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## A tragedy rooted in systemic failure

Strong political will needed to reduce transport-sector vulnerabilities

It is tempting to think of life in Bangladesh in terms of something expendable given how easily it is cut short almost every day, every month, and during every festival—often in unimaginable yet preventable accidents. The incident that took place at the Daulatdia ferry terminal in Rajbari on Wednesday is a stark reminder of this reality that citizens have to live with. It involved a bus carrying at least 40 passengers that rolled off a ferry pontoon before plunging into the Padma as onlookers watched in horror. While the exact cause of this tragic accident remains unclear, there is little uncertainty about what became of most passengers inside the bus. As of writing this editorial, 26 bodies have been recovered, and at least nine rescued alive. Many are still missing, however, as rescue efforts continue.

After every such tragedy, we see officials undertake a routine response, and this time was no exception. But why does so little change despite the repeated loss of lives in transport accidents? Earlier this week, a train-bus collision in Cumilla claimed 12 lives. Between March 19 and 24, at least 28 more people were killed in accidents across the country. With the long Eid holiday period still underway, the toll is likely to rise further. What is both tragic and unconscionable is that such tragedies keep recurring every year across roads, railways, and waterways. In most cases, they are rooted in human negligence, enabled by systemic mismanagement in a sector deeply influenced by political power play and mismanagement. Unfortunately, not even the non-political interim government was able to fix this, which showed how deeply dysfunctional the sector has become.

The pattern that follows each major accident is all too familiar by now: a committee is formed, findings are submitted, and a few individuals are punished. Meanwhile, powerful actors within the transport sector remain beyond accountability. As a result, meaningful reform never materialises, leaving the system vulnerable to repeat tragedies. In the case of the Daulatdia incident, the probe body will probably identify a definitive cause, but it remains to be seen whether the broader safety concerns will be addressed. Passenger safety at ferry terminals—through adequate railings, safe boarding and disembarking practices, etc—demands urgent attention. So too does the chaotic environment at terminals, where vehicles race along narrow, uneven approach roads in competition to board ferries.

Accident risks in the transport sector cannot be mitigated on a piecemeal basis. What is required is a holistic assessment of risks, followed by strict measures to resolve or reduce them, even if some actions call for heavy-handed discipline of those within the sector. The government must not shy away from such measures because of partisan interests. The safety of citizens should matter above all other considerations.

## End sexual abuse in newsrooms

Media outlets must ensure safe working environment

We are deeply concerned by the findings of a recent survey on workplace sexual harassment of journalists in the country. According to the study, 15 percent of surveyed journalists reported experiencing sexual harassment at work, with women facing significantly higher rates of verbal, online and physical abuse compared to their male counterparts. At a time when journalists play a crucial role in shaping public discourse and holding power to account, the lack of safe and dignified working conditions within newsrooms is indeed alarming.

According to the survey, 60 percent of women who experienced harassment reported verbal abuse, compared to nine percent of men. Nearly half of the women surveyed reported experiencing online harassment, as opposed to 15 percent of men, while physical harassment was reported by 24 percent of women and seven percent of men. Seven women and two men said they had been raped. The study also revealed weak institutional responses when incidents of harassment were reported. In many cases, complaints about verbal abuse went unaddressed—43 percent of cases reported by women and 60 percent reported by men received no formal action. And when action was taken, it was often limited to issuing warnings. This raises serious questions about media organisations' commitment to holding perpetrators accountable and the absence of robust mechanisms to address such complaints.

The newly approved Workplace and Educational Institutions Sexual Harassment Prevention Ordinance, 2026 provides a strong legal framework to address these issues. It mandates the formation of an internal complaint committee at every workplace and educational institution, tasked with investigating complaints, ensuring the safety of complainants, and recommending disciplinary measures ranging from reprimands to termination. This law is expected to strengthen accountability, enforce protection, and foster safer, more inclusive working environments across the country. Media organisations must form these committees right away.

To complement these legal measures, the Sexual Harassment Response Protocol for Media Professionals provides awareness-building measures, clear provisions for punishment, and steps to create an effective support network for victims. In addition, the Women Journalists Network Bangladesh has reportedly signed memoranda of understanding with Bangladesh Mahila Parishad and the Institute of Psychology and Health to help prevent harassment and offer survivors legal and psychological support. These initiatives, if implemented effectively, can make a meaningful difference for harassment survivors.

Media organisations must have a workplace culture where harassment is neither tolerated nor normalised, and where survivors feel safe to speak out without fear of retaliation or professional repercussions. They must lead by example and establish clear, accessible and confidential complaint mechanisms, ensure timely and impartial investigations, and enforce meaningful penalties for any misconduct. There should be no place for sexual harassment in newsrooms.

### THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Marlon Brando declines Oscar for Godfather

On this day in 1973, American actor Marlon Brando refused his "Best Actor" Oscar for The Godfather, sending fellow actress and activist Sacheen Littlefeather to decline it in protest of Hollywood's treatment of Native Americans.

# 'Strategic capacity' in fossil fuels is not the answer to our crisis



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Bangladesh has been entrapped in medium-term energy challenges because of the US-Israel war against Iran and its consequent impact on crude oil infrastructure and supply chains based around the Strait of Hormuz. The government has so far maintained a roll-out plan by rationing energy supply. However, with the expected demand for air-cooling systems and the need for electricity and diesel for irrigation for Boro rice cultivation, energy requirements are likely to increase further from April. The coming month(s) will also require fertiliser supply for Boro cultivation, which the government is trying to manage through imports.

Meanwhile, industrial production, both in export-oriented and domestic markets, has started to decline. Rising energy prices are likely to increase the shipment costs of imported products, which could push food inflation further. Therefore, addressing challenges from a prolonged energy crisis would require medium- to long-term strategies.

The government's top priority must be to establish a structured system of energy and electricity rationing, ensuring that limited resources are directed towards vital economic activities such as production, job creation, and export industries. Several think tanks, academics, and policy analysts have offered suggestions for building strategic capacity in fossil fuels, particularly diesel and LNG, to address emergency requirements. Some are enthusiastic about using imported coal or exploring domestic coal as a strategic option for energy security. Such initiatives would wrongly mix short-term strategies with long-term priorities.

It should be noted that borrowing to import LNG, developing additional LNG and diesel infrastructure based on interest-bearing long-term loans, and importing or mining coal from local mines using foreign loans and public funds will further deepen the indebtedness of the Ministry of Power, Energy and Mineral Resources, and severely damage the sector's long-term energy transition plan under the Renewable Energy Policy 2025.

As part of a transition towards clean energy, a more cost-effective solution would be to explore domestic natural gas from "probable" wells. The government should immediately expedite drilling works in Sriakail Deep-1, Mobarakpur

Deep-1, and Fenchuganj South-1. It should also allocate additional funds to explore natural gas in other "probable" and "possible" onshore sites. Besides, foreign companies currently involved in onshore gas exploration must be pushed to update their operations regularly. The Tengratilla Gas Field (Chhatak West) is now out of international dispute and ready for re-exploration. The chances of discovering new reserves there are high. As a long-term strategy, the government must take bold steps to explore offshore gas blocks. Petrobangla must learn from earlier failures and proceed with re-tendering based on feedback from international oil and gas companies.



Long queues of cars and motorcycles stretched from the Trust Filling Station in the Bijoy Sarani area beyond the BAF Officers' Mess in Tejaon, Dhaka, on March 24, 2026.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

The government should also emphasise replacing diesel-based irrigation with solar-based systems soon. Approximately 13 lakh irrigation pumps annually use 10 lakh tonnes of diesel, about 15 percent of total diesel imports, costing about \$1 billion each year. A rapid shift to solar irrigation could significantly reduce import dependency and save foreign currency. Moreover, solar irrigation with net metering could generate additional income for farmers and installers during the off-season from power distribution companies. Hence, the ministry needs to boldly act to accelerate net-metering connections through distribution companies such as the Bangladesh Rural Electrification Board (BREB).

promote EVs, charging stations, and related maintenance facilities across the country. Bangladesh's bilateral trade agreements with countries that promote diesel, petrol, or LNG-based transport need to be revisited. The ministries of transport, power and energy, finance, and planning must work together to develop nationwide infrastructure for EV-based transport as soon as possible.

The power and energy ministry should also forge ahead with its renewable energy initiatives—the National Rooftop Solar Programme 2025 and utility-scale solar power plants through public procurement. Successful implementation of these

and sustainable renewable energy solutions across power generation, irrigation, and industry and household use. This transition would significantly reduce demand for imported fossil fuels—diesel, crude oil, LNG and LPG—in later years. There is no need for new investments in fossil fuel infrastructure that would burden the country with long-term debt for 20-25 years. Bangladesh is not in a position to bear that burden.

Ultimately, energy security and sustainability will depend not on diesel, LNG, coal, or LPG, but on solar, wind, hydro and waste-to-energy systems for power generation, transmission, and distribution.

## What an empty Dhaka teaches us about how we live



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On a regular weekday afternoon, Dhaka's roads are overwhelming. Horns blare, the air smells of diesel, people hurry by, and it feels like several million people are all trying to find space at once. But during the short duration of Eid holidays, the city changes completely. The usual crowds disappear, the streets clear up, the dust settles, and for once, you can stand on the overpasses in Banani or Mohakhali and actually hear the wind.

Every year, at least one crore people—sometimes even more—leave the capital to visit family. For those who stay behind, the city feels almost perfect. Suddenly, you can drive from Uttara to Dhanmondi in less than half an hour. The air gets noticeably cleaner as the city takes a break from pollution. However, behind the relief of empty roads, there is a deeper truth: for many, Dhaka is more of a workplace than a true home. The rest of the country relies on this one city for work, education, and a better life. Everyone, from a rickshaw-puller to an executive, endures the chaos because most opportunities in Bangladesh are concentrated in this overburdened metropolis. But when they leave, the city becomes a shadow of its regular self. Local tea stalls close, the vibrant neighbourhood activity fades, and the city's underlying infrastructure

is exposed.

While Dhaka's Eid migration is dramatic, big cities like Mumbai, Lagos and Jakarta see similar patterns during major holidays. Some of these big cities have addressed this challenge in different ways. For example, in Mumbai, the development of satellite towns like Navi Mumbai has helped ease pressure on the city centre by spreading out population and job opportunities into neighbouring areas. Similarly, Lagos has supported the growth of nearby towns such as Ikeja and Lekki through infrastructure investment and by encouraging businesses to set up outside the main city. These cases show that thoughtful decentralisation and better regional planning can help large cities manage the stress caused by massive populations.

The "Eid version" of Dhaka offers a tantalising glimpse of the city's potential. The cleaner air and quiet streets show that better urban living conditions are physically possible. However, as recent urban studies highlight, these improvements are fleeting due to long-standing institutional weaknesses and centralised planning that benefit only a few. This reliance on centralisation leaves the city's infrastructure fundamentally strained, making

genuine decentralisation difficult and leaving both the city centre and its outskirts facing perpetual challenges.

To achieve lasting improvements, the government should decentralise key services and opportunities by actively supporting hospitals, universities, and industries in regional centres. This could be done through targeted public investment in building and upgrading facilities outside Dhaka and offering incentives for businesses to relocate or expand beyond the capital. Improving public transport modes, such as developing reliable, frequent commuter rail links between regional towns and Dhaka, would also make it practical for people to live and work outside the city. Urban planners can update zoning regulations to require mixed-use developments, ensuring that housing, business, and public facilities grow together in new satellite towns. Clear policy guidelines, with measurable targets, enforceable timelines, and dedicated budgets, would ensure accountability in implementing these initiatives.

Of course, there will be some challenges. Moving institutions, services, and industries away from the capital city that has run as the central hub for economic activities, education, and administrative work for so long will require significant collaboration between different levels of government, private investors, and local communities. There could be resistance from stakeholders who benefit from the current set-up. In addition, building strong regional economies will take time and may face obstacles, such as a lack of local expertise or slow infrastructure development. Addressing

these challenges will require consistent leadership, transparent monitoring, and flexibility to adapt policies as needed. Implementing evidence-based approaches would bring sustained improvements to urban life across Bangladesh, turning the Eid experience from an exception to the norm.

In a couple of days, those who left Dhaka for the holidays will all return. Trains will be packed at Kamalapur, traffic jams will return to the city roads, and the noise will be back. We will revert to our routines, dealing with traffic and crowds again.

For now, as we walk through these empty streets, we have a chance to turn this relief into real change. Dhaka's transformation during Eid is a clear call to action. Only with real decentralisation and investment in other regions, led by government, business and community efforts, can peace and liveability become part of daily life, not just a brief holiday moment.

As concrete next steps, every group has a role to play. Policymakers can begin public consultations to identify promising regional centres and commit to pilot projects outside Dhaka. Businesses might consider shifting part of their operations or opening new branches in the growing towns across the country. University students and young professionals can get involved in local civic initiatives or volunteer projects to improve their home districts. Citizens can contact their elected officials to advocate for better transport and healthcare facilities in their own communities and stay engaged with the planning processes. The choice is ours; let's make it.