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

Harassment of PM's adviser unacceptable

India must provide satisfactory explanation, acknowledge its failure to follow protocol

The harassment of Dr Zahed Ur Rahman, the prime minister's adviser on policy and strategy affairs, by Indian immigration officials at Delhi's Indira Gandhi International Airport on Sunday, is unwarranted and unacceptable. The incident sends the wrong message at a time when bilateral relations between Bangladesh and India, which have been strained following Sheikh Hasina's fall and escape to India in 2024, appeared to be warming up. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi congratulated Prime Minister Tarique Rahman on his party's landslide win in the February 12 national election, while Indian Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla joined the swearing-in ceremony of the new cabinet. However, the inexplicable and unwelcoming behaviour by Indian immigration officials stands in stark contrast to that earlier diplomatic messaging.

Although little is known about exactly what unfolded at the Indira Gandhi International Airport, there has been no ambiguity about Dr Zahed's purpose and protocol of the visit. He was not there in his personal capacity, but was representing Bangladesh officially at the 28th Meeting of the Committee of Senior Officials (CSO) of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), organised by India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), scheduled for June 15-16. Both the Bangladesh foreign ministry and Bangladesh's High Commissioner to India had informed India's MEA of Dr Zahed's visit. Yet, for two hours, he was "detained and harassed" by immigration officials at the airport, while the rest of the Bangladeshi delegation were allowed entry. Though Dr Zahed, too, was later permitted to pass through immigration, he decided to return to Bangladesh as an "instant protest" against the untoward behaviour of the Indian officials.

The discourteous attitude displayed by Indian officials at the Delhi airport echoes what has been happening on the Bangladesh-India border for the past couple of weeks. Since the Bharatiya Janata Party's win in the West Bengal election, the political antagonistic rhetoric about Bangladeshis has increased, along with the number of push-in attempts and prolonged stranding of groups of people—women, children, and elderly—at various points along the border. Besides, border killings by India's BSF continue, with no commitment to curbing this international crime in the latest Bangladesh-India border talks. These run contrary to a stable and neighbourly relationship.

We hope that the Indian government conducts a proper probe into the incident and takes appropriate action. We also expect nothing short of a satisfactory explanation on the part of the Indian government. They should acknowledge and make amends for this mistake. Since this sort of incident often acts as fodder for rhetoric that can negatively impact bilateral relations between the two neighbours, we urge both governments to take note and resolve the issue with diplomatic urgency. There should not be any slip-ups that can further fuel resentment and strain future relationships.

Three union names, one troubling pattern

Reverse the naming of unions after state minister's family members

Controversies over the naming of institutions, sporting events, and public establishments are common in our country, largely because of deep partisan divisions and political rivalries. However, naming union parishads after the family members of a state minister—two after two sons and one after a family title—sets a troubling new precedent. The politician at the centre of this controversy is none other than the state minister responsible for local government, the second most powerful office-holder in the ministry that oversees local government institutions, including union parishads. This ministry allocates funding, approves development programmes, and even holds the authority to remove elected representatives from these bodies.

State Minister for Local Government and Rural Development (LGRD) Mir Shahe Alam told parliament that the two unions had not been named after his sons but that the names matching exactly was merely coincidental. Responding to a question and criticism from opposition MP Shafiqul Islam, Shahe Alam insisted that the names of the unions had "miraculously" matched those of his sons. He further argued that since the prefix "Mir" was not included in the names of the two unions, they could not be linked to his family, adding that he could have instructed the deputy commissioner to include the prefix had he wished to do so. He offered no explanation, however, for the naming of Mirbari union after his family title.

It is difficult to accept that such remarkable coincidences could occur in a single upazila comprising just 12 unions—not once, not twice, but three times. If the minister's explanation is to be accepted at face value, the phenomenon would surely merit the attention of the world's leading mathematicians, statisticians, and algorithm experts who would be eager to understand how such extraordinary probabilities can come to pass.

Equally troubling is the enthusiasm with which Treasury bench members endorsed the minister's explanation, seemingly forgetting the familiar adage: "Once is an accident, twice is a coincidence, three times is a pattern." One cannot help wondering whether party loyalty clouded their judgement. In this context, it is worth recalling Prime Minister Tarique Rahman's decision to reject a proposal to rename the Keraniganj Technical Training Centre (TTC) after former Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia, arguing that existing institutions should not be renamed. The present controversy suggests that this policy directive may not have been taken seriously by all concerned.

Our elected representatives must recognise that their constituencies are not personal fiefdoms and that the public views such attitudes as abuse of power. Imposing a politician's legacy through the naming of public institutions after their own family does not ensure permanence; rather, it fuels a cycle of politically motivated renaming whenever governments change. This practice must end. The government would do well to reverse these naming decisions and thus deliver a clear message that members of the cabinet and parliament cannot allow personal or family interests to interfere with their sole duty to serve the public.

