MY DHAKA

CAUGHT BETWEEN SOIL AND SIGNAL

The collapse of Bangalee adda

RBR

Last Friday I realised something maddening: our once-famous Bangalee addas -- those spirited gatherings that felt like cultural performances, a way of living -- now stand fractured and quiet.

Adda was once the heartbeat of Dhaka's social life: unhurried conversations under tea-stall smoke, debates stretching into the night at a friend's place, jokes stitching friendships together. Politics, literature, cricket, gossip, philosophy -- everything found its place.

Today's adda belongs to the neo-modern deshi, caught between soil and signal. Rooted in tradition yet reshaped by digital modernity, the café-goer scrolls reels while humming Rabindra Sangeet; the coder wears a gamcha; the meme-maker spins Bangla-English mashups. True friendship shrinks into a synchronised pout for the camera. Intimacy feels staged, rehearsed, posted -- rather than lived.

This slipping away feels too intense, because my ache lies in reaching out and finding no one to laugh with. As any Bangalee would, I turn to Tagore. His once-political anthem "Ekla Cholo Re" now feels like a solution to my personal struggle with loneliness. "Jodi tor dak shune keu na ashe tobe ekla cholo re" (If no one responds to your call, then go your way alone) -- speaks to the quiet courage of carrying on when companionship fails.

Solitude, however raw, can be strength only if you are brave enough to break free of the behaviour society expects of you. The song becomes less about leading a crowd and more about leading yourself -- a hymn for those who discover, in the hollow of solitude, a stubborn resilience.

Last weekend, almost on a whim, I skipped an Instagrammable adda with friends. Such gatherings feel rehearsed, almost fake. If meeting friends feels like a chore, then the spicy fun in togetherness has thinned out.

Instead, I wandered to Curzon Hall. Wet grass, Nagalingam blossoms, children squealing, couples whispering -- all framed by a sundown that felt real. I walked barefoot, was bitten by ants, picked flowers, and pleaded with a guard for a few stems. Their blooming season revealed itself to me by sheer luck, because I chose to skip tea with friends. The prize was not the adda I missed but the chance to feel the city's texture -- ants on my feet, blossoms in my hands, solitude unposed for the camera. Crossing to Doyel Chatar, I lost myself among crafts and plants, finally falling for a Kailash sapling and a pink Nandini bloom.

I admit I suffer from urban solitude, but not emptiness -- the paradox of being alone in a crowd. My need to be with you, to be us, is now replaced by the need for constant gratification and notifications. I know you are there, yet a message left unread, a post ignored, a call unanswered feels brutal.

My susceptible nature picks up these off-putting vibes. Laughter thins out as soon as politics -- the old spice of adda -- is discussed, or when media, newspapers, even religion and the neo-Islamic right-wing perspective enter the conversation.

Polarisation turns banter into rift, voices harden, laughter fades. Beneath the chatter, a hush slips in uninvited. Such addas bolt down the fun halfway through: coffee replaces tea, conversations shorten, silences lengthen.

Differences of opinion now cut too sharply, and we have become disrespectful of others' views. Disagreement, debate, and collision, once part of the fun, today carry sharper edges. Friends hesitate, voices harden, playful banter becomes a personal rift. Sometimes it hides the fear of speaking, as if certain truths are too heavy to name.

Neo-Dhaka is hyper-connected yet emotionally fragmented. This identity is not a rejection of heritage but a negotiation of being Bangalee in 2026.

Adda once thrived on affectionate complaints -- playful scolding as a love language. Now "no one responds" has replaced my old-world playful complaint that "nobody loves me."

These fractured addas unsettle my need for companionship, my urge to crack a joke, share gossip, or fret about disappointment. Neo-modern Dhaka is a city negotiating its soul -- caught between soil and signal, between heritage and hyper-connectivity. And in that negotiation, adda collapses, leaving us to walk alone, humming Tagore under the weight of solitude.

Distressed NBFI depositors seek repayment by Dec

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Depositors of six distressed non-bank financial institutions (NBFIs) yesterday said that despite protests and a memorandum submitted earlier this month, they have yet to receive any formal communication from Bangladesh Bank or the finance ministry regarding the return of their long-frozen funds.

At a press conference in Dhaka, the Alliance for Six NBFI Depositors' Recovery Committee said depositors were learning about possible repayment plans only through media reports.

"There has been no communication with us," said Zafar Ullah Khan, convener of the alliance.

The platform says it represents over 12,000 depositors across the country. It demanded a formal and legally binding government order ensuring full repayment -- including accrued interest -- by December 31, 2026.

