

The Daily Star

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Fix our ailing hospitals

MPs' concerns must lead to concrete health sector reforms

It is encouraging to see our lawmakers raising issues relating to public welfare in parliament. In a recent session, MPs highlighted the daily struggles of patients seeking even basic medical services, and during discussions under Section 71 of the Rules of Procedure, they drew the health minister's attention to the alarming condition of hospitals and health complexes in their respective constituencies. From crumbling infrastructure to severe shortage of medical personnel, the failure is all pervasive.

An MP's remark that a hospital in her constituency is "like a patient" itself underscores the extent of institutional neglect in healthcare. Located in Brahmanbaria's Sarail upazila, the 50-bed hospital in question reportedly has 64 vacant posts, including critical shortages of physicians, nurses, and technical staff. Services are continuing in a dilapidated facility, compromising patient care. Meanwhile in Rajshahi, a single health complex serves around 400,000 people, with doctors working in cramped conditions. The absence of something as basic as an ambulance driver has had fatal consequences, with critically ill patients unable to reach referral hospitals in time. In Bagerhat, despite getting an upgrade to 250 beds, the Sadar hospital remains crippled by staff shortages, with most consultant posts lying vacant. Even a newly inaugurated ICU has remained non-functional from day one, which is another example of infrastructure without operational readiness.

This daily has reported on such gaps in our healthcare systems many times, but little seems to have changed. A recent report found that 80 health facilities across 18 districts remain idle due to manpower shortages, lack of equipment, and bureaucratic delays, leaving thousands deprived of essential healthcare. Disturbingly, at a time when many hospitals are struggling to cope with a growing number of child patients amid the ongoing measles outbreak, six specialised children's hospital buildings have remained unused for years after their completion. Every time a public health crisis arises in the country, these gaps in our healthcare system become evident. There is a persistent disconnect between planning and implementation in the health sector, turning vital institutions into symbols of inefficiency.

Addressing this problem requires a comprehensive and coordinated response. First and foremost, the government must urgently fill vacant posts at all levels of the healthcare system, ensuring that facilities are adequately staffed to meet patient needs. Second, strict accountability mechanisms must be put in place to prevent delays and the abandonment of development projects. Third, operational readiness—including staffing, equipment, and maintenance—must be a prerequisite for any infrastructure upgrade or inauguration. Equally importantly, ICU facilities in all hospitals must be made functional so that critically ill patients are not forced to travel long distances at great risk.

The concerns raised in parliament should serve as a wake-up call. The government must act decisively to address these long-standing deficiencies in our healthcare management. Lastly, all the MPs should raise issues troubling their constituencies and help make our parliament truly people-oriented.

Secure cooking fuel for Bhasan Char

Prolonged LPG shortage is causing rapid deforestation

It is disheartening to learn that Rohingya refugees living in the camps of Bhasan Char are struggling due to an LPG shortage. According to a report in this daily, with the supply of LPG cylinders halted because of a fund crunch, residents of the island are forced to cut down trees to harvest firewood for cooking. This has been going on for months as LPG supply began to dwindle in August last year. Since then, more than 250,000 trees have reportedly been cut down.

The consequence of this LPG shortage and the resultant tree felling is two-pronged. Not only are the Rohingya refugees being deprived of reliable cooking fuel, but the chopping down of trees at such a large scale is also causing rapid deforestation in an already environmentally vulnerable area. Being a coastal area, it is the vegetation that keeps Bhasan Char safe from the dangerous impact of cyclones, storm surges, and erosion. While the Rohingya—around 34,000 of them—living on the 40 sq km island have little choice but to adapt to the fuel shortage this way, it is the authorities' lack of action to prevent this crisis that disappoints us the most.

The Islamic Relief Bangladesh, a local subsidiary of a US-based NPO by the same name, has been supplying 8,000 Rohingya families with a 12kg LPG cylinder each on a regular basis since 2020. However, due to the US president's slashing of foreign aid last year, the supply of LPG cylinders to the island took a hit in August last year. Over the following months, this supply slowed and then halved against a requirement of 5,000 cylinders per month. No solution has yet been found despite repeated correspondence from the Bhasan Char and Cox's Bazar offices of the Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner (RRRC) and the NGO Affairs Bureau.

More concerning, there is apparently no government fund to ensure an uninterrupted supply of LPG to Bhasan Char. We find it unacceptable that a project like Bhasan Char, which has been planned extensively, should be deprived of an item as essential as cooking fuel for so many months. We urge the government to take note of this urgent matter and work with funding organisations to find a lasting solution. Planning for this island also involved massive afforestation efforts. That must not be undone as it would make the island population even more vulnerable than they already are.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Zimbabwe becomes independent



On this day in 1980, Zimbabwe gained independence from the United Kingdom.

