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Trade probe against Bangladesh is baffling

Govt must engage in dialogue with the US to ensure fairness

Bangladesh's inclusion in the trade investigation initiated by the Office of the United States Trade Representative (USTR) comes as a surprise. The probe was launched on Wednesday against 15 other countries as well, including China, the European Union, Vietnam, Mexico, Japan and India—countries that have bilateral trade surpluses with the US ranging from \$500 million to \$1 trillion, compared to our \$6.15 billion.

The USTR, in a statement, said it would dig into the acts, policies, and practices of these economies relating to structural excess capacity and production in certain manufacturing sectors that threaten American manufacturing. It also said "large or persistent trade surpluses" of these countries with the US are an indicator that "excess capacity and production exist" in certain manufacturing sectors of these economies. In other words, the US is arguing that these trading partners are producing more goods than they can consume domestically, incentivised by state subsidies, suppressed wages, and lax labour laws, and are exporting the surplus to the US at very low prices.

In Bangladesh's case, its trade surplus with the US, according to the USTR, is led by the textile sector and government cash incentives for dozens of export products, including domestic textiles and leather. They even cite excess capacity in the country's cement industry—a curious inclusion, since Bangladesh is not among the US's top exporters for cement. Canada, Turkey, Mexico and Vietnam are, and except for Turkey, the other three have large trade surpluses with the US. Furthermore, the American diagnosis suffers from a fatal flaw when applied to the RMG sector. Bangladesh's RMG industry is almost entirely based on orders from international buyers. Therefore, it is neither profitable nor logical for manufacturers to "overproduce."

Besides, the USTR's insinuation of lax labour standards relies on outdated stereotypes. In preparation for graduating from the Least Developed Country (LDC) status, Bangladesh has actively tightened its belt and modernised its laws. In fact, it is the first country in Asia to have ratified all fundamental International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions, including vital measures on occupational safety and workplace harassment. Export incentives, too, were significantly slashed three years ago.

The Trump administration's recent move to investigate these economies using a 1974 trade law highlights a broader, troubling shift in Washington: the weaponisation of trade law to mask a desperate hunt for tariff revenue. For Bangladesh, it appears to be a tactic to keep the new government under pressure. As an economist pointed out, these investigations are rarely objective. What our government must do is engage in proactive and regular dialogue with the US, ensuring that our case is properly presented and fairly assessed. In the new world order, countries have little choice but to employ every diplomatic tool available to survive.

Hospital buildings must not lie idle

Make Narsingdi Sadar Hospital's new building functional urgently

It is unfortunate that the services at the new eight-storey building of Narsingdi Sadar Hospital have yet to begin, even after four years of its completion. The problem persists due to an acute shortage of manpower and equipment, while patients are forced to receive treatment on the floors and in the corridors of the hospital's old 100-bed building. According to a report published in this daily, the hospital—the district's main government healthcare facility—struggles to cope with a daily flow of around 1,200 patients, operating from its old infrastructure. Patients report standing in long queues, with some waiting up to four hours just to consult a doctor at the outpatient department.

As the hospital is situated right beside the Dhaka-Sylhet highway, many road accident victims and critically injured patients are frequently brought here. However, they are often referred to Dhaka's hospitals, as the ICU, CCU, SDU, isolation units, and expanded emergency services in the new building are not operational. Along with loss of time and money, the delay of transferring patients to Dhaka often turns life-threatening.

The project to upgrade the hospital to 250 beds was taken in 2019, and construction of the eight-storey building was completed by the Public Works Department (PWD) in 2022. However, the hospital authority did not take over the building from PWD, because they said it is not feasible to operate a 250-bed facility with manpower allocated for a 100-bed hospital. Disappointingly, several requisitions were sent to the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) seeking additional staff, but to no avail. Although the civil surgeon of Narsingdi said efforts are underway to resolve the manpower crisis and make the new building operational within the year, he did not explain why the building, worth Tk 40.38 crore, has been lying idle for four years.

Bangladesh's public healthcare has long been marred by unused hospital buildings. It is time that infrastructure development is strictly tied to workforce recruitment. The DGHS must immediately fulfil the staffing requisitions for Narsingdi Sadar Hospital to operationalise its ICU and emergency units situated in the new building. Furthermore, the health ministry must implement a strict protocol ensuring no future medical building is constructed without a pre-approved staffing plan. Government must ensure public funds translate into active patient care, not just empty concrete structures.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Gorbachev becomes Soviet Union's president

On this day in 1990, Mikhail Gorbachev was elected as the new president of the Soviet Union. He was the only person to hold the title before the dissolution of the USSR.

