

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

Protect youth from irregular migration

Implement targeted programmes to prevent human trafficking

The fact that Bangladesh continues to top the list of sea arrivals of migrants to Europe indicates that we have largely failed to nurture and capitalise on our demographic dividend—the youth. According to a report in this daily, citing UNHCR data, at least 20,259 Bangladeshis reached Europe in 2025, enduring perilous sea journeys through illegal routes. They made up 30.5 percent of the total arrivals by sea, far more than any other country.

That the number of people, even from war-ravaged Sudan, is far lower than the number of Bangladeshis lured to Europe by human trafficking gangs, underscores the depths of anxiety and uncertainty that shape the outlook of many of our young people. Sadly, high levels of irregular migration from Bangladesh persist, with 1,358 Bangladeshis reaching Europe by sea in the first two months of this year. Worse still, many end up losing their lives in this venture. In March alone, at least 18 Bangladeshis died while crossing the Mediterranean Sea on a small boat from a port in eastern Libya to Europe. The survivors, including 21 Bangladeshis who were rescued off the Greek coast, later recounted the dangerous journey traffickers had compelled them to undertake. Many of them spent months locked in “game ghars” or detention centres without their phones or documents, and even without sufficient food and water, before being sent off to sea in small rubber boats. Often, these migrant hopefuls are rescued by patrolling ships, but their ordeals do not end there. Sometimes, they are sent home broke and burdened with enormous debt, like 21-year-old Shakil Ahmed from Sunamganj, who had paid Tk 10.5 lakh to a broker to take him to Greece. He never reached Greece; instead he was kept in Libya until his rescue and deportation in 2024.

A recent BRAC study found that most of the people whom brokers had promised good jobs did not find any after reaching Libya. Instead, many were detained along the way and suffered physical abuse. They usually travel to Libya via Dubai, Egypt, Qatar, Istanbul, or Syria. From there, some are sent on notorious sea journeys, often with insufficient food and water. Quoting a Criminal Investigation Department official, this daily reported that around 70,000 people, mostly aged between 25 and 40, have gone to Europe this way over the last decade.

Since news reports of irregular migration do not appear to deter young people from attempting such journeys, more targeted programmes in areas prone to human trafficking should be undertaken by the government. Young people can be trained for skilled migration or provided with entrepreneurial opportunities. At the same time, intelligence must be gathered on local recruiters to bring to account the ringleaders of trafficking gangs. The government must ensure that the lives and aspirations of this country's young people are not lost in the pursuit of the so-called European dream.

Delayed testing hampers treatment

Ensure immediate stockpiling of measles testing kits

The ongoing measles situation has been a wake-up call for us all, but it should be especially so for the country's health sector. After myriad issues regarding vaccine procurement and stocks, the government finally launched a nationwide measles-rubella vaccination campaign on Monday. Under the programme, around 1.8 crore children aged six months to 59 months will be vaccinated until May 20. We advise relevant authorities to ensure that this campaign runs smoothly and effectively, especially in rural and high-risk areas. However, it is most concerning that there is a dismal shortage of measles testing kits in the country.

According to a Prothom Alo report, the Institute of Public Health (IPH) in the capital's Mohakhali receives around 300 samples and has the capacity to test 300-400 samples daily. However, it can only test 120 samples due to a kit shortage. The measles testing kits are supplied by the World Health Organization (WHO), and each kit can be used to test 90 samples. As of Sunday, the IPH had 63 kits, with 60 more arriving that evening. Many of these kits are stuck at the Dhaka airport, delayed by documentation hurdles. Given this situation, a large number of samples are not being tested in time.

What is unfathomable is that the IPH is the only public organisation in the country where samples are tested for measles. How is it that, even a month into this crisis, testing capacity has not been expanded to include facilities in other major cities? Why is it that measles samples from public hospitals outside Dhaka are sent all the way to this one institute situated in the capital?

It is true that the government's response so far, considering all aspects of the crisis, has been admirable. But there are still several holes in its “plan,” and this might be one of the biggest so far. Given the seriousness of the situation and the death toll so far (with 181 suspected and 36 confirmed measles deaths till Sunday afternoon), we ask the relevant authorities to not only work on freeing the kits stuck at the airport, but to urgently communicate with the WHO to secure an adequate stock of measles testing kits. Vaccination is crucial for prevention, but timely diagnosis is equally important to ensure that patients older than the vaccination age receive the best possible care. Most importantly, diagnostic capacity in other divisions besides Dhaka must be strengthened to reduce the time between sample collection and diagnosis countrywide.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

500 years of the Mughal empire



On this day in 1526, Babur, a Central Asian prince, defeated the Delhi sultanate ruler Ibrahim Lodi in the first battle of Panipath and laid the foundations of the Mughal empire in the Indian subcontinent. The dynasty continued to shape the political, economic, social landscape of the region until 1857.

