

The Daily Star

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Keep soldiers and politics apart

PM has rightly drawn a clear boundary

Prime Minister Tarique Rahman has said what needed saying. While addressing the armed forces at Dhaka Cantonment on Sunday, he made it clear that the military belongs to no individual, no family, no party. Its loyalty is to the Constitution and the people. This is a powerful statement, and that the PM felt it necessary to say so before an audience of uniformed officers is itself a measure of how far a section of the armed forces had strayed from that norm in the past, especially under Sheikh Hasina's rule.

Under 15 years of Awami League rule, individual officers deputed to different security agencies were drawn into the machinery of political control, and their professional culture was eroded. That erosion often took scandalous forms—enforced disappearances, unlawful detention, and the brazen takeover of Islami Bank by serving officers. Credit, however, must be given where it is due. In moments of crisis, the armed forces have often filled the vacuum. When law and order faltered, or when natural disasters overwhelmed civilian agencies, they stepped in. They did so again after the 2024 mass uprising to make up for the administrative paralysis that followed it. That deserves recognition.

The army's role in elections, too, has become hard to avoid. In the past, votes were stolen, suppressed, or stage-managed. But the February 12 election, by most accounts, marked a departure. Soldiers were deployed across constituencies, and polling proceeded without the organised thuggery that marred previous elections, resulting in a proper democratic transition. The PM has acknowledged this, and rightly so. But this is where the distinction must be held. There is a difference between soldiers who hold a country steady during a crisis and soldiers who stray beyond their constitutional role. This is why the PM's address warrants careful scrutiny.

Bangladesh faces a gap it has not yet honestly confronted: what legal protection does an officer have for refusing an illegal order—one that violates the Constitution or basic human decency? At present, the answer is not reassuring. Refusing an illegal order from superior officers requires courage but lacks clear legal protection. It is time to confront this if Bangladesh is serious about having armed forces that remain within constitutional bounds. Officers who decline to become instruments of state crime deserve not just moral recognition but also institutional protection.

Bangladesh's armed forces have earned a reputation that extends well beyond our borders. The country is among the largest contributors to UN peacekeeping missions in the world, deploying troops to conflict zones. Our soldiers have served in some of the most demanding areas, often in conditions that test not just military competence but moral judgement. That record remains a source of national pride.

At home, a military that safeguards elections while remaining neutral is an institution a democracy must accommodate. But a military that begins to see itself as the final arbiter of political order is one a democracy cannot sustain. So, we wholeheartedly support Tarique Rahman's remark that the armed forces must serve the nation through the Constitution. What remains is the harder part: making it stick. Democratic consolidation is earned slowly, through consistent practice.

Bring Kushtia pir's killers to justice

Culture of mob violence must be eradicated without delay

We unequivocally condemn the brutal mob lynching of a pir in Kushtia's Daulatpur upazila, reportedly over allegations of hurting religious sentiments. The victim, Abdur Rahman alias Shamim al-Jahangir, was beaten and hacked to death by a mob at his *darbar*, which was vandalised and set ablaze. This reprehensible act once again shows how mob violence, often fuelled by rumours and religious incitement, continues unabated in Bangladesh with impunity. As of this writing, no arrest has been made in the Kushtia murder case.

Mob violence saw a sharp rise during the interim government, claiming 197 lives in 2025 alone. With the return of an elected government in February this year, we hoped such lawlessness would come to an end. But the brutality of the Kushtia killing suggests that those behind mob violence still remain emboldened. Just a few days ago, another violent mob assaulted at least four people near the Shahbagh police station in Dhaka. Many of these attacks take place in plain sight, with law enforcement members failing to intervene even if they are present at the scene.

