The Daily Star
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Hormuz reopening is in everyone's interest

Govt must move to build an energy economy less exposed to shocks

The agreement between Washington and Tehran to end their war and reopen the Strait of Hormuz, if implemented as announced, will be felt far beyond the Gulf. Among its quieter beneficiaries stands Bangladesh, which has spent more than 100 days absorbing an energy crisis it did nothing to cause and has limited means to resolve.

The deal is the most significant diplomatic development in a conflict that has killed thousands and convulsed global energy markets since US and Israeli forces struck Iran in February. The foreign ministry in Dhaka welcomed the agreement warmly on Monday. The ministry's hope for the "early restoration of regional calm, supply chain and collaboration" made clear what was really at stake. Bangladesh's power sector is heavily dependent on imported liquefied natural gas, mostly brought through the Strait of Hormuz, which has remained effectively closed since the war began. The cost fell on Bangladesh in higher energy import bills, strained reserves and idle power plants, damages that rippled through an already fragile economy.

The global market swiftly responded to the announcement of the deal. Brent crude fell 4.4 percent to less than \$85 a barrel on Monday. It had almost reached a peak of \$120 after the war began. If the strait is gradually reopened over the first 30 days of the 60-day ceasefire extension, as agreed, Bangladesh's import bill should ease and so should the pressure on the taka. These are not trivial gains for an economy operating with limited fiscal headroom and overwhelmingly dependent on imports.

The deal also carries longer-term implications. The agreement, which caps weeks of fraught negotiations since an initial ceasefire was agreed in early April, is set to be signed by the two adversaries in Switzerland on Friday. However, the memorandum of understanding is just a beginning. Israel's strike on Beirut on Sunday—which prompted a rebuke from President Donald Trump—illustrated how quickly spoilers can destabilise even carefully constructed diplomatic processes. Iran's compliance with mine clearance, the pace of sanctions relief, and the durability of the nuclear framework all remain to be tested. Trump said the US would lift its naval blockade imposed in April on ships moving in and out of Iranian ports. Bangladesh's foreign ministry was right to hope the agreement would be "implemented in good faith and prove durable and sustainable."

For Bangladesh, the more urgent task is operational. The energy authorities should now lock in improved terms on LNG procurement while prices remain soft. We must remember that markets move faster than shipping lanes reopen. Over the medium term, the lesson of the past 100 days should not be forgotten even as the immediate crisis eases. An economy so exposed to a single maritime chokepoint requires diversified supply chains, accelerated domestic gas exploration, and a serious renewables programme as alternatives to LNG imports and hedges against the next conflict that chokes fuel supplies. The aim should be to build an energy economy less exposed to future shocks.

Bring Benazir back to face justice

Govt must secure his extradition without delay

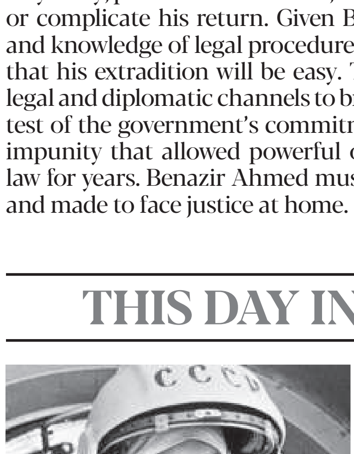
The arrest of former Inspector General of Police (IGP) Benazir Ahmed in Dubai, UAE on June 12 marks a major breakthrough in the effort to hold him accountable for the grave crimes he allegedly committed while in office. As one of the most loyal enforcers and key enablers of the Awami League regime, Benazir allegedly used his unchecked authority to amass illicit wealth and commit serious human rights abuses. His arrest following an Interpol Red Notice is, therefore, welcome news. The home minister has described it as a historic success and a milestone for the rule of law. These words must now be matched by action.

Benazir faces multiple corruption charges. According to the ACC, he allegedly concealed assets worth Tk 2.62 crore and acquired another Tk 9.44 crore from sources beyond his known income. During his rise through the police ranks—from Dhaka Metropolitan Police commissioner to Rab chief and eventually IGP—serious allegations of human rights abuses repeatedly surfaced. In 2021, the US imposed sanctions on Rab and several of its officials, including Benazir, over these allegations.

