

The Daily Star

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Ordinances lapsed, reforms missed

Renewed politicisation of laws must be avoided

It is unfortunate that we must note the end of this government's first month in parliament with much disappointment. As had been feared, many ordinances that had to do with major reforms for judicial independence, human rights, and anti-corruption were allowed to expire on April 10. The repealed ordinances included the National Parliament Secretariat (Interim Special Provisions) Ordinance, 2024; three concerning judicial independence; and three ordinances related to the notoriously ineffectual National Human Rights Commission (NHRC). Among the lapsed ordinances are the Referendum Ordinance, two ordinances on the prevention and remedy of enforced disappearance, the Anti-Corruption Commission (Amendment) Ordinance, and the Right to Information (Amendment) Ordinance.

That so many of the expired ordinances could have created reforms, which the people of Bangladesh have been seeking for so many years, is disturbing. Whatever the BNP government's future plans may be in terms of effecting laws which prioritise justice over politics, it has so far failed to take the pulse of the people. And while the opposition's allegation that the government had gone back on prior understandings on key ordinances is concerning, we must also criticise its apparent lack of ineptitude in debating the ordinances in parliament. While all 133 ordinances had been presented promptly on March 12 (the first day of the 13th parliament's first session) by the law minister, the opposition seemed more preoccupied with pushing its agenda for a reform council—deemed unconstitutional by the government—than deliberating on and debating the ordinances presented. This betrays a lack of preparation on the part of the opposition, most of whose members have never sat in parliament until now.

At this point, one cannot help theorising that the contents of the expired ordinances had not been to the liking of the BNP government and that it would like to reintroduce them in the future. Needless to say, it does not bode well if ordinances ensuring the depoliticisation of the judiciary, the independence of the NHRC, and justice for and prevention of enforced disappearances are not to the liking of this new government. We hope we will be proven wrong in our grim assessment of why such urgent ordinances were repealed and allowed to lapse. Each member of this parliament must be aware that their current position is solely due to the fatal sacrifices suffered by the people of Bangladesh in the July uprising. They owe it to the survivors of the movement to preserve the spirit of that uprising. And this must be reflected in the legislation this government passes—and soon.

Govt must take mob violence by the horns

Identify culprits and punish them

We strongly condemn the assault of at least four people by a crowd, rallying under the banner of "Azadi Andolon" near the National Museum gate in Dhaka's Shahbagh area. This kind of moral policing, often weaponising religion to humiliate and attack people, has been going on for many months. Human rights organisations have recorded a horrifying number of mob attacks where victims have been killed or viciously attacked. In most of these cases, police have not taken prompt action; investigations have been too slow, with hardly any arrests, let alone punishment of the attackers.

One of the victims, *The Daily Star* reports, was having tea with friends at a roadside shop on Friday night, when a group of around 20 people brought out a procession in the area, chanting slogans. When the friends were about to leave, members of the group started sexually harassing them. When two of the victims tried to stop the attackers, they were all mercilessly beaten.

We would like to know how such an incident took place so close to the police station at Shahbagh? What did the police do after they were aware of the incident?

The home minister has said in parliament that under the new BNP government, there will be no mob culture. But incidents of mob attacks persist. On April 11, a *pir* was brutally killed in Kusthia's Daulatpur on allegation of religious distortion. Earlier, *Prothom Alo* reported on March 24, a mob of around 100 individuals vandalised a stage, musical instruments and chairs near a mazar in Sylhet's Biswanath upazila where a traditional Baul festival was supposed to take place. Threats and attacks on Baul singers, shrines, members of religious minorities, women and other marginalised groups and individuals associated with the Awami League regime were frequent during the interim government's tenure. The previous government's failure to hold accountable those who instigated the mobs, even when perpetrators were clearly identified through videos and CCTV footage, emboldened these groups. This led to an uptick in mob violence, a malaise that hasn't been eradicated even under the present government.

In January, 21 people were killed in mob beatings, up from 10 deaths recorded in December 2025, according to the Manabdhikar Shongskriti Foundation's (MSF) monthly monitoring report. According to Ain O Salish Kendra, in the first two months of this year, 23 mob incidents took place in the country.

