

The Daily Star

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Time to build an accountable Biman

Address pilot licensing fraud, aircraft procurement plan with due seriousness

The systemic licence fraud by several senior pilots of Biman Bangladesh Airlines, unearthed through an internal investigation by the airline itself, is condemnable as such practices jeopardise passengers' safety and destroy the carrier's reputation. While we commend Biman for the probe, how such an oversight was allowed to occur in the first place remains a concern.

According to a report by this daily, following allegations raised over the years, Biman formed a committee on January 28 this year to investigate five pilots over forged flying licences. Although the committee submitted its report on February 3, citing discrepancies in the licences of all five and wilful submission of forged documents in at least two cases, no action has been taken, even though more than a month has passed. Worse still, a pilot, against whom there is an allegation of sexual misconduct, has been allowed to continue work, apparently due to a pilot shortage during the Hajj season. Biman's explanation for that is, they are waiting for a response from CAAB about the probe. Meanwhile, the regulator says it is conducting an audit of the investigation, though, curiously, the one person in CAAB qualified to oversee the licensing issue has recently been transferred. This raises doubts about CAAB's seriousness regarding the matter, particularly because the regulator has a history of ignoring irregularities in pilot licensing.

While we await the fate of the findings of this particular investigation, bigger questions surrounding Biman's performance, planning, and growth remain unanswered. In the past, the carrier acquired several expensive aircraft but left them largely underutilised, while struggling to service huge debt. There has been a consistent mismatch between the airline's global expansion plans and aircraft acquisition. And yet, during the interim period, it decided to buy 14 aircraft, valued between Tk 30,000 crore and Tk 35,000 crore, from US planemaker Boeing, backed by a sovereign guarantee from the government. In other words, the government will have to pay off the debt or financial obligation if Biman defaults on the payment. What remains unknown is the airline's plan regarding these aircraft. Does it have a concrete route expansion plan, enough qualified crew, maintenance personnel, etc to justify such a large-scale acquisition? Why should such a procurement, which could strain the national coffers, remain shrouded in mystery?

We demand an end to this lack of transparency at the Biman board and urge that public discussions on its expansion and procurement plans be held before any such decisions are made. We want to see our national flag carrier follow in the footsteps of internationally reputable and profitable airlines. The primary difference between them and Biman lies in proper planning and transparency, which must be addressed. Finally, we urge CAAB to take urgent measures against pilot licensing irregularities. No gaps should be allowed when it comes to the issue of passengers' safety.

Why reintroduce school admission exams?

Scrapping lottery system could bring back old problems

We are deeply concerned by the government's decision to scrap the lottery-based admission system for school enrolment from class one to class nine, which is supposed to take effect from the 2027 academic year. The move has raised concerns among educationists and parents alike, who fear it could revive many of the problems the lottery system was originally designed to address. Children will again be facing the old-style admission battle to secure places in their desired schools, while those at the primary level will have to bear unnecessary pressure.

The lottery system was introduced in 2011 to address longstanding irregularities in school admissions, which had often been marred by allegations of corruption, nepotism, and favouritism. Many parents felt compelled to enrol their young children in coaching centres and private tutoring to prepare for admission tests, fuelling the coaching business across the country. The lottery system was therefore seen as a way to make the process more transparent and equitable, particularly for children from ordinary and low-income families.

It also helped curb the intense competition for admission to a limited number of reputed schools in major cities. Although there are tens of thousands of government primary schools in the country, admission pressure remains concentrated in a relatively small number of urban institutions perceived to offer better education. Reintroducing admission tests in such circumstances could therefore exacerbate inequalities, as children from wealthier families are better positioned to prepare for them. Although the education minister insists that the proposed primary-level tests will be very simple, it is unlikely to prevent parents from turning once again to coaching centres for better results, especially given the limited number of seats in many sought-after schools.

Educationists further argue that admission tests for young children are neither educationally sound nor psychologically healthy. At such an early age, children's abilities are still developing, and subjecting them to competitive examinations risks labelling them unfairly and exposing them to unnecessary stress. While admission tests at higher levels may be appropriate for evaluating students, they make little sense at the primary stage.

We believe that a policy change of this magnitude should not be rushed. Before taking any decision regarding the scrapping of the lottery system, the government should conduct further research and hold broad consultations with all stakeholders. Instead of replacing one system with another, the government must go for proper educational reforms that benefit the students. Policymakers must consider minimising inequality in education, reducing unnecessary pressure on children, maintaining transparency in the admission process and ensuring that all neighbourhoods have good quality schools.