He is now facing trial before the International Crimes Tribunal in cases involving crimes against humanity, including enforced disappearances, torture, and the 2013 Shapla Chattar crackdown. The Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances has reportedly linked him to at least 95 disappearance cases during his time as Rab chief. This daily's 2024 investigation also found that hundreds of Hindu families in Gopalganj and Madaripur were allegedly forced to sell their ancestral land to him at far below the market value. The ACC further found that Benazir and his family acquired over 613 bighas of land, much of it previously owned by minority communities. Despite the seriousness of these allegations, he has remained beyond accountability.

While his arrest is good news, the bigger challenge lies ahead. The government has a limited window to submit a formal extradition request, and the authorities must act with urgency. Any delay, procedural weakness, or poor coordination may delay or complicate his return. Given Benazir's resources, influence, and knowledge of legal procedures, it would be naive to assume that his extradition will be easy. The government must use all legal and diplomatic channels to bring him back. This is a crucial test of the government's commitment to ending the culture of impunity that allowed powerful officials to operate above the law for years. Benazir Ahmed must be extradited without delay and made to face justice at home.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY



First woman in space

On this day in 1963, aboard the spacecraft Vostok 6, Soviet cosmonaut Valentina Tereshkova became the first woman to travel in space.

Promises and pitfalls of the new education budget

MANZOOR AHMED

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The allocation for education in the proposed budget for FY2026-27 reverses the trend of shrinking outlay for the sector in recent years. The outgoing year's revised budget has proportionately the lowest allocation in a decade, at around 1.4 percent of GDP. For the incoming fiscal year, an allocation of Tk 1,22,495 crore has been proposed for the three main public education agencies: the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education, Secondary and Higher Education Division, and Technical and Madrasa Education Division. Adding allocations for other government ministries and agencies, including textiles, railways, defence, agriculture, fisheries, and ICT, the total allocation amounts to Tk 1,36,606 crore—14.56 percent of the total budget.

The proposed budget, the BNP government's first in two decades, promises a shift away from physical infrastructure to human capital development and a journey towards a democratic, humane and inclusive economy. Can these promises be delivered?

The budget speech touched on themes of school curriculum reform and a compulsory third language instruction in school. "Free education" for female students up to undergraduate level, school uniforms, shoes, and school bags for children, mid-day meals at schools, and specialised learning materials and assistive technologies for children with special needs were mentioned. Technical and vocational education will be introduced from Class 6, and new subjects and textbooks on sports and culture and "learning with happiness" will be added.

Quality enhancement programmes in science, mathematics, English, and information technology will be initiated in madrasas alongside religious education. "One Teacher, One Tab," multimedia classrooms, and free Wi-Fi in educational institutions are to be supported by the education budget.

Reconfiguring curriculum, textbooks and student assessment, easing economic burden on families, incentives and encouragement for students, and large-scale use of digital technology are continuing tasks in a dynamic system. However, we have trodden this path before, not often with happy outcomes. The devil is in the details—contextualisation and adaptation with the right emphasis, nuances that lead to the right actions, and eventually lead to results.

Many education analysts question the apparent emphasis on curriculum rewriting instead of curriculum implementation in the classroom with the essential adaptation. The idea of a compulsory additional foreign language besides English is considered by many as misguided and impractical. Compulsory vocational courses at the secondary level is a discarded idea because it has generally proven to be unworkable. Schools have a tough enough job teaching basic competencies, which is the critical lacking now for young people's preparation for life and work. Distribution of digital devices is not seen by many as the first or most useful step for harnessing the benefits of digital technology for education. Critics ask: is there a tendency to showcase symbolic and performative actions? The most trenchant critique of education sector moves has remained unanswered: that they are a collection of fragmented and partial measures to alleviate symptoms rather than a holistic strategy to treat the disease.

It can be fairly argued that there is a "curriculum reset" fatigue. Teachers, students, and parents are wary of undergoing multiple textbook and curricular overhauls after every political shift. Recent reversals have not proven to be helpful: after July 2024, the return to the 2012 curriculum and then the partial swing back to the 2023 content, and now inserting new subjects like "Learning with Happiness." Arguably, it is a pedagogic approach to be practised by teachers and students, rather than a subject to be taught. Teachers are at risk of suffering operational fatigue from trying to adjust to continuously shifting guidelines about teaching content, pedagogy, and assessment.

