

The unemployment crisis is turning youth migration into a deadly gamble



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On May 2, 28-year-old Md Riyad Rashid from Kishoreganj was killed in a Ukrainian drone attack near the Russia-Ukraine border while serving with Russian forces. His friend Limon Dutta, who was injured in the same attack, informed the family and said another Bangladeshi had died beside him. Riyad had gone to Russia in 2024 believing he would work for a company. His parents never imagined their son would end up becoming a soldier on a distant frontline, let alone embracing such a tragic fate.

According to a March 2026 joint report by rights groups Fortify Rights and Truth Hounds, which draws on Ukrainian official data and survivor testimonies, at least 104 Bangladeshis had been recruited into the Russian military by February 2026, with at least 34 confirmed killed. The actual number is undoubtedly higher, as news of deaths often reaches families through informal networks such as friends or colleagues, rather than official channels.

Unlike previous instances where some Bangladeshis joined foreign conflicts for ideological or religious reasons—such as the Khilafat Movement, the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan, or ISIS—the current wave is driven overwhelmingly by economic deception rather than conviction. Many are lured by recruitment agencies promising legitimate jobs in construction, logistics, or manufacturing, only to have their passports confiscated and be forced into combat. A BRAC Migration Programme report highlighted how legal migration channels

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have been twisted into forced recruitment, while some are even trafficked through third countries using Umrah visas or other deceptive routes. Social media posts glorifying life in the Russian army have added another layer of false allure.

among the most affected.

Closer to home, the Andaman Sea and Bay of Bengal routes offer no comfort. These mixed voyages, often carrying both Rohingya and Bangladeshi nationals, made 2025 the deadliest year on record in South and Southeast Asia, with nearly 900 Rohingya deaths or disappearances. In April, another boat capsized off Teknaf, leaving around 250 people feared dead or missing. Families sell

remain in low-paid, insecure informal jobs, reflecting a deep skills mismatch between education and labour market needs. In this gap, brokers and migration agents thrive, making emigration feel like the only viable path for many.

The crisis is especially acute in rural areas where opportunities are limited and state presence uneven. Most migrants reportedly come from districts such as Cumilla,

has further reinforced the perception that a secure and predictable future at home is increasingly uncertain.

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The United Kingdom's decision earlier this month to sanction the Bangladeshi agency "Dream Home Travels" and "Tours Ltd" should shame us into action. The UK accused the firm of deceiving migrants with promises of safe jobs in Russia, only to funnel them into Moscow's war machine. If a foreign government can identify and penalise such networks operating from our soil, why have our own law enforcement and intelligence agencies struggled to do the same with the urgency and transparency required?

Equally troubling is the diplomatic silence. While India and Nepal have issued formal demarches to Moscow seeking the discharge and repatriation of their nationals, Bangladesh's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare have remained largely passive. There has been no visible high-level protest, sustained diplomatic pressure, or public demand for the return of those still trapped on the frontlines. This absence of accountability deepens the sense of abandonment felt by affected families.

We have expanded higher education impressively in numbers, yet failed to ensure quality or relevance. Technical and vocational training remains underfunded and stigmatised. Remittances hit a record \$32.8 billion in 2025 but this success has become a dangerous crutch. We celebrate the remittance inflow while ignoring the human cost of lives lost and families broken. Longstanding governance failures—political short-termism, weak anti-trafficking enforcement, poor coordination, and insufficient rural awareness—complete this tragic picture. We have left too many gaps for traffickers and foreign recruiters to exploit.

Our young men are not pawns to be sacrificed in someone else's war, nor bodies to be counted among the drowned. They are our asset: a vast youthful population that should be powering a real demographic dividend. Instead, through our collective policy failures across governments, we have turned too many of them into vulnerable exports.

It is time we faced this difficult truth with honesty and courage. We must create quality jobs for the millions of new entrants each year, overhaul education to match skills with demand, reform migration with strict verification and fee controls, dismantle trafficking networks regardless of their origin or power, and—most crucially—restore stable governance, rule of law, and assertive diplomacy so that our youth, especially in rural Bangladesh, can believe in a future here at home. Only then can families stop receiving news that no parent should ever have to hear. The blood of Riyad Rashid and so many others demand nothing less.



