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

Migrant workers need stronger safeguards

Thousands are dying abroad, raising concerns about workers' safety

Remittances from Bangladeshi migrant workers have been one of the country's most successful economic stories. In the current fiscal year alone, between July 1 and October 6, the country received $9.22 billion in workers' remittances. Yet, for migrant workers whose arduous labour contributes so significantly to our economic growth, not enough has been done by successive governments to ensure their health and wellbeing when they are abroad. The result has been devastating: thousands of migrant workers coming back in body bags.

According to a Prothom Alo report, between January and September this year, 4,060 bodies of migrant workers have been brought back home—on average, more than 14 bodies daily. Most of them are young men and women. Such a shocking number is a wake-up call to the fact that our migrant workers are working under unusually harsh conditions, resulting in deaths.

The highest number of migrant deaths were in Saudi Arabia—almost 2,000 this year. Malaysia is second on the list. Recently, there have been reports of Bangladeshi migrant workers being tortured and even killed by cyber scam gangs in Cambodia. Many women migrant workers have come back after experiencing horrendous sexual and physical abuses; others have returned as corpses, their deaths unexplained. The official reason for migrant workers' deaths has been either "natural causes" or accidents.

Foreign employers, whether they are companies or individuals, must be held accountable when there is evidence of abuse.

According to migration-sector research organisations, many Bangladeshi workers in the Middle East work in construction, exposed to extreme heat, which leads to heat-related illnesses such as heat stroke, kidney damage, heart disease, and other serious health conditions. Therefore, it is imperative that workers are equipped with training and knowledge about the nature and environment of the work in their destination country. They must learn to acclimatise to the temperatures, protect themselves from extreme heat, stay healthy, and cope with the work hours and pressure.

In addition, Bangladesh must develop the negotiating power to demand health insurance, better working conditions with adequate breaks, nutrition, and protective gear where necessary. Foreign employers, whether they are companies or individuals, must be held accountable when there is evidence of abuse. The Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment must play a proactive role, maintain a database of all migrant workers that includes where they are working and install hotlines through which workers can get help when they fall sick or get entrapped in abusive conditions. The high commissions in the host countries must be active in getting help from local authorities to investigate cases of abuse, entrapment, and death of migrant workers.

The Wage Earners' Welfare Board insurance scheme that provides funds for death and injury of migrant workers should also include facilities for undocumented workers. The process of bringing back the bodies of deceased workers to their families should be made easier. These facilities are the bare minimum that migrant workers are entitled to. Giving our workers dignity and respect for their huge contribution to the country's development is the least we can do.

This is no way to run our universities

Forcing RMU VC to 'resign' through intimidation raises alarm

We are deeply concerned by the allegation that Rajshahi Medical University (RMU) Vice-Chancellor Prof Md Jawadul Haque was coerced into signing a resignation letter by a violent mob. According to reports, 20 to 50 people stormed his office on Tuesday, assaulted his personal secretary, and forced both of them to sign resignation letters, leaving with the letters, the VC's mobile phone and laptop. Later, the RMU officials found CCTV equipment had been removed and electricity and internet services disconnected.

There may be legitimate grievances against the VC. There have been protests following allegations of irregularities in university appointments and other activities, which he has denied. He also alleged that some of those who entered his office were linked to local contractors, while others were outsiders backed by political groups. He said they accused him of favouring Dhaka-based firms in university contracts and called him an "Awami League collaborator". These allegations, including any allegations against the VC, should be investigated properly. But nothing justifies forcing an official to resign through intimidation.

This incident follows a pattern we have seen before. In 2024, mobs of students forced teachers and university officials to resign from educational institutions around the country. At the time, we warned that such actions could create administrative and academic vacuums, undermine institutional discipline, and further damage teacher-student relations. Two years on, we are witnessing the same problem in a different form. This incident sets a dangerous precedent whereby anyone with enough supporters can attempt to remove an official they dislike.

As a case has been filed over the incident, police have arrested a local BNP leader who was present at the scene along with some other fellow party members. Hence, we urge the BNP to take appropriate action against any of its members found to have been involved. The ruling party must also ensure that their political influence is not used to intimidate university officials or anyone else. At the same time, the RMU authorities must conduct a proper and impartial investigation to identify everyone responsible and hold them accountable, regardless of their political affiliation or connections. Any genuine allegations of wrongdoing within a university campus should also be investigated with due diligence, followed by appropriate action if wrongdoing is proven.

Crackdowns alone cannot rein in teen gangs for long



Naznin Tithi is a member of the editorial team at The Daily Star.

