

For how long will traffickers go free?

Take action to discourage people from seeking irregular migration

A criminal justice system that drives victims to choose compromise over justice, allowing perpetrators to walk free repeatedly, cannot be the norm in a society that strives for fairness. Sadly, this pattern has become increasingly common in human trafficking cases in recent years, according to a report published in *The Daily Star*. Last year, anti-human trafficking prevention tribunals across the country disposed of 245 cases, of which 236 ended in acquittal. In 2024, the acquittal rate in disposed human trafficking cases was 94 percent; in 2023, it was 95 percent, and in 2022, all disposed cases ended in acquittal.

The report explains the reasons behind such high acquittal and low conviction rates. The arrest of perpetrators is often not the issue. Rather, it is the lack of documentary evidence from abroad, the absence of witnesses, and, most importantly, the long drawn-out legal process that exhausts the victims and their families. Thus, reaching a compromise with the perpetrators often becomes preferable to waiting for justice, which is physically, mentally, and financially draining as cases sometimes take four to five years just to reach trial.

Moreover, victims and their families, who have already spent huge sums to pay traffickers, either as ransom or as migration fees, often remain desperate to recover that money quickly. For them, enduring years of legal proceedings with no guarantee of compensation is too big a gamble. Many incur substantial debts to raise these funds, and the pressure to repay them pushes them towards settlement with the accused. In fact, such out-of-court settlements appear to be one of the key reasons behind the high acquittal rates.

The consequence of these acquittals is that perpetrators—members of trafficking networks—feel emboldened to repeat their crimes, as they see that the criminal justice system, albeit unintentionally, works in their favour. What we need, therefore, is an overhaul of the system. The government should establish more anti-human trafficking prevention tribunals, as the seven in divisional headquarters are insufficient to handle the large number of pending cases. This would also reduce costs for victims and their families who often have to travel long distances for hearings. Besides, the government must ensure stronger victim protection mechanisms and create a fund to support trafficking survivors and their families during the protracted legal battles. Coordination with foreign countries is also essential not only to obtain evidence but also to bring perpetrators to justice and curb irregular migration and trafficking.

Awareness alone will not deter people from seeking opportunities abroad through irregular and illegal channels. They need decent employment opportunities and the promise of a stable future at home. This calls for policies that equip young people with the right skills and provide access to capital, enabling them to build livelihoods in a supportive environment where they can thrive.

Measles response clearly not enough

Health ministry, DGHS must heed experts' inputs

Despite the ongoing nationwide vaccination campaign, the rise in measles cases appears undeterred. According to a recent report on Bangladesh's measles situation by the World Health Organization (WHO), a total of 19,161 suspected measles cases and 2,973 laboratory-confirmed measles cases were reported between March 15 and April 14 as well as 166 suspected measles-related deaths. At least 91 percent of the cases so far occurred among children aged one to 14 years. Concerningly, the WHO observed that the current outbreak indicates a reversal from Bangladesh's previous progress towards measles elimination and highlights increasing vulnerability to sustained transmission. Unfortunately, while there are measures being taken to address the outbreak, there are also several instances of neglect and a lack of proactivity from the health ministry and the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS).

For instance, a joint meeting of the National Immunization Technical Advisory Group (NITAG) and the National Verification Committee (NVC) was held on April 12, during which specialists put forward several urgent recommendations, including the formation of a multi-stakeholder committee comprising paediatricians, epidemiologists, virologists, laboratory specialists, and other relevant experts. However, the health minister reportedly remains uninformed about these urgent recommendations, according to a *Prothom Alo* report. More disappointingly, the DGHS director-general has been unavailable to provide answers to media queries regarding this crisis, while the Expanded Programme on Immunization (EPI) does not even have a spokesperson.

Another issue that came to light is the distinction between confirmed and "suspected" measles deaths. Apparently, for only those cases where samples from deceased children could be tested, the DGHS reported confirmed deaths. This means that even when children died of measles symptoms, their deaths were often not counted because the DGHS failed to test them because of an acute shortage of measles testing kits. Could this distinction between "confirmed" and "suspected" measles deaths imposed by the directorate indicate an attempt to downplay the severity of the current measles outbreak?

