

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

Measles vaccination hobbled by neglect Govt must rebuild broken immunisation system amid reports of deaths

There is something particularly cruel about a child dying of measles. The disease is ancient, the vaccine usually reliable, and the science unambiguous. This disease can be beaten cheaply. Yet, children are dying of it again—at least 46 as of March 29 this year, with new deaths being reported at overwhelmed hospitals in Dhaka and beyond.

The facts coming to the surface are grim. The Infectious Diseases Hospital in Mohakhali has reportedly received 560 suspected measles patients this year alone. Twelve children died at Rajshahi Medical College Hospital this month; five at Mymensingh Medical College Hospital; six at Bangladesh Shishu Hospital; three in Chapainawabganj. The true toll is almost certainly higher, because health authorities themselves admit they lack comprehensive data on measles-related deaths.

Worse still, the central vaccine warehouse is running short of routine vaccines for tuberculosis, hepatitis B, polio, pneumonia, the combined measles-rubella jab, and the vaccine for tetanus and diphtheria in women, according to a report by *Prothom Alo*. Only three vaccines remain in adequate supply. Meanwhile, in 37 of the 64 districts, 45 percent of frontline health workers are simply absent. The country's vaccination programme also depends on 1,326 porters who transport jabs daily in special containers from local centres; those porters have not been paid for nine months. The system is thus being disrupted in various ways.

Measles is a disease of gaps—gaps in coverage, in funding, in political attention. Bangladesh's routine immunisation reaches 90 to 92 percent of children, which sounds impressive until one does the arithmetic. With roughly 30 lakh births per year, that residual 8 to 10 percent represents hundreds of thousands of unvaccinated children accumulating annually. The special vaccination campaigns held every few years exist precisely to mop up these accumulated gaps, but the last such campaign was conducted in 2020; the next, planned for 2024, a year of political turmoil, was cancelled. Vitamin A and deworming campaigns, which strengthen children's nutritional resilience against measles complications, were also suspended. Regular services were disrupted three times in a single year by strikes among health assistants. None of this happened overnight. Each failure was the product of decisions deferred, warnings unheeded, and budgets cut.

Under the previous procurement arrangement, Bangladesh bought vaccines relatively swiftly, with Unicef and Gavi facilitating fast-tracked purchases. In August 2025, the interim government abolished this system without having a replacement ready. Since then, every step of the process—drafting new project documents, securing approvals, appointing a project director, releasing funds—has stalled. What should the new government do then?

First, the finance ministry must release proper funds immediately. The recent approval of a Tk 604 crore vaccine procurement proposal is welcome, but approving a budget line is not the same as getting jabs into arms. A functioning procurement mechanism therefore must be in place. Field staffing gaps in different districts must also be filled. Coverage data must be disaggregated to pinpoint exactly where immunity has lapsed. And those responsible for managing the health system must be held accountable. Otherwise, more children will die from a disease that should have been under control.

An alarming record of trade misinvoicing Govt must show political will to curb illicit financial outflows

It is deeply concerning that trade misinvoicing continues to drain the nation's wealth, undermining our economic stability and development prospects. According to the latest report by Global Financial Integrity (GFI), Bangladesh lost around \$68 billion between 2013 and 2022 due to trade misinvoicing—an average of \$6.8 billion annually. These illicit outflows account for roughly 16 percent of the country's total trade with the world. Of the total amount, \$32.8 billion is linked to transactions with advanced economies.

Illicit Financial Flows (IFFs) refer to money or assets moved across borders that are illegally earned, transferred, or used. Such flows erode a country's tax base, weaken domestic resource mobilisation, undermine the rule of law, and severely constrain the government's ability to finance public services. If these persistent losses of resources could be contained, they could be invested in healthcare, education, and infrastructure development.

Trade misinvoicing, through the deliberate over- or under-reporting of import and export values, has long been recognised as a key channel for money laundering across the region. In Bangladesh's case, over-invoicing of capital machinery imports, often facilitated by access to subsidised loans, has emerged as a particularly common tactic. Weak oversight, delayed reporting of trade data, and limited coordination among institutions have created an enabling environment for such activities. Economists have pointed out that discrepancies in trade data are often exacerbated by our failure to publish timely and comprehensive statistics, making it difficult to verify transactions with partner countries. This not only hampers accountability but also emboldens those seeking to exploit the system. Moreover, export earnings that are not repatriated, along with the use of informal remittance channels such as hundi, further contribute to the outflow of foreign currency. Together, these practices paint a worrying picture for our economy.

The new government must prioritise addressing this issue. It needs to strengthen customs enforcement, ensure real-time monitoring of import and export pricing, improve transparency in trade transactions, and undertake institutional reforms. Since Bangladesh is not alone in facing these challenges—similar patterns are evident across developing Asia—the need for coordinated domestic and international responses is reinforced. Enhancing data sharing and cooperation with international partners, particularly those in advanced economies where a substantial share of these illicit flows is directed, is essential.

Above all, the government must demonstrate the political will to confront the underlying drivers of illicit financial flows. As the deadline for achieving Sustainable Development Goals approaches, we cannot afford to lose billions of dollars through preventable loopholes.