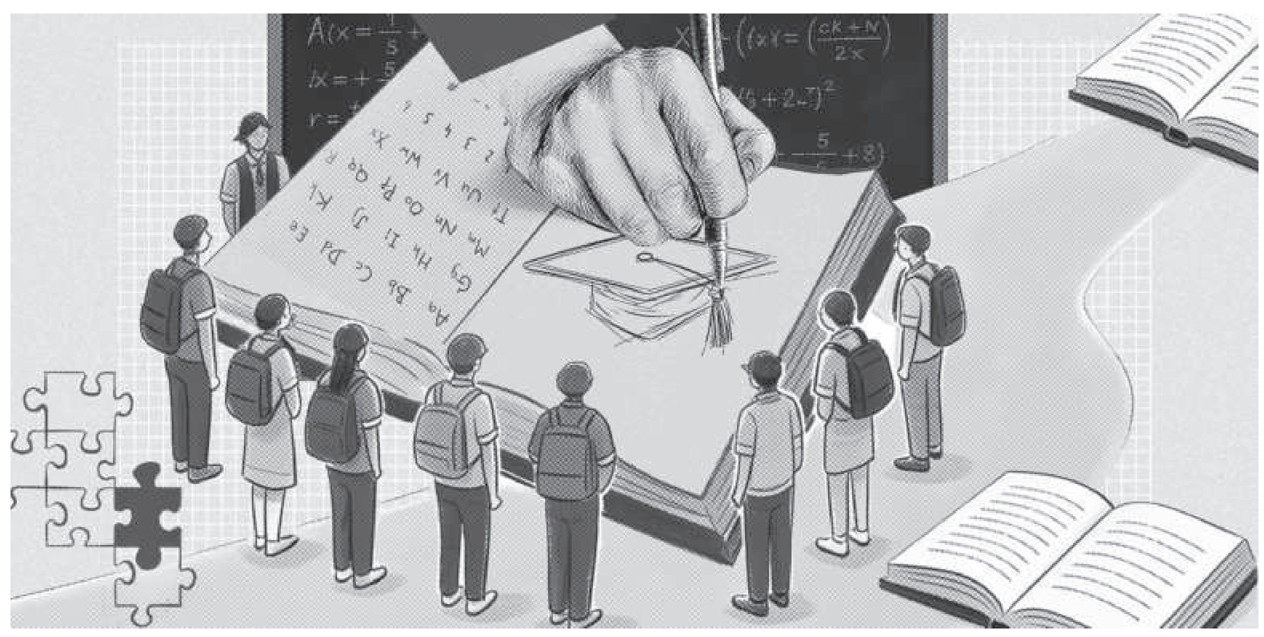
One set of numbers can be cited to illustrate what may be called a structural problem in the education system. Primary education is the foundation upon which the edifice of education stands.

Between 2013 and 2024, enrolment in government primary schools dropped from 1.5 crore to around 90 lakh, according to data from the Directorate of Primary Education. During the same period, the number of primary-level madrasa students increased from 12 lakh to 17 lakh. Kindergartens and other private schools increased their enrolment from 18 lakh to 43 lakh. The enrolment loss of government schools was partly due to a demographic reduction in the school-age population, but it is clear that a significant number of parents decided to take their children out of government schools. National student assessment and other independent surveys have shown that most children at the primary level don't acquire basic foundational skills of reading, writing, and counting, but the performance of students in government schools (and madrasas) is the worst. Madrasas still attract students because they are the least costly to parents, and there is also a religious motivator in some cases.

Amid the buzz about system reform, technology, and innovation, is old-fashioned pedagogy in the classroom being forgotten, where teachers and students engage in learning and where basic conditions are ensured? Such a system includes having a sufficient number of teachers to keep the class size manageable, a headteacher who leads the school team that works and plans to serve the children, and teachers who are not overburdened and receive guidance and supervision from the upazila education office and resource centre as needed. Where attractive textbooks and well-designed teachers' guides are available, classrooms and the school premise are safe and friendly, and teachers keep in touch with parents. Too many schools in Bangladesh don't meet these basic conditions.

Arguably, at least half of the families in the country, including those under or close to the poverty line (and others disadvantaged by ethnic, cultural or ecological reasons), face insurmountable challenges in bearing the cost of their children's education. A standard government school is not likely to be equipped or able to provide the help and support many of these children need. This is where education NGOs of proven capability can play a role, provided that the government recognises the necessity and supports a government-NGO-community partnership with appropriate policy and financial backing.

