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

Govt must stand by citizens in foreign jails

Too many of them are being left to fend for themselves

A remittance economy rests on a bargain. Millions of workers leave home, endure hard conditions, and send back the money that keeps households fed and the country's balance of payments steady. In return, the government is expected to stand by the workers if things go wrong. For more than 15,000 Bangladeshis now in prisons abroad, however, that bargain seems to be unravelling.

The testimony of families as reported by this newspaper suggests a consular service that too often fails them. A woman from Rajbari learned of her husband's imprisonment in Thailand—and that he had been trafficked and tortured—not from Bangladesh's embassy but from fellow detainees who had returned home. Two months after she petitioned the foreign ministry, she says she has heard nothing back. Three brothers from Sylhet, jailed for nine months in Riyadh over a protest they say they knew nothing about, report that the Bangladesh mission engaged with them only after demonstrations at home made their case politically awkward.

Most troubling is the recent execution of two detainees in Saudi Arabia, home to roughly half of Bangladesh's overseas prisoners. The consulate in Jeddah had reportedly found their names on a prisoner list two weeks earlier, apparently without knowing they faced death sentences. It says Riyadh did not inform it, and that the families had not sought legal help. Both may be true, but neither is an adequate answer.

State Minister for Foreign Affairs Shama Obaed Islam's invitation to aggrieved families to email her personally is, while well-meant, itself an admission that the institutional channels are not working.

The least a mission receiving such a list, in a jurisdiction that applies capital punishment, could do is check for possible death sentences and seek legal assistance for those at risk.

Overall, the pattern described by these families is of a consular service that barely functions in a way needed by our citizens abroad. State Minister for Foreign Affairs Shama Obaed Islam's invitation to aggrieved families to email her personally is, while well-meant, itself an admission that the institutional channels are not working.

Against this backdrop, three reforms are essential. First, the planned prisoner database should be built quickly and properly. Recording identity documents, charges and sentence lengths, with alerts ahead of release dates, is basic administration. It should also flag every detainee facing a capital charge for immediate legal review. Second, legal aid must be considered as appropriate. As a BRAC official rightly argues, someone held for an expired visa and someone facing a murder charge need very different kinds of support. Missions in high-caseload countries need retained lawyers and dedicated welfare staff, not just labour attachés. Dhaka should also press host governments, Saudi Arabia above all, for timely notification of arrests and sentences. Third, the government must confront the conditions that put workers in jail in the first place and take preventive actions.

These measures are paramount considering the fact that Bangladesh depends on its overseas workers more than most countries do. It must take proper steps to ensure that they are safe and have the legal support they require on foreign soils.

Ensure transparency in BR online ticketing

Probe allegations against Shohoz, prevent ticketing irregularities

The allegations against Shohoz-Synesis-Vincen JV—the online ticketing contractor for Bangladesh Railway (BR) since 2022—of using bots to "secure" train tickets as soon as online sales opened and reselling them at higher prices are deeply disconcerting. Reportedly, the state rail authority sought an explanation from the company regarding these allegations, which Shohoz has already submitted and is currently being examined, alongside the possibility of Shohoz's involvement in ticket black marketing. As the company's five-year contract with BR is nearing its end in January 2027, the railway is taking over administrative controls at some stations and preparing to invite tenders for a new ticketing agency.

It has been alleged that bots operating through an unauthorised website are holding large numbers of tickets for resale at inflated prices, putting into question Shohoz's fulfilment of its contractual security obligations. BR's own audit has flagged security weaknesses, identified around 169 suspicious administrator accounts, and found that the administrator dashboard allowed tickets to be held several days before sales opened. The audit suspects black marketing of train tickets via collusion between Shohoz representatives and railway booking assistants using administrator accounts operated by the contracted company's employees. According to our report, an audit covering fiscal years 2021-2026 alleged a shortfall in deposits to the government treasury against revenue from online ticket sales, citing a staggering Tk 1.4 crore in fines that had not been recovered from Shohoz. Besides these major issues, the contractor had previously been warned and fined several times over slow servers, outages, and other system flaws. These fines were recovered from payments BR owed to Shohoz.

It should be noted that Shohoz's role as a contractor for the national railway has seen controversies in the past as well. In its first year after being appointed, Shohoz was fined at least twice, for Tk 4.15 lakh in total, by the Directorate of National Consumer Rights Protection (DNCRP) over allegations of mismanagement in selling tickets. Both times, Shohoz's writ petitions to the High Court succeeded in having the fines suspended.We hope the recent audit will finally lead to accountability.

The allegations discovered from the railway authority's audits must be investigated thoroughly. Both Shohoz as well as any colluders within BR must be held to account for obstructing the right of citizens to proper train ticketing services. Any security issues within the online system itself must be resolved. Sending out a tender for a new contractor come 2027 must not translate to any offenders being allowed to slip through without accountability.