"We have been waiting for long. Please issue the order. Set a deadline," Zafar said.

The six institutions are FAS Finance & Investment Limited, Premier Leasing, Fareast Finance, Aviva Finance, People's Leasing and Financial Services, and International Leasing and Financial Services.

The latest development follows a protest staged in front of BB on May 6, when depositors urged the central bank to take immediate steps to facilitate the return of their funds.

The alliance said depositors invested their life savings in the institutions because they were licensed and regulated by BB, arguing that the collapse of the NBFIs reflected a broader regulatory failure.

It also rejected any repayment plan limited to principal amounts, saying that depositors must receive full accrued interest alongside their original savings.

"Our members trusted that stamp with their life savings," said Kawsar Hossain Chowdhury, co-founder and coordinator of the alliance.

"Now they are being offered their principal back -- as though the years of waiting cost them nothing."

The alliance further demanded the criminal prosecution of directors, executives, and defaulting borrowers responsible for the collapse of the institutions, as well as the recovery of misappropriated assets.

According to the alliance, individual deposits in the six institutions total around Tk 3,525 crore.

Four Dhaka exits raise Eid travel fears

FROM PAGE 1

locations, each on the Dhaka–Tangail–Rangpur and Dhaka–Chattogram highways; 21 on the Dhaka–Sylhet highway; eight on the Chattogram–Cox's Bazar highway; seven each on the Dhaka–Aricha and Dhaka–Mymensingh highways; and one on the Dhaka–Barishal route.

The risky points include ongoing flyover, overpass and expressway construction sites, damaged road sections, bridge approaches, toll plazas, bus terminals, industrial zones, markets and U-turns.

Areas with heavy movement of garment workers returning home for Eid have also been marked highly vulnerable. Police also warned that temporary cattle markets set up along highways could further intensify congestion.

Highway police reports have recommended accelerating construction work, repairing damaged sections, and deploying additional manpower during the Eid rush.

Field visits by The Daily Star correspondents to Narayanganj, Baipail in Savar, Elenga in Tangail, and Brahmanbaria found the roads to be in very poor conditions where congestions are already persistent at several key points.

In Narayanganj, transport operators and passengers say that congestion along three major highways in the district will further deteriorate ahead of Eid, as repair and renovation work continues on the Dhaka–Sylhet Highway and the Asian Highway (Dhaka Bypass).

During visits to Kanchpur, Jatramura, Barab, Rupshi and Bhulta on May 16 and 17, traffic was observed at multiple points. Recent rainfall has created potholes and waterlogging, further damaging road surfaces.

"Almost half an hour has passed, but no bus can reach here because of the congestion," said commuter Mst Sathi at Tarabo intersection, waiting for a bus to Gulistan. "Without traffic jams, buses used to arrive every five minutes."

Narayanganj Additional Superintendent of Police (Traffic) Sohel Rana acknowledged that ongoing construction, narrow roads and rain are jointly worsening congestion across all three highways in the district.

On the Dhaka–Ashulia road in Savar, commuters said journeys that once took 45 minutes now require over two hours due to waterlogging, potholes and elevated expressway construction.

A recent visit from Baipail to Ashulia showed slow-moving traffic amid waterlogging and ongoing works, with some sections completed as two lanes and others still under construction.

Project Director Md Shafiqul Islam said the road, previously two lanes, suffered waterlogging due to poor drainage and nearby factories.

He added that expressway pillar construction damaged the surface, and the road is being upgraded to four lanes. According to him, 3.5 km will open before Eid and the remaining 1.5 km by July. He apologised for the inconvenience.

In Tangail, transport operators say the unfinished Elenga flyover near the Jamuna Bridge could become a major bottleneck. Around 20,000 vehicles use the Dhaka–Tangail highway daily, a number expected to multiply several times during Eid travel.

"Although the highway condition is not very bad, the unfinished Elenga flyover may cause congestion again this Eid," said bus driver Md Shahidul.

In Brahmanbaria, passengers and drivers fear the 12-km stretch between Ashuganj roundabout and Sarail Bishwaroad on the Dhaka-Sylhet highway may face serious traffic during the Eid rush and the post-holiday return to Dhaka. The corridor links six districts with the capital.

They blamed the situation on the slow progress of the Ashuganj-Akhaura four-lane project, narrow and dug-up roads, unfinished work at the Ashuganj and Bishwaroad roundabouts, poor traffic management, roadside parking, and unchecked movement of autorickshaws and easy bikes. Drivers said crossing the stretch often takes three to four hours.

