

Measles disaster warrants answers

Govt must open inquiry to establish individual responsibility

Measles has killed more than 300 children since mid-March and infected more than 47,000 across Bangladesh. This is an avoidable disaster that demands accountability from interim government leaders who chose to dismantle a functional system without the competence to rebuild it. The country's measles vaccination coverage rose steadily for two decades, becoming an international model for low-income countries. That record has now been squandered with shocking negligence by the past interim government.

The failure follows a depressingly familiar pattern: a new administration, suspicious of its predecessor's institutional choices, opts to restructure it. The Health, Population and Nutrition Sector Programme—a framework in place since 1998—was scrapped in March 2025 without an adequate exit plan. "Bridging projects" meant to cover the transition were not approved until November 2025. Vaccine procurement stalled. Medicine supplies to more than 14,000 community clinics dwindled, and the buffer stocks that had provided a critical safety margin were exhausted. Furthermore, Bangladesh had procured vaccines through Unicef under a well-established direct procurement method. Officials changed this arrangement, directing that half the supply be obtained through open tender—despite having no experience with the process and despite explicit warnings against the change from Unicef. Not a single vaccine arrived through either of the new methods.

In public health, as in construction, you do not tear down a load-bearing wall before you have something in place to hold up the roof. The interim administration violated this principle. It suspended operational plans, eliminated the associated manpower structures, shifted funding to a revenue budget requiring approval from multiple cabinet committees, and then appeared surprised when the system seized up. Prof Sayedur Rahman, special assistant to the chief adviser for health in the interim administration, says officials were "not accustomed to the new system" and that "bureaucratic inertia" caused the delays. He claims that Unicef's warning reached him only on December 30, 2025, leaving little time to act. But warnings of declining coverage had been sounded by epidemiologists long before that. A nationwide supplementary measles campaign—already overdue since 2020—was pushed back to April 2026. That decision alone reflects a startling misreading of urgency.

The human consequences are painful. Among confirmed measles patients, 74 percent had received neither dose of the vaccine while 14 percent had received only one. These are children who fell through a gap the health ministry itself created and then failed to close. Two additional campaigns—for deworming tablets and Vitamin A supplements—have also remained suspended for over a year, a disruption experts believe worsened children's vulnerability to infection.

Reform requires contingency planning and recognition that failure in the health sector is measured in lives harmed or lost. The interim government's actions shockingly fell short. The lack of accountability warrants a probe committee—one with the authority to establish individual responsibility. The deaths of children are tragic. Those who dismantled this programme must answer for each of these deaths.

Form a permanent media commission

BNP's pledge must translate into urgent, credible action

The urgent need for reform in our media sector has once again come to the fore, as journalists renew their calls for a permanent media commission to enforce self-regulation of the media industry. The BNP government made an election pledge to deliver this reform, but implementation of that promise is yet to begin. The information minister has now assured that the government will "definitely" move forward with such a plan. While we welcome this intent, our experience suggests that assurances alone are not enough; the government must act quickly to implement it.

Successive governments have historically regulated media, sometimes creating undue pressure. A properly constituted commission could bring all stakeholders, including the government, under a transparent framework. However, the proposal to form yet another consultative committee risks unnecessary delay, since the groundwork has already been done. As senior journalists have noted, the Media Reform Commission has already submitted detailed recommendations on structural reforms and journalists' rights. These must not be left unimplemented. The government should clearly state which recommendations it will implement immediately and which it will pursue in phases. Without such clarity, the initiative risks being stalled by indecision and bureaucracy.

Moreover, the blurring of lines between ownership and editorial independence continues to erode public trust, particularly when news is suppressed or altered to serve vested interests. This underscores the need for codes of conduct for both owners and editors. However, enforcement must not fall into government hands, as that could open the door for abuse. The media must take primary responsibility for upholding its own standards, with an independent body ensuring accountability.

Furthermore, there has been no visible progress in long-pending cases involving attacks on journalists and media institutions, such as the Sagar-Runi murder case and the attacks on *The Daily Star* and *Prothom Alo*. Sadly, the former case has been delayed indefinitely, while the home minister's two-month deadline in the latter case has already expired. These cases must not be allowed to linger any further. The government must also ensure that no journalist remains in prison for their work, and that those detained on false charges are released promptly, while genuine allegations are addressed through due legal process. We expect nothing less from the BNP government.

The call for a permanent media commission is about restoring trust, protecting journalists, and strengthening democratic institutions. If the government is serious, it must move beyond rhetoric with a clear roadmap, swift reforms, the release of unjustly detained journalists, and accountability for past abuses. Finally, the government should never see the press as an adversary. Its respect for press freedom must be reflected in laws, policies, and action.