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

Russia's desperate need for manpower in its prolonged war of attrition has intensified this exploitation. The number of work permits issued to Bangladeshis by Russia surged to 9,300 in 2025—more than triple the 2,800 issued in 2024. This happened as Bangladesh sent over 11 lakh workers abroad in 2025, an 11.8 percent rise from the previous year. Intelligence assessments suggest Russia planned to recruit at least 18,500 more foreigners in 2026, with Bangladesh remaining a key target.

These deaths on Ukrainian battlefields, however, form only one chapter in a larger tragedy, as the same economic desperation pushes thousands of our young men onto even more perilous paths. In 2025, at least 24,318 Bangladeshi nationals reached Europe through irregular sea and land routes—a staggering 59 percent increase from 2024—making them one of the top nationalities on the dangerous Mediterranean crossings. Hundreds have perished from drowning, starvation, or exhaustion. Early 2026 has already pushed Mediterranean migrant deaths close to 1,000, with Bangladeshis

their last pieces of land, take crushing loans, and pay brokers Tk 8-16 lakh or more, all driven by the belief that there is no future left for them in their own country.

These heart-wrenching losses—sons dying in foreign wars, bodies lost at sea, families left in eternal grief and debt—are not mere accidents of geography or the cunning of distant traffickers. They are the direct, predictable result of our own long-standing failures in economic planning, education, migration governance, and political leadership. We have created a nation that exports its youth's vulnerability.

At the core lies a persistent youth employment crisis that has eroded hope for millions. According to the BBS Labour Force Survey 2024, unemployment rose to 3.66 percent from 3.35 percent in 2023, with literate unemployment at 4.17 percent versus 1.39 percent among the non-literate. Youth unemployment is far higher at 8.07 percent (ages 15-29), while 20.3 percent are neither in education, nor employment, nor training. Of the 26.24 lakh unemployed, 8.85 lakh are graduates. Many who do work

Chattogram, Tangail, Brahmanbaria, Noakhali, and Chandpur. In 2022, Cumilla alone accounted for 105,997 migrant workers, or 9.52 percent of the national total. Migration has become deeply normalised across generations, with local economies increasingly dependent on remittances. Returnees often reshape social hierarchies through new homes, land purchases, and visible consumption. For many young men, going abroad is now seen as a socially respected career path, turning personal aspiration into collective pressure and entire regions into labour-exporting zones.

Since the 2024 July uprising, desperation has deepened further. Hopes that political transition would bring a reverse brain drain and attract skilled Bangladeshis back to rebuild have largely faded. Instead, migration pressure has increased, with more people attempting to leave through both legal and irregular channels. Alongside economic factors, growing distrust in political stability, governance, and the rule of law has become a key driver. The post-uprising breakdown in law and order, along with rising mob violence,

INTERNATIONAL NURSES DAY

For nurses, respect must go beyond words



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Today, on the occasion of International Nurses Day, we remember the contribution of nurses with deep respect. Without them, the entire healthcare system would be almost unimaginable. When a patient is admitted to a hospital, the first person to stand by them is usually a nurse. In the middle of the night, when fever rises, when saline is administered, when pain becomes unbearable, it is the nurses who stand beside the patients' bed. Yet, we know little about their lives, their labour, and their sacrifice, let alone remember them.

Nursing is more than just a profession; it is a responsibility, a commitment to service. Florence Nightingale's birth anniversary on May 12 is observed worldwide as International Nurses Day. The woman who cared for wounded soldiers with a lamp in her hand on the battlefield of the Crimean War paved the way for millions of nurses today. In Bangladesh, too, nurses continue their work with the same dedication and commitment, often without adequate recognition or benefits.

Modern nursing in Bangladesh began in the late 19th century, when missionary hospitals first introduced trained nursing services. After the partition of India, some institutional training developed during the Pakistan period, though it remained insufficient and unstructured. Following

independence in 1971, efforts were made to organise the nursing profession as part of building a new healthcare system.