In the first quarter of 2026, 49 people were reportedly killed in 88 mob-related incidents. Attacks targeting shrines, Baul singers, religious minorities, and other vulnerable groups have become disturbingly regular. This state of affairs points to a serious failure of law enforcement in the country. In Kushtia, the authorities reportedly knew about the possibility of an unrest, and police were also present there. Still, they failed to prevent the attack. There was no strong and immediate response from the government either, which is equally frustrating. At a time when a clear condemnation and warning could have reassured the public, the government's silence sent the wrong message. Meanwhile, the Kushtia pir's family has reportedly decided not to file a case, likely out of fear and insecurity. This is most unfortunate and utterly unacceptable.

We urge the police to file a case and launch a thorough investigation into Shamim's murder, and arrest everyone involved. The government must send a strong message that mob violence will no longer be tolerated by ensuring proper punishment for the perpetrators. It must also take action to stem the spread of hate speech and incitement and strengthen preventive measures at the community level. If left unchecked, this trend of mob violence will continue to erode public trust in the rule of law and threaten our social fabric. As we celebrate Pchela Baishakh today, the government must reaffirm that no violent groups can attack our diverse social and cultural practices and traditions in the name of religion or any other pretext.

Even if deferred, we must prepare for eventual LDC graduation



MACRO MIRROR
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Unless the government's request for deferment is granted, Bangladesh is set to graduate from the Least Developed Country (LDC) category in November this year. This would be a historic milestone for the country as this is the culmination of decades of steady progress in income levels, human development, and structural changes. The country has consistently surpassed all three graduation criteria: per capita gross national income (GNI), human asset index (HAI), and economic vulnerability index (EVI). However, behind this achievement lies a troubling truth: while it may appear ready to graduate officially, Bangladesh is still not fully equipped to handle the practical aspects of the transition.

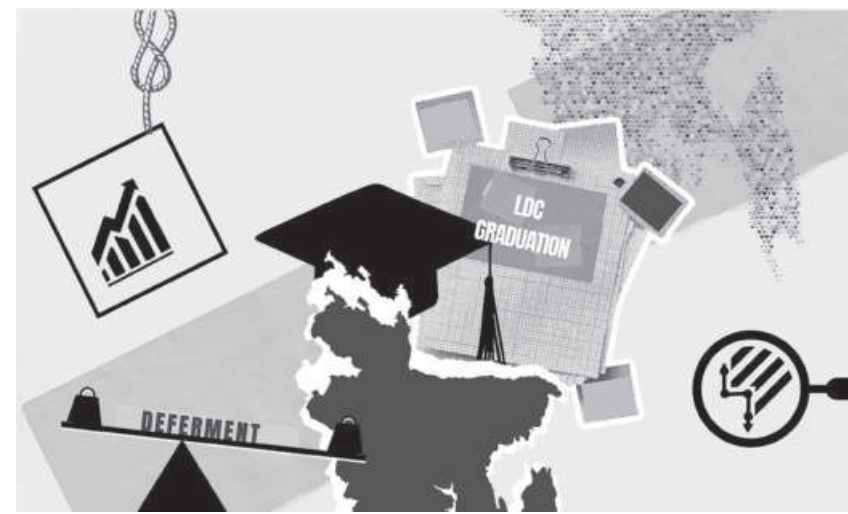
There are key differences between eligibility and readiness. Graduation is not just about past achievements. It is a future-oriented assessment of whether a country's economy, institutions, and policies can sustain progress without international support and various forms of flexibility. Recent evidence suggests we should proceed with caution on this matter. Bangladesh's readiness for LDC graduation is under strain due to macroeconomic pressures and structural weaknesses. The country is entering the final stage of its graduation process during a fragile macroeconomic period. A consistently high inflation rate over the past three years reduced real incomes and pushed many people back into poverty. This setback in poverty reduction is the first of its kind in recent decades and highlights deep vulnerabilities that must be addressed.

External sector pressures are also significant. Foreign exchange reserves have fallen sharply—from \$46 billion at the end of 2021 to \$30 billion (BPM6) as of April 9, 2026. This covers import expenses of four or five months only. The taka has depreciated continuously, raising the domestic costs of essential imports such as fuel, food, and industrial input. In this circumstance, policy options to address post-graduation shocks are quite limited.

