The Daily Star
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Don't gamble with Dhaka's future

Latest amendments to the city's DAP raise concerns

What is the purpose of the Detailed Area Plan (DAP)? From what we understand, DAP defines the dos and don'ts of development in the Dhaka metropolitan area, specifying land use, building construction limits, and use of water bodies and open and/or green spaces. That would mean DAP was designed to guide a balanced, sustainable development of our capital city. But the latest round of revision of this crucial urban planning framework put this concept into doubt.

The amendment in question, gazetted on October 14, introduces changes in three key provisions of the current DAP (2022-2035): i) the floor area ratio (FAR) has been raised by up to 0.5 for plots measuring five kathas or more in Purbachal and Jhilmil housing projects, if residential plot owners apply for building-plan approval within six months from October 15; ii) three plots in Ailbahar mouza under Shyampur and Kadamtali, which lie along the Buriganga River, have been reclassified from open spaces to heavy industrial areas, and iii) revision of rules involving water flow overlay zones. These revisions have drawn criticism from urban planners. Raising FAR can have a significant impact on a given area's population density and access to amenities such as roads, drainage, and utility services. And in a city that houses 3.66 crore people, where only 8 percent of its area provides open spaces and industrial pollution poses a major urban public health challenge, how justified is converting open spaces along a river into heavy industrial areas?

Dhaka desperately needs a development plan that leaves some room to breathe. Without adequate infrastructure, environmental safeguards and public services, making the aforementioned changes will only worsen congestion, waterlogging and other problems that plague the city.

Equally troubling is the allegation that the amendments have been issued bypassing the required technical review and approval process, raised by a source within the Rajdhani Unnayan Kartripakkha (Rajuk), the authority in charge of the capital's development. According to the source, the industrial classification was done without acquiring no-objection clearances from the Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority and the city corporation. Also, there was no site inspection and assessment of potential impact on the local ecosystem. As of this writing, Rajuk has not provided any clarification regarding its decision. If it has indeed skipped these necessary steps before finalising the changes, it must explain why.

Experts have alleged that business interests have been prioritised over public welfare. This is not the first time such allegations have been raised. Experts and advocates have repeatedly cautioned against compromising Dhaka's liveability just to favour commercial gains. These concerns deserve a transparent and substantive response. We urge the authorities to properly investigate these allegations. Dhaka desperately needs a development plan that leaves some room to breathe. Without adequate infrastructure, environmental safeguards and public services, making the aforementioned changes will only worsen congestion, waterlogging and other problems that plague the city. The relevant authorities must disclose the technical assessments, consultations and approvals underlying the latest amendments. An independent review should establish whether due process was followed and whether the changes truly serve public interest. If they don't, the amendments should be withdrawn pending proper review. Urban planning must be guided by evidence, professional expertise, and accountability to citizens only.

Cyber law must not muzzle dissent

Heed stakeholders' advice for amending the law

One would be forgiven for losing count of how many shapes Bangladesh's "cyber/digital security" laws have taken since the draconian Digital Security Act, 2018 was enacted. Still today, we find ourselves repeating the same concerns about the infringement of citizens' rights, as if by rote. The recently amended Cyber Security Act, 2026, is based on the interim government's Cyber Protection Ordinance, 2025, which, at the time, was criticised for lacking adequate stakeholder consultation before enactment. The BNP government then adopted this controversial ordinance as law in April, amended it once in June, and proposed further changes last month.

It should be noted that, for the last eight years, rights groups and news media have called for much of the same: mainly broader definitions, exclusion of vague terms (such as "dignity" and "rumour"), guarantee of press freedom and freedom of speech and expression. Based on the government's latest proposal to criminalise defamation and introduce prison terms and fines for "humiliation" and "bullying", it seems that the calls have fallen on inattentive ears. Even after witnessing the local and global backlash faced by the Awami League for enacting such restrictive cyber laws—which directly contributed to the people of Bangladesh rising against the regime in 2024—how can any subsequent government fail to read the room?

According to Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB), 101 people were accused and 64 arrested in 44 cases under the cyber law between March and September. Worryingly, the motivation behind the law and its proposed amendments seems to be to further consolidate power, not to truly ensure justice for victims of cybercrimes. Indeed, the country's vaguely-termed cyber laws have historically been used primarily to impinge on the freedom of the press and to silence dissent.

Prior to approving the latest amendment to the Cyber Security Act, 2026, we urge the government to heed the warnings and advice of its own media committee and those of relevant stakeholders and the Editors' Council. It is unacceptable that our primary cybercrimes law should be so focused on limiting press freedom and citizens' free speech, as well as outlining disproportionate punishment for vaguely-defined crimes. The internet must indeed be made safer for users in Bangladesh, and this should be the only sentiment guiding any changes to the current law.

IMF-WORLD BANK MEETINGS

More diagnosis, less relief

MACRO MIRROR



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Views expressed in this article are the author's own.

