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

Address teacher shortages urgently

Learning gaps among students in secondary schools are increasing

The impact of the persistent shortage of teachers at government secondary schools will be monumental unless it is addressed immediately. We wrote about the issue not long ago, and a recent report by this daily shows that the problem still persists, with no concrete solution in sight. It is mind-boggling how 2,842 teaching posts remain vacant in government secondary schools and 77,227 posts in non-government secondary schools under the Monthly Pay Order (MPO) programme. As a result, students are not learning enough while existing teachers are overworked. Consequently, the overall quality of education is deteriorating at a stage as crucial as secondary school. This will likely impact the academic and professional future of these young people adversely.

The data is truly shocking. Out of the 20,631 secondary schools, as many as 3,861 do not have ICT teachers, 2,744 have no mathematics teachers, and 2,625 are without English teachers. The lack of trained teachers in key subjects has been a persistent problem, leading to poor learning outcomes, an increase in dropout rates, and a rise in the number of students failing.

Delays in recruitment, problems in teacher deployment and difficulty in retaining teachers are the main factors behind the shortage. These are festering problems that have been allowed to accumulate. Unfortunately, successive governments have paid little heed to expert suggestions in addressing the crisis, resulting in predictable consequences.

During the interim government's tenure, a 10-member Improvement of Secondary Education Committee was formed, which provided 120 recommendations. It included a long-term proposal to make major changes in the recruitment and deployment process of secondary school teachers. It recommended, for instance, establishing a National Teaching Corps under which graduates would be recruited into the teaching service with competitive salaries, allowances, and professional status. In addition, they would have to serve for at least five years in government-assigned institutions, especially in schools in rural areas where acute teacher shortage is often a chronic issue.

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Learning from other countries, especially within the region, to see how teachers are trained, paid, and incentivised to stay in the schools for which they were originally recruited, would be the right step. The present government has increased the education budget from 1.39 percent of the GDP to 2 percent, but it is still less than the four to six percent as recommended by Unesco. We urge the government to fully endorse the recommendations of the committee and implement them as soon as possible. Thousands of secondary students have already had to bear the brunt of a flawed education system and paid the price in terms of low-paying jobs and unemployment. Teachers help in building the intellectual backbone of a country. Yet teachers are some of the lowest-paid professionals. This must stop. Teachers must be given their due both financially and in terms of their status. Only then can we hope to get an adequate number of qualified teachers in all schools.

Is social media use getting out of hand?

Address the growing mental health risks of excessive use

Whenever we think of "doomscrolling"—defined as the compulsive habit of spending a huge amount of time viewing negative, distressing, or alarming content on social media—we usually blame ourselves for lacking the self-restraint to stop. While we do bear some personal responsibility for avoiding harmful habits, it would be naïve to let social media platforms off the hook entirely. These platforms invest considerable effort in keeping users hooked, employing research-backed mechanisms to increase engagement and time spent on social media. What may seem like a straightforward pursuit of profit maximisation has translated into serious consequences for users' mental health.

A Bangladesh-based study, conducted in 2024 involving 440 young adults aged 18 to 35 years, found that spending more than four hours a day on social media was associated with a higher likelihood of depression and anxiety. The findings point to a broader relationship between excessive social media use and mental health difficulties. These can, in turn, contribute to internet addiction, sleep problems, poor concentration, and irritability, among other challenges. Easy access to digital devices and a lack of digital literacy have exacerbated the problem, as parents often hand smartphones to very young children, without setting clear limits on screen time or monitoring the content they consume.

All this points to a grim reality for Bangladesh's overall mental health. The last national mental health survey, conducted in 2019, found that at least 18.7 percent of adults aged 18 years and above and 12.6 percent of children between the ages of 7 and 17 years had a mental disorder. The toll on young people is reflected, in part, in reports of student suicides, with at least 224 students dying by suicide up until September this year. There may also be links between deteriorating mental health and the reported rise in teen gang violence across the country. As per research in other countries, gang involvement has been associated with polytraumatisation—the experience of multiple traumatic events—which can have lasting adverse effects on mental health.

To address this crisis, our government must implement policies such as digital literacy programmes, accessible mental health services, and public awareness campaigns. Digital platforms must also be held accountable for design practices that encourage compulsive use. Young people need to grow up with healthier digital habits that promote their overall quality of life, rather than undermine it.

New NCT deal must deliver measurable gains for Bangladesh



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The debate over the New Mooring Container Terminal (NCT) at Chattogram port has entered a new phase after Chittagong Port Authority (CPA) and UAE-based DP World signed a 15-year concession agreement on Thursday, October 8, for the operation, maintenance, and modernisation of NCT and its overflow container yard. Ownership of the terminal, land, and core infrastructure remains with the port authority, while Customs, Immigration, the Navy, Coast Guard, and other security functions remain under the control of the relevant state agencies.

