers and concerned groups when Biman was given the task to manage luggage handling at the third terminal, reflecting how people largely withdrew trust from this carrier. But the interim has now reportedly fast-tracked a

highly expensive procurement of 14 Boeing aircraft for Biman without any research, needs assessment, feasibility study, cost-benefit analysis, or stakeholder discussion. By doing so, it is effectively prioritising a foreign company's interests while depleting national coffers.

The interim government has entered another sensitive arena

Iran, Afghanistan, or Cambodia. The interim's sudden leap into establishing a defence industrial zone instead is both absurd and contradictory to what Bangladesh needs now: employment generation and recovery from economic downturn.

The interim is thus not only attempting to alter Bangladesh's character but is also behaving anti-



FILE ILLUSTRATION: BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY

economically. While people jocularly say that six economists will generate seven opinions, there is consensus among economists that increasing military spending is discouraged for countries aspiring to rapid poverty alleviation, respectable growth, and faster development. As Noam Chomsky asserts, "If you're worried about the deficit, pay attention to the fact that it's almost all attributable to military spending and the totally dysfunctional health program."

Finally, the interim's handling of the public sector pay hike issue is a poorly timed disaster. It may act as a landmine for the next elected government, which will neither be able to avoid it nor totally afford it given the revenue situation that was worsened by the interim itself. High inflation has certainly eroded public servants' purchasing power, but the issue could have been deferred to the incoming government.

Such last-minute deals, along with high-impact administrative initiatives reported by the media recently, are poised to do more harm than good. They are socially divisive, politically inappropriate for the present, and economically perilous for the next government.

## Election season and the strain on urban environment



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Election season in Bangladesh has a recognisable soundtrack and palette: loudspeakers, processions, and streets dressed in political colours. But it also has a less-discussed footprint: plastic flex, laminated posters, strings, tapes, and broken frames that quietly outlast the speeches and slogans. What begins as "visibility" often ends up as waste, and that waste travels down to gutters, roadside drains, canal edges, and culvert mouths. Then, even modest rainfall can result in avoidable waterlogging. The election ends in a day, but the mess lingers for months.

The rules for this upcoming election are, on paper, stricter than before. The Election Commission has banned electioneering posters and tightened controls on banners in its code of conduct, with campaigning set to end 48 hours before polling. There have even been directives telling printing presses not to print election posters. Yet the hard truth is, rules alone do not keep drains clear; operational discipline does.

In the months leading up to an election, campaign materials—designed to withstand the weather—mushroom rapidly. Plastic coated

surfaces and flex banners endure rain and remain readable, which is precisely why they become dangerous once obsolete. Instead of breaking down, they fragment and move with the wind. Environmental experts have long warned that plastic-based campaign materials clog drains and waterways, becoming an environmental hazard.

In Dhaka, posters and flyers have continued to appear even as restrictions were strengthened. When enforcement is inconsistent, the cost of non-compliance feels low in the moment, and the volume of material grows. This matters because "a little extra" clutter refuses to stay as an aesthetic problem; it also becomes a source of blockages in drains and pipes.

The removal phase is also poorly enforced as urgency fades after the polling day. As the materials are often installed without clear responsibility for their removal, the city corporations inherit the burden while citizens inherit the inconvenience.

Urban flooding is usually a choreography of small failures—blocked grates, narrowed culverts, silt, and unmanaged solid waste.

When campaign debris enters the system, it behaves like a net. It catches other garbage, slows flow, and creates chokepoints precisely where water needs to escape. The World Bank has noted how mismanaged plastic waste clogs drains and contributes to urban flooding. This is why election-season waterlogging can occur even without heavy rain: the blockage builds up out of sight and flooding suddenly appears at intersections and culvert mouths.

A report on post-election poster waste described how large volumes end up in landfills and are sometimes burned, polluting surrounding areas. Burning plastic clears drains but pollutes the air, and careless dumping just moves the waste from streets to rivers and landfills.

So, what can realistically be done this election season without turning the issue into a political fight?

The starting point is simple: drain protection must be treated as an essential service during polls. City corporations and local administration should identify high-risk drainage hotspots such as major intersections, low-lying wards, culvert mouths, and canal edges and carry out extensive clearing drives during and after election week. The aim is to prevent chokepoints from turning minor rainfall into flooding.

This effort should be paired with a strict enforcement of "no-material zones." Sewers, canal edges, culvert mouths, bridge underpasses, and median gaps should be treated as zero-tolerance areas, not for political reasons, but because these are precisely

the locations where a single torn banner can trigger a chain reaction of blockages.

Temporary waste collection points should also be established in densely populated areas. Election waste spikes at predictable locations such as meeting venues, busy intersections, and main corridors. Simple bins or collection cages, cleared out daily, are low-cost but effective measures to prevent loose campaign materials from being swept into gutters.

Planning for the aftermath is equally important. A post-election clean-up calendar should be announced in advance. Authorities should specify a short window for removal, identify the lead agency, and provide a clear channel for reporting problem areas.

Finally, disposal practices must be addressed. Collected campaign plastics should be transported to approved sites rather than burned in open spaces. Alongside this, communication should be treated as infrastructure: short, repeated messages such as "Do not block drains" and "Remove materials after polling" can meaningfully influence behaviour.

Bangladesh has an opportunity this election season to prevent waste-related plights for citizens. The poster ban, directives to printing presses, and tighter code-of-conduct provisions show that policymakers recognise the civic cost of campaign clutter. What remains to be seen is execution on the ground: keeping drains clear, enforcing smart no-go zones, and cleaning up promptly after polling day.