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The 2026 Annual Meetings of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank Group, held in Bangkok from October 12 to 18, took place amid a war-driven energy shock, record public debt, rising inflation, and an AI boom that is lifting some economies while leaving others behind. Beyond acknowledgment of these issues, poorer countries need affordable finance, workable debt solutions, and room to protect people while implementing reforms.

The meetings, which covered jobs, investment and growth, public debt, energy and food security, climate risks, and artificial intelligence, broadly diagnosed global challenges but made few binding decisions. The employment challenge was especially stark. World Bank President Ajay Banga at the Annual Meetings plenary said about 1.2 billion young people are expected to enter the labour market over the next 10 to 15 years, while only about 400 million jobs are projected to be available.

The IMF's steering committee called for greater support for countries facing short-term financing difficulties, particularly those affected by conflict and high energy prices. The International Monetary and Financial Committee (IMFC) Chair said the global economy had weathered shocks better than expected, but its resilience was weakening.

The World Bank reported efforts to expand its lending capacity and attract private investment. But its own figures show the limits of private investment in closing the development gap; for low-income countries, such mobilisation remained at around $3 billion. Poorer economies often lack the infrastructure, stable institutions and financial conditions needed to attract large commercial investments. Cheaper and more flexible public and concessional finance therefore remain essential.

The challenges facing poorer countries must now translate into practical debt relief and affordable financing because the stakes are immediate. High debt costs, expensive imports and limited revenue leave governments with less to spend on health, education, social protection and investment. So, developing countries called for more accessible financing.

Rapid access to finance should be on terms countries can repay without cutting essential services. When debt becomes unmanageable, they also need a timely, predictable restructuring process. However, the meetings did not deliver a major new debt-relief agreement or a clear, funded response to the pressures facing vulnerable countries, leaving urgent concerns over debt, conflict, inflation and access to affordable finance unresolved for developing countries.

Private investment can help when projects are viable and risks are manageable. But it cannot replace concessional finance when expected returns are low, risks are high, or private investors cannot capture the benefits. Poor countries need private investment for projects that can generate a return, and public or concessional finance for essential projects that cannot attract private investors.

Notably, Bangladesh has requested a new IMF-supported programme, but the amount and date are not officially confirmed. On June 3, 2026, the IMF confirmed the request and ongoing policy discussions, but its July mission statement did not mention any finance amount or timetable. Per the IMF's lending guidance, staff-level agreements are not final without conditions and until the IMF Executive Board approves them.



Demonstrators attend a protest against the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank Group in Bangkok on October 16, 2026, as the IMF Annual Meetings take place in the Thai capital. PHOTO: **AFP**

Earlier in January 2023, Bangladesh entered into an IMF-supported programme which was later expanded, bringing total financing under its three facilities to about $5.5 billion, prioritising revenue mobilisation, exchange-rate flexibility, financial-sector stability, and climate resilience. In May 2025, it said completing the third and fourth reviews depended on prior actions related to tax revenue and exchange-rate reforms.

Bangladesh has proposed implementing reforms in phases. Phasing could make difficult changes more manageable, provided it includes clear deadlines, public reporting, and protection for households affected by price or subsidy changes. If subsidy changes raise household costs, targeted support should protect low-income people—a recommendation also made in the IMF's July 2026 statement. Earlier in June 2026, the IMF said the economic and political context had changed substantially since it approved the previous programme and noted that weaknesses in the banking sector and low revenue mobilisation underscore the need for renewed, sustained reform efforts.

The IMF has not yet published the conditions for a new Bangladesh programme, so any list of requirements should be treated as an informed expectation, not as an agreed package. The IMF's July statement identifies likely areas of focus, including stronger revenue mobilisation, rationalising subsidies, greater exchange-rate flexibility, and a credible plan to restructure the banking sector. An IMF programme could also seek better loan classification and recovery, stronger bank supervision, fewer tax exemptions, improved public financial management and protection for low-income households affected by price changes. These are not merely loan conditions but reforms Bangladesh needs to address its own economic problems.

Such reforms are crucial, particularly when Bangladesh faces persistently high inflation, weak economic growth, subdued private investment, and inadequate job creation. The government should therefore own the reform agenda rather than wait for international organisations to prescribe it.

Bangladesh can decide how to reform energy prices. It need not withdraw all support from every group, including poor and vulnerable households. It can replace broad, costly subsidies with targeted assistance, improve energy pricing, collect more revenue, reduce non-performing loans, and strengthen bank governance and supervision. If the government demonstrates commitment and results, it will be better placed to negotiate the pace and design of reforms with the IMF. If the country does not own the reform and pursue it seriously at home, no loan conditions can make it succeed. Delays will weaken the economy and increase the debt burden, ultimately placing repayment costs on citizens who did not create the underlying problems.

While Bangladesh must urgently tackle its economic challenges, its negotiations with the IMF and World Bank highlight a broader question: how can international institutions provide timely, affordable support while giving countries room to tailor reforms to their own circumstances? The annual meetings in Bangkok offered a chance to see whether they are ready to meet that challenge.