Fiscal fragility compounds these risks. Bangladesh's tax-GDP ratio was only 6.6 percent in FY2025, one of the lowest worldwide. This greatly restricts the government's capacity to invest in critical sectors such as infrastructure, human capital, and

social safety nets, among others. Fiscal capacity is further constrained by high debt servicing. The country now faces a moderate risk of debt distress, up from low risk, mainly due to downward revisions in export data that weakened key debt indicators under stress scenarios.

The financial sector poses perhaps the most immediate systemic risk. Non-performing loans (NPLs) have surged to 30.6 percent of total banking sector loans as of December 2025. Such a high NPL ratio indicates



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significant governance failures, regulatory gaps, and politically driven lending practices. Such a stressed banking system is ill-prepared to sustain the investment growth needed to boost competitiveness in a post-LDC landscape.

Overall, these macroeconomic indicators suggest that Bangladesh is approaching LDC graduation amid increased economic vulnerability rather than stability. The most immediate and tangible impact of this transition will be on trade. The country's export success, especially in the RMG sector, has heavily relied on preferential market access and policy flexibilities provided by the World Trade Organization (WTO). Revocation of these preferences post-graduation will fundamentally alter the country's competitive landscape. The European Union is the most vital market for Bangladesh, accounting for about 44 percent of its exports. As trade policies evolve, safeguard measures could lead to tariffs of 12 percent on average on Bangladeshi

RMG products, even if the country qualifies for GSP+. On the other hand, countries like Vietnam and India enjoy zero tariffs through free trade agreements. This disparity could significantly diminish Bangladesh's market share.

That Bangladesh's capacity to offset these preference losses is limited adds to the concerns. Export diversification has progressed slowly, with dependency on RMG products increasing rather than decreasing. Structural challenges such as high logistics costs, which are currently about 16 percent of GDP, port congestion, energy shortages, and compliance issues continue to raise the cost of doing business.

In effect, Bangladesh risks transitioning to the post-LDC phase with weakened external competitiveness at a time when global trade itself is becoming more fragmented and protectionist. The

strategy (STS) with 157 actions was adopted in February 2025, its meaningful implementation has been hindered by insufficient preparation. Institutional coordination remains weak and implementation capacity strained. Therefore, a three-year deferment would provide critical breathing space to stabilise the macroeconomy, address major trade uncertainties, especially with the EU, strengthen financial governance, and accelerate STS implementation.

However, this extension should not lead to complacency. It must be rooted in a well defined, efficient reform plan with specific, measurable milestones.

This preparation must contain a stringent reform agenda. Macroeconomic stabilisation should be prioritised. Revenue collection must be improved via comprehensive tax reforms, establishing a credible plan to increase the revenue-GDP ratio to at least 10 percent in the short to medium terms. Public spending should be reoriented to focus on investments that boost productivity and on social protection.

In the banking sector, tackling NPLs, strengthening regulatory discipline, and improving governance are crucial to restoring confidence and enabling credit for productive investments. The banking sector reform measures must be an ongoing process. Political intervention in the sector's decision-making process must be curtailed to achieve better outcomes.

Enhancing competitiveness requires structural reforms. Key steps include reducing logistics costs, improving port efficiency, ensuring a reliable energy supply, and helping firms meet global compliance standards. To effectively diversify exports, it is essential to create sector-specific hubs, implement performance-based tax incentives, and establish a dedicated technology upgrading fund for SMEs. Active support should be directed towards sectors such as pharmaceuticals, agro-processing, electronics, and light engineering through targeted policies and investments. In addition, trade diplomacy efforts should focus on early negotiations with the EU and on developing institutional capacity to handle tariff changes after LDC graduation. Bangladesh needs to prepare for a future where it can comply with WTO rules without preferences.

