

## Eid exodus amid fears of traffic chaos

Govt must ensure safe travel as pressure mounts on highways

The great exodus from Dhaka has begun, as millions of people leave the capital to reunite with their families and celebrate Eid-ul-Azha. According to the transport minister, nearly 2.5 crore passengers are expected to travel within a short span of time, posing a major logistical challenge for the government. Although the minister has assured that Eid travel will be “comfortable,” reports of poor transport infrastructure and unfinished road projects, as well as the unusually high passenger load, make safety and operational challenges harder to contain.

Reports indicate concerns over severe traffic congestion at four major entry and exit points of Dhaka—Baipail, the Kanchan Bridge approach roads and sections of the Asian Highway, the Jatrabari-Kanchpur corridor near Kanchpur Bridge, and the Elenga bus stand area on the Dhaka-Tangail highway. These concerns have already been raised during meetings with highway authorities. Highway police have identified 94 choke points across the country, including the above four, indicating that traffic chaos (or accident risk) is likely to extend far beyond Dhaka and affect major highways.

According to official assessments, there are 25 vulnerable locations each on the Dhaka-Tangail 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 highway. Highway police have acknowledged that despite preparations involving mobile strike forces, rescue teams, and wreckers stationed at key toll plazas, bridge approaches, and construction zones, they still lack sufficient manpower and resources to manage the situation effectively.

It goes without saying that traffic congestion and sudden disruptions cause immense suffering for passengers, especially the elderly and children. During the Eid rush, many transport operators deploy old and worn-out buses with only cosmetic repairs, making journeys stressful and, at times, dangerous. Some vehicles are driven by unqualified or even unlicensed drivers, significantly increasing the risk of accidents. Poor road conditions and unfinished construction work further heighten the likelihood of mishaps. During the Eid-ul-Fitr travel rush earlier this year, road accidents claimed 351 lives over a 15-day period, while many people suffered life-changing injuries. The number of deaths, according to the Bangladesh Jatri Kalyan Samity, saw an 8.26 percent increase compared to that during last year’s Eid-ul-Fitr travels.

These fatalities are avoidable with proper planning, adequate resource allocation, stricter oversight, and timely implementation of infrastructure projects. Corruption in road construction and maintenance must also be addressed. At the same time, the government needs to expand alternative modes of transport, particularly rail and river transport, to reduce pressure on highways during peak travel periods. The minister’s promise of comfortable Eid travel can only be meaningful if safety is ensured and the suffering of passengers trapped in traffic jams is significantly reduced.

## Who will defend our forests?

Govt must do better to protect Chunati forest, wildlife

We talked about this for years. We saw how, before the 2024 political transition, influential groups and even government officials encroached upon the Chunati Wildlife Sanctuary in Chattogram. But it’s saddening that this trend continues even today, according to a recent report by this daily. The original Chunati forest area covered 37,182 acres, and in 1986, the then government declared around 19,200 acres between Chattogram and Cox’s Bazar as the Chunati Wildlife Sanctuary. But due to unabated encroachment and extraction over the decades, at least 1,870 acres have been converted into settlements and agricultural land. According to the Forest Department, 6,991 houses have been built within the boundaries of the forest so far; there are also 18,899 betel leaf gardens, 23 fish farms, and 1,550 acres for paddy cultivation.

Against this despicable reality, one thing that gives us pause is that most of those who have built structures illegally within the forest are climate refugees. While the role played by influential locals in facilitating such encroachment and settlement is undeniable, and punishable, the plight of many residents, having been displaced by coastal erosion, also deserves consideration. Inevitably, however, this growing human presence has severely affected the wildlife that once thrived here—for whose benefit, let us not forget, the sanctuary was originally established. Once a lush haven for Asian elephants, the safety and welfare of these animals have been compromised over time due to declining forest density and frequent human-elephant conflict.