Cox's Bazar at the crossroads of beauty without design

BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

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The sea and the sand have no qualms against humans. Waves crash in, staining the dunes in their own rhythm, like an artist engrossed in its own creativity. The longest unbroken natural beach of Cox's Bazar and its deep blue water offers beauty to the beholders, just like it does for any other littoral country with a similar shoreline. As someone who has travelled across the waters, Cox's Bazar makes me reflect on nature's ambivalence. During a recent visit, it also made me pause to reflect on the opportunities glimpsed but not quite taken.

Anyone who has visited coastal belts in Thailand and Indonesia will dial up a mental analogue and rue the absence of services and activities that could have made Cox's Bazar even more attractive, particularly for foreign tourists. Think of places like Krabi or Bali, where similar topographies are carefully curated to maintain their local character but structured to welcome the world. The layering is well-designed with designated tourist zones, cultural districts, managed beachfronts, and planned activities. The infrastructure and layout in any popular tourist destination consider visitors' expectations and are designed accordingly.

In contrast, Cox's Bazar seems uncomposed. To be fair, there is a vibrant ecosystem comprising mostly local tourists. They travel in big numbers to clasp the setting sun in one camera shot, ride the beach motorcycle, opt for horse-riding or even paragliding, enjoy local food, and buy souvenirs to sponsor informal economies or small businesses. Corporate houses sponsor events that promote local tourism. This democratic access to leisure is no small feat. But the absence of zoning is telling. There have been attempts to do so without much success. The prying eyes, intrusion of privacy, and safety concerns have systematically discouraged international tourism. There is no promenade or night market that visitors can go to without risking personal safety. The cutthroat rates of public transport, the unstructured growth of tong shops, dirty pavements,

incidents of attacks and muggings, and lack of public hygiene make you wonder if there is a reason why the sea is so indifferent about the people on the seashore.

The Marine Drive is arguably one of the most scenic coastal roads in South Asia. Thanks to our uniformed outfits, we have a road that has protected the



FILE PHOTO: BSS

Cox's Bazar has a vibrant ecosystem comprising mostly local tourists.

shoreline. You see the future project signs and realise how some of these jobs have become personal. The signs will announce many welfare associations of groups or individuals connected to those who built the roads (according to the driver who took us from Inani Beach to Teknaf). Then there are the political goons or business tycoons who have taken over most of the beachfront property. To access the Marine Drive from the city, you have to negotiate a narrow stretch that remains underdeveloped, reportedly stalled by local political contestations, which has led to significant delays in improving transportation and access to the coastal areas. In the city, you see a five-star hotel just where the beach should be. These are symbolic of a broader infrastructural fault. Personal or group interests preceded the greater interest of people, leading

to decisions that prioritise profit over community needs and environmental sustainability. The lack of imagination and sincerity has literally bottlenecked the growth of the location as a world-class tourist destination.

The place also remains filled with the silences that we carry within ourselves. On our way to Teknaf, we saw the site associated with the killing of a retired army officer. It is a sharp reminder of the fragility of law on the road. It is not simply a "spot" but an index of how quickly a destination's narrative can shift from promise to caution. The red sign is a reminder of the informal economy of smuggling and the godfathers and their organised crime. The hills remain equally ambivalent. They have witnessed the troubles and pains of migrant

spaces that tell the story of the coast and the shared heritage of maritime histories? Where are the thoughtfully designed activity zones: water sports with safety protocols, eco-trails, and guided cultural walks? Where are the upscale eateries that could showcase coastal cuisine with both authenticity and refinement? Yes, there are some attempts, but they are not good enough. Also, there seems to be an absence of tourists of different price ranges. Most South Asian countries benefit from backpackers. Somehow our modestly priced hotels do not match the services of similar types of hotels or hostels in Thailand or Indonesia.

Countries that earn most of their revenues from tourism have created an ecosystem: air, rail and road transport, local transport, nightlife, craftsmanship, promenades and marine drives, trekking, and activities like scuba diving, underwater swimming and turtle hatcheries. We plan these elements. Bali's beach clubs coexist with temple rituals. Phuket's night markets translate local culture into experience without entirely diluting it, showcasing traditional crafts, local cuisine, and cultural performances that reflect the region's heritage. In both places, there is a conscious effort to maintain a narrative of place, of identity, even while scaling tourism.

There were previous attempts to brand Bangladesh and pitch Cox's Bazar. But somehow we have relapsed. We are neither fully preserving local culture nor effectively packaging it for a global audience. The result is a kind of cultural thinning, where values are eroded informally without being meaningfully rearticulated, leading to a loss of identity and connection to heritage among the local population.

Nobody questions the potential of Cox's Bazar. Clearly, it can compete with any of the top class beaches elsewhere. For that, the administrators need to think beyond immediate, narrow interests. They need to plan access roads despite local pressures. They need to designate zones for overseas tourists and local tourists. Instead of the current practice of thinking of tourism as a seasonal surge, there should be infrastructural and ecological investment to make Cox's Bazar a long-term national project.