How geopolitics is redrawing the Global South's economy

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

The 2026 Spring Meetings of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank Group took place from April 13 to April 18 amid ongoing geopolitical tensions, persistent inflation, and slowing growth. These meetings demonstrated a reactive rather than a transformative system. At the meetings, it was acknowledged that the global economy is experiencing prolonged turbulence in the absence of robust multilateral cooperation.

The World Economic Outlook report released at the meetings appears grim. Global growth remains sluggish and uneven, with the IMF forecasting 3.1 percent growth for 2026 and 3.2 percent for 2027. The report warns that escalating geopolitical risks could further dampen the outlook. The IMF also expects global headline inflation to rise slightly in 2026 before declining again in 2027. The growth slowdown and rising inflation are expected to be particularly pronounced in emerging markets and developing economies, reflecting a deeper structural problem. The global economy is no longer dealing only with cyclical, quickly reversible shocks. Instead, it faces persistent, interconnected disruptions, including conflict-driven energy volatility, supply chain adjustments, and financial tightening.

A key aspect of the meetings was the widespread recognition that geoeconomic fragmentation has become deeply entrenched. Trade, investment, and technology exchanges are increasingly driven by geopolitical alliances rather than by cost and efficiency. Many are also severing economic ties with rivals, particularly in critical areas such as technology and energy. Consequently, global supply chains are being reshuffled to prioritise security. This shift complicates international cooperation and diminishes the effectiveness of global institutions. Such fragmentation undermines the fundamental goal of the Bretton Woods system, which has traditionally relied on consensus among major powers.

For the global economy, the implications are profound. A fragmented system is inherently less

stable and more volatile. However, the developing world feels these impacts most acutely. During the meetings, the recurring concern was the tightening of external financing conditions, which constrain the policy options available to emerging economies. Rising global interest rates have increased borrowing costs, while weaker global demand has reduced export revenues. Consequently, these countries face a fragile macroeconomic situation marked by currency pressures, falling



VISUAL: SIFAT AFRIN SHAMS

reserves, and rising debt levels.

Bangladesh exemplifies these dynamics. With high inflation, pressure on foreign exchange reserves, and low revenue mobilisation, the country has limited fiscal capacity to absorb external shocks. As the global economic outlook indicates, these constraints are likely to persist in the near future. Therefore, countries like Bangladesh need to prepare for a prolonged period of external vulnerability and limited concessional aid.

Debt distress was a key topic at the meetings. Despite commitments, global debt restructuring faces delays, coordination challenges, and limited creditor involvement. The IMF report suggests that global public debt will reach record levels, raising concerns about fiscal sustainability and financial stability. For low-income countries, rising food and energy costs, reduced

aid, and climate shocks have heightened vulnerabilities. The IMF suggests that tens of billions of dollars in additional funding may be needed to support the most vulnerable economies. Nonetheless, current resources remain inadequate given the scale of the need.

In this context, the question arises: did the IMF and the World Bank make significant new commitments? The response is somewhat mixed. There were announcements of increased support. The World Bank launched new initiatives targeting climate resilience and vital services, including water security projects intended to serve large populations in vulnerable areas. However, these commitments do not meet the expectations of many developing countries. They are incremental, reflecting a cautious stance shaped by the fiscal constraints of donor countries and the intricate politics of multilateral governance. Significant breakthroughs in debt



relief, extensive concessional financing, or core reforms of the international financial structure were notably absent.

IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva and World Bank President Ajay Banga outlined a cautious approach centred on three key pillars: preserving macroeconomic stability, strengthening resilience to shocks, and mobilising additional funding, particularly from the private sector. The IMF promotes targeted fiscal policies, cautious monetary strategies, and structural reforms to boost productivity and competitiveness. The World Bank aims to better use its assets and attract private investment to meet development and climate goals.

These strategies are reasonable but also reveal a core limitation. Relying on market-based solutions when market conditions are worsening for developing countries is impractical.

Private capital remains unpredictable and cautious, especially amid global uncertainties. Therefore, focusing on catalytic financing might not generate the necessary scale of resources.

Another key issue is the growing importance of climate in macroeconomic policy decisions. Climate change is now seen as a central factor affecting economic stability and growth, rather than merely a peripheral concern. Nonetheless, a major issue persists. The gap between climate finance commitments and the funds actually disbursed remains large. Developing countries still face substantial obstacles in securing affordable financing for adaptation and mitigation efforts, especially as climate risks increase.

The meetings highlighted how geopolitical tensions hinder consensus among countries within multilateral organisations and restrict coordinated efforts. Consequently, the global system becomes more fragmented and less effective at delivering collective solutions to global issues.

For developing countries, including Bangladesh, the message is clear but critical. External factors are expected to remain restrictive. In this case, domestic policy decisions are even more vital. Boosting revenue collection, improving expenditure efficiency, and strengthening financial sector stability are crucial for resilience. Additionally, it is important to be more active in global forums to push for reforms that serve the interests of the Global South.

Without faster debt relief, increased concessional funding, and stronger climate support, low-income countries risk falling behind and facing prolonged stagnation. The current trend suggests that the most vulnerable nations could bear a disproportionate economic burden of adjustment in a fragmented global system.