■ **NAZNIN TITHI**

As a nation, we tend to address deep-rooted social problems only at the surface level. After 13-year-old Oprotim was murdered by members of a teenage gang in Cumilla, our immediate reaction was to blame the victim and his parents, particularly his mother, for what many described as her "failure" to raise him properly. Some even rushed to offer unsolicited parenting advice on social media. Few, however, seemed interested in asking the questions that actually matter: Why are our children getting involved with violent gangs during the years they should be focused on education and personal development? Who are patronising these groups? And what have we done to protect them from harm's way?

Over the past few years, reports of teen gang violence have surged across the country, spreading from Dhaka and Chattogram to districts like Manikganj, Khulna, Chandpur, and Noakhali. These groups of children are not only engaged in occasional street fights. Police and intelligence sources say they are increasingly involved in extortion, drug peddling, territorial control, and even land grabbing. In Dhaka alone, police have identified 127 teen gangs. In Chattogram, roughly 200 gangs with at least 1,400 members are active and are responsible for at least 548 criminal incidents over the last six years. The brutality of their actions is escalating to unthinkable levels. On September 29, in Chattogram, a 16-year-old boy named Hridoy was stabbed to death over an internal gang dispute. His ears were cut off before he was stabbed.

Faced with this growing challenge, the state's default response has been to conduct sweeping crackdowns. In Cumilla, teenage gangs emerged as a major problem around 2015 when only a few groups were active, but their number has grown exponentially since then. According to police, gang members have since been linked to numerous crimes, including at least 12 killings and more than 100 other incidents between 2017 and 2025, as well as at least 25 notable crimes in the first eight and a half months of this year. Their alleged activities include murder, extortion, drug dealing, mugging, motorcycle theft, and carrying weapons.



VISUAL: **ANWAR SOHEL**

Crackdowns are bound to fail when they only target the teenage gang members while ignoring their patrons. The chief whip of parliament recently declared that teen gangs would be eradicated within three months. But is it possible to do so if the political elites who actively use these teenagers to wield power are exempt from such crackdowns?

Recent drives in Cumilla saw at least 2,035 young people detained in just five phases. Of them, 1,409 were warned and released to their guardians, and 626 were sent to court.

As the crackdown on teenage gangs continues, we must ask if mass arrests are enough to stop these gangs. Experiences say they are not. Many of the gang leaders and members arrested recently have histories of committing serious crimes, including murder. Cumilla's notorious "R Squad" (or "Ratan Group") has made headlines for years over public displays of weapons and attempted murders. Its main organiser, 25-year-old Imran Hossain alias Ratan, has nine cases against him, including a murder case, while his close associate Saiful Islam faces 10 cases. They were out on bail before being arrested in Cox's Bazar. The impunity they enjoyed emboldened them further.

More importantly, crackdowns are bound to fail when they only target the teenage gang members while ignoring their patrons. The chief whip of parliament recently declared that teen gangs would be eradicated within three months. But is it possible to do so if the political elites who actively use these teenagers to wield power are exempt from such crackdowns? Furthermore, such rhetoric feels less like a solution and more like an attempt to appease the public.

While it is encouraging that police authorities have finally instructed field-level officers to investigate the influential individuals behind these gangs, law enforcement must follow through and keep the public updated. They must also monitor how new members are recruited and why those released on bail again return to crime.

In some recent violent incidents, including the hours-long attack on the Radda health centre, the presence of juveniles was noticeable—dozens among around 150 people involved in the attack. Teenagers were also involved in the recent Adabor attack. In Chattogram, police have identified 64 "big brothers" who provide patronage or protection to teenage groups. In Cumilla, Imran Hossain alias Ratan of the "Ratan Group" was seen walking closely behind the vice-president of the Cumilla city unit of Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal in a procession. Such scenes exemplify how these gangs thrive on political patronage.

So, what happens after the mass arrests? Our justice and rehabilitation system for juvenile crimes seems largely unequipped to handle the influx. In Cumilla, at least 27 recently detained teenagers were sent to the Tongi Child Development Centre, which is already running beyond capacity, while the Cumilla Central Jail is currently housing 3,500 inmates against a capacity of 1,500. Furthermore, a recent investigation by The Daily Star revealed widespread abuse, severe overcrowding, and inadequate mental health support at these centres. Unless these facilities are transformed into safe spaces providing education, counselling, and vocational training, mass arrests will do nothing to rehabilitate juvenile offenders. Moreover, in case of those who were released to the custody of family members, is that the end of the state's responsibility? What, if anything, is done to rehabilitate them?

Research on juvenile delinquency worldwide has found that family problems, lack of parental supervision, delinquent peers, poor academic performance, school disengagement, substance abuse, and poverty can contribute to delinquent behaviour. However, these factors do not make criminal behaviour inevitable; they make children more vulnerable to it. A March 2024 survey by Chattogram city police found that 54 percent of students who were regularly absent from school were involved in criminal activities, including pornography, cybercrime, mugging, theft, drug use and dealing, and online gambling.