Patients' need, not political clout, should guide hospital expansion



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When patients are forced to lie on hospital floors for lack of beds, allocating public funds to hospitals should be guided by one principle: patients' medical need, not political influence. Recent data on health facilities expansion shows that hospitals located in places linked to ministers and state ministers have received an overwhelming share of additional beds while other overcrowded hospitals remain neglected. Public healthcare is a national responsibility, not a political reward. No constituency should receive preferential treatment simply because its representative holds power.

According to a recent report in The Daily Star, between February 17 and September 22, 2026, the government added 2,879 beds in 19 public hospitals, including several medical college hospitals and two specialised hospitals. Of these, 2,688 beds, or approximately 93 percent, were allocated to hospitals in districts or constituencies associated with ministers and state ministers. Only 191 beds were approved for five hospitals outside these areas. Meanwhile, several hospitals experiencing severe pressure on their existing capacity received no comparable expansion.

These figures do not necessarily prove that political considerations determined every decision. Hospitals in politically influential constituencies also have genuine needs. However, such a concentration of investment demands a clear explanation, particularly when hospitals elsewhere face more severe overcrowding. The fundamental question is simple: are we expanding hospitals to serve patients, or allocating healthcare infrastructure according to political influence?

Our public hospitals are under enormous pressure. A shortage of hospital beds is a chronic problem. Healthcare professionals struggle with excessive workloads, while diagnostic facilities, essential medicines and functioning equipment remain inadequate in many facilities. Expanding hospital capacity is undoubtedly necessary, but where and how that capacity is expanded matter as much as the decision itself.

The concentration of hospital expansion in politically influential areas raises a more fundamental question about the roles and responsibilities of elected representatives. A Member of Parliament (MP) represents a particular constituency and is expected to raise its concerns and advocate for its development. A minister, however, holds a position in the national government and has responsibilities that extend beyond the constituency from which they were elected. So ministers are duty-bound to consider the needs of the entire country and ensure that public resources are allocated according to national priorities.

When ministers appear to prioritise hospitals in their own constituencies over facilities elsewhere with equally urgent or greater needs, it raises concerns about whether they are fulfilling their national responsibilities or continuing to act primarily as constituency representatives.

A minister must think and act as a minister, not merely as an MP. Public leadership requires looking beyond local interests and making decisions in the interests of the entire population. A minister's responsibility is not to secure the largest possible share of public investment for their own constituency, but to ensure that resources reach the people and places where they can generate the greatest public benefit.

This distinction is particularly important in healthcare, where inequitable investment can have direct consequences for people's lives. Citizens should not have to depend on the political influence of their representatives to access essential healthcare services.

In this connection, another fundamental misconception is that increasing the number of sanctioned beds automatically improves healthcare. A bed becomes useful only when supported by adequate doctors, nurses, medical technologists, support staff, medicines, diagnostic services, and functioning equipment. Constructing additional wards without these complementary resources may increase nominal capacity without improving actual service delivery.

Hospital expansion must, therefore, be based on a comprehensive assessment of existing capacity and future demand. Bangladesh urgently needs a transparent, evidence-based mechanism for prioritising healthcare investment.

First, the government should establish standard criteria for assessing hospital expansion proposals. These should include bed occupancy rates, inpatient, and outpatient volumes, population projections, disease burden, travel time to appropriate facilities, referral patterns, and workforce availability.

Second, every major proposal should undergo an assessment of both capital and recurrent costs. The government must consider not only construction expenditure but also the long-term costs of staffing, medicines procurement, equipment, utilities, and maintenance.

Third, the rationale for approving major projects should be publicly disclosed. Citizens should understand why one hospital receives priority over another and what evidence supports the decision. Where a less overcrowded hospital is prioritised over a more congested facility, the government should explain the reasons.

Fourth, an independent technical body should review major expansion proposals before approval. Periodic evaluations should establish whether investments have reduced overcrowding, improved service availability, and generated better health outcomes.

Finally, equity must be an explicit consideration. Remote, disadvantaged, and historically underserved communities may require additional investment even when their hospitals report lower occupancy rates, because geographical barriers and limited access can suppress demand. Investment decisions must balance efficiency with fairness.

These measures would not prevent ministers and MPs from identifying and advocating for local healthcare needs. Rather, they would ensure that every proposal is assessed against the same transparent criteria, regardless of the political importance of the constituency concerned.

The challenge facing Bangladesh is not simply a shortage of hospital beds. It is also the need to allocate scarce public resources efficiently, fairly and transparently. When investment decisions appear to favour locations connected to influential politicians from the ruling party, public confidence suffers, while underserved communities continue to face overcrowding, delayed treatment and unnecessary travel.