The Tk 5,791 crore Bangladesh-India-funded project to upgrade the 51-km Ashuganj-Akhaura highway into four lanes began in 2020.

Project Manager Shamim Ahmed said redesigns, funding issues, and workers leaving after the August 5, 2024, political changeover slowed progress. "Overall completion has reached 62 percent, while the contract for the third package was cancelled before work began," he told The Daily Star.

Highway Police Deputy Inspector General Habibur Rahman Khan said lists of congestion-prone points have already been submitted to the RHD and relevant ministries, which have assured remedial measures ahead of the Eid rush.

He noted that work has already begun in some areas and added that said special measures and additional force deployment have been planned.

Highway Police officials said mobile strike forces, rescue teams and wreckers will be stationed at key toll plazas, bridge approaches and construction zones to ensure traffic flow and uninterrupted movement of cattle-laden trucks and homebound passengers.

Despite these preparations, officials acknowledged severe manpower and resource constraints. The Highway Police has around 3,030 personnel and only 99 patrol vehicles to monitor more than 3,990 kilometres of national highways and 425 kilometres of regional roads -- roughly one vehicle for every 44 kilometres. Seven patrol vehicles are currently out of service.

The force operates through four divisions, eight regions, 10 circles, 73 police stations and nine camps.

Officials said around 990 additional personnel may be deployed on deputation ahead of Eid to manage traffic pressure and maintain law and order. They added that the force ideally requires at least 6,000 personnel and 250 patrol vehicles to effectively manage the national highway network.

[Our correspondents from Narayanganj, Savar, Tangail, and Brahmanbaria have also contributed to this report.]

'We want a safe place for our children'

FROM PAGE 1

committee yesterday, said its General Secretary Mohammad Kalam Khan.

Like the previous days, people from different walks of life gathered in front of Ramisa's house in Pallabi yesterday morning and held human chains, demanding capital punishment for the accused.

"We are now living in fear for our own children. No human being should commit such brutality against a child. We want a speedy trial. We want a safe place for our children," said a woman who joined one of the human chains.

After Juma prayers, several hundred people under different banners blocked the Mirpur-10 intersection. The protest, which began around 2:15pm, continued for two hours. Later, the protesters blocked the Kalshi road for several hours.

Protesters said a culture of impunity has allowed heinous crimes such as rape and murder to rise.

Paritran Talukder, ADC (Traffic) of Mirpur division, told The Daily Star that traffic movement from Kalshi to Mirpur-11 remained suspended for a few hours due to the protest, while vehicular movement was also disrupted at Mirpur-10.

Members of Prothom Alo's youth platform Bondhushava held a protest rally at the SAARC Fountain in Karwan Bazar, demanding the quickest possible trial and capital punishment for those responsible.

The platform placed a three-point demand, including modernisation of the Women and Children Repression Prevention Act to ensure exemplary punishment and speedy disposal of cases involving violence against women and children.

The platform also demanded a unified legal definition and punishment for sexual abuse against children, regardless of gender, and called for strict measures against abuse of boys in residential educational institutions, including madrasas. Religious leaders and political parties were urged to speak out strongly against such abuse.

Bondhushava also called for nationwide awareness campaigns against violence against women and children through state initiatives involving media outlets, educational institutions, and religious organisations.

The Gulshan Society formed a human chain at the Gulshan-2 intersection yesterday morning, demanding exemplary punishment for those responsible for Ramisa's murder.

A human chain was also held in Block-C of Khilgaon under the banner of Pallima Sangshad. Around 200 people, including members of affiliated organisations and local residents, joined the programme.

Similar protest programmes were held in Dinajpur's Nawabganj, Brahmanbaria's Bancharampur, and Rajbari's Goalanda.

Meanwhile, the city unit of Islami Chhatra Shibir brought out a protest procession from New Market Baitun Noor Mosque.

Debt clock ticks on Dhaka airport terminal

FROM PAGE 1

Progress on the agreement nearly stalled during the 18-month tenure of the interim government. Talks resumed in March, shortly after the BNP-led government assumed power, according to CAAB officials.

Air Vice Marshal (retd) M Mafidur Rahman, CAAB chairman from June 2019 to June 2024, blamed the interim administration for lacking the negotiation capability to expedite the process.

When contacted, SK Bashir Uddin, former interim civil aviation adviser, claimed that they had held several rounds of intensive negotiations in an effort to reach an agreement.

Aviation expert Kazi Wahidul Alam criticised CAAB's handling of the negotiations, noting that a deal should have been struck immediately upon the terminal's completion.

