

Chaos returns in Dhaka's underworld

Recent rise in criminal gangs' activities exposes systemic failure

The recent spate of violence by criminal groups across Dhaka points to a dangerous resurgence of organised crime in the capital that is reminiscent of underworld activities more than two decades ago. A recent report by *Prothom Alo* reveals that the weak law and order following the political changeover on August 5, 2024, opened doors for organised criminals to make a comeback. Many high-profile criminals secured bail at the time. Now, many of them have unleashed a wave of violence across the city to carve out territories to control.

Over the past 21 months, there have been reports of at least 23 incidents involving professional criminals. Among these incidents, several killings were carried out in public. In the latest incident, Khandokar Noyem Ahmed Titon, a top criminal who had been out on bail on August 13, 2024, following a long stay in prison, was gunned down by rivals in the New Market area on April 28. In many of these cases, the victims were targeted by their rivals in a bid to remove competition in "business." A number of them have some sort of political affiliation. Besides public execution, the criminal gangs are attacking establishments, issuing threats and making extortion demands—often via foreign numbers.

The report notes a pattern in these attacks that reflects a disturbing level of coordination and brazenness. Many of these incidents have been planned by fugitive kingpins abroad, communicated digitally, and executed by local gangs. Police say several local operatives are recruited from a pool of unemployed, vulnerable youths who are desperate for a source of income. These turf wars are rooted in a crime-driven economy where illegal income streams dictate power dynamics. Criminal groups are using violence as a tool to assert dominance, while ordinary businesspeople are silently enduring extortion demands, fearing retaliation and lacking confidence in legal protection.

A top police official confirmed to *Prothom Alo* that they were preparing an area-wise list of criminals and their associates, and would soon launch a "combing operation" against them. However, past experiences show that such operations often fail to root out this menace. Another failure on the police's part was weak monitoring of criminals who were out on bail. The lack of proper monitoring, combined with a gap in law enforcement since August 2024, provided these criminals a fertile ground to regroup.

Dismantling these organised crime networks, therefore, requires a practical approach. What we expect law enforcement agencies to prioritise is better intelligence coordination to identify the criminals and their locations, cutting off their reach from beyond the border, shutting down the flow of funds that facilitate such criminal activities, and ensuring airtight monitoring of bail-released criminals. Beyond that, the links binding these criminals and their political patronage must be severed. In addition, awareness campaigns and employment opportunities must be urgently planned to prevent jobless youths from turning to criminal gangs to make a living.

End the motherhood penalty at work

Investing in childcare is a must to stop mid-career exit of women

It is utterly frustrating that thousands of experienced women in the country are being pushed out of the workforce at the very stage when they are ready to assume leadership roles. A recent report by this daily shows how many women are forced to choose between their careers and caregiving responsibilities because of inadequate childcare support, inflexible workplaces, and unequal burdens at home. Over the past decades, the country has made significant progress in women's education, but that progress has not been fully translated into economic advancement in the absence of a conducive, women-friendly environment at workplaces.

The story of Feroza Ahmed, as reported in this daily, reflects the widespread reality of many women in the workforce. Despite having more than a decade of experience and a successful media career, she had to leave her job after the birth of her second child. While she successfully managed her department remotely during the pandemic, no hybrid or part-time option was offered to her when she needed it most. Such experiences are common across sectors, where motherhood often becomes a penalty for women.

According to a BRAC study, nearly 75 percent of 1,200 mid-career women now seeking employment had previously quit jobs due to domestic responsibilities or motherhood. Meanwhile, a Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics Time Use Survey found that married women perform 7.3 times more unpaid care work than men. These numbers expose how women continue to shoulder a disproportionate share of unpaid work while being expected to compete equally in the formal job market. The country loses valuable human capital as trained women professionals leave work. It is telling that less than seven percent of managerial roles in the country are currently held by women.

We therefore urge the government to formulate the necessary policies to create an environment where women do not have to leave their careers midway. Childcare and caregiving services must be expanded so that women from all economic backgrounds can access these services. Community-based and affordable day-care centres, certified caregiving services, workplace childcare facilities, flexible work arrangements, paid parental leave, and inclusive support for mothers of children with disabilities are all essential. Equally important is raising awareness and challenging the deep-rooted notion that caregiving is solely a woman's responsibility. A 2024 ILO report suggests that investing 3.99 percent of GDP in care sectors could create around 70 lakh jobs in Bangladesh by 2035, with 91 percent formal roles for women. If we are serious about economic growth, productivity, and equality, we must build a care economy that allows mothers to thrive at home and work.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

First Grammy awards presented

On this day in 1959, the first Grammy awards were presented, the winners included Ella Fitzgerald as well as Frank Sinatra and the Kingston Trio, among others.

Why are we paying so much for our metro rail?



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

The issue of abnormally high costs in metro rail construction in Bangladesh has long been a subject of discussion and criticism. During the tenure of the Awami League government, the metro rail line from Uttara to Motijheel (MRT-6), built with loans from the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), was alleged to have cost several times more per kilometre compared to similar projects constructed in other countries during the same period.

