The Daily Star
FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

Stop the rape of our children

Delayed justice is emboldening perpetrators as cases soar

The recent horrifying case of an 11-year-old girl in Netrokona found seven months pregnant after allegedly being raped by her madrassa teacher has rightly spurred widespread public outrage. But this case is one of a larger, more disturbing pattern. The latest data from Ain o Salish Kendra show that at least 56 girls under the age of 12 were raped in the first four months of 2026 alone. Sixteen of them were under six years old. In 2023, 58 girls aged between seven and 12 were raped. In 2024, the number was 63. In 2025, it was 148. At the current pace, 2026 will surpass even that grim record. In most cases, perpetrators were neighbours, relatives, or teachers; people in positions of trust. We must ask, as we have asked before: why do perpetrators continue to feel so emboldened?

Activists working in this field attempt to locate the answers in a culture of continuous impunity, negligence by law enforcers, and an erosion of social values. It is not the absence of laws but the absence of consequences that is failing our children; Bangladesh's rape conviction rate is among the lowest in the world. Over 35,000 cases of violence against women and children have remained pending before special tribunals for more than five years. The law mandates that cases be disposed of within 180 days. In practice, the average case takes 1,370 days, nearly four years, to resolve. In such a system, perpetrators have no fear of punishment, and so the violence continues.

The government has spoken of plans for a dedicated children's affairs department and expanded awareness programmes, which we welcome. But intent without institutional follow-through has been the pattern for too long. We call on the authorities to ensure all pending child rape cases are fast-tracked through the courts without further delay; that victim and witness protection mechanisms are established and enforced; that One-Stop Crisis Centres are made fully operational in every district; and that educational institutions are brought under active monitoring and mandatory reporting obligations. The state's most fundamental duty is the protection of its most vulnerable citizens, and it is currently failing that duty.

However, accountability cannot rest with the state alone. We as a society must confront our own failures. We have heard so many of these stories that we risk becoming numb to them, each case provoking only a moment of outrage before fading from public attention. Families must speak to their children about safety and bodily autonomy. Communities must stop protecting perpetrators in the name of honour or social peace. And we must refuse to let these numbers become routine.

End extortion in Dhaka's waste trade

Household waste collection must be brought under a structured system

It is very unfortunate that essential urban services such as household waste collection in the capital have long been captured by politically connected interests. An investigation by *Prothom Alo* has found that across Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC), waste collection has turned into a highly profitable and largely unregulated business marked by arbitrary fees, extortion, political patronage, and intimidation. Residents are being forced to pay inflated charges far above the rates set by the city corporation, while different groups compete to control this lucrative sector.

Although DNCC regulations reportedly fixed household waste collection fees at Tk 100 in older wards and Tk 50 in newly added wards, residents in many areas are paying far more. In Mohammadpur, Mirpur, Shewrapara, Dakshinkhan, and Bhatara, households are reportedly being charged Tk 150 to Tk 300 per flat. In affluent areas such as Gulshan and Banani, hotels and restaurants are paying several thousand taka each month. The business reportedly generates hundreds of crores of taka annually, creating strong incentives for political actors and criminal groups to maintain control over the system.

During the Awami League era, the party leaders and councillors allegedly controlled this business. Now, leaders and activists affiliated with BNP and its associated organisations are reportedly controlling operations in many areas. The names of the extortionists may have changed, but the system appears unchanged. Waste collection operators have described being forced to pay monthly extortion money to continue operating, while some reportedly lost control of their businesses after refusing to comply with extortion demands. The situation is pretty much similar in Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC). The question is: how long will this culture of extortion continue?

Due to this situation, the city corporation is losing both revenue and control over the sector. Data shows that DNCC has 342,688 holdings, including buildings and flats. If each holding is charged an average of Tk 150, the waste collection business earns at least Tk 5.14 crore every month. It is unfortunate that the city corporation is losing such substantial revenue.