Farmers of the haors are dying of despair



NO STRINGS ATTACHED

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AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

A plateful of rice may be considered an unhealthy indulgence for those of us with sedentary lifestyles. Yet the Bangalee spirit cannot be satisfied in any other way. Despite health warnings, we savour each morsel of that white, fluffy carbohydrate, a staple for most of the population. Rarely do we, however, think of the hands behind it all—the endless hours spent planting, cultivating, threshing, and drying before the grain finally makes its way to our kitchens. Most of us urbanites remain distanced, physically and emotionally, from the farmers who break their backs to grow food, not just rice, for the nation.

How many of us know, for example, that acres upon acres of Boro paddy in the haor region have been submerged in water after torrential rains even before the monsoon? It is just as unlikely that we know about the farmers who, after helplessly watching their precious crops ruined, have collapsed and died of heartbreak. Fifty-five-year-old Ahad Mia of Nasirnagar upazila in Brahmanbaria is one of them, who could not bear the sight of his ready-to-harvest paddy submerged in sudden rain. On Saturday, he lost consciousness on the spot and died soon after, his final thoughts perhaps of his family, how they would survive, or how they would repay the loan he had taken to cultivate the land.

Several other farmers in the area have also fallen ill after experiencing similar losses. Meanwhile, in Kishoreganj, Akhter Hossain, a 60-year-old farmer, also collapsed and died upon seeing his submerged paddy field in Austagram haor.

Farmers in the haor districts are clearly in a desperate situation. Heavy pre-monsoon rainfall over the past week or so has been threatening to destroy their painstakingly grown paddy just before harvest. Breached embankments and an acute shortage of harvesters and labourers have made saving the crops all the more challenging.

The haor region contributes about 20 percent of the country's Boro rice production, highlighting the importance of this harvest for our food security. This year, in seven haor districts, Boro has been cultivated on 4.55 lakh hectares of land, while harvesting has been completed on 3.24 lakh hectares so far, according to sources at the Department of



Acres upon acres of Boro paddy in the haor region have been submerged in water after torrential rains even before the monsoon. PHOTO: SHEKH NASIR

Agricultural Extension's (DAE) Field Services Wing. However, heavy rainfall between April 26 and May 2 has submerged 46,730 hectares—or 10.27 percent of the total haor land—which underscores the gravity of the situation.

This aligns with a decade-long trend where, as per a report by this daily, early pre-monsoon rainfall has been excessive in the northeastern haor basin, triggering flash floods that destroy crops faster than farmers can harvest them. In 2017 and 2022, floods destroyed almost all their Boro harvest. The recent heavy rainfall and subsequent effects are a painful reminder of those bleak days.

Farmers are reportedly facing multiple hurdles at once. While they

have managed to harvest a large part of the Boro paddy in haor districts, they are struggling with the rest. Harvester machines do not function in water, and farmers are finding it difficult to secure labourers willing to work in watery fields. Labour has, moreover, become too costly—around Tk 2,000 to harvest paddy from one katha—leaving many farmers with virtually nothing. Even when the paddy is harvested, it is often wet and difficult to sell in the market except at heavily discounted prices, which again means little to no return for farmers.

The situation is worse for those who have taken out loans before cultivation. How will they repay their debts? How will they feed their families? These questions are pushing many into utter despair. Early rains and flash floods are not new phenomena. Yet every year,

appeared in some areas; continuous rainfall threatens to weaken or damage others. Authorities are now on alert to protect newly constructed dykes through regular monitoring, but could this not have been done before the rains began?

According to a DAE official, measures were taken from April, including the appointment of 11 civil service officials in Sunamganj and three more in Netrokona, Habiganj, and Kishoreganj to bring in labourers from other districts and mobilise local support for harvesting. Given that the current government has only been in office for over two months, these are encouraging signs. However, the government must learn from this experience and ensure that these and other protective measures are implemented well in advance of rainy seasons in the future.

Time, however, is running out fast for the haor farmers. Rivers continue to swell, and weather forecasts predict more rain, leaving the remaining unharvested rice crops at risk. Making matters worse, there has been an unusual frequency of lightning of late, claiming 38 lives across the country in April—more than half of them farmers and labourers working in paddy fields. This is naturally discouraging the latter from working in such dangerous conditions.

The prime minister has recently announced that the government will support affected farmers for three months. Already, dryer machines for wet grain are being mobilised, according to the DAE. These emergency measures may provide some relief, but farmers' hardships have been persistent and deeply structural. With rising fertiliser and fuel costs, driven mostly by the war in Middle East, farmers are already grappling with high production expenses. Now, with the catastrophe caused by early rains, many are being forced to sell their crops at low prices, incurring further losses. The government must ensure that farmers receive fair prices for their produce.