The worst aspect of this outbreak is that it was entirely preventable. Due to the irresponsibility of various stakeholders in the health sector across successive governments, parents are witnessing their children's deaths. Do those who helmed the health ministry and its adjacent institutions feel the burden of the ongoing tragedy? They should. And this burden should urge the current authorities to act before—not after—the consequences of their lax attitude are felt. To this end, the health ministry must go through the recommendations made by expert groups and the WHO, and form a multi-stakeholder committee immediately. Mass vaccination as a response is crucial, but also expected. What we also need is for our health institutions to be held accountable for their many oversights.

Energy crisis: Global problem, local failure



Kallol Mustafa is an engineer and writer who focuses on power, energy, environment, and development economics. He can be reached at kallol.mustafa@yahoo.com.

KALLOL MUSTAFA

More than a month and a half has passed since the Middle East war began to affect Bangladesh's energy sector. During this period, although the BNP government managed to import fuel oil and LNG from various sources, it has failed to ensure discipline in the distribution process across the country.

As a result, on the one hand, the government claims that there is sufficient stock, news reports highlight the arrival of successive fuel shipments, and there are accounts of Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC) depots overflowing with fuel. On the other hand, consumers' suffering shows no sign of easing. Long queues of motorcycles and private cars can be seen at filling stations. Public transport operations have declined due to diesel shortages. Farmers and fishermen are not getting enough diesel to meet their needs. Consequently, farmers are unable to irrigate their fields on time, and fishermen cannot go to rivers or the sea for fishing.

This means the fuel held by the government is not reaching people at the pumps. The government is failing to manage the fuel supply chain properly. A group is creating artificial scarcity and selling fuel at higher prices elsewhere, while ordinary people are deprived of access.

Meanwhile, electricity generation has also declined due to the energy crisis. Against a demand exceeding 16,000 megawatts, production stands at 13,000 to 14,000 megawatts. As a result, more than 2,000 megawatts of load shedding is being imposed daily, most of which is borne by rural populations. While load shedding is relatively lower in Dhaka and other cities, rural areas are experiencing 7-8 hours of outages.

Although the government had initially pledged not to raise fuel prices following the outbreak of war in the Middle East, it has recently done so for all types of fuel. Diesel prices have increased by 15 percent from Tk 100 to Tk 115, the highest in the country's history. Prices of other fuels have also reached record levels: octane has risen from Tk 120 to Tk 140, petrol from Tk 116 to Tk 135, and kerosene from Tk 112 to Tk 130.

According to economic principles, the demand for essential goods such as food, medicine, or fuel does not

decrease even when prices rise, because they are necessary for survival. For example, life-saving medicines such as insulin have no substitutes; patients are compelled to purchase them regardless of price increases. In economic terms, the price elasticity of demand for essential goods is typically very low—this is known as inelastic demand. Since demand does not fall, hoarding persists even when prices increase. In fact, hoarders may intensify stockpiling



A certain group may be contributing to creating artificial fuel scarcity within the country to maximise profit, resulting in long queues outside of fuel stations around the country.

FILE PHOTO: MEHEDI HASAN

in anticipation of selling at even higher prices. Therefore, increasing the price of such essential goods does not reduce shortages unless supply is increased; rather, it fuels inflation.

The same phenomenon is evident following the recent fuel price hike. Even before the increase, transport fares for goods carriers had risen due to the fuel crisis. After the price hike on April 18, fares have increased further. While diesel prices rose by 15 percent, field-level data indicate that truck and covered van fares have increased by up to 35 percent. In addition to higher transport costs, there is also a shortage of vehicles. As a result, the cost of transporting agricultural

produce—including grains, vegetables, raw materials, seasonal fruits, and processed foods—has increased. Not only agricultural goods, but also the cost of transporting industrial goods for import and export has risen. Diesel is also used in agricultural machinery, irrigation, electricity generation, and industry. Consequently, the cost of all goods and services, including agriculture and industry, will increase. While BPC may earn an additional Tk 700-800 crore per month due to the fuel price hike, the resulting increase in transport costs, commodity prices, and overall cost of living will amount to several thousand crore taka.

However, BPC is not a loss-making entity. It could have continued operations for several more months without raising prices by utilising the funds accumulated from past profits. Over the past 11 years, BPC has earned approximately Tk 52,000

crore in profit—an annual average of around Tk 4,500 crore. Employees have received substantial bonuses from these profits. This raises the question of whether BPC is behaving like a hoarder. Notably, following the price increase, BPC announced a 10-20 percent increase in supply.