Institutional coordination must be enhanced by establishing high-level mechanisms with clear accountability. And last but not the least, it is essential to incorporate climate resilience into the development strategy. Bangladesh must obtain concessional funds while enhancing its domestic capacity for climate adaptation and mitigation.

Ration cuts without work rights may worsen the Rohingya plight



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While global attention is on tensions involving the United States, Israel, and Iran, another crisis continues quietly in Bangladesh. Recently, the World Food Programme (WFP) introduced a revised Targeting and Prioritisation Exercise (TPE) for nearly 12 lakh refugees living in Cox's Bazar and Bhasan Char. Under the new system, refugee households will receive food assistance of \$12, \$10, or \$7 per person per month. The amount depends on their assessed level of food insecurity. Previously, all refugees received \$12 per person. On paper, vulnerability-based targeting appears reasonable. In many humanitarian crises, such systems help ensure that limited resources reach those most in need. However, the Rohingya context is slightly different.

Unlike refugees in some other countries, Rohingya in Bangladesh have extremely limited freedom of movement, and they have restrictions on the work they can do. Refugees are also generally not formally employed by humanitarian organisations, except as volunteers, who receive small daily allowances. As a result, they

remain almost entirely dependent on humanitarian assistance. Within this context, reducing aid raises serious concerns, as when refugees are not legally permitted to engage in meaningful economic activity, food insecurity becomes less of a household condition and more of a structural outcome. Humanitarian agencies have provided life-saving support for years, and their efforts should not be overlooked; however, survival is not the same as stability. Instead of creating pathways toward self-reliance for Rohingya and local communities in Cox's Bazar who are affected due to refugee settlements, the current system has largely institutionalised dependency.

Many programmes labelled as "livelihood initiatives" have not produced meaningful outcomes. Skills training programmes—such as electrical repair or other technical courses often fail to translate into real opportunities because refugees do not own motorbikes, electricity access is limited in many camp areas and they cannot legally move beyond the camps

to seek work. This raises difficult questions: why invest donor resources in skills that cannot realistically be applied? And what long-term strategy do these initiatives serve? The new targeting model categorises refugees as extremely food insecure, highly food insecure, or food insecure. Some vulnerable households—such as those led by elderly individuals, persons with disabilities, or children—will continue receiving the highest level of assistance. Yet, the broader reality remains unchanged: the entire Rohingya population in Bangladesh faces severe restrictions on economic participation.

Recent protests in the camps are often described as reactions to ration reductions. In reality, they reflect deeper concerns about uncertainty and the absence of long-term planning. This can include discussions about ensuring safe and dignified lives in the camps until the Rohingya are able to return to Myanmar, expanding economic participation for refugees, and creating policies that allow them to contribute economically while remaining under appropriate regulation. At the same time, Bangladesh itself is going through a transitional period after the February 2026 election. The new government has said they will work closely to make Rohingya repatriation possible and shared data on 8.29 lakh Rohingyas with Myanmar. But the crisis facing the Rohingya on the ground cannot be a lesser priority. The new government

also needs to recognise that prolonged encampment cannot be managed indefinitely through restriction and aid relief alone. Carefully regulated work opportunities—such as camp-based enterprises, pilot employment schemes, or limited work authorisation programmes could help reduce humanitarian dependency while preserving government oversight. If even one or two members of each refugee household were allowed to work legally under controlled frameworks, the humanitarian costs could gradually decline, camp economies could stabilise, and youth frustration could decrease.

As global funding pressures increase and donor fatigue grows, humanitarian assistance is being recalibrated downward. Without structural reforms, this risks managing dependency more efficiently rather than reducing it. The Rohingya crisis requires more than improved targeting of aid. It requires policies that combine protection with participation and living with safety. The global community has shown it can keep the Rohingya fed. The real challenge is whether it will ensure they can live with dignity until they are able to return to Myanmar safely and with their rights guaranteed. If not, families will continue to cut back on meals, young people will be pushed into unsafe, informal work, and the risks of child labour, early marriage, hazardous migration, and involvement in illicit activities will only grow.