We urge both city corporations to urgently introduce a transparent and centrally managed framework for household waste collection with fixed fees, enforceable licensing, digital payment systems, and strict oversight. Political interference in waste management must not be tolerated, regardless of which party is involved. If necessary, the city corporations should directly manage collection services through their own workforce, instead of leaving control to politically connected intermediaries. Restoring accountability in this sector is essential to protect residents from exploitation and to ensure better service delivery.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

State of Israel proclaimed

On this day in 1948, David Ben-Gurion, head of the Jewish Agency, proclaimed the establishment of the State of Israel. US President Harry S. Truman recognised the new nation on the same day.

Disconnected digital systems are slowing our trade

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In today's global trading system, data moves alongside goods. Every shipment is accompanied by invoices, regulatory approvals, banking records, inspection reports, and logistical updates. Before a product reaches its destination, this information must pass through multiple institutions. In many cases, delays in data—not goods—delivery slow down trade the most.

This link between data and logistics is becoming increasingly important in Bangladesh, too.

Over the past decade, the country has made notable progress in digitisation. Many processes that once relied on paperwork—customs declarations, banking transactions, and port operations—are now handled electronically. These changes have improved transparency, reduced manual handling and, in many cases, increased efficiency. But digitisation alone does not guarantee smooth trade.

While systems are digital, they often do not work cohesively. Different institutions—customs, banks, port authorities, shipping agents, and regulators—use their own digital platforms, each designed for specific purposes. As a result, businesses are often required to submit the same information multiple times to different authorities. This creates a different kind of inefficiency. The problem is no longer paper—it is fragmentation.

This issue is particularly relevant in the maritime sector. Globally, the International Maritime Organization (IMO) promotes the concept of a Maritime Single Window (MSW). The idea is simple: information related to a ship's arrival or departure should be submitted once and shared among all relevant authorities. In practice, however, achieving this requires systems to be connected and able to exchange data smoothly.

Experience from different countries shows that digitising systems is only the first step. Without proper coordination and data sharing, digital platforms can still operate in isolation, limiting the benefits they provide.

For an export-oriented economy like Bangladesh, even small delays in the flow of information can incur widespread consequences. Businesses often navigate multiple procedures involving similar datasets. While digitisation has reduced paperwork, the lack of coordination among systems can still lead to delays, duplication, and uncertainty. As global buyers increasingly prioritise speed and reliability, improving how information flows across institutions may become just as important as improving physical infrastructure.

This is where proper digitalisation becomes critical. It goes beyond putting processes online, and involves making systems work together as part of a connected ecosystem. At the centre of this is the ability of different connection requires separate discussions, approvals, and technical adjustments. As more systems are added, this process becomes slow and difficult to manage. Over time, fragmented solutions risk recreating the very inefficiencies that digitisation was meant to reduce.

Around the world, countries are therefore moving towards more structured approaches to connecting systems. Instead of building links case by case, they are developing common frameworks that allow different platforms to communicate more easily from the start.