"In that case, CAAB could have paid loan instalments from its own [terminal] income," said Wahidul, a former member of the Biman Board of Directors.

Even when a deal is reached, immediate revenue is out of the question.

Talking to this correspondent recently, CAAB Chairman Air Vice Marshal Md Mostafa Mahmood Siddiq said it would take at least three months to finalise the agreement.

Following the signing, a mandatory test run -- Operation Readiness and Airport Transfer (ORAT) -- will require another six months to a year, pushing the actual opening into 2027.

The airport loan sits within a rapidly growing national debt narrative. Bangladesh's total external debt nearly doubled over three years -- rising from Tk 4,95,793 crore in June 2022 to Tk 9,59,311 crore by December 2025. Over the same period, the country's overall debt-to-GDP ratio climbed from 33.79 percent to 38.61 percent.

Loan disbursements from international financial institutions have been sluggish, reaching only 11 percent of the full-year budget target in the first half of the current fiscal year.

Meanwhile, Japan remains Bangladesh's single largest bilateral creditor, accounting for 18 percent of all external bilateral debt. As 22 percent of Bangladesh's total external debt is denominated in Japanese yen, every weakening of the taka against the yen inflates the effective cost of repayment.

Built by the Aviation Dhaka Consortium (Mitsubishi Corporation, Fujita Corporation, and Samsung C&T Corporation) at a total cost of Tk 21,300 crore, the third terminal saw a "soft inauguration" under the Awami League government in October 2023.

The terminal boasts a floor space of 230,000 square metres, housing 115 check-in counters, 66 departure immigration desks, 59 arrival immigration desks and three VIP immigration desks.

Once fully operational, the airport's annual passenger and cargo handling capacity is expected to more than double from the current eight million passengers and 500,000 tonnes of cargo per year.

Govt to pull out of $5.5b IMF loan deal

FROM PAGE 1

interim government, taking the total to $5.5 billion.

Bangladesh has so far received $3.8 billion in five tranches. The sixth tranche remained pending after the IMF suspended discussions in November and decided to resume talks with the new government following the election.

Under the previous schedule, the fifth and sixth tranches, together worth $1.3 billion, were due by June this year, while the final tranche was expected in December.

Discussions on a replacement programme began during the IMF-World Bank Spring Meetings in April, when the Bangladesh delegation led by the finance minister held talks with IMF officials in Washington, DC. The IMF signalled during the Spring Meetings that no further tranches would be released without visible progress on economic reforms.

Since then, virtual discussions have continued every week over the proposed loan amount and reform conditions.

Finance ministry officials said the BNP-led government had reservations about continuing the programme from the outset, partly because it was initiated under the Awami League government and because many of its conditions are difficult to implement under current economic conditions.

Maintaining the programme would require Bangladesh to meet several stringent conditions within the next six months, a target the government considers unrealistic amid global and domestic economic pressures. A new programme, officials said, would allow reforms to be implemented gradually.

Speaking to reporters after returning from Washington in April, Khosru said the IMF programme had been negotiated under the previous "unelected" Awami League government and included conditions the BNP government may not accept.

"We are an elected government. We will not accept any condition that goes against public interest. This programme will end in six to seven months, after which we will decide whether to continue further," he said.

Officials said key areas of disagreement include introducing a single VAT rate, reducing tax exemptions, adopting a fully market-based exchange rate, cutting power and fertiliser subsidies, and implementing reforms in the banking sector and the National Board of Revenue.

Despite the disagreements, officials said Bangladesh still needs an active IMF programme because it serves as a "seal of approval" for international lenders and investors, helping unlock financing from other development partners.

According to finance ministry officials, the government will require $3 billion to $4 billion annually in budget support to finance large upcoming budgets and fulfil electoral commitments. Securing at least $1 billion a year from the IMF would help attract further support from lenders such as the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Japan International Cooperation Agency.

At the end of an IMF mission in November last year, mission chief Chris Papageorgiou warned that Bangladesh faced "significant macro-financial challenges stemming from weak tax revenue and undercapitalisation in the financial sector".

He said delayed or inadequate policy action could weaken growth, raise inflation and increase risks to macro-financial stability.

The IMF also called for ambitious tax reforms, including eliminating reduced VAT rates and exemptions except on essential goods and services, increasing the minimum turnover tax for corporations, containing subsidies at fiscally sustainable levels, and accelerating reforms in the banking sector.

The lender further stressed the need for stronger monetary policy to curb inflation, greater exchange-rate flexibility, and measures to improve banks' governance, transparency and recovery of non-performing loans.