Now that the deal has been signed, following a lengthy process marked by controversy and protests, the debate should move beyond the binary question of "foreign versus local." The more useful question for our trade and economy is: what measurable additional value will the concession produce, and how will that value be verified?

NCT is not a new facility being built from scratch. It is an established public asset that has been operating since 2007 and already handles around 44 percent of the port's container traffic. So, a concession involving such an asset cannot be judged by whether it maintains existing service levels; it must demonstrate additional gains in productivity, reliability, technology, service quality, and public revenue.

Some important parameters are already publicly known. According to Invest Bangladesh, DP World will pay an upfront fee of approximately Tk 600 crore and invest more than Tk 1,000 crore over the first 10 years in modernisation, equipment, and technology. CPA will also receive a revenue share and a fixed annual fee. The agreement establishes key performance indicators (KPIs) and requirements for regular reporting, CPA monitoring and audits, along with financial penalties for missed targets. These provisions make the concession's performance measurable, but they alone cannot guarantee whether it will ultimately deliver value for money. The real test lies in implementation.

To assess the results, the first priority should be to establish a performance baseline before the full operational handover. If vessel turnaround, berth productivity, crane moves per hour, truck turnaround, equipment availability, container dwell time, and yard utilisation are expected to improve, their starting levels should be documented. Otherwise, future gains may be difficult to distinguish from changes resulting from trade growth, new infrastructure, or wider port reforms.

As it is, Chattogram port's current performance leaves much room for improvement. It ranked 364th among 400 ports in the 2025 Container Port Performance Index, while container dwell time exceeds nine days and vessels spend more than 2.5 days in port. To turn these performance gaps into measurable improvements, any targets set must be specific, time-bound, and enforceable. Under the concession agreement, DP World's KPIs will include truck turnaround and crane productivity, with financial penalties applying if the company fails to meet agreed targets for three consecutive months. Such provisions will be meaningful only if performance is consistently monitored and the penalties enforced.



The real test of the NCT concession is whether it delivers measurable efficiency gains and a fair return from a public asset.

FILE PHOTO: **RAJIB RAIHAN**

The reported minimum annual container handling guarantee also needs to be put in perspective. The agreement reportedly sets a floor of 1.23 million TEUs (twenty-foot equivalent units), below the 1.385 million TEUs that NCT handled in FY2025-26. The guarantee is, therefore, better viewed as a contractual volume floor than as a productivity target. The more important test is whether the operator can improve crane productivity, vessel and truck turnaround, dwell time, and service reliability while handling future growth.

Investment commitments deserve the same scrutiny. The Tk 1,000-plus crore commitment should be broken down into measurable stages: what equipment will be purchased or replaced, which digital systems will be introduced, when investments will be made, and what improvements they are expected to deliver. DP World says its investments will cover civil works and equipment upgrades, digital solutions, and improvements in berth planning, yard management, equipment utilisation, preventive maintenance and safety.

Public accountability does not require the disclosure of every commercially sensitive clause. But users and citizens should understand the broad basis on which an established national asset is expected to generate public value over 15 years. It would, therefore, help to have a concise public concession summary disclosing the principal investment obligations, performance benchmarks, broad revenue-sharing principles, tariff governance, reporting requirements, review arrangements, default remedies, and handback conditions.

Terminal productivity is not the same as overall logistics productivity. Modern cranes, automated gates, and advanced terminal operating systems can improve NCT's performance, but a container that moves rapidly through the terminal and is then delayed by Customs clearance, banking documentation, regulatory approvals, or inland transportation remains part of an inefficient logistics chain. NCT's digital transformation should, therefore, integrate with Customs and Bangladesh's wider trade-facilitation systems. A digitally advanced terminal should not become an efficient island surrounded by paper-based processes. What matters to an exporter or importer is not merely how quickly a crane moves a container, but how predictably cargo moves from vessel to factory, or from factory to vessel.

Labour transition should also be part of the performance equation. The government says local employment will continue and that modern technology and international training will strengthen skills within the port and logistics sector. There remain some concerns among sections of workers, however, and these should be addressed through a structured workforce development programme covering retraining, safety, new technical skills, and opportunities for local professionals to take on increasingly sophisticated roles.

There is also an opportunity to make accountability visible. Since the agreement already provides for KPIs, regular reporting, CPA monitoring, and audits, CPA could publish a concise quarterly performance dashboard without disclosing commercially sensitive information. Indicators such as throughput, berth productivity, vessel and truck turnaround, dwell time, equipment availability, safety performance, and investment delivered would show whether promises are being translated into results.