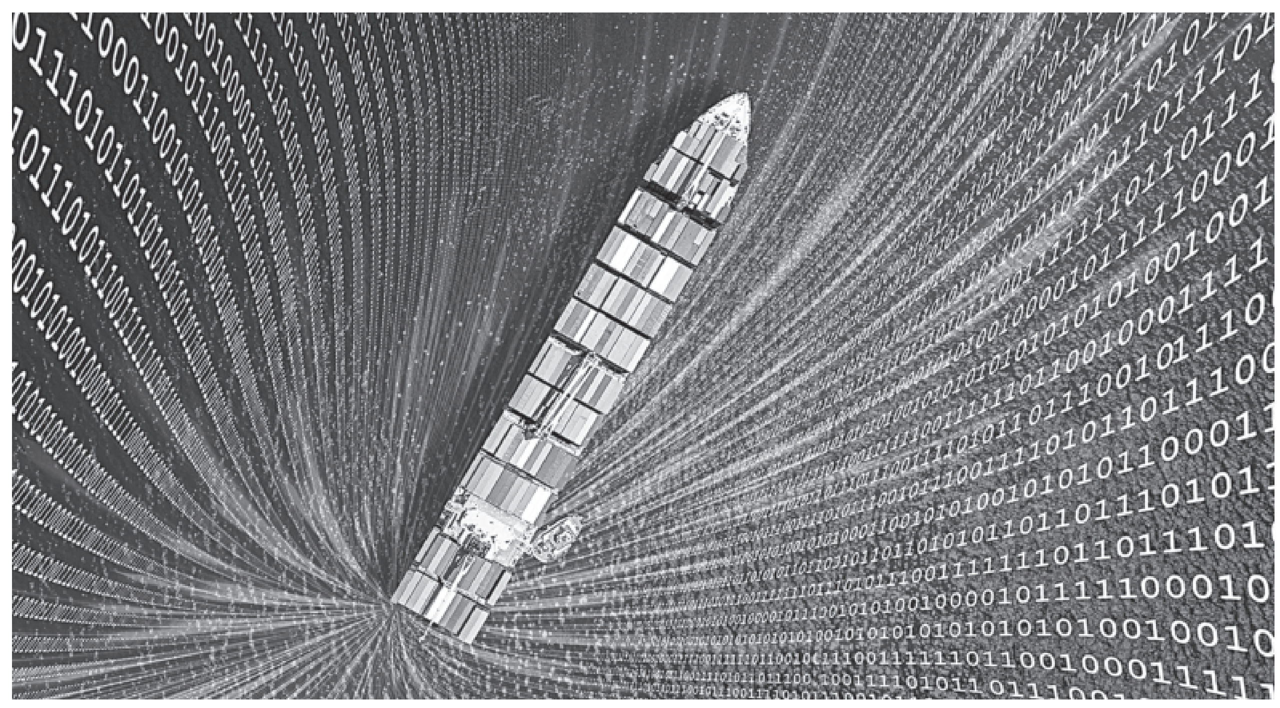
For example, Estonia has built a secure system that allows government agencies to share data while maintaining control over their own databases. In trade, the "single window" approach follows a similar principle: businesses submit information once, and relevant authorities can access it as needed. These examples highlight an important lesson: connected systems are more effective than isolated ones.

For Bangladesh, this presents an important policy opportunity. Developing a national framework for data sharing could help connect existing systems and make trade processes faster, more predictable, and more reliable. Ongoing policy reforms could support this shift. By including provisions for secure data exchange, the government can improve coordination between customs, financial institutions, and other agencies involved in trade. This would reduce duplication, speed up processes, and strengthen compliance. More broadly, it would help build a stronger digital foundation for trade facilitation.

At the same time, such an approach would need to be supported by strong data protection and cybersecurity measures. Importantly, this does not require centralised data storage. Different institutions can retain control over their own systems while enabling secure and standardised data exchange.

The benefits of such a shift could be significant. For businesses, it would mean fewer repeated submissions, lower compliance costs, and faster processing times. For government agencies, it would improve data consistency, strengthen coordination, and support better risk management. For the economy, it would contribute to faster and more predictable trade flows.

It is also important to recognise that this is not only a technical issue, but also an institutional one. Public agencies operate within defined legal mandates, and without clear rules for data sharing, officials



VISUAL: AFIA JAHIN

systems to exchange information securely and efficiently. In simple terms, it means submitting data once and using it wherever needed.

Bangladesh has already taken some steps in this direction. The growing linkage between Bangladesh Customs and Bangladesh Bank—connecting customs declarations with foreign exchange monitoring—demonstrates the value of system integration, reflecting an understanding that better data connectivity can improve transparency, compliance, and efficiency. However, many of these efforts are still based on individual arrangements between institutions.

While such approaches can support initial cooperation, they have clear limitations. Each new

may be cautious about exchanging information, even when doing so could improve efficiency. A well-defined framework can provide the clarity and confidence needed to enable effective collaboration.