The Development Committee chair's statement sets out priorities, including growth, jobs, resilience, and stronger crisis response, without any binding commitments to provide new funds or deliver debt relief by set dates. Developing-country representatives pressed for more. The G24's statement at the meetings called for faster IMF quota realignment, a stronger World Bank lending capacity, broader participation in debt restructuring and reforms to strengthen developing countries' voice and representation, ensuring institutional policies and financing reflect their needs. Bangkok was therefore a diplomatic success but delivered limited results. The meetings clarified the scale of the challenges and reaffirmed cooperation yet offered few enforceable steps to meet the expectations of people and countries in the Global South. The test now is whether the institutions and their shareholders can turn recognition into affordable finance, fairer decision-making, and timely results.

We need a lasting safe water system

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MO HOQUE *and* **ASHRAF DEWAN**

Bangladesh may be approaching an important new phase in its long struggle to ensure safe drinking water for all. On October 8, Local Government Minister Abdul Moyeen Khan said the government was discussing an integrated programme worth about $2.1 billion, or Tk 25,000 crore, with UNICEF, World Bank, WaterAid and other development partners. The proposed initiative aims to ensure access to safe drinking water for the country's 18 crore people, amid growing challenges from drying rivers, upstream water withdrawals, and rising salinity in the south.

Around the same time, a Prothom Alo-WaterAid roundtable on water security and integrated water-resource management called for longer-term planning, stronger coordination, better information-sharing, local participation, maintenance, and accountability. One point was particularly important: access to water is not enough; it must also be safe, reliable and sustainable.

The proposed investment, therefore, raises a practical question: will it make sure that a family still has safe water five or ten years after the projects are completed?

For decades, rural water programmes have understandably focused on visible outputs: tubewells installed, treatment plants constructed, and households nominally covered. But a water point that stops working, becomes contaminated, or is no longer accessible does not provide a safe-water service. Bangladesh now needs to move beyond projects that provide infrastructure towards a system that continuously manages access to safe water.

This is important because rural supply will remain highly distributed. Millions of households depend on individual or shared tubewells, and the government cannot routinely test and certify every private well. Nor does it need to. Instead, every village could have a minimum network of recognised, tested, accessible and functional safe-water sources. These could include government deep tubewells, rehabilitated wells from earlier projects, verified community sources and, where owners agree, privately owned safe wells made available to neighbours.

The policy question would then change. Instead of asking mainly how many new wells were installed, planners could ask what proportion of households currently have reasonable access to a verified, functioning safe-water source. The acceptable distance could vary with settlement density, population and local hydrogeology.

That change would also alter investment decisions. Before drilling another well, authorities could ask whether a suitable public well already exists nearby, whether it is still functional, when its water was last tested, and whether a damaged pump or platform could be repaired. Bangladesh has invested in safe-water infrastructure for decades; repairing and reusing existing infrastructure could free up funds for communities that genuinely need new facilities.

Managing such a network, however, requires a digital backbone linking users, water points and the institutions responsible for keeping them safe and functional. A user-friendly platform should help households determine whether their water source may be unsafe, locate the nearest verified safe-water source, and check whether it is functioning. Community volunteers could report damaged or inaccessible water sources. Health workers could identify households still using unsafe water and direct them to safer alternatives. Local officials could see maps of coverage gaps, testing needs and non-functional water sources, while national planners could identify where rehabilitation or new construction should take priority.

Some foundations already exist. The Department of Public Health Engineering (DPHE) lists digital systems for water-quality testing and reporting, rural water supply and water-point management, while iArsenic allows users to estimate the arsenic risk of tubewell water. These functions need to be connected so that risk information leads directly to safe-water options, functionality monitoring, and institutional response.

Technology alone, however, cannot provide accountability. The Prothom Alo-WaterAid roundtable also emphasised the need for clearer standards, stronger oversight, and greater accountability for DPHE and WASA. Bangladesh should consider establishing an independent drinking-water regulatory function, either by strengthening existing arrangements or through a dedicated regulator.

As argued in an earlier article, the organisation responsible for providing a public service should not be the sole judge of its performance. The safety of drinking water makes this separation particularly important. An independent mechanism should be able to conduct risk-based and random testing, audit compliance, investigate persistent failures, publish performance data, and require corrective action. While the digital system would help target inspections, independent testing would lend credibility to any water point labelled "verified safe".

The proposed national investment is, therefore, an opportunity to build four things together: infrastructure, a managed network of safe water sources, a digital backbone, and independent assurance and regulation. Different regions will still require different technologies because arsenic, salinity, groundwater depletion, and climate pressures vary widely. But whatever technology is chosen, people ultimately need a service that works every day.

This time, success should not be determined by the number of projects completed. Years after the investment programme closes, every family should still know where to find safe drinking water and whether it is genuinely safe. If Bangladesh builds a system that keeps answering these questions, safe water can become a continuously managed and available public service.

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