The unfinished promise to our women



BLOWN' IN THE WIND

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The 13th parliament, in its inaugural session on Thursday, saw the slim presence of seven female members in a cohort of 300. The 50 reserved seats for women, once inducted based on proportional representation, may reduce the gender gap. The presence, or rather absence, of female MPs in a country where more than half of the population are women speaks volumes of the existing structural barriers that hinder women's political participation. A democratically elected government must own up to this reality and create opportunities for women, especially educated women, so that they remain engaged in the development calculus.

The current government, in particular, must recognise that they owe it to the women voters who changed the course of the election last month with their decisive voting weight. The heavy turnout and unmistakable preferences of women voters were a reaction to a controversial remark by the chief of the now opposition party. Comments on the women's ineligibility for top leadership positions or the need to cut short the working hours to increase home stay triggered a backlash. For many voters, it was more than an insensitive comment in a country where we have had successive female premiers for more than three decades, and where women are the driving force behind the economic growth. The comment made the long-standing struggle over women's place in the public sphere obvious.

Given the election results, one could assume that the female voters have registered a clear electoral message. They do not want to retreat into the margins of civic life. And why should they? Bangladesh has made extraordinary progress in educating girls and women. However, a recent study shows that the transition from classroom to career remains overwhelmingly frustrating. Women constitute 47 percent of public university graduates in Bangladesh (as of 2023). This is a remarkable feat attained through strategic interventions by different governments

over the last three decades, including initiatives to promote female education, scholarship programmes, and awareness campaigns aimed at reducing gender disparities in higher education. Every year, we get to see how girls consistently outperform their male peers in many public examinations. There is no question over their competence and conviction.

However, the employment situation presents a contrasting narrative. Female graduate unemployment (20.39 percent) is almost double that of male graduates (11.31 percent). Women's



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unemployment figure is 34 percent in the age group of 15-29 years, compared to men's 26 percent. The survey also claims that among the employed women, the majority are absorbed into the informal sector, where job security, career progression, and social protection are minimal, leading to questions about the effectiveness of education in providing sustainable employment opportunities for women.

This scenario presents us with a development paradox. What benefit does educating women provide if we fail to employ them and transform them into economic agents? The labour of love, often associated with homemaking, frequently withdraws women from the workforce. But the

main problem lies in the mismatch between education and employment. Universities continue to produce graduates in disciplines that do not necessarily align with the demands of the job market. Women remain under-represented in sectors such as technology, finance, engineering, and digital services. Female students are often advised to pursue humanities and social sciences, based on the assumption that they would be engaged in less challenging professions. Policymakers must decide what they expect from this country's women.

The configuration of academic seats, often decided based on the available seats in the dormitory, must be rethought. Then again, the issue is far from academic allocation. Most tertiary institutions lack clear career placement services. The speed and trajectory of career progression, otherwise known as "career velocity," must also be considered. It denotes the rate at which individuals move

the compliance regulations, these female workers receive somewhat due attention. But the situation remains dire in the informal sector. For instance, in domestic work, small-scale services, and home-based production, wages are low with little or no opportunities for advancement. Their contribution to economic statistics remains invisible, even though it sustains families and communities.

There has to be some social awareness campaign as women's choices are in many cases restricted by societal and cultural expectations. Women are expected to prioritise domestic responsibilities over professional ambitions to demonstrate that they are "good" daughters, wives, and mothers. Even those who escape this identity trap face workplace safety and harassment, as well as housing and transportation issues. The M-shaped curve corresponding to marriage and maternity is another challenge that women face. This curve shows how female labour participation is high in early adulthood but declines during the child-rearing years and is only partially recovered later. Then there are enough moral police out there to stigmatise female participation in the labour market, which further reinforces the societal belief that women's primary role should be confined to the home rather than in professional settings.

The reality is, Bangladesh's development story cannot be separated from female participation. The demographic dividend window that has opened up for the country will remain unattainable if women aren't engaged in a strategic manner. They have already proven their capacity in almost all economic sectors and professional fields. Their academic achievements indicate the intellectual foundations they have attained. The new government must not only expand education but also ensure that educational investment is translated into economic output. This requires a more coordinated policy approach where universities align curricula with emerging sectors of the economy, and where public and private sectors work together to place women in high-growth industries such as technology, renewable energy, and financial services. Additionally, there has to be a support structure in childcare, transportation, and workplace protections to enable women to pursue their careers.

The government and this country owe it to women.