Government-led development projects have also added to the erosion of the forest’s biodiversity. According to data from the Wildlife Division, 207 acres of forest land were de-reserved in 2018, while around 240,000 trees were felled and several hills levelled to accommodate the Chattogram-Cox’s Bazar railway line. Since its operations began in late 2023, not only has the railway disrupted wildlife behaviour in the area, but an elephant was also killed by a train in October 2024. Additionally, the proposed expansion of the Chattogram-Cox’s Bazar highway threatens elephant crossing points in and around the sanctuary.

We urge the BNP government to prioritise the preservation of the biodiversity and wildlife of the Chunati Wildlife Sanctuary, along with finding humane alternatives for those displaced by climate crises. The authorities must identify major encroachers and bring them to justice so that they cannot evade accountability. Chunati is nationally and internationally significant, given its status as the only Monitoring the Illegal Killing of Elephants (MIKE) site in Bangladesh. Fragmented efforts to prevent further deforestation or recover lost land are no longer enough; we need a coordinated approach.

# Why ‘exemplary punishment’ will not end the rape epidemic



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The media is, once again, saturated with graphic details of the horrific rape and murder of an eight-year-old child. Personal details about the victim and her family were almost immediately revealed, and her photos were splashed across our screens. Different outlets are now in fierce competition to churn out fresh details for a morbidly fascinated audience. Without a doubt, the crime that has been committed is beyond gruesome. The smiling face of that innocent child is bound to haunt anyone with a drop of humanity, and already, agitated crowds have staged protests in Pallabi and other parts of Dhaka. Social media has also been flooded with calls for exemplary punishment.

But there is a dark side to this kind of exposure, and we are already starting to see it. A cursory scroll through Facebook comments reveals misogynistic and even downright criminal comments. There are certain groups that are already going down the oft-trodden route of victim-blaming, despite her age, and blaming her family for failing to protect her as well.

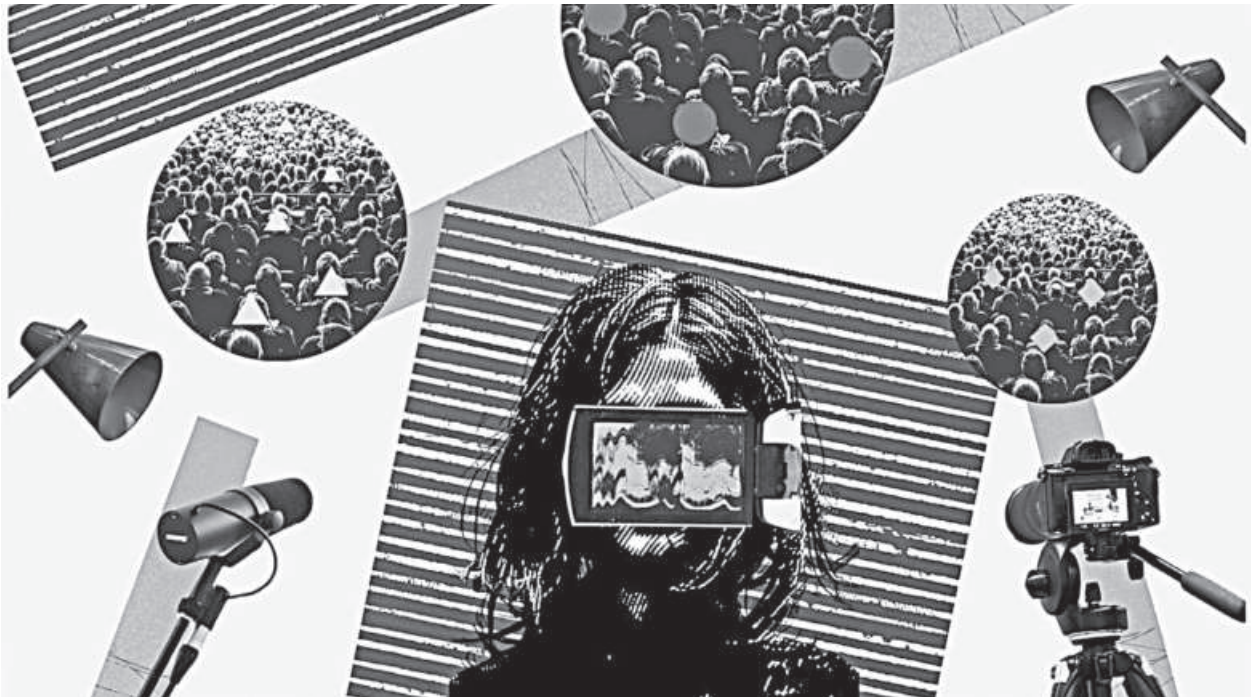
It’s not just the paedophiles and perverts we should be worried about (and why/how we have normalised the sexualisation of minors as a society is a separate conversation). When it comes to rape victims, especially ones who are killed violently, we have fallen into a pattern of sensationalist and voyeuristic journalism inflaming a thirst for vengeance in the public, replacing demands for justice, accountability, and institutional reform with calls for exemplary punishment.