There was an expectation that after the fall of the AL government, the practice of excessive spending in infrastructure projects like metro rail would come to an end. However, as reported by *Prothom Alo*, for two new metro routes in Dhaka, Japanese contractors are now quoting costs per kilometre more than double those of the Uttara-Motijheel line. The cost per kilometre for MRT-6 was Tk 1,574 crore, whereas for the planned MRT-1 from Kamalapur to the airport to Purbachal and MRT-5 (North) from Hemayetpur to Bhatar, the estimated cost per kilometre would be Tk 3,618 crore. Such high costs will not only increase fare pressure on passengers but also add to the country's debt burden.

A significant portion of Bangladesh's infrastructure development projects relies on foreign loans. These lending agencies are often referred to as "development partners," and their loans as "assistance." However, there is an ongoing debate about whether these loans truly support the recipient country's development or primarily serve to expand the lender country's business and exports.

In many cases, institutions from the lending country are involved in planning the project, conducting feasibility studies, consultations, and even implementation as contractors. Most procurement is also sourced from the lender country. This creates a conflict of interest, undermines objective cost assessment, and leads to inflated project costs. While corporations from the lending country benefit, the people of the borrowing



FILE PHOTO: STAR

For two new metro routes in Dhaka, Japanese contractors quoted costs per kilometre more than double those of the Uttara-Motijheel line.

country bear the burden due to high costs and questionable feasibility. Bangladesh's metro rail projects are a prime example of this dynamic.

JICA finances metro rail construction in Bangladesh. A Japanese consultancy firm, Nippon Koei, plays a key role in preparing and evaluating tender documents. According to a report by *Prothom Alo*, loan and tender conditions appear to be structured to make it easier for Japanese companies to secure contracts, effectively excluding competitors from other countries.

For instance, MRT-1 tender documents require the use of the "one-pass joint" method for tunnel construction, which is favourable to Japanese contractors. Similarly, only specific types of Japanese steel, produced by only three companies in Japan, are allowed for bridge construction. Even if contractors wish to use equivalent steel from other countries, they must obtain approval from the Japan Road Association.

Due to these conditions, even open tenders fail to attract contractors from outside Japan. Typically, only two or three Japanese firms participate in

the final bidding process, and their quoted prices must be accepted. As a result, metro rail construction costs under JICA financing are several times higher than comparable projects in neighbouring countries.

For example, MRT-6 in Dhaka had cost Tk 1,574 crore per kilometre. In contrast, similar elevated metro systems in India cost about Tk 150

crore per kilometre, and underground systems cost up to Tk 450 crore per kilometre. In other countries, costs are also significantly lower. According to an analysis by Dhaka Mass Transit Company Limited (DMTCL) cited by *Prothom Alo*, metro construction costs per kilometre are Tk 672 crore in Turkey, Tk 448 crore in the Ivory Coast, Tk 784 crore in South Korea's Seoul, and Tk 740 crore in Thailand's Bangkok. However, as already stated above, under the current JICA conditions for MRT Lines 1 and 5, costs in Dhaka are projected at Tk 3,618 crore per kilometre, which is much higher than global benchmarks and more than double that of MRT-6.

India also implements infrastructure projects using foreign loans, but does not accept conditions that undermine competitive bidding. As a result, local contractors often secure contracts, keeping costs lower. For example, metro construction in Patna, Bihar—also financed by JICA—is being executed by Indian contractors at a cost of Tk 450 crore per kilometre for underground sections. In contrast, Bangladesh's acceptance of restrictive loan conditions creates a severe

conflict of interest in which the same country's entities plan, finance, study, consult, and execute the project. JICA justifies higher costs by citing superior quality standards, arguing that higher upfront costs reduce maintenance and repair expenses in the long run. This argument is unconvincing. First, if JICA can maintain quality in Patna at Tk 450 crore per kilometre, why is Bangladesh's cost projected to be eight times higher? Second, according to a DMTCL report, the Uttara-Motijheel metro system has 45 defects and deficiencies, which contradict claims of superior quality. These include 10 issues in signalling and telecommunications, 16 in electrical systems, 10 in civil engineering, and nine related to trains and associated systems. The report also notes water leakage at 89 locations across 16 stations. Trains sometimes fail to stop precisely at designated points. Rust has appeared on tracks in depot areas. Sensor malfunctions have disrupted operations. Air conditioning systems have frequently failed. Ticket vending machines and energy storage systems often break down. Due to substandard bearing pads and design flaws, a bearing pad detached in the Farmgate area, causing the death of a pedestrian.

JICA also attributes cost escalation to expanded project scope, currency depreciation, and rising material costs. However, to verify these claims, open competitive bidding is essential. Currency fluctuations and global price increases affect all contractors, not just Japanese firms. Only through genuine international competition can the true cost be determined.

There is no doubt that the metro rail is necessary to address traffic congestion in a densely populated capital like Dhaka. However, constructing such infrastructure at abnormally inflated costs is unacceptable. There should be no obligation to accept unreasonable conditions out of gratitude towards a foreign lender. Loan repayments ultimately come from taxpayers, and higher construction costs translate into higher fares for the public.