An annual budget is not an instrument for designing reform. Practical and pragmatic reform ideas must exist, which a budget can help implement. More homework is needed to formulate and shape realistic reforms in the education sector within a framework of comprehensive change in the sub-sectors over the next five to ten years.



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

Solarising three-wheelers should be our next step in clean mobility

MOHAMMAD ALAUDDIN

Mohammad Alauddin is former rector of Bangladesh Power Management Institute.

The major tax cuts extended to battery-powered electric vehicles (EVs) in the just-unveiled budget have, by association, brought the issue of battery-run three-wheelers to the fore. From Dhaka's crowded roads to remote rural growth centres, these vehicles have transformed mobility in Bangladesh. Known locally as easy bikes, e-bikes, or auto-rickshaws, these vehicles offer affordable mobility and livelihoods to countless people across the country. But it also comes with a growing dilemma in regard to energy consumption.

Most three-wheelers use electricity that is generated largely from fossil fuels. At a time when Bangladesh is looking for cleaner and cheaper energy solutions, solarising this informal but massive fleet of three-wheelers offers an important opportunity to connect mobility with renewable energy and turn a mounting electricity burden into a pathway for green mobility.

Estimates vary, but according to the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority, more than 60 lakh battery-run three-wheelers are operating nationwide. Despite their popularity, these vehicles face several challenges, including unstable structures, poor braking and suspension systems, unregulated operations, and unsafe charging practices. Their energy issue is even more serious.

Most of the vehicles still rely on outdated and heavy lead-acid batteries paired with inefficient, cheap chargers that generate excessive heat and waste a significant portion of the electricity drawn. Although much lighter and more efficient lithium-ion batteries are available in the market, their adoption remains limited because of higher upfront costs and lack of policy support.

Charging these vehicles also puts pressure on the national grid. A large chunk of electricity is drawn through domestic connections or illegal hooking. Since many vehicles remain unregistered, accurate statistics are difficult to obtain. However, if each vehicle consumes an average of four to six units of electricity daily, the combined demand of 60 lakh vehicles could exceed 3.5 crore units every day. This is where considering a move towards solarisation becomes relevant.

Installing solar panels on the roofs of three-wheelers, connected through charge controllers to the battery system, can partially recharge batteries during daytime operations. One study looking into electricity consumption across developed and developing countries suggests that, for households, use of rooftop solar panels can reduce grid electricity consumption by 20 to 60 percent. The same positive outcomes could be seen for three-wheelers fitted with rooftop solar panels as well.

Bangladesh can also explore solar-powered charging stations under net metering arrangements. Charging hubs equipped with solar photovoltaic (PV) systems could export electricity to the national grid during the daytime and draw electricity back at night when vehicles require charging. Such systems would reduce pressure on the national grid while promoting renewable energy integration.

The idea is neither unrealistic nor unprecedented. In recent years, Cuba has rolled out electric three-wheelers demonstrating how these vehicles can be gradually and sustainably integrated into a country's transport ecosystem. What began as a localised pilot project in Havana has evolved into a vital nationwide transport network. These vehicles are now common in parts of Havana and other cities. Rather than banning informal electric vehicles, Cuba focused on improving and modernising them.

Bangladesh can draw useful lessons from this experience. For years, battery-run three-wheelers have operated largely outside the scope of formal regulation. Attempting to ban them altogether (as is commonly suggested) would neither be practical nor economically sound. A better approach would be to modernise and retrofit the existing fleet in phases while also keeping in mind the safety of passengers and drivers.

At present, no single authority appears fully responsible for the sector. The Sustainable and Renewable Energy Development Authority (SREDA) could take the lead by coordinating with BRTA to introduce pilot projects focusing on solarisation, improved charging systems, and vehicle regularisation for electric three-wheelers. Such initiatives could transform three-wheelers into more than just low-cost transport, allowing these to become instruments and examples of energy transition, climate adaptation, and decentralised mobility.

The finance minister's budget speech for FY2026-27 emphasised the intent to deploy solar-powered and electric vehicles (especially buses and trucks) as well as expand supporting infrastructure. But Bangladesh's clean transport transition can also start with the ordinary three-wheeler that already serves millions of people every day. Modernising and solarising this vast transport network will not only reduce fossil fuel dependency but also ease electricity shortages and bring the use of renewable energy closer to everyday life.

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