One could argue that in a country where the law has failed rape victims for so long, perhaps public outrage is the only way to ensure this doesn’t just become another case lost in the legal labyrinth. But how long can outrage last? And how much has it helped in the past?

In 2020, we saw widespread protests against rape—once after a Dhaka University student was raped after getting off at the wrong bus stop, and again after a video of a gang-rape of a woman went viral on social media. One of the major demands of protesters was capital punishment, similar to what we are seeing now, which led to the then government amending the law to introduce the death penalty for rapists. This move was popular at the time, and the rapists involved in these

high-profile cases eventually got life sentences.

But there was hardly any change in rape statistics in the following years. Data from other South Asian countries also suggests a similar impact—not only did the death penalty not reduce rape, it created fear that rapists might become more likely to kill their victims because there is no additional penalty for murder, especially as



VISUAL: ALIZA RAHMAN

it would also eliminate the main witness, thus reducing their chances of being caught. In cultures that tie women’s “honour” with rape, calls for retribution tend to have more to do with restoration of said honour than justice for victims/survivors.

It is human nature to identify with individual victims and to feel grief and empathy for their suffering. But when we continuously highlight individual cases, we run the risk of ignoring the structural issues that have turned rape into an epidemic in Bangladesh. Take, for example, the eight-year-old girl from Magura who was raped by her sister’s father-in-law while visiting them for Eid in March last year. The child died. The protests after her rape led to a conviction within record time.

Yet, in that same period, child rape cases went up by nearly 75 percent compared to 2024. Did the other

When we see the faces of such young victims, wanting justice is the most normal reaction. But there is nothing normal about people calling for televised executions and public hangings, or about asking the government to skip the investigation and trial process entirely, and go straight to penalty. And there is certainly nothing normal about children coming out onto the streets to declare, in front of rolling cameras, their intent to take the law into their own hands if the rapist is handed over to them.

Clearly, there has been a breakdown in public trust when it comes to the law. For too long, law enforcement and the courts have worked for the powerful few and not the ordinary people, and these are not issues that can be solved overnight. But that doesn’t mean we should allow public vengeance to become the driving force of the

Bangladesh, and there’s no denying that public pressure can oftentimes ensure speedy justice. But if we truly want an end to child rapes and murders, we have to channel our anger towards advocating for durable change. The media has a responsibility here to shift the narrative away from rape as isolated incidents of violence that we react to only after the worst has happened, and view it instead as a human rights issue that requires long-term policy interventions and structural change. Let’s start with respecting the anonymity of victims which, according to the Women and Children Repression Prevention Act (Section 14), is already a legal requirement. We have to be able to ask for justice without exploiting the trauma of victims’ families, and without hyper-focusing on individual victims who have gone through the most pain.