Why our vegetable exports fail long before take-off



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Bangladesh produces more than 1.7 crore tonnes of vegetables annually, yet exports account for less than 0.3 percent of total output. This is mainly due to a combination of poor practices and decisions leading up to boarding the air freight.

When we talk about the challenges surrounding our vegetable exports, we often frame the issue as a simple question of export promotion, certification, or country branding. But the real issue is whether our vegetable production and supply chain can consistently deliver safe, traceable, and market-ready output. A major misunderstanding in our policy formulation is the assumption that awareness automatically leads to compliance. Many farmers have heard of Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) requirements but do not follow it. SPS measures are food safety and plant health rules meant to ensure exported products are safe and free from harmful pests, diseases, and chemical residues.

This gap between awareness and compliance is one of the most serious weaknesses in Bangladesh's vegetable export chain. Farmers may know about safe pesticide use in principle, yet very few keep records of pesticide or fertiliser application. Without records, there is no reliable traceability and without that, exporters cannot confidently verify compliance.

The biggest challenge, however, is likely overuse and misuse of pesticide. This is where Bangladesh's export ambition runs directly into farm level realities. Excessive spraying, frequent chemical application, and mixing multiple pesticides in one spray cycle raise the risk of residue exceedance. These practices are often shaped by immediate pressure from pests, fear of crop loss, and advice from agro-input shopkeepers, instead of formal guidance from government agriculture officers. So, when exporters later face residue related problems, the issue is often portrayed as an export side problem, even though it is actually a governance problem on the production side.

The same applies to pre-harvest intervals (PHI) which is the minimum waiting time between the last pesticide application and harvest. This is one of the most basic principles of safe production for export. Yet in practice, farmers often harvest too quickly after spraying. Market demand is immediate, so is pest pressure and the need for cash. On the other hand, the benefits of compliance are distant, uncertain, and often captured by someone else in the chain. Until this incentive mismatch is addressed, PHI noncompliance will continue to undermine export competitiveness.

Another uncomfortable truth is that

Bangladesh's vegetable export system still depends heavily on fragmented sourcing. Most farmers do not sell directly to exporters. They sell to local markets and middlemen. This weakens traceability and encourages mixing of produce from different sources, including farmers who may not have followed safe production practices. When exporters need to fill shipment volumes, the system becomes even more vulnerable to compliance uncertainty. In effect, we expect strict quality control at the end of the chain after allowing disorder in the middle.

Post harvest handling is another neglected issue. Public discussions on export rejection often focus on pesticide residues, which is important, but hygiene and packaging matter too. If produce is not washed properly, if packaging materials are unsafe, or if pesticide and fertiliser sacks are reused for vegetables, contamination risks rise sharply. This has a direct effect on export credibility. We cannot build a reputation for safe vegetable exports if basic post-harvest hygiene remains weak at the farm and local aggregation level.

Similarly, when it comes to testing infrastructure, exporters need rapid and reliable residue testing, especially for perishable vegetables. But when testing facilities are limited, centralised, expensive, or slow, the compliance system becomes impractical. In Bangladesh, there are very few private and public testing labs that can conduct the tests required for vegetable exports. Even then, the tests take a few weeks to produce results. A few weeks can be a significant amount of time in vegetable value chains. Which is why farmers and exporters often neglect proper testing prior to exports.

Then comes the obstacle everyone acknowledges but few address

effectively: logistics, especially the absence of a functional cold chain. Bangladesh cannot scale fresh vegetable exports if cold chain management is treated as optional. The problem is made worse by the centralised handling system, where vegetables must first be sent to the packing house in Shyampur for sorting, grading, inspection, and issuance of the Phytosanitary Certificate (PC), which confirms export eligibility. As a result, even vegetables arriving from northern districts often have to pass the airport area, travel onward to Shyampur for certification, and then return to the airport for shipment. This back-and-forth movement increases transit time, handling, and exposure to non-cold storage conditions, all of which can significantly reduce product quality and export viability.

So, what does any of this mean for policy? It means Bangladesh should stop treating SPS compliance as a final checkpoint before export. Compliance has to be built into the full value chain. That requires coordinated action across farmer training, pesticide usage, PHI enforcement, traceability systems, safe packaging, residue testing, and cold chain logistics. It also requires something we often avoid discussing: incentives. Farmers and traders will not sustain better practices unless the market rewards compliance and the system makes compliance feasible.

Bangladesh has the production potential. The question is whether it is willing to make the institutional and logistical investments needed to export safely and consistently. The bottlenecks in our value chain are not isolated and they are not accidental. They are systemic. And unless they are addressed as a system, Bangladesh's vegetable export ambitions will continue to fall short on their promise.