The BNP government has a responsibility to put an end to mob justice and moral policing, which has taken so many lives and continues to be a threat to society. The public loss of trust in the rule of law must be restored. The government must ensure that the police initiate an immediate and thorough investigation into Friday's incident, identify the attackers and arrest them. This should be done for all other attacks with exemplary punishment to the culprits. With the upcoming Pabela Baishakh festivities, the government must take extra precautions to make sure public spaces are safe for everyone.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Launch of first space shuttle

On this day in 1981, NASA launched the first space shuttle, Columbia, which was designed to orbit Earth, transport people and cargo to and from orbiting spacecraft, and glide to a runway landing on its return to Earth.

A preventable outbreak in a system that did not act in time



A CLOSER LOOK

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TASNEEM TAYEB

In March alone, amid a sudden measles outbreak, some 229 patients died at Rajshahi Medical College Hospital (RMCH) awaiting ICU beds. Ninety-one of the deceased were children. Many died on waiting lists, never receiving the treatment they needed, and the numbers are still rising.

At RMCH, the consequences of the healthcare system's failure are not abstract. With limited ICU capacity, hundreds of patients were placed on waiting lists over the course of a single month. Some could be admitted but many were not. Access to life-saving care became dependent on whether a bed became available in time. That distance between needing care and receiving it is where the system begins to fail in a way that is both visible and irreversible.

As of early April, Bangladesh recorded 9,883 suspected measles cases and 128 suspected deaths, with 81 percent of infections among children under five and cases reported across 56 districts. Paediatric wards in several public hospitals are operating beyond capacity, while critical care units are under sustained pressure. These are not isolated developments and they are putting pressure on a system that is already struggling. Routine immunisation coverage has slipped in recent years, leaving many children unprotected. According to Unicef and WHO, post-pandemic disruptions have created pockets of "zero-dose" and under-vaccinated children—those who have missed routine vaccines entirely or partially. Measles, which requires around 95 percent immunisation coverage to interrupt transmission, does not need large gaps to spread. Even small breaks in coverage can be risky, particularly in densely populated areas where transmission accelerates quickly once it begins.

Early cases were identified in Rohingya refugee camps in Cox's Bazar in January. Within weeks, infections were rising in highly populated slum areas in Dhaka. These outbreak locations reflect where immunisation coverage is most fragile: where it is easier to look away. The fragile condition of the healthcare system is not a new reality for Bangladesh. Adequate investment and actions in healthcare infrastructure improvement have been emphasised enough in public discourse. Despite the repeated raising of flags, budgetary

allocations have been minimal, mobilisation even less so.

Public spending on health has not increased sufficiently over the years, rising from just over Tk 32,000 crore during the early pandemic period to nearly Tk 42,000 crore in the latest fiscal cycle. That might look like progress on paper, however in reality, the shift is more restricted. Health spending has remained close to five percent of the national budget,

complications will follow.

The emergencies differ—between Covid and measles outbreaks—but the problems do not. Facilities are present, but not all are running the way they should. Staffing falls short when the number of patients rises, the system begins to falter under stress, and expansion is discussed only after a crisis emerges.

Outside Dhaka city, these limitations are more exposed. Hospitals beyond the capital handle outbreaks without the required resources. They have fewer trained specialists, outdated or limited equipment, and little room to adjust when cases rise quickly. When cases mount, patients wait for longer, conditions worsen, and whether someone gets care in time often comes down to what is available at that moment. Then, questions arise about whether healthcare in marginal areas is prioritised, about delayed investment

coverage levels that significantly reduced transmission. The tools to prevent this chain from forming already exist within the system; however, what has weakened is continuity: between policy and implementation, between reported coverage and actual reach, and between early warning signals and timely response. These are governance gaps.

Declining follow-through in routine immunisation, missed cohorts of children, and uneven coverage have been visible for some years now. They were not addressed in time under the previous governments. The present response, while knee-jerk and piecemeal at best, has followed escalation rather than preventing it. What we are currently witnessing is not a sudden crisis, but a failure that was allowed to unfold without adequate containment.

The current failure is visible in the



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FILE PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

and as a share of GDP, it still accounts for less than one percent. Even within that bracket, utilisation has struggled to keep pace with allocation, with development spending frequently revised and at times shelved as projects stall in the procurement and implementation phases. The emergency vaccination campaign now underway, targeting more than a million children in high-risk districts, reflects a system that reacts to events. WHO and Unicef have warned that without rapid and sustained coverage, transmission will continue and further

in infrastructure upgradation and capability building, and about the absence of a consistent medical governance framework. Ultimately, it reflects negligence and a persistent apathy towards the periphery.

