

The Daily Star

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Road safety must come first

The government must maintain strong stance to ensure safe roads

The procession of preventable deaths from road crashes never seems to end in Bangladesh. In January alone, at least 487 deaths and 1,194 injuries from 559 road crashes were reported in the country, according to data compiled by the Road Safety Foundation (RSF). Another report in this daily highlights the persistence of these tragedies despite the change of government, with 10 people killed over the weekend of February 20-21. Even as we write this, news has emerged of two passengers of a human hauler killed in the capital's Jatrabari area, when a bus rammed it from behind; another passenger was critically injured.

Unsurprisingly, the highest death toll in January, according to RSF, was in Dhaka division, which also recorded the highest number of crashes. In the capital alone, 26 crashes resulted in 18 deaths. Poor traffic safety and urban transport mismanagement are the primary causes of the numerous crashes witnessed on Dhaka's crowded streets. On highways outside the capital, however, the presence of slow-moving vehicles—including two- and three-wheelers—alongside heavier vehicles is a major cause of collisions. Of the five crashes reported in this daily over the weekend, three involved motorbikes, and all three riders were killed. The RSF report also underscores this concern: 15.81 percent of total deaths involved riders and passengers of motorbikes, easy bikes, CNG run auto-rickshaws, and auto-vans. Additionally, 27.90 percent of crashes occurred on national highways and 37.03 percent on regional roads.

According to experts, such unfortunate incidents cannot be prevented unless the number of two- and three-wheelers is regulated through strict registration and licensing requirements, and unless a professional system of bus route management is introduced. Road safety awareness must also be strengthened among both riders and passengers. Dedicated lanes for two- and three-wheelers and other slow-moving vehicles can be considered as well.

However, the most crucial factor is political will. One of the main reasons that reckless driving, unfit vehicles, buses operating without route permits, and unlicensed drivers continue unchecked is the corrupt system that benefits transport owners, drivers, law enforcers, and politicians. Extortion and bribery sustain this system, obstructing any attempt at reform. In this context, the incumbent road transport and bridges minister's recent comment—that money collected from transport operators on the roads through "mutual agreement" cannot be called extortion—sends an alarming signal.

There are high expectations from the BNP government that came to power through a credible election following a mass uprising that toppled the authoritarian Awami League regime. It must remember that the July uprising was preceded by the 2018 road safety movement and its demands remain unmet to date. Therefore, the government must employ every effort to break the corrupt nexus that has long plagued our transport system. Ensuring safer roads needs strict actions, not the redefinition of terms such as extortion.

Clean air must be prioritised

Govt needs to treat air pollution as a public health emergency

We are alarmed by reports that Savar's Air Quality Index (AQI) soared to 537 on Sunday, surpassing the "hazardous" threshold of 500 and ranking it among the most polluted places in the world. On the same day, Dhaka's AQI stood at 220, in the "very unhealthy" category. With safe air quality generally measured between 0 and 100, these figures underscore the severity of the crisis unfolding in and around the capital.

Savar, located some 20 kilometres from Dhaka, has been a significant source of pollution affecting the capital. Last year, the government declared the area a "degraded airshed" and restricted the operation of brick kilns. Considering that brick kilns account for nearly 58 percent of the region's air pollution, the move appeared sensible; however, weak enforcement and non-compliance by kiln owners have rendered the decision largely tokenistic. Additionally, northwesterly and northeasterly winds during the dry season carry polluted air from Savar into Dhaka, further deteriorating the capital's already unhealthy air.

According to 2024 data from the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA), over 25,000 older vehicles are running in Dhaka, emitting toxic gases. Emissions of airborne lead particles from battery rickshaws are putting a significant number of children at risk of irreversible neurological damage. Furthermore, chemical fumes from fog machines—used to spray medicines to prevent mosquito breeding—are hazardous for humans when inhaled. Other sources of PM2.5 in the country include solid waste burning, dust from construction sites, and transboundary pollution, etc.

The consequences of persistent air pollution are deadly. According to a study by the Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air (CREA), some 48 percent of those who die due to air pollution in Bangladesh are residents of Dhaka and Chattogram. The study—conducted on data from 2022 to 2024—found that controlling the presence of PM2.5 in the air could prevent over one lakh deaths in the country. Furthermore, air pollution increases the overall healthcare costs in Bangladesh, reducing the overall quality of life.