The 2026 Spring Meetings highlight a key paradox of recent times: while global challenges grow more complex and urgent, the capacity for collective action is shrinking. The IMF and World Bank remain vital institutions, yet they cannot overcome the limitations imposed by geopolitical divisions and national interests alone. The path forward requires renewed dedication to multilateralism, significant institutional reforms, and commitments from major economies to foster a more inclusive and efficient global financial system. Without these changes, future Spring Meetings may continue to identify the same issues without providing the solutions the world desperately needs.

Fifty seats for women, but who will they really represent?

Farah Kabir
is country director of ActionAid Bangladesh.



FARAH KABIR

By mid-May, the parliament will have completed the process of filling the 50 reserved seats for women. On Monday, the ruling BNP announced the names of its candidates for the 36 seats allocated to it in proportion to its representation in parliament, while Jamaat e-Islami and others are expected to announce theirs soon. But in the wake of a mass uprising that intensified calls for parliamentary reforms—including increasing women's reserved seats and holding direct elections for them—this otherwise routine procedure has become a test of whether the country is willing to move from symbolic inclusion to meaningful power-sharing.

And unless the current system is fundamentally reimagined, it risks reinforcing the very inequalities it claims to dismantle.

Ensuring equal participation and representation of women in parliament is not just a matter of democratic justice; it is foundational to democracy itself. But representation must go beyond tokenistic gestures. It must reflect the full diversity of women's lived realities across class, ethnicity, religion, disability, and identity. Without this, inclusion becomes illusion, and democracy becomes exclusionary by design.

Globally, women remain underrepresented in political life, particularly in decision-making

roles. For women from historically marginalised communities, the barriers are even steeper. While many countries have adopted gender quotas to close the representation gap, few have meaningfully addressed the layered disadvantages faced by minority women. Intersectionality remains the missing piece in most political systems, including Bangladesh's, where structural inequalities continue to shape who gets to speak, who gets to lead, and who gets left behind.

The promise of gender parity in political leadership was set out decades ago, but progress has been uneven and, in many cases, superficial so far. Women continue to face structural barriers to participation: entrenched social norms, limited access to resources, and systemic discrimination within political parties themselves. These constraints shape their confidence, mobility, and access to political networks, ultimately limiting women's capacity to lead and to act in the best interests of their communities and the nation at large.

The system of reserved seats for women in parliament has undeniably increased numerical representation. But numbers alone do not equal power. Too often, women elected to these seats are treated as second-tier legislators—without direct constituencies, without independent mandates, and without meaningful control over resources.

Their political survival depends not on voters, but on party leadership, reinforcing a hierarchy that sidelines their agency.

In such a setting, accountability flows upwards, not outwards. When MPs owe their positions to party patronage rather than public trust, their ability and willingness to challenge party lines or advocate for transformative change is curtailed. Reserved seats, in this context, risk becoming a ceiling rather than a foundation—a mechanism that contains women's political empowerment rather than expanding it or strengthening democratic accountability.

Across the country, violence against women in politics, whether physical, psychological, or digital, remains pervasive. In the past, we have seen how women MPs have sometimes faced harassment, intimidation, and gendered attacks aimed at silencing them or diminishing their credibility. Without proper institutional safeguards and enforcement mechanisms, as well as cross-party commitments to address such abuses, the political arena will remain hostile terrain for many, deterring future generations of women leaders.

Media representation often compounds this problem. Women politicians are still judged less by their ideas than by their appearance, marital status, or personal lives. This trivialisation not only undermines individual leaders but also reinforces broader societal biases that discourage women from entering public life.

Given these realities, we must rethink how women are represented in politics, especially in parliament. Political parties must open up their nomination processes. At a minimum, they should be required to publish

transparent, merit-based criteria for selecting women to reserved seats, prioritising prior demonstration of leadership, community engagement, and public service over loyalty to or relationships with party elites. At the same time, reserved-seat MPs must be meaningfully connected to citizens through mandatory constituency linkages or structured public consultation mechanisms so that their accountability extends beyond party hierarchies to the people. And most importantly, we must move to direct elections for these seats.

Having cross-party women's caucuses is also important. These platforms can enable women MPs to collaborate across political divides, advancing a shared agenda on issues such as gender-based violence, equitable budgeting, and social inclusion. But caucuses cannot function on symbolism alone; they require institutional backing and recognition to influence legislation, oversight, and national priorities.

There are models to draw from. In some advanced democracies, women's parliamentary forums have shown that when women organise collectively, they can shift national priorities and hold systems accountable. Bangladesh does not lack capable, committed women leaders. What it lacks is a political structure that fully enables them to exercise power independently and effectively.

As the time for finalising reserved seats approaches, the public has a right to demand answers to the concerns surrounding these seats. The question is no longer whether enough women will be in parliament. The question is whether they will be allowed to matter, and sufficiently empowered to make a difference.