Too many holidays are bad for any growth economy



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MAMUN RASHID

Amid the prevailing Middle East crisis and economic lull, Bangladesh is heading into a prolonged holiday period around Eid-ul-Fitr. Officially, the government has declared a seven-day holiday beginning on March 17 and ending on March 23. Offices will reopen briefly on March 24-25, but the Independence Day observance on March 26, followed by the Friday-Saturday weekend, will effectively extend the holiday atmosphere across the country. In reality, many officials and employees are likely to take additional leave on the two working days in between, meaning that economic activity would considerably slow down for 12 consecutive days.

At first glance, extended holidays during festivals appear harmless, even desirable. Festivals are deeply embedded in the country's social fabric. Eid, in particular, is not merely a religious event but a powerful cultural moment that reconnects families and communities. However, the economic implications of long, variable shutdowns are often underestimated.

Our recent experience suggests that extended holidays can disrupt supply chains, slow down production, and ultimately contribute to inflationary pressures. The country witnessed a clear example of this in 2025. During Eid-ul-Fitr that year, it observed a nine-day holiday between March 28 and April 5. Later in the same year, the Eid-ul-Azha holiday stretched even longer from June 5 to June 14, effectively suspending economic activities for 10 days. In the weeks that followed, prices of essential commodities such as rice, eggs, poultry, and vegetables increased noticeably. Various surveys and studies confirmed that the extended holidays had disrupted agricultural supply chains and contributed to price increases.

One important factor behind these price movements is the seasonal shift in consumption patterns during Eid. Millions of people travel from major cities to their hometowns and villages to celebrate the festivals with their families. This mass migration alters the geographic pattern of demand for food and consumer goods. Goods that are usually consumed in urban centres must suddenly be transported to rural markets located far from traditional supply hubs. This shift increases pressure on the transport system and raises logistics costs. When goods

need to travel longer distances within a limited time frame, freight charges inevitably rise.

This year, however, the situation is further complicated by fuel shortages caused by the ongoing Middle East crisis. Business leaders and transport operators report that many filling stations are struggling to meet demand, even after the withdrawal of fuel rationing. Drivers are forced to wait in long queues to refuel, and transport operators are already reporting freight cost increases by 20-25 percent. Truck shortages are also emerging in long distance routes, a

cumulative impact can be significant.

Trade and logistics are particularly sensitive to such interruptions. For example, if a cargo vessel is forced to remain idle at a port for several days due to reduced operations or banking closures, demurrage charges begin to accumulate. Eventually, these additional costs are passed on to consumers through higher product prices.

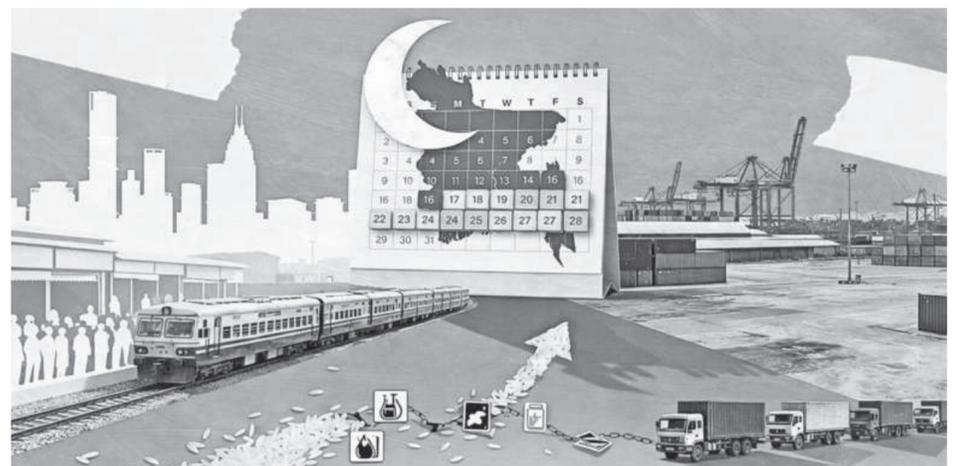
Agricultural supply chains are even more vulnerable. Following the extended Eid-ul-Azha holiday last year, the Bangladesh Bank conducted a study covering 61 upazilas across 18 districts to examine the efficiency of agricultural value chains. The findings were revealing. During the survey period, the retail price of coarse rice stood at Tk 61 per kg, compared with Tk 55 in the same period of the previous year. Fine rice was selling at Tk 78 per kg, up from Tk 70 a year earlier. In other words, prices increased by around 10.9 percent for coarse rice and 11 percent for fine rice within a

not the only reason behind the price increases. Rising labour costs, higher irrigation expenses, shrinking arable land, and import duties also played roles. Nevertheless, the study clearly highlighted that prolonged holiday shutdowns can aggravate supply disruptions.

This brings us to a broader question: does Bangladesh have too many holidays?

Compared with many emerging economies, the country observes a relatively large number of public holidays throughout the year. In addition to religious festivals, there are numerous national commemorations and administrative holidays. When combined with two days of weekly breaks, the total number of non-working days becomes substantial.