The coming months will be difficult, especially for those who have already lost so much. So, government support must be sustained year-round and substantial enough to provide farmers with a basic sense of security. Safeguarding those who feed the nation is something that we cannot afford to fail at.

INTERNATIONAL DAY OF THE MIDWIFE

More midwives can reduce reliance on unnecessary C-section



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May 5 marks the International Day of the Midwife, with this year's theme being "One Million More Midwives." For Bangladesh, this is a call to complete a journey that began with great promise. The country has earned global recognition as a "Champion Country" for its rapid progress in reducing maternal mortality and establishing a professional midwifery cadre to offer high-quality sexual and reproductive health services, including safe, respectful maternity care. As the lead technical partner in this journey, UNFPA has been standing alongside the Government of Bangladesh for over 15 years, helping to build international-standard curricula, faculty, and regulatory frameworks that underpin this vital profession. Today, over 11,000 midwives in Bangladesh have graduated and are licensed to work.

Despite the strong foundational work, progress in deploying these professionals is taking too long. Maternal and newborn death rates still remain high, with approximately 4,000 women losing their lives every year during childbirth in 2023. The commitments made to midwifery in Bangladesh have yet to translate into enough professionals standing with women to save lives. To regain momentum, we must recognise that investing in midwives is not a health expense but an investment in

women's lives and a development best-buy to build a healthy, resilient, and prosperous nation. Here, we can cite what experts call the "triple impact" of midwifery.

The impact on health: Quality over medicalisation

The UNFPA's technical expertise ensures that midwives are trained to international standards, capable of providing 90 percent of essential sexual and reproductive health services. When midwives lead care, we see a dramatic reduction in unnecessary medical interventions. Increasingly, we see health facilities over-medicalising childbirth. To counter this, we need midwives who can champion safe, natural delivery. By reducing the reliance on unnecessary Caesarean sections and other surgical interventions, midwives not only improve the health of mothers and newborns but also protect families from staggering out-of-pocket medical expenses.

The impact on the economy: A 16-fold return

The economic case for midwifery is undeniable. Midwives provide a cost-effective pathway to serving the hardest-to-reach communities, ensuring that high-quality care is available at the primary level closest to where women live and not in facilities

that are overburdened with critically ill patients. Global evidence shows that in countries like Bangladesh, every dollar invested in midwifery can yield a return of up to 16 times that amount. By preventing long-term disabilities in newborns and keeping mothers healthy and productive, midwives directly contribute to the growth of Bangladesh's human capital.

The impact on resilience: Climate and crisis

As one of the world's most climate-vulnerable nations, Bangladesh faces constant threats from cyclones, floods, and rising sea levels. When disasters strike and hospitals become inaccessible, midwives remain steadfast with women and adolescents in their communities. UNFPA and the Government of Bangladesh have worked together to ensure midwives are the first responders to natural disasters and climate change, ensuring that a woman's right to a safe birth is not disrupted during climate-related crises. Whether in a remote coastal village or the crowded refugee camps of Cox's Bazar, midwives provide the continuity of care that saves lives.

For these benefits to be realised, a midwife needs professional training and a supportive workplace. This means she must be educated in accredited institutions, licensed, fairly paid, and given the authority to practise the full range of her skills. A midwife needs an enabling environment to perform her work of saving lives and bringing dignity to women. In practical terms, this means that health facilities need to be equipped with water and sanitation, electricity, communication and refrigeration equipment, and other required supplies. Life-saving maternal drugs and contraceptives must be available continuously

without disruption.

The country needs an estimated 25,000 midwifery posts in primary health centres by 2030. The systematic creation of midwifery posts and the rapid deployment of these professionals into primary health centres represent the critical next chapter of this success story. Accelerating this process is not just a health priority; it is a vital step towards strengthening national resilience. Until every woman in Bangladesh, regardless of her income or location, has access to high-quality midwifery care, the country remains at risk of falling behind in meeting its ambitious development goals.

Investing in midwives means investing for the rights, dignity, and equity of every woman in Bangladesh. We need more midwives in posts, in health facilities, and in our communities. By placing just three midwives in each of the 3,500 union-level health facilities across the country, we can create a 24/7 lifeline for mothers. These facilities already exist; the infrastructure is there. By bringing midwives into these local hubs, we can move life-saving care from a distant hospital directly to each village's doorstep.

The advancements achieved to date are a testament to the efforts of the government and people of Bangladesh. UNFPA will continue to support the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare in ensuring these new posts for midwives are filled by highly skilled professionals who are supported by a workplace that values their expertise.

When we empower midwives, we save women's lives and the lives of their newborns. What better way can there be to secure a healthy and bright future of Bangladesh for generations to come?