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

Motherhood must not end sporting careers

BCB should introduce a formal maternity policy without delay

In Bangladesh women's cricket, motherhood can mean losing both an income and the chance to continue a career due to the lack of a formal maternity policy as well as adequate institutional support. The experience of former pacer Suraiya Azmin, as reported by this daily, highlights this issue. When she emailed the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) on May 9 to request paid maternity leave, she received no response. After giving birth in August, she found herself dropped from the national contract list, while her leave request and unpaid salary remained unresolved. The question is: should motherhood be a penalty for women cricketers who have dedicated their lives to represent our country?

Suraiya is not the only one to face this reality. Former national team batter Sanjida Islam Moyna, who played 16 ODIs and 54 T20Is between 2012 and 2020, went through a similar situation. While she continued playing domestic cricket after her marriage in 2020, she had to eventually step away after giving birth in 2025 to raise her child. Former cricketer and international umpire Sathira Jakir Jessy also struggled to balance motherhood and cricket. According to Sanjida, officials and selectors often assume that married players or those who have children will not continue playing for long, so they do not want to invest further in them. Such attitudes undermine women's careers and risk wasting the talent and experience the country has already invested in developing.

We welcome BCB's assurance that it will follow the ICC guidelines. But promises to address these matters on a case-by-case basis are not enough.

While our women players are expected to choose between family life and professional ambitions, the situation in many other countries is different. Australia and New Zealand provide paid maternity leave to contracted players, while Pakistan introduced a parental support policy in 2021. These measures demonstrate that supporting players through pregnancy and childbirth is compatible with sustaining their careers. The International Cricket Council (ICC) has recently introduced return-to-play guidelines for female cricketers after pregnancy, covering medical assessments, recovery, gradual training, and monitoring. The guidelines provide a framework for member boards but do not guarantee paid leave, making a clear national policy all the more necessary.

We welcome BCB's assurance that it will follow the ICC guidelines. But promises to address these matters on a case-by-case basis are not enough. BCB should urgently introduce a comprehensive maternity policy, establishing the right to paid maternity leave clearly, protecting contracts and salaries during pregnancy and recovery, and providing appropriate medical care and fitness assessments to support their return to competition. It should also set out transparent procedures for contract renewal and selection so that marriage or motherhood does not become an unofficial ground for excluding players. These protections should also extend to other cricketing individuals, including coaches and match officials, so that their careers are not similarly disrupted by inadequate maternity support. In Suraiya's case, the board must settle her outstanding dues promptly and clarify her contractual position.

Profits must not trump conservation

Easing St Martin's tourism restrictions raises concerns

The government's decision to ease tourism restrictions at St Martin's Island, rolling back some of the stricter measures introduced earlier, raises questions about its commitment to environmental protection. From November 1, the island will be open to tourists until March 15, with the daily visitor limit increased from 2,000 to 3,500. Previously, the tourism season on the island ran from November 1 till January 31. While the decision has understandably been welcomed by tourism businesses and residents, we must ask: what evidence of ecological recovery justifies increasing the daily visitor limit by 75 percent and extending the tourism season? Has any credible assessment established that this ecologically critical area can withstand the additional pressure?

These questions are especially relevant given reports of continued resort construction and environmental degradation on the island. Although the authorities have retained restrictions on overnight stays, noise, beach lighting, and activities harmful to biodiversity, their possibility of enforcement remains a concern. The introduction of a Tk 100 environmental conservation fee is a good move, but how will the money be spent, and who will ensure compliance with the restrictions?

St Martin's predicament reflects a much wider and persistent pattern in which commercial interests repeatedly trump environmental considerations. In Bandarban, resorts operating under the banner of ecotourism have reportedly cleared forests, cut hills, and obstructed natural streams. Similar developments are unfolding around the Sundarbans, where reports indicate that 21 resorts and cottages have emerged in its ecologically critical surroundings, many without environmental clearance or registration. Another 10 are reportedly in the pipeline.

The threats extend well beyond tourism. The government is reportedly considering locations near or within the Sundarbans, including Akram Point, for LNG terminals despite serious concerns raised by forest officials about potential damage to mangroves, dolphins and other wildlife. In Gazipur, the city corporation reportedly proceeded with constructing a waste transfer station inside Bhawal National Park despite objections from the Department of Forest and without environmental clearance. In Patuakhali's Rangabali, hundreds of trees have been felled in a reserved forest following a land lease granted by the district administration.

Together, these developments indicate a troubling disregard for environmental safeguards, sometimes by the authorities themselves. It is particularly disappointing that the current government, from which a stronger environmental stewardship was expected, appears to be falling short. Development that destroys forests, biodiversity and fragile ecosystems is ultimately self-defeating. The government must explain the scientific basis for relaxing tourism restrictions at St Martin's Island as well as why it is allowing the other developments. It must ensure strict enforcement of conservation laws and reconsider projects that threaten protected areas.