Besides education, other constructive activities are important. For many families, even providing for education is hard, let alone sports, music, art, or other activities for their children. How many of our neighbourhoods have safe playgrounds, libraries, youth clubs, or other spaces where teenagers can spend their time constructively? Psychologists say that these activities can help children develop social skills, confidence, and a sense of belonging. If we want children to stay away from gangs, we must also ask what meaningful alternatives the state is offering them.

Young people can achieve a lot when they have a sense of purpose. The students who took to the streets during the 2018 road safety movement demonstrated immense capacity for constructive social organisation. Young people were also at the centre of the 2024 student-led anti-quota movement that evolved into the July uprising. When children's energy and desire to belong are not channelled into constructive activities, they can be exploited. Should we leave our children vulnerable to such an outcome?

If we fail to address the underlying causes of growing teenage violence in the country, we will continue treating the symptoms while allowing the real problem to go unchecked.

Who pays for stability? A climate and feminist question



Farah Kabir is country director at ActionAid Bangladesh.

■ **FARAH KABIR**

In October, Bangkok is hosting two conversations about the future that are rarely held together. Climate Action Week will see the gathering of activists, communities, young people, and climate advocates. Days later, finance ministers, central bankers, economists, and civil society representatives will get together for the IMF and World Bank Annual Meetings.

The proximity of these two events is important to note, as it signifies that climate change is no longer an environmental crisis alone. It is also a debt crisis, a fiscal crisis, and a question of who carries the cost of adjustment. The feminist question in this regard is this: who pays for stability?

Macroeconomic policy is often presented in neutral terms. But budgets are lived differently. When governments cut spending, remove subsidies, or tighten fiscal policy, the costs can move from the treasury into households and communities. And it is women who frequently absorb them through unpaid care, additional work, and reduced access to essential services.

The IMF has moved in recognising this. Its recent work acknowledges that fiscal policy affects women and men differently, and that childcare, social protection, and public services impact women's economic participation. But recognition is only the first step towards genuine transformation.

An economist sees the removal of a subsidy as fiscal reform. But what does a woman see when transport, cooking fuel, or food become more expensive and her unpaid working day becomes longer? Research examining fuel-subsidy reform in Bangladesh, Egypt, and Kenya has found that adjustment can impose disproportionate costs on women and marginalised groups through higher household expenses, increased unpaid care, and weaker access to food, transport, housing, and essential services.

This is not an argument for preserving every subsidy. Some are poorly targeted, costly, or environmentally damaging. But reform cannot be judged only by what it saves for the state. It must also account for what it costs society, and who pays.

The same question applies to debt. ActionAid's latest "Debt Fuels the Climate Crisis: How the Finance Flows" report shows that across 65 highly climate-vulnerable countries, debt servicing absorbs around 65 percent of government revenue and is nearly 25 times higher than spending on climate action. Global South countries are projected to repay around 225 times more debt in 2026 than they receive in grant-based climate finance. This signals not a debt problem, but misplaced choices.

When debt service consumes scarce public resources, governments have less room to strengthen health systems, expand social protection, invest in resilient infrastructure, support locally led adaptation, or finance a just transition.

Climate-vulnerable countries are being asked to borrow to recover from and adapt to disasters, then find additional resources to repay those loans. When climate finance consists mainly of debt, adaptation efforts can deepen fiscal vulnerability.

When public services weaken, the task of care work falls on families. When food or energy costs rise, households have to adjust accordingly. When water becomes scarce or infrastructure fails, someone spends more time securing what the state or market no longer provides reliably. Much of that invisible work remains women's work. This is why climate change and debt cannot be treated as separate conversations.

Campaigners gathering in Bangkok are pressing for debt cancellation and a fairer debt architecture, including mechanisms to suspend debt payments after climate disasters; grant-based climate finance; progressive taxation; and a shift in financial flows away from fossil fuels towards a just transition. Their demands challenge a system in which countries facing the greatest climate risks can have the least fiscal space to respond.

Establishing fiscal justice means treating care, health, education, social protection, and climate resilience as economic infrastructure, rather than expenditure to be trimmed when budgets tighten. It means judging debt sustainability against a country's ability to protect its people and prepare for future shocks, not only its capacity to repay creditors. It also requires moving beyond gender mainstreaming. A gender statement attached to a budget is useful but a budget that changes who controls resources, performs care, and has economic opportunity can be transformative.

The real test of economic policy is whether it expands people's capabilities to withstand shocks—not merely whether it restores fiscal ratios. The questioning carried from Bangkok's climate gatherings into the IMF and World Bank meetings should be: what kind of stability are we building, whose resilience does it protect, and who is paying for it?

A stable economy cannot be one that balances its books by exhausting its people. Its ultimate measure is whether, when the next shock arrives, people have the resources, services, and choices to withstand it.

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