Bangladesh has already laid down a strong foundation through digitisation. The next step is to ensure that these digital systems can work together. As global trade becomes faster, more data-driven, and increasingly standardised, the ability to connect systems is no longer just an advantage; it is a necessity. Countries that move in this direction can unlock the full value of their digital investments, while those that do not risk falling behind in efficiency and competitiveness.

Merge investment agencies, yes, but first fix the system

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The government has reportedly grown more cautious in merging Bangladesh's investment agencies. The early impulse to gather several bodies under one roof has now given way to a phased plan: start with the Bangladesh Investment Development Authority (BIDA) and the Public-Private Partnership Authority (PPPA), then decide what to do with Bangladesh Economic Zones Authority (BEZA), Bangladesh Export Processing Zones Authority (BEPZA), Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation (BSCIC), and the Bangladesh Hi-Tech Park Authority (BHTPA). While this is a better place to begin, it is still only a beginning.

The frustration that initially led to the reform drive is understandable. Anyone who has sat across from a confused investor knows it: too many doors, too many approval paths, too many competing interpretations of who is responsible. BIDA and BEZA have built one-stop services for the permits they control. This is a genuine improvement, but confusion often remains. Land, environment, power, and sectoral licences still cut across multiple bodies. When decisions stall over repeated paperwork or inconsistent incentives, it is the country that ultimately pays the price.

So the instinct behind the planned merger is sound, but merging alone is not the solution. Placing institutions under one umbrella does not automatically dissolve confusion—sometimes, it only brings confusion from outside the building to inside it.

BIDA, PPPA, BEZA, BEPZA, BSCIC, and BHTPA are not six versions of the same office. They carry different legal mandates, assets, capabilities, and cultures. BIDA promotes and facilitates investment. PPPA structures public-private partnership projects that require financial modelling, risk allocation, and long-term contract discipline. BEZA and BEPZA manage economic and export processing zones. BSCIC harbours a small-industry legacy. BHTPA focuses on technology investment. Therefore, a factory investor, a PPP concessionaire, and a tech firm do not need the same service.

The strongest case for a phased merger, therefore, is not political convenience; it is institutional rationality. However, BIDA and PPPA may be natural early partners, but PPP project development is not routine investor servicing. If that specialised capability is diluted inside a general agency, the country may lose a function it genuinely needs. The same caution applies to BEPZA, which is often regarded as one of the more effective institutions in Bangladesh's investment landscape. A functioning system should not be casually dismantled because a new organogram looks tidier.

A merger changes who controls investor pipelines, land data, incentive recommendations, and access to decision-makers. When reform reshuffles such branches of authority, internal resistance should not be dismissed as an expression of turf protection. As scholar M. Lynne Markus observed, people often resist not change itself but the redistribution of power that comes with it. Some objections protect duplication. Others flag real operational risks. Serious reform must tell the difference.

Before any nameplates change, five questions need clear answers. First, what should be centralised? Investor entry, aftercare, and national promotion may suit a common platform, but zone management and PPP structuring need protected units.

Second, who has final authority? If the new body only collects complaints but depends on old agencies for decisions, it becomes a forwarding desk.

Third, how will data be integrated? Officials should not ask investors for information the government already holds.

Fourth, how will expertise be preserved? Specialists should not become general administrators. And finally, how will success be measured? Clearly not by agencies being merged, but by faster approvals, fewer repeated documents, and more predictable decisions.

Having worked in Bangladesh's investment space, I have seen one lesson repeat itself: investors do not judge reform by lofty announcements. They judge it by whether their problem gets solved without being passed from desk to desk.

Bangladesh should, therefore, pursue this reform with the seriousness it deserves. Fragmentation has lasted too long in our investment landscape. But we must not confuse consolidation with capability. A phased merger is sensible, but phasing alone is not a strategy. Having a single umbrella for investment, however it is rolled out, is not enough; having an accountable system to support it is what will ultimately determine whether this reform will improve our investment climate or merely rearrange the surrounding bureaucracy.

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