In contrast, many growth economies, including our neighbour, maintain a more concentrated holiday structure. China, for example, observes a long holiday during the Lunar New Year but maintains a strong work



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problem that may intensify once the Eid holiday progresses.

Such developments matter because Bangladesh's economy is currently navigating a fragile macroeconomic phase. High inflation, weak investment growth, rising unemployment, and concerns about energy security have already placed the economy under stress. In such circumstances, extended nationwide shutdowns can amplify vulnerabilities.

The economic logic here is straightforward. Each additional day of nationwide closure interrupts production, slows trade, and weakens supply chains. Factories suspend operations, banks close their counters, administrative decisions are delayed, and port activities slow down. Even if these disruptions are temporary, their

single year.

The study indicated that extended holiday closures were one of the contributing factors. Many rice mills remained closed for around 10 days during Eid. At the same time, banking services were suspended, preventing normal transactions between farmers, traders, and mill owners. As a result, farmers and wholesalers delayed selling their paddy and instead held onto their stocks. When the mills reopened after the holiday, they attempted to resume production simultaneously. This created a sudden surge in demand for paddy while supply remained limited. The imbalance pushed up paddy prices, which quickly translated into higher rice prices for consumers.

Of course, extended holidays were

culture during the rest of the year. Bangladesh, apart from regular earned, casual, and sick leave, however, experiences multiple extended holidays throughout the calendar, each of which temporarily slows economic momentum. Government declared special holidays particularly impact the growing private sector most.

This does not mean that cultural traditions should be diminished. For us, the challenge is not to eliminate holidays but to manage them more strategically. A balanced approach, where cultural priorities co-exist with economic efficiency, would be essential. Otherwise, celebration may gradually translate into supply disruptions, higher inflation, and additional pressure on an already strained economy.

Will Family Card actually lift the poor or sink the economy?



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MD DEEN ISLAM

The announcement of the Family Card programme, which promises a Tk 2,500 monthly allowance for vulnerable families, has been celebrated as a landmark initiative in the government's efforts to deliver on a major election promise. On the surface, it is a heartwarming initiative that seeks to help millions of people escape poverty. Even though the intention behind the programme is admirable, the government's haste in rolling out the programme without a clear economic strategy or a comprehensive review of the existing social protection programmes threatens to undermine the very foundations of the economy that it seeks to strengthen.

The first and most pressing concern that arises from this programme is the fiscal sustainability that it requires. The government has indicated plans to expand this programme to include some two crore families by 2030. This means that it will cost the government approximately Tk 60,000 crore annually. This amount is a major part

of the country's Annual Development Programme (ADP) that goes into building roads, bridges, power plants, etc. The government's capacity to generate revenue is limited, with a tax-GDP ratio that remains one of the lowest in the world. Additionally, a huge and ever-expanding share of the national budget is already locked into inflexible commitments, such as the interest payments on the national debt and power sector subsidies. This leaves a very narrow fiscal space for a new, recurring commitment.

To finance the family card at the intended scale, the government might have to make difficult trade-offs. It cannot cut the salaries and benefits of its employees, so the funds for the card are likely to come from somewhere else: the human capital, including the education and health budget, or the ADP for physical capital. Reducing the education and health budget will be a short-sighted solution as it will undermine the country's growth potential. Similarly, the ADP

cannot be deprived of funds, as this will only slow down the growth of the country's infrastructure, which, in turn, will slow down the growth of the economy's capacity to produce goods and services.

In addition to the macroeconomic considerations, the design of the family card programme also poses questions about its efficacy. Bangladesh already

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has some 140 social protection programmes running under 26 ministries, but they have been roundly criticised for their inclusion and exclusion errors. The process for the family card programme is also prone to similar problems and may fail to include those who deserve to benefit most from the initiative. If the money

is transferred to those who are not actually poor, then the programme's ability to combat poverty will be reduced to nothing but a waste of public money.

Furthermore, discussions on the family card have been almost exclusively on the potential benefits of the programme with little attention paid to the opportunity costs. Perhaps the funds could be better utilised for programmes that have a long-term rate of return, such as those that combine early childhood nutrition with effective communication and skill trainings. A recent study conducted on the long-term impact of cash transfers in Bangladesh found that while cash transfers give a temporary reprieve from poverty, a combination of cash and complementary services like nutrition education may result in a long-term solution to poverty.

Ultimately, the family card is a litmus test for good economic management. Launching a scheme of this nature without a dedicated source of finance, without streamlining existing welfare programmes, and all the while lacking a proper and transparent mechanism to ensure that funds are channelled to the right people, is fiscally irresponsible. The government needs to treat this as an opportunity to reform the overall structure of social welfare web, not just add another layer of inefficiency to an already crumbling system.