The persistence of such toxic air and its repercussions on citizens reflects years of weak enforcement and political complacency. Therefore, the elected government must treat air pollution as a public health emergency and move beyond just simple declarations. This requires strict implementation of existing laws, transparent monitoring, and holding polluters accountable. Without sustained political will and regulatory integrity, hazardous air will remain a recurring crisis rather than a solvable one.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Dhaka's first Shaheed Minar built

On this day in 1952, Dhaka's first Shaheed Minar was built on Dhaka Medical College campus. It was informally inaugurated the next morning by Mahbubur Rahman, father of martyr Shafiur Rahman, and formally on February 26 by Abul Kalam Shamsuddin, the editor of The Azad.

Army's role during the polls and interim period merits a nod



WINKERS AWEIGH!

Tanim Ahmed
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TANIM AHMED

Now that the dust has settled and we have begun another hopeful journey under a new government, we can look back at the interim government's 18-month tenure and say with confidence that the defence forces, especially the army, played a highly creditable role. Their final act came during the election, which was most likely their finest.

Zero tolerance for mischief—that was the tone firmly set by the army on the eve of the February 12, 2026 election. It was a relief to see aspiring troublemakers scampering through crop fields and alleyways as men in fatigues gave chase. The army was in no mood for disorder, and the sight of soldiers patrolling the streets was reassuring.

Considering the uncertainties surrounding this election, the army's role was always going to be crucial. Law enforcement in the run-up to polls and on polling days is critical even in normal times, since it is customary for the losing side to reject the results outright. It was therefore, bound to be a serious challenge for the Election Commission to make the February 12 polls so fair and peaceful that even the losing side would find them broadly acceptable. The army was always going to be the commission's linchpin in this exercise.

Although seldom stated openly, it was almost a foregone conclusion that the army would be a decisive factor in ensuring law and order, more so because it was perhaps the one institution that still commanded authority among the people. And as far as the public was concerned, the army acquitted itself commendably. Together with the Election Commission, it delivered an election that will remain exemplary.

To be fair, despite the shifting timelines and narratives—"early election if fewer reforms are wanted," "election between December 2025 and June 2026," and so on—the army was unwavering in its stance on the necessity of elections at the earliest possible time. For much of the interim



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PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

government's tenure, the timetable remained conditional, but the army was resolute both in its support for the government and in its insistence on a return to polls.

In fact, it was the army chief, General Waker-Uz-Zaman, who first articulated the 18-month timeline for the national election. As early as September 2024, just over a month after Muhammad Yunus and his cabinet had been sworn in, when they were still coy or uncertain about the duration of their tenure, General Waker stated in a rare interview with Reuters that an election could be held within a year and a half. It was the first time that a key figure had publicly advanced such a timeframe. In the same interview, he also asserted his force's wholehearted support for the chief adviser and his mission, thus allaying concerns about the military establishment's position.

Later that month, however, the interim government indicated that

the election timing would depend on progress in reforms. It also pointed out, most likely for the consumption of the army chief, that only the government could determine the length of its stay in office. There were several more occasions when General Waker's patience was also tested.

Perhaps the most visible episode occurred in March 2025, when a July

actors did not seem especially keen on transitioning to elected rule but rather content with the interim arrangement, whereas the army chief was making pointed public statements in favour of a democratic transition.

A few months later, the newly formed National Citizen Party (NCP), led by a section of the July leaders, faced a setback in Gopalganj. The army did not dither in rescuing those very leaders who had earlier mocked and criticised General Waker. Had it not been for the deployment of APCs, the outcome could have been quite grave. Significant bloodshed in Gopalganj at that juncture would have been detrimental to Bangladesh's stability.

Going back to the beginning, it was also General Waker-Uz-Zaman who assumed responsibility during the brief but critical power vacuum in August 2024—between the fifth, when Sheikh Hasina fled, and the eighth, when Muhammad Yunus took the oath of office. During those days, it was the army that maintained what semblance of order existed across the country. Having lost moral authority after siding with the Awami League regime and opening fire on protesters, the police were initially afraid and later reluctant to confront crowds or mobs for much of the interim period. Hence, policing effectively became the army's job. Deployed with magistracy powers, it was instrumental in maintaining order throughout these 18 months. Barring some unfortunate excesses, its role in standing beside the people and giving them a sense of security must be noted.

Since the early days of August 2024, Bangladesh has teetered dangerously close to the brink on several occasions. One of the reasons that it was able to weather these storms was because the army stood resolutely behind the interim government while strongly insisting on a democratic transition. In doing so, General Waker set himself apart as an army chief who did not reach for power even when it lay within grasp.