A welcome pivot to logistics reform, but time for a commission

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The proposed national budget for FY2026-27 deserves recognition for placing logistics and trade facilitation closer to the centre of Bangladesh's economic transformation agenda. Over the past decade, policymakers, businesses, development partners, and industry practitioners have repeatedly highlighted a simple reality: Bangladesh cannot achieve its export ambitions, attract large-scale foreign investment, or successfully navigate the post-LDC transition period without significantly reducing logistics costs and improving supply chain efficiency. This year's budget suggests that the government is listening.

FILE PHOTO: RAJIB RAHMAN

While the budget addresses many operational challenges, it leaves unresolved a more fundamental issue: governance.

Several initiatives outlined by the finance minister signal reforms long advocated by the private sector and logistics stakeholders. The emphasis on developing Chattogram as a regional trade and logistics hub, expanding rail-based freight transportation, modernising ports, promoting inland container depots (ICDs), liberalising off-dock investments, and simplifying customs procedures are all welcome steps in the right direction.

Particularly encouraging is the proposal to allow greater private and foreign participation in logistics infrastructure and cargo handling operations. The decision to facilitate investment in air cargo stations and logistics facilities beyond traditional airport boundaries has the potential to transform our export competitiveness, especially for high-value, time-sensitive sectors such as pharmaceuticals, electronics, fresh produce, and garments.

The budget also places considerable emphasis on customs modernisation, digital services, and trade facilitation. Continued expansion of the National Single Window system, automation of customs processes, and simplification of regulatory procedures should help reduce transaction costs and improve predictability for businesses. Likewise, investments in freight rail connectivity between ports and inland logistics facilities can help address one of Bangladesh's most persistent bottlenecks: excessive dependence on road transportation.

These initiatives deserve appreciation because they can move the country closer to having a modern logistics ecosystem capable of supporting sustained economic growth. But while the budget addresses many operational challenges, it leaves unresolved a more fundamental issue: governance.

Indeed, Bangladesh does not suffer from a shortage of infrastructure projects; it suffers from fragmentation.

The country's logistics ecosystem involves multiple ministries, departments, regulators, and public agencies. Ports fall under one authority, railways under another, customs under a third, civil aviation under a fourth, inland waterways under a fifth, and road transport under yet another. Investors, exporters, importers, freight forwarders, shipping lines, and transport operators all must often navigate overlapping jurisdictions, inconsistent regulations, and disconnected decision-making processes. As a result, projects that appear sound in isolation frequently fail to deliver their full benefits because coordination mechanisms among authorities remain weak.

The budget proposes investments in ports, railways, customs, digitalisation, and connectivity. However, it does not include a proposal to establish a single institution responsible for ensuring that these initiatives work together as part of a coherent national logistics strategy. This is why the government should consider creating a national logistics commission.

Such a commission would not replace existing ministries or agencies. Rather, it would serve as the central coordinating body responsible for logistics policy, performance monitoring, regulatory harmonisation, and implementation oversight. It could bring together representatives from the government, private sector, and development partners under a single framework with clearly defined objectives and accountability mechanisms.

Countries that have successfully transformed their logistics sectors rarely achieved success through infrastructure investment alone. Singapore, the UAE, and, increasingly, India have demonstrated the importance of integrated logistics governance. Efficient logistics systems are not merely collections of roads, ports, and warehouses; they are coordinated networks managed through unified policies and shared performance targets.

Another area requiring urgent attention is the development of a national port community system. While the budget promotes digitalisation across several government services, logistics information remains scattered across multiple platforms and organisations. A port community system would connect shipping lines, port authorities, customs, freight forwarders, terminal operators, transport providers, and regulatory agencies through a single digital platform. Such systems have become the standard for leading trading nations as they reduce paperwork, improve cargo visibility, minimise delays, and enhance transparency. For exporters and importers, the difference can be measured not in hours but in days.

The trucking sector also remains largely absent from the current reform agenda. Despite carrying the overwhelming majority of domestic freight, road freight transport continues to operate without a comprehensive modern regulatory framework. Issues relating to vehicle standards, driver certification, cargo tracking, axle-load compliance, digital freight matching, and operational efficiency deserve greater policy attention.

Similarly, inland waterway logistics remain underutilised despite Bangladesh possessing one of the world's largest river networks. Better integration of barge operations, inland terminals, and multimodal transport planning could significantly reduce logistics costs while easing pressure on roads and ports.

Finally, rail freight reform should move beyond infrastructure development alone. Investments in rail connectivity are essential, but long-term efficiency gains may also require greater private-sector participation in freight operations, transparent access arrangements, and performance-based service models.

The encouraging aspect of this year's budget is that the government appears to recognise logistics as a strategic economic sector rather than merely a transport issue. This shift in thinking is important and deserves acknowledgement. However, infrastructure investments, while necessary, are only part of the solution. Without institutional coordination, integrated digital systems, and modern logistics governance, many of the benefits of these investments may remain unrealised.

Bangladesh's ambition to become a regional manufacturing, trading, and logistics hub is achievable. The foundations are being laid through projects such as Matarbari Deep Sea Port, Bay Terminal, expanded rail networks, and customs modernisation initiatives. The next phase must focus on governance.