Today, the Bangladesh Nursing and Midwifery Council regulates nursing education and practice in the country. There are over 300 public and private nursing institutes offering three-year diploma and two- to four-year BSc programmes. However, considering the country's vast population, the number of trained nurses remains far below the standard number recommended by the World Health Organization: there are only 0.7 nurses per 1,000 people in the country, according to 2023 World Bank estimates.

Let's consider how this low ratio impacts our healthcare system. Doctors diagnose and prescribe medication and treatment, but nurses remain on duty round the clock ensuring timely medication administration, monitoring saline flow, and observing for any new symptoms. Their vigilance often makes the difference between life and death. This is especially significant in the context of Bangladesh where the number of doctors is still insufficient and access to specialised care in rural areas is limited. Nurses contribute directly to reducing maternal mortality, managing immunisation programmes, and providing family planning services.

They provide more than physical care. A patient lying in a hospital bed, overwhelmed by fear, pain, and loneliness, finds comfort in a kind word, a gentle touch, or simple reassurance. Nurses provide this every day. In medical science, this is known as "holistic care"—treating the patient as a whole, not just the disease.

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out several tasks simultaneously—such as administering injections, recording vital signs, comforting patients, and preparing patient files—which requires not only medical knowledge but also patience, empathy, and mental strength. But the working conditions for nurses in this country are riddled with problems. Salaries and benefits are often inadequate, especially in private hospitals where many nurses work long hours for minimal pay. Irregular shifts, lack of weekly

leave, and insufficient rest negatively impact their physical and mental well-being.

There are also social challenges. Many still believe that studying nursing lowers a person's social status. This discourages talented students from entering the profession, creating a vicious cycle: an insufficient number of nurses leads to heavier workloads, making the profession less attractive, which scares off potential nurses. Breaking this cycle requires a change in our attitude. People forget that during the Covid pandemic, nurses stood on the front lines, risking their lives. Many were infected, and some even lost their lives. They stayed beside patients when families could not, holding their hands in their final moments. Their sacrifices must not be forgotten.

Meanwhile, nurses must update their skills to keep up with new technologies, treatments, and diseases. ICU nurses manage ventilators, operating room nurses maintain strict sterilisation, and dialysis nurses understand kidney functions. Continuous training and higher education opportunities are essential. In Bangladesh, opportunities for master's and PhD-level nursing education remain limited. Without research, the scientific advancement of nursing is not possible. In developed countries, nurse practitioners can diagnose illnesses and prescribe medication independently. Introducing such roles in Bangladesh could significantly improve healthcare access, especially in remote areas.

One positive aspect is the growing global demand for Bangladeshi nurses. Countries in the Middle East, Europe, and North America face severe nursing shortages. If Bangladesh can ensure quality training and English proficiency, this sector could generate substantial remittance. The

Philippines currently leads in global nurse exports. Bangladesh has the potential to follow. However, increasing numbers alone is not enough; quality of work must also be ensured. Nursing curricula must align with international standards and practical training must be strengthened, along with a focus on language skills. Such investments will yield long-term economic benefits.

The development of nursing profession is not solely the government's responsibility; it requires collective effort. The government must improve salaries and working conditions. Strong regulatory frameworks are needed to ensure fair wages in private institutions. Raising social awareness is equally important. Media and educational institutions can play a key role in highlighting the importance of nursing. Children should be taught from an early age that nursing is a noble and humane profession. The role of male nurses also deserves attention. In Bangladesh, nursing is still considered a profession only for women, but male nurses can contribute equally. Encouraging male students and creating a supportive environment is essential.

At some point in life, everyone needs hospital care. In those uncertain and difficult times, the person who stays closest is often a nurse. For carrying such immense responsibility, they deserve our deepest respect and gratitude. If Bangladesh truly aims to build a healthy and prosperous nation, nurses must be given their rightful dignity. On this International Nurses Day, let's move beyond formal expressions of thanks and demand real change. True gratitude will be reflected in meaningful improvements in nurses' lives. The lamp lit by Florence Nightingale still burns today, in the hands of millions of nurses. Let's honour that light.