The past year and a half has been a testament to Bangladesh's unique brand of resilience and resourcefulness. Now that an orderly transition has taken place, it is time to recognise the army's role as a pillar of stability during a turbulent period, and General Waker as a patriot.

Tourism and roads won't solve CHT's deeper wounds

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KURNIKOVA CHAKMA, JOYA DEWAN and MUHAMMAD ASADULLAH

In July 2024, a student-led movement demanding quota reform evolved into the mass uprising against authoritarianism, bringing an end to over fifteen years of increasingly centralised and coercive rule. What followed was an interim government and then Bangladesh's first genuinely competitive election in decades, won by the BNP. Since then, the country has been gripped by a mix of hope, excitement, anxiety, and speculation. From farmers in rural areas to political elites in Dhaka, and from indigenous communities in the hills to people in the plains, Bangladeshis are looking ahead to how the BNP will shape the nation's political future.

This energy has also reached the most historically marginalised regions of the country. In the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) and indigenous villages in the plains, election banners lined the roads, and political processions were a regular sight during the election campaign period. Yet among hill communities, this moment was marked as much by scepticism as by anticipation. A common concern was that no matter which party came to power, life in the hills would remain unchanged. This belief has deep roots, shaped by decades of unfulfilled promises, stalled agreements, and systemic neglect. Whether the BNP will prove

different remains to be seen.

The CHT occupies a distinct place in Bangladesh's political imagination. Its geography, cultural diversity, Indigenous identities, and history of conflict and marginalisation set it apart from the rest of the country. Internationally recognised standards, including the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), affirm that Indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination, to maintain their distinct political, social, and cultural institutions, and to participate meaningfully in decisions affecting their lives. Any serious democratic project must therefore address the

Hill Tracts Accord all featured prominently. These commitments resonated with UNDRIP's emphasis on redress for historical injustices, cultural protection, and Indigenous participation in governance. However, beyond these broad pledges lies a troubling consensus: all three parties primarily frame the CHT as a site for eco-tourism and infrastructure development.

This narrow understanding of "development" overlooks the core political and historical issues that define the hill tracts. Roads, resorts, and tourist facilities cannot substitute for constitutional recognition, land rights, demilitarisation, justice

Tourism in the CHT has increasingly become synonymous with Sajek Valley. Yet during the summer months, residents of Sajek Valley struggle to access safe drinking water. While new roads have improved connectivity, quality schools, trained teachers, and higher education opportunities remain scarce. There are very few university students from the valley. Bandarban offers a similar paradox.

specific realities of the CHT rather than subsume them under generic development narratives. In this context, it is worth examining how Bangladesh's major political parties addressed—or failed to address—the concerns of hill communities in their manifestos for the election.

At present, political discourse largely revolves around the BNP, Jamaat-e-Islami, and National Citizen Party (NCP). A review of these parties' manifestos revealed some encouraging language. Commitments to a truth and healing commission, constitutional rights, protection of Indigenous languages and cultures, strengthening the Hill District Councils and the Regional Council, and reforming the Chittagong

for past atrocities, protection from communal violence, and the full implementation of the CHT Accord. UNDRIP clearly recognises Indigenous peoples' rights to their traditionally owned or occupied lands and requires that development projects proceed only with their free, prior, and informed consent. Treating infrastructure as a cure-all risks depoliticising deep-rooted injustices and reinforcing existing inequalities.

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education opportunities remain scarce. There are very few university students from the valley. Bandarban offers a similar paradox. Celebrated as a premier tourist destination, it continues to have one of the lowest literacy rates in Bangladesh. These contradictions reveal the limits of a development model that prioritises visibility over lived realities and fails to uphold Indigenous peoples' rights to education, health, and social well-being.

Particularly noteworthy is the BNP's assertion that everyone in both the hills and the plains should be defined by a single identity: "Bangladeshi." While shared citizenship is essential, conflating nationality with ethnic identity risks erasing the distinct Indigenous identities of hill communities. UNDRIP affirms that Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain their distinct identities while fully participating in the political life of the state. A democratic society should be capable of accommodating plural identities within a shared political framework. Unity does not require uniformity.

If this election and the subsequent democratic transition are to represent a genuine break from the past, BNP must move beyond symbolic recognition and cosmetic development. The people of CHT are not asking for charity or tourist branding. They are demanding justice, recognition, meaningful participation in decision-making, and the fulfillment of long-standing political commitments. Until these demands are addressed with sincerity and courage, the hope that "this time will be different" will remain fragile, not only in the hills but across Bangladesh.