As the parliament deliberates on the proposed budget, policymakers have an opportunity to complement these important investments with reforms that strengthen coordination, accountability, and efficiency across the entire logistics ecosystem. The budget has opened the door—a national logistics commission would help ensure that Bangladesh walks through it.

Bangladesh needs a new social contract for higher education

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When it comes to higher education, Bangladesh does not have a funding problem; what it has, instead, is an accountability problem. Every year, billions in funding flow into public universities, research institutes, and national agencies. Campuses expand, degrees multiply, and policies are announced. Yet, one question remains unanswered: who is actually responsible for the results?

Are universities accountable for whether students learn and graduate? Are students accountable for making use of heavily subsidised education? Is the research system accountable for solving national problems? At present, the honest answer is: no one is accountable, fully.

The prime minister's visit to Dhaka University in May, his first since taking office, reignited familiar debates about quality, global rankings, and research relevance in public universities. Then came the controversy over a minister's remark comparing Dhaka University to a coaching centre. These moments underlined a frustration that many Bangladeshis share. What Bangladesh needs instead is a new social contract for higher education, one that makes responsibility visible and links public investment to real outcomes.

Today, a student at a public university receives an education almost entirely financed by the taxpayers. That fact remains largely invisible and unaccounted for. Funding flows through block grants to institutions. Students pay little, and rarely think about the scale of investment behind their degree.

A straightforward reform would change this. Every student admitted to a public university would receive a formal higher education scholarship. Nothing changes about who pays: the state continues to finance education in those institutions. But the mechanism becomes transparent. Funding would follow the student, and the universities would receive allocations based on enrolment and, crucially, on student progression. If students drop out or fail to advance, funding declines. If they succeed, institutions are supported.

Here, the benefit is twofold: students gain a concrete understanding of what public investment means—not as an abstraction—but as something with their name on it, and universities gain a direct incentive to prioritise teaching quality, academic support, and retention over expansion for its own sake. This is not privatisation but performance-linked public funding that keeps the state firmly in control.

The scholarship model targets one specific cost: teaching. Infrastructure, capital development, and strategic expansion would continue to flow through government grants, as they do today. Universities could also grow income through competitive research awards and development funds. The model does not cut university budgets; it only makes the teaching portion more transparent and directly accountable to student outcomes.

The research awards and development funds, however, depend on a system capable of generating them. Bangladesh's research capacity is not as weak as its global rankings suggest. Institutions such as Bangladesh Rice Research Institute (BRRI), Soil Resource Development Institute (SRDI), Geological Survey of Bangladesh (GSB), Bangladesh Space Research and Remote Sensing Organization (SPARRSO), and others generate genuine knowledge. The problem is that they operate in isolation: from universities, from each other, and from national priorities. Research funds are scattered across ministries with minimal coordination, creating duplication and missed opportunities.

The solution, then, should be structural. The government should establish a national research council, modelled broadly on UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), that directs research and innovation funding in the UK, but designed for Bangladesh's scale and needs. Such a body would provide sustained core funding to permanent national research institutions, coordinate competitive grants across universities and disciplines, and align the whole system with long-term national challenges: water security, climate resilience, agriculture, health, energy, AI, etc.

This framework would also address something rarely discussed: the absence of a genuine research culture inside universities. That means investing in staff development, building pathways for junior academics, and integrating students into real research work as active contributors rather than afterthoughts. These are cultural interventions, not expensive ones, and a national coordination body is the right vehicle to drive them.

A system that funds institutions without measuring what they produce will always stagnate. Bangladesh should introduce a performance-based strategic funding layer, with reviews every five to seven years assessing teaching quality, student progression, research output, and contribution to national priorities.

Institutions that perform well would receive additional research and development support. Those that underperform would face structured pressure to improve. This is not punitive by design; it is the basic logic of any serious public investment framework. Over time, it would also shift university leadership from ceremonial authority to genuine accountability for outcomes.

Critics may argue that these proposals belong to wealthier countries, but the core challenge in Bangladesh is not a lack of spending, but rather a lack of alignment. Public money already flows through multiple channels into higher education, but those channels run in parallel, with no shared logic and limited accountability for what they produce.

The political economy of this reform deserves to be stated plainly. The government would retain the upper hand. Students would remain dependent on the state through the visible scholarship. Universities would continue to rely on the government for development finance and national research investment. What changes is not who holds power, but how transparently and productively that power operates.

A more integrated system would not necessarily cost more, but it would deliver far better returns: in learning quality, research relevance, and the institutional leadership the country needs.

A new social contract would make responsibilities explicit: the state funds transparently, universities perform accountably, students recognise the value of public investment, and research serves the nation with coherence and purpose. So, the question that the state must confront is whether to keep managing the system's failures or finally redesign it.

The Daily Star
Reg. No. DA 781

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Printed by him on behalf of Mediaworld Ltd at Transcraft Ltd, 229, Tejgaon Industrial Area, editor@thedailystar.net

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