Therefore, metro rail projects must ensure open tendering and fair competition, control excessive costs compared to global standards, and rely on domestic experts and institutions in decision-making. Otherwise, under the guise of development, public funds will continue to serve the commercial interests of foreign entities rather than the people of Bangladesh.

Without NBR reform, the revenue crisis will only deepen



Md Asaduz Zaman is a journalist at The Daily Star. He can be reached at asaduz.zamanjbd@gmail.com.

MD ASADUZ ZAMAN

Throughout the interim government's tenure, reforming the country's revenue sector drew intense attention. The issue even spilled onto the streets, echoing through corridors of power, and igniting debates across bureaucracies. The "Revenue Policy and Revenue Management Ordinance 2025" was finally promulgated on May 12 and revised on September 01 last year. However, under the new BNP government, the fate of the revenue sector reforms has become uncertain as the parliament failed to ratify the ordinance within the constitutionally mandated 30-day period since its first sitting on March 12.

The ordinance aims to separate tax policymaking from tax administration to enhance efficiency, accountability, and revenue mobilisation by bifurcating the National Board of Revenue (NBR). This reform push evolved from Bangladesh's persistently low tax-to-GDP ratio, which hovers below seven percent, one of the lowest in the world, even among South Asian peers. Multilateral lenders, including the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, alongside businesses, economists, and policy analysts, have long advocated for such a structural separation.

The ordinance, however, drew criticism as the formulation procedure lacked proper consultation with

stakeholders. At the onset, NBR staff staged an unprecedented demonstration across the country over restructuring the revenue administration and sharing top posts between revenue and admin cadres. Although the ordinance was later revised, it could not be implemented due to a bureaucratic wrangle and a writ petition filed by an admin cadre official.

Following its lapse in the parliament, the incumbent finance minister, Amir Khosru Mahmud Chowdhury, said that his government would complete the separation of revenue policy and administration after further review. He labelled the ordinance as half-baked, but did not clarify what a more judicious reform would entail. Last week, a nine-member panel was formed to re-examine the ordinance and its amendment.

Yet, a critical question remains: is there any immediate prospect of reviving meaningful revenue sector reforms under the new government?

Reform is crucial for an already strained revenue system with limited fiscal space. In fact, the failure or uncertainty of the NBR bifurcation may even accentuate the impact of external shocks. For instance, uncertainty has arisen about the final tranche of IMF's \$4.7 billion loan programme (later revised to \$5.5

billion). There have been some media reports about IMF loan suspension due to uncertainty of major reforms, including the NBR bifurcation, but the government denied such claims.

While financial support from multilateral lenders remains uncertain at this point, Bangladesh's low tax-to-GDP ratio continues to severely constrain the government's ability to finance essential public services, from infrastructure and energy to health and education. As expenditure needs rise, driven by subsidies, debt servicing, and social protection, the gap between revenue and spending continues to widen.

On top of that, the ongoing US-Israel war on Iran has dealt a double blow to the country's revenue sector. Bangladesh is already "out of pocket by nearly \$2 billion" as soaring energy import costs force it to rely on volatile and expensive spot markets amid disrupted supply chains. Meanwhile, the revenue administration is facing a massive Tk 2.67 lakh crore shortfall in the current fiscal year. This has forced the government to rely more on bank borrowing, both domestically and externally. Increased domestic borrowing risks crowding out private sector credit, while external borrowing raises concerns about debt sustainability, especially in a volatile global environment.

Apart from addressing these financial issues, the separation stipulated in the ordinance is also important for ensuring efficiency and governance. The current structure of the NBR combines policy formulation and tax administration within a single entity, creating conflicts of interest and limiting accountability. Separating these functions could improve transparency, reduce discretion, and strengthen enforcement.

Also, Bangladesh's tax system remains narrow and uneven, with a heavy reliance on indirect taxes such as VAT, which disproportionately affect lower- and middle-income groups. As per the reform recommendations, a modernised revenue framework could be formed to help broaden the tax base, improve compliance, and make the system more equitable.

Finally, the reform could pave the way for a more research-driven and participatory tax policy framework, replacing the current system, which is widely seen as inefficient and slow to respond to emerging economic needs. A stronger institutional setup would allow evidence-based policymaking, greater stakeholder consultation, and more adaptive tax measures aligned with changing domestic and global economic realities.

This is why the argument for separation matters. An autonomous tax authority would not magically raise revenue overnight, but it could begin to change incentives. In fact, delaying reform carries mounting economic costs. Without a stronger and more efficient revenue system, the government's ability to sustain growth, manage fiscal pressures, and respond to external shocks will remain constrained.

As reforms hang in the balance, the implicit costs become higher for Bangladesh. Had the government started the reform programmes sooner, it would have strengthened revenue mobilisation. The government should, therefore, publish a credible reform roadmap to rebuild trust among multilateral lenders and local stakeholders, since uncertain reform may erode credibility.

The price of inaction is clear. The question is whether policymakers are willing to pay it.