Such transparency would benefit both sides. If DP World achieves substantial productivity gains, objective data will demonstrate the value of international operational expertise. If performance falls short of agreed commitments, the same system will allow CPA to intervene early.

Bangladesh has legitimate reasons to engage experienced global terminal operators. Technology, operational discipline, maintenance practices, and international standards can strengthen the competitiveness of the country's trade gateways. That said, the signing of the agreement itself should not be regarded as success. For exporters and importers, the desired outcomes are shorter logistics times, greater predictability, and more efficient cargo movement. For CPA and the state, what's expected is a fair and verifiable return from a public asset as well as the preservation of effective regulatory oversight.

So, the most constructive approach going forward would be to properly establish the baseline, measure contractual commitments, monitor investment and performance, enforce agreed standards, and report the results. If NCT becomes faster, more reliable, and technologically stronger while Bangladesh receives a fair return and CPA retains effective oversight, the concession will make its own case. If those improvements do not materialise, the country should be able to see that just as clearly.

Beware machines that always take our side



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It is past midnight, and a university student in Dhaka is still turning over an argument with her roommate. She doesn't communicate with any of her human friends, perhaps fearing judgement or to avoid inconveniencing them. Instead, she types the whole story into a chatbot. Within seconds, it replies, warmly and at length: her feelings are completely valid, and the roommate sounds hard to live with. It feels good, and that is exactly the trouble.

Most public worry regarding artificial intelligence is about what it might do to us: take our jobs, flood the internet with lies, one day outthink us. Fair enough. But a smaller change is already underway, and it concerns how we deal with each other. More of our conversations now happen with a listener that never tires, never has a bad day, and rarely disagrees. Much of what we learn from other people comes from their willingness to disagree with us, and we are quietly losing the habit of hearing it.

In a study published in *Science* in March, Stanford researchers put personal dilemmas to 11 leading chatbots and found that the models backed the user's actions 49 percent more often than people did, even when the situation involved deception or illegality. When the prompts came from a Reddit forum where commenters had already judged the poster to be in the wrong, the bots still sided with the poster just over half the time. The researchers then tested real people. After a single exchange with a flattering chatbot, participants grew surer they were right and less willing to apologise or mend the quarrel. They also rated the flattering bots as more trustworthy.

Chatbots are refined using human feedback, and people tend to reward answers that agree with them. OpenAI came close to admitting as much in April 2025, when it withdrew a ChatGPT update that had turned strangely fawning. The company said it had leaned too heavily on short-term feedback and had no specific tests for flattery before release. Young people are the most exposed to such risks. A US survey published in *JAMA Pediatrics* in June found that nearly one in five people aged 12 to 21 had turned to chatbots for mental health help when they felt stressed, angry, or sad. Comparable Bangladeshi data is scarce, but the habit looks familiar. *The Daily Star* has reported on young people here using ChatGPT as a stand-in therapist, with a clinician warning about emotional dependence.

Abroad, the consequences have sometimes been grave. Families in the United States have sued chatbot companies after teenagers died. Character.AI and Google agreed in January to settle several such cases, while OpenAI is still fighting a case over the death of a 16-year-old and has argued in court that he misused the product. Courts will decide those claims, but what happens to a teenager's social skills when the easiest conversation in their life is also the only one that never pushes back?

When someone states something that is simply untrue, does the model nod along, and how often? How often does it praise weak work? Developers should publish those figures, and schools, parents, and regulators should be able to compare products on whether they tell the truth, not only on how clever they sound.

None of this is an argument against AI. A shy person can rehearse a difficult conversation. A student in a village with no private tutor can get patient help with algebra at any hour. But people should always be told when they are talking to a machine, in text, and on voice calls. The government's draft National AI Policy already acknowledges that chatbots have harmed people elsewhere and promises a risk framework.

We test AI systems for safety, so we can test them for weakness too. When someone states something that is simply untrue, does the model nod along, and how often? How often does it praise weak work? Developers should publish those figures, and schools, parents, and regulators should be able to compare products on whether they tell the truth, not only on how clever they sound. Builders can also reward a model for saying "I think you're mistaken", politely and meaning it.

We also need some time set aside for people alone. Schools could keep a few assignments and the lunch break free of screens. Offices can hold meetings where nobody consults a bot. Families can agree that a condolence message or an apology is written by the person who owes it. This is not technophobia. Talking to people is a skill, and skills fade when nobody uses them.

None of this is dramatic, and it isn't meant to be. How we treat one another is being shaped right now, in small late-night chats nobody is watching.

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