What makes this particularly difficult to accept is that measles remains one of the most preventable infectious diseases, yet also one of the most longstanding ones for Bangladesh. Vaccines are widely available, protocols are well-established, and the country has previously demonstrated strong immunisation performance, achieving

queues, in the waiting lists, and in the children who did not survive long enough to receive care. Nothing about this was unexpected. The risks were known. The sequence was clear. But it was not acted on. These deaths sit on our conscience, because the lessons were there—from past outbreaks, immunisation successes, healthcare system upgrade proposals—but the system was not reinforced to follow through or operate under pressure. We must demand urgent action to strengthen the system now to prevent further tragedy.

Fuel crisis is a chance to rethink our cities

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While the fragile ceasefire and ongoing talks amid the Iran-US war offer some hope, the war has already driven up fuel costs and strained supply. For Bangladesh, this means rising prices, fiscal pressure, and a deepening energy crisis. Bangladesh is currently spending Tk 167 crore daily on fuel subsidies. Much as the subsidy is aimed to reduce the cost of living for everyone, it is safe to say that fuel is mostly used by the wealthiest in our contemporary society.

As there may be no straightforward way out of this war, there is also no quick way to bring fuel prices down or increase availability. Attacks on energy infrastructure in the Middle East will have lasting consequences—not just on the region, but the entire world. Ships carrying oil move slowly, so the backlog of ships carrying oil will not reach their destinations in time even after the Strait of Hormuz is fully operational again. Since enough oil isn't being transported—exporters have largely stopped or slowed production—and restarting it fully is going to be a time-consuming task. Even when prices

ease and supply stabilises—weeks or months from now—we will still be left grappling with the consequences of a car-dominated city. Dhaka already suffers from one of the world's worst air qualities, alongside staggering pollution and chronic congestion. Unplanned urban sprawl has only deepened these challenges, leading to wasted time and space, eroding independent mobility for children, the elderly, and persons with disabilities, and imposing crushing costs on both individuals and the state to sustain car-centric infrastructure. Here, it's important to realise that most people's usage of automobile has less to do with their infatuation with cars and more to do with the planners' patterns of making cities difficult and unsafe to navigate by other, more efficient means. Many of those who own a car have bought it with a loan because they have, or believe they have, no other viable options for going to work or taking their children to school or bringing groceries home.

Many countries around the world have increased their use of cheaper

and cleaner renewable energy by investing in rail, walking, and cycling infrastructure, and those investments continue to pay off. Everyone who is able to move about by foot, bicycle, and public transit currently might as well be largely spared the rising cost of fuel. They also know that their movements are not contributing as strongly to the city's pollution. Better yet,

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active transport—including walking and cycling to destinations—means virtually cost-free transport while also delivering needed exercise and often contributing to the commuter's socialisation and recreation. In some parts of Dhaka, it's much faster to move about by bicycle than by car or even motorbike. Individuals can adopt those active means of transport by realising how many of their trips are short enough to be feasible by foot and bicycle. Governments, both local and national, should explore options where

movements of people and goods can be done with minimal use of vehicles. I have written repeatedly about how walking should not be a punishment and government must make sure pavements are safe for pedestrians. Similarly, cycling should not involve a potential death sentence. Those moving about lightly, burning no fuel and causing no danger to others, should have favourable conditions for doing so.

As individuals, we can also make our demands known to our policymakers and government officials. It makes no sense to rely so heavily on expensive, climate crisis-inducing fuel to move around our cities. A shift to prioritise the infrastructure and spending—for both walking and cycling—complemented by public transit, should be adopted. While high fuel prices might be the impetus at present, the benefits are multifold. Who would not like to see less traffic congestion, breathe in air that is less hazardous, spend less money on an unviable transport system, and enjoy more safety, freedom, and joy when roaming the city? All of these positive changes are possible and we should start by making demands.

War is unspeakably atrocious, but let us at least find some silver lining for our country in the insanity occurring elsewhere. Let's declare our freedom from the enslavement of fossil fuels and the car-based life and work to create vastly better cities and stronger economies.