# Time for nation branding through smart storytelling



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The national election of February 12 brought forward a new set of national leaders, garnering international attention towards Bangladesh. Used well, the spotlight can improve investor confidence, attract tourists, open markets, and strengthen our voice on climate and regional security. This is why the government should treat nation branding and soft power as a policy priority.

The country is scheduled to graduate from the LDC status on November 24, 2026—a transition that is not only economic but also reputational. As preferential trade benefits narrow and competition intensifies, something more durable than a price advantage is needed—trust of buyers, partners, tourists, students, and the global public.

Multiple international indices suggest Bangladesh’s reputation is not keeping pace with its ambitions. Brand Finance’s Global Soft Power Index described Bangladesh as a country that “punch[es] much below [its] weight,” noting a slide from rank 96 to 104 in 2025. Despite steady gains in economic brand value, Bangladesh’s soft power remains a glaring weakness.

Even with a slight bump to 101st in 2026, this ranking is wholly inadequate for a rapidly emerging economy of Bangladesh’s scale.

However, it would be a mistake to interpret “branding” as a marketing campaign that can simply shout out negative news. Soft power does not work like advertising. It is built through consistent behaviour (governance, stability, and standards) and only amplified through image-building communication.

For instance, Japan institutionalised “Cool Japan” through government coordination and public-private partnerships, treating culture, content, and design as strategic assets. Similarly, South Korea paired export excellence with cultural reach. “Hallyu” (K pop, dramas, and film) is now openly recognised as a soft power engine. Brand Finance, an international brand valuation consultancy, links Korea’s global performance to culture and media influence. Qatar also proved that an English-language media platform can project national visibility globally; Al Jazeera English, launched in 2006, expanded Qatar’s presence

far beyond its geography. Bangladesh should learn one thing from these models: soft power grows when policy coherence meets world-class storytelling.

Nation branding needs coordination across foreign affairs, commerce, tourism, ICT, culture, labour, and diaspora engagement. A national brand council anchored at the centre of government but involving the private sector and independent experts should publish an annual soft power dashboard: tourism receipts, foreign direct investment (FDI) sentiments, export reputation signals, diaspora engagement, international media share-of-voice, and brand index performance. What gets measured gets funded, and what gets funded gets done.

Bangladesh’s communications problem with global audiences, who mostly encounter it through foreign coverage when crisis spikes, needs to change. An English-language platform with global standards, such as news, explainers, documentaries, business programming, and cultural storytelling, is a must. A state megaphone will fail; global audiences reject propaganda. The solution is governance design: editorial independence, transparency, professional leadership, and a digitally native strategy (YouTube, OTT, social media), with partnerships for co-productions and exchanges. Bangladesh should aim for a “Bangladesh World Service” model: credible enough to be cited, interesting enough to be watched, and fast enough to compete

in real time.

Tourism is one of the fastest ways to convert reputation into jobs and foreign currency because visitors become storytellers. Research on the “Beautiful Bangladesh” campaign found a measurable bleed-over effect: tourism advertising improved perceptions of Bangladesh not only as a destination, but also towards its people and government. But campaigns cannot substitute for delivery. Bangladesh needs visible progress on safety, cleanliness, service quality, transport connectivity, visitor information, and environmental protection.

Besides, Bangladesh’s external identity, shaped by RMG and disasters, can no longer be the whole story. If the country wants to be considered a global hub for business, tourism, and IT, then the brand pillars should align accordingly. The promotion of AI innovations, electronic chips, and semiconductor industrialisation projects should take the lead in showcasing the country’s aspirations.

In climate action, Bangladesh has already established itself as a moral authority. Global leadership and the voices of marginalised communities can demonstrate our response to real climate threats and measures taken to mitigate these risks.

Soft power rises when the world can describe you in one sentence and wants to be associated with that sentence. If Bangladesh does not invest in telling its story with strategy and integrity, others will keep telling it for us, which may not always be in our favour.