Ultimately, the success of health policy should not be measured by the number of beds approved or hospital buildings constructed. It should be measured by whether people receive timely, affordable and quality healthcare, regardless of where they live or whom they elect. In a fair health system, the urgency of patients' needs, not political power, must determine the priority for public investment.



FILE PHOTO: **MEHEDI HASAN**

Chronic bed shortages in public hospitals across the country force many patients to receive treatment on the floor.

The 'time tax' we have to pay every day



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When a citizen visits a government office to obtain a simple service, the direct fee may be small, but the person may lose half a day in the process. The opportunity cost of time is not readily discernible. But the time lost still has an economic value. This is what may be described as the time tax—the hidden cost of the time and mental energy people spend filling out paperwork, waiting in queues, and navigating complex bureaucracy simply to access basic services, receive government benefits, or exercise their rights.

People stand in long queues and spend substantial amounts of time obtaining services from government offices. Some of the most time-consuming services are associated with obtaining passports, permits/licences for businesses or vehicles, land documents, resolving tax issues, accessing low-cost healthcare, to name just a few.

Moreover, a wealthy person can reduce the opportunity cost of time by hiring an agent or intermediary, while some people may resort to informal payments to speed up a service. A poor person, however, usually has fewer options. The relative loss of time can therefore be much greater for poorer citizens. For a low-income household, the forgone wages of days spent in queues are far more consequential than it would be for a richer household.

Bangladesh has, to some extent, recognised the importance of reducing this burden. The country's digital reforms have used Time, Cost and Visit (TCV) as measures of improvement in public service delivery. A World Bank document reports that Bangladesh's service delivery initiatives have measured reductions in the time, cost and number of visits required to obtain services, with substantial aggregate reductions attributed to digitisation.

But despite digitisation and innovation in public-service delivery, some sectors remain mired in delays and administrative hassles. According to the World Bank's Bangladesh Development Update published in April this year, senior managers in Bangladesh spend an average of 13 percent of their time dealing with government regulations, higher than in any comparable country in the region. This national average, however, masks substantially heavier burdens in some parts of the country. In Chattogram, managers spend about 40 percent of their time dealing with regulatory compliance, while in Barishal, the figure rises to 60 percent, leaving little room for productive management and strategic decision-making.

The burden is also unevenly distributed across firms. As per the report, frontier firms—defined in the report as the most productive companies in the formal sector—"spend around five percentage points less time dealing with regulators and face fewer tax inspections than non-frontier firms." Regulatory delays further compound these challenges. Obtaining an operating licence takes an average of 28 days, while construction permits and import licences each take about 49 days—nearly twice as long as in China or India, per the report. These regulatory burdens have tangible economic consequences: firms facing heavier regulatory demands are 19 percent less likely to invest.

The concept of time tax can be extended beyond government offices to another major source of lost time: traffic congestion. For millions of Bangladeshis, commuting has become an everyday tax on their time. A 2018 study estimated that around five million work hours are lost annually in Dhaka because of persistent traffic congestion, with an associated economic loss of an average of Tk 37,000 crore. Direct and indirect losses can be 6-10 percent of national GDP.

Time tax also has an important relationship with bribery. When bureaucratic procedures impose substantial costs in time, an unofficial payment may become, from the individual's perspective, a way of escaping queues, delays and uncertainty. This creates a troubling incentive structure. If a person believes that paying a bribe can expedite a task that takes several weeks, the time tax itself can create a demand for speed money.

Besides, when entrepreneurs and firms spend substantial time obtaining licences, complying with regulations, or dealing with government agencies, that time becomes part of the cost of production. Firms may respond by reducing investment, delaying expansion or passing some of the additional costs on to consumers through higher prices. Ultimately, consumers may bear part of the burden through reduced purchasing power and lower welfare.

What, then, can be done? First, every major public service should publish a small set of measurable indicators: average processing time, average citizen waiting time, number of visits required, number of documents required, and number of physical interactions. This would make the time tax visible and allow citizens and policymakers to compare services and institutions.

Second, digitalisation should not simply transfer an inefficient paper-based procedure to an online platform. The underlying process itself should also be simplified. If a citizen has to upload the same information repeatedly, visit an office for physical verification, and then wait for several approvals, an online interface alone cannot eliminate the time tax.

Third, traffic congestion needs to be treated as a time-tax problem as well as a transport problem. Several measures have already been taken to ease congestion in Dhaka and Chattogram, but rapid urbanisation means that other divisional and major cities are increasingly facing similar problems. These cities also deserve greater policy attention. Finally, existing roads must be effectively used, as poor planning, roadside markets, illegal parking, and weak enforcement limit expanded highway capacity.

Time is one of the few economic resources that cannot be produced, imported or recovered once it is lost. Bangladesh has traditionally measured the cost of government services in terms of money. It is time that we also measure them in terms of hours lost. A tax collected in money appears in the government's accounts. A tax collected in time does not. But it is no less real for citizens, businesses and the economy.

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