The sea can maintain its rhyme and rhythm. But we, too, can create our own to benefit from it by developing sustainable tourism practices that respect the natural environment and promote year-round visitation.

The fiscal burden of interest-free car loans

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It is often the quietest policies that carry the loudest consequences. One such long-standing but rarely scrutinised provision is the interest-free vehicle loans extended to senior public officials and select banking-sector employees, including those at the central bank. Up until recently, officials of the rank of deputy secretary and above were entitled to borrow up to Tk 30 lakh without interest to purchase personal vehicles, with repayment structured so that depreciation charges effectively settle the liability over time. In effect, the borrower neither pays interest nor bears the true economic cost of capital.

In a telling policy reversal, the government recently suspended this facility in response to fuel price shocks and mounting fiscal pressures. This reveals more about the nature of the policy than years of its quiet continuation ever did. If the facility were truly benign—merely an administrative convenience or a neutral compensation tool—why would it be among the first to be curtailed during economic stress? The answer is straightforward: because it carries a real, albeit hidden, cost.

The suspension can be seen as an admission that such benefits are not costless. They contribute to fiscal strain, foreign exchange demand (through vehicle imports and fuel consumption), and broader macroeconomic pressures. When fuel

prices surge and external balances tighten, the continuation of such policies becomes difficult to justify. This brings us back to a fundamental issue: interest-free loans do not eliminate cost, but merely obscure it. Whether financed through budgetary allocations or institutional balance sheets, the subsidy embedded in such loans must ultimately be borne by someone—taxpayers, depositors, or the economy at large.

The inflationary dimension, while often dismissed due to the relatively small scale of these loans, cannot be ignored in principle. Any allocation of capital at zero cost encourages demand that would not exist under market conditions. It promotes consumption without a corresponding increase in productive output. Even if the direct impact on inflation is modest, the policy sets a precedent for non-market allocation of financial resources. More importantly, the suspension of the provision during a fuel crisis highlights another channel of cost: external sector pressure. Private vehicles increase fuel consumption, which is heavily import-dependent. Encouraging vehicle ownership through subsidised financing indirectly raises demand for imported fuel, thereby exerting pressure on foreign exchange reserves.

But if a policy must be withdrawn during times of stress because it exacerbates macroeconomic vulnerabilities, should it exist in the first place? The opacity surrounding the true cost of this facility is also troubling. Additional benefits—maintenance allowances, fuel support, and other vehicle-related

expenses—are often embedded within institutional budgets, making it difficult to ascertain the full fiscal burden. The absence of transparent disclosure undermines accountability and weakens the credibility of broader fiscal policy.

At a time when governments call for subsidy rationalisation, energy conservation, and prudent use of foreign exchange, the coexistence of such hidden benefits creates contradiction. In a country where most individuals face high interest rates on personal loans, the provision of interest-free credit to a select group represents a clear departure from market principles. It creates a dual financial system where one is governed by market discipline for the majority, and another is shaped by administrative privilege for the few. The recent suspension does not resolve this inequity, as, unless the policy is fundamentally re-evaluated, it remains available for reinstatement when conditions improve.

The justification often offered for such benefits is the need to attract and retain talent in public service. While this is a valid concern, the method of compensation matters. Transparent salary structures, subject to taxation and public scrutiny, are preferable to opaque, distortionary perks. The latter obscures the true cost of employment and creates incentives for preserving privilege rather than enhancing performance. The link between such benefits and service delivery also remains tenuous. There is little evidence to suggest that ownership of a subsidised private vehicle significantly improves the efficiency of public

officials. In many cases, official duties can be adequately supported through shared or institutional transport arrangements.

The contrast of the provision in question against policies in the non-government sector is particularly stark. For instance, companies in the readymade garments sector—operating amid intense global competition—cannot afford such privileges. They function within hard budget constraints, where every cost must be justified by productivity. The idea of offering interest-free vehicle loans to employees without clear returns is simply not viable. While the private sector must continuously adapt to cost pressures, parts of the public and financial sectors operate with embedded cushions that dilute incentives for efficiency.

From a policy standpoint, the way forward lies in rationalisation and transparency. If employee benefits are to be provided, they should be explicitly budgeted, clearly disclosed, and linked to measurable outcomes. Interest-free loans could be replaced with market-based credit, accompanied by targeted and transparent subsidies if deemed necessary. More fundamentally, policies must be evaluated not only in terms of their immediate administrative convenience but also their broader economic implications.

In an economy facing multiple challenges—exchange rate pressures, inflation, and fiscal constraints—the need for consistency and coherence in policy is paramount. Every allocation of resources must align with the principles of efficiency, equity, and sustainability.