Moreover, the government earns substantial revenue from BPC each year through duties and taxes—over Tk 125,000 crore in the past 11 years. In other words, when global oil prices were low, both BPC and the government benefited, but during times of crisis, the burden is shifted onto the public. The government has cited examples of fuel price increases

Digital cards and the reality of poverty in Bangladesh



Md Rakibul Hasan works with Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation (BSCIC). He can be reached at rakib4457@gmail.com.

MD RAKIBUL HASAN

According to the World Bank's April 2026 Bangladesh Development Update, the country's poverty rate increased to 21.4 percent in 2025 from 18.7 percent in 2022, adding 14 lakh more poor people in 2025. At present, the government's increasing number of digital welfare programmes—Family Card and Farmers' Card—appear to be well justified. But the question remains whether technology can meaningfully benefit those in the greatest need.

From an administrative perspective, the family card initiative is indeed a landmark project. It was launched on a trial basis last month in 14 upazilas, offering Tk 2,500 per month to over 40,000 women-headed households over four months. Simultaneously, the government is implementing 95 programmes under its social protection budget of Tk 1.26 lakh crore for the current fiscal year, accounting for 1.87 percent of the GDP.

Nonetheless, a fundamental problem within the economy has yet to be addressed. According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS),

inflation has been higher than wage growth for 50 consecutive months till March 2026, despite a gradual rise in pay since February 2022. The BBS also reported a reduction in real wages by 1.9 percent in FY 2024. Given this state of the economy, improving food distribution via digital cards may not be of much use unless the actual volume of assistance keeps pace with rising market prices.

A substantial portion of the 21.4 percent poverty rate comprises the new poor—once self-sufficient middle- and lower-middle-class families whose modest savings have been wiped out by successive shocks. The World Bank says that almost one-third of the population is still at risk of becoming poor because of a simple shock such as a natural calamity or illness.

The government's own family card implementation guidelines acknowledge a structural failure in the existing system: an estimated 22.25 percent of the actual poor are currently excluded from existing social programmes, while fragmentation and

weak inter-ministerial coordination cause persistent duplication among the 95 social protection schemes. A complete digital platform will be helpful for avoiding repetition, but it can result in exclusion in rural areas due to a lack of digital skills within the community, poor internet connectivity, and reliance on OTPs.

For digital welfare reform to make a lasting difference, upgraded systems must be paired with meaningful policy changes in three areas: adequate benefit levels, responsive targeting, and proper funding.

First, benefit amounts must be automatically adjusted in line with inflation, ideally using the Consumer Price Index or a food-specific basket relevant to low-income households. Countries such as Brazil—through its Bolsa Familia programme—and Argentina—through its Universal Child Allowance—have successfully applied such indexing.

Second, Bangladesh must move beyond static beneficiary lists. The family card's pilot design, using a dynamic Proxy Means Test and field surveys of 320,000 families across 14 wards, is a step in the right direction. The World Bank has repeatedly noted that dynamic registries linked to national identification systems significantly improve accuracy and the capacity to respond to economic shocks.

Third, present expenditure on core social safety net programmes is still small. Even with the government's

figure of 1.87 percent of GDP overestimates welfare expenditure because it includes public sector pension schemes and savings certificates. The actual rate is closer to 1.32 percent of GDP. In its family card programme guidelines, the government aims to increase social security spending to three percent of GDP by 2028. Meeting this goal requires more efficient revenue generation and resource allocation through targeted interventions rather than misdirected subsidies. It should be noted that, in 2022, the World Bank found that 35 percent of the wealthiest households received social protection benefits in Bangladesh, while half of the poorest families did not.

Technology can facilitate policymaking, but it cannot replace it. Although the family card system can be applied to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of service delivery, it is not sufficient to fully address increasing poverty. Unless policymakers take decisive steps towards fiscal reforms, lower inflation rates, increase in real wages, and job creation, technology alone won't do much for the poor in Bangladesh. Policymakers should refrain from falling into the trap of looking for technological fixes for socioeconomic woes. Any improvement in technology will not sustain itself for long due to rising inflation and falling wages, unless there are also good economic growth and strong political will.