Managing fuel shocks for Bangladesh's economic stability



MACRO MIRROR

Dr Fahmida Khatun is an economist and executive director at the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD). Views expressed in this article are the author's own.

FAHMIDA KHATUN

Bangladesh faces a fuel crisis worsened by global tensions, supply disruptions, and panic buying, even after rationing was lifted ahead of Eid. Long queues at the filling stations persist, indicating uneven deliveries and fears of shortages. The distribution system is being strained, exposing vulnerabilities in the country's energy supply chain that struggle to respond quickly to shocks.

The government should view this situation as a challenge to energy security, the balance of payments, and inflation control, rather than just a concern about fuel procurement. This shock comes at a time of high inflation, a contractionary monetary policy and insufficient foreign exchange reserves. In February 2026, headline inflation reached 9.13 percent, and the Bangladesh Bank kept the policy rate steady at 10 percent amid ongoing inflation risks. Reserves were \$29.39 billion (BPM6 method) as of March 25, 2026. Meanwhile, Bangladesh's tax-to-GDP ratio was only 6.8 percent in FY2025, limiting fiscal space for widespread subsidies.

In terms of energy supply, the primary objective should be to secure essential volumes early before the spot market prices rise further. Bangladesh should swiftly divide its energy import plan into three phases amid high LNG procurement costs—first, immediate short-term cargoes to keep up power supply and industry operations for the next one to three months; second, medium-term contracted supplies for use in the six to twelve months ahead; and third, a contingency reserve for emergency replacements if disruptions worsen.

The import strategy should therefore shift away from over-reliance on opportunistic spot buying and towards a portfolio approach. For crude oil, refined products, and LNG, Petrobangla and Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC) should maintain a diversified supplier matrix with explicit caps on single-source exposure, while allowing private and state entities to source from multiple countries whenever freight and delivery windows are feasible. For LNG in particular, Bangladesh already has a World Bank-backed financing facility to support new imports from this year. Once operationalised, it is expected to provide \$350 million in annual commercial financing.

Simultaneously, the government should reduce demand in areas which generate the lowest economic benefits. Safeguarding gas and electricity

supplies for export industries, food production, fertiliser, irrigation, and urban passenger transport should be prioritised, while non-essential public spending needs to be cut back. There should also be a clear, temporary energy-rationing system that includes reduced hours for non-essential public buildings, setting lower fuel-use targets for government fleets, halting decorative lighting, and establishing a merit order in gas distribution that favours sectors with the highest foreign-exchange earnings and critical food-security roles. It is logical because, with domestic gas output declining and LNG reliance increasing, attempting to supply all sectors

amid rising fuel prices risks converting temporary external inflation into persistent domestic inflation by boosting demand, devaluing the taka, and increasing import needs. For Bangladesh, with high inflation, fragile expectations, and reliance on energy and industrial imports, cutting policy rates could strengthen dollar holdings and weaken the taka. Another reason to avoid cutting rates is the risk of second-round effects. Rising fuel prices increase freight, electricity, irrigation, and fertiliser costs. When these costs spill over into food and services, reversing inflation becomes more difficult. If monetary policy is loosened simultaneously, wage demands, pricing behaviour, and credit growth can all reinforce inflationary persistence. In this context, maintaining steady or tight rates is not about restricting growth; it is about preventing a stagflationary cycle.

Therefore, a tight monetary approach alone will not solve the issue. The government should combine it with targeted fiscal measures rather

as food inflation becomes much harder to control once production costs increase. With international fertiliser and fuel costs raising irrigation and logistics expenses, the government should safeguard the farm input supply chain, even if that means higher prices elsewhere.

The fuel-pricing system should stay formula-based, but include a stabilisation component. Bangladesh implemented an automatic fuel pricing mechanism in February 2024, which should be maintained and refined. Instead of fully passing on international price spikes at once, the scheme should gradually incorporate price changes over time. During sharp global price increases, only part of the rise can be passed through immediately, with the rest phased in over multiple review periods. When prices drop, the formula should save some benefits to rebuild a stabilisation fund or settle arrears. This approach is better than ad hoc price controls because it maintains incentives, enhances transparency, and prevents sudden fiscal shocks.



PHOTO: HABIBUR RAHMAN

Petrol pumps in a number of districts across Bangladesh have been struggling to keep up with fuel demand.

equally during a shock is inefficient and costly.

Meanwhile, the Bangladesh Bank should manage foreign currency carefully. It must preserve reserves for key imports and allow the exchange rate to adjust gradually, avoiding aggressive dollar sales to support taka. This approach aims to reduce volatility rather than artificially fix rates. The government should ensure external stability through flexible exchange rates, targeted support, formula-based fuel pricing, and tight monetary policy, given the inflation risk. The central bank must continue buying dollars when market conditions allow to rebuild reserves and prioritise reserve adequacy, cutting non-essential imports, and allocating foreign exchange mainly to fuel, fertiliser, food, medicine, and export-related raw materials.

Despite the challenges posed by high interest rates, this is not the right time to cut policy rates. Lowering rates

than broadly controlling fuel prices. Widespread fuel subsidy could risk crowding out development projects, increasing domestic borrowing, and making inflation harder to manage. A more effective strategy is a targeted support package for low-income households, small farmers reliant on irrigation, public transportation, and potentially export-oriented SMEs, with clear eligibility criteria and sunset clauses. This approach will maintain social objectives while minimising fiscal losses.

For households, the most effective immediate measure would be to offer income protection to the most vulnerable by reallocating existing budget priorities and, where possible, partly through external aid. Regarding transportation, buses and freight services linked to essential goods should be supported. In agriculture, the focus should be on diesel support for irrigation throughout the crop cycle and ensuring a reliable fertiliser supply,

The medium-term solution involves structural reduction of dependence on imports. Bangladesh cannot remain overly vulnerable to external fuel shocks. This requires speeding up domestic gas exploration where feasible, improving grid efficiency, decreasing system losses, expanding renewable energy options that reduce reliance on imported fuels, and being more selective about new LNG infrastructure investments. The current crisis demonstrates that energy security involves more than just securing contracts. It includes diversification, storage, financing, pricing discipline, and macroeconomic coordination.

The optimal approach now is to secure vital imports early, diversify sources, conserve foreign exchange for key needs, maintain a tight monetary policy to control inflation, avoid blanket subsidies, and leverage the crisis to develop a more resilient energy system.

The case for a database that can transform our madrasa workforce



Md Mahmudul Hasan is a digital banking and fintech strategist focused on financial inclusion, platform economics, and innovation.

MD MAHMUDUL HASAN

A few months ago, I hired an Arabic teacher for my children. He arrived on time, was patient and methodical, and could explain grammar to a 10-year-old while quoting theological texts from memory. One afternoon, I asked him, was there any platform where families like mine could find teachers like him—verified, experienced, and available? He looked at me in quiet confusion.

The fact is, no one knows precisely how many Qawmi madrasa students exist in Bangladesh today. Conservative estimates place the figure at around 14 lakh. Under Befaqul Madarisil Arabia Bangladesh alone, examination participation grew from 225,631 students in 2022 to 349,776 in 2025. In Sylhet division, one regional board oversees more than 185,000 students across roughly 1,100 institutions. If smaller and unregistered madrasas are included, the total number of Qawmi institutions could exceed 60,000 nationwide.

But as things stand, Bangladesh has no unified national database

recording who these students are, what qualifications they earn, or how their skills connect to the wider economy. This is not simply a data gap. It is one of the largest missing pieces in the country's human capital infrastructure.

A typical Qawmi student spends 10 to 15 years in rigorous study—classical Arabic, Quranic exegesis, jurisprudence, logic, and rhetoric. Their Dawra e-Hadith degree carries official recognition that is equivalent to a postgraduate qualification. Many graduates are multilingual, trained in memorisation and disciplined reasoning. Yet the economic pathways available to them remain narrow. A widely cited empirical study by economist Abul Barakat and colleagues found that roughly three-quarters of madrasa graduates were unemployed or underemployed within a national context where, according to the World Bank, graduate unemployment rose from 9.7 percent in 2013 to 27.8 percent in 2022. Within that broader crisis, Qawmi graduates

remain the least visible.

Many Qawmi madrasas function as orphanages, housing and educating thousands of children from vulnerable backgrounds. This system is sustained by donations from across the country. But without a unified data infrastructure, there is limited scope for independently verifying how those contributions are actually allocated—whether towards nutrition, healthcare, or residential welfare. The same absence of data that hides graduates from the labour market also constrains financial accountability.

Qawmi graduates possess social capital, serving as imams, teachers, counsellors, and mediators in communities across the country. In many places they are among the most trusted local figures. Economists describe this as trust capital: high-trust intermediaries who lower transaction costs and strengthen community cooperation. But the modern labour market has no mechanism to recognise or mobilise this trust.

Other countries have begun addressing similar challenges. Indonesia, for instance, has started integrating its pesantren network into national digital systems through the Ministry of Religious Affairs' Education Management Information System, enabling graduates to access broader economic opportunities without altering their religious education.

A digital platform could allow

madrasa graduates to maintain verified professional profiles linked to their institutions and qualifications. In that scenario, when a student completes *Dawra e-Hadith*, the credential is authenticated. Service as an imam or teacher becomes searchable. Once credentials become visible, families can find tutors, mosques can recruit imams, and organisations can identify community educators. Over time, the same verified identity could connect graduates to digital skills training, scholarship programmes, or microfinance. Even a modest transition—say, 10 to 15 percent of currently underemployed graduates moving into structured income-generating roles—could translate into significant economic activity, potentially adding thousands of crores annually through increased productivity and household income.

Bangladesh has solved complex development challenges before, such as building a global model for microcredit, a garment industry exporting billions annually, and digital financial services at a remarkable scale. Each transformation occurred because infrastructure was built where none previously existed. The Qawmi network already hosts centralised examinations processing hundreds of thousands of students annually. What is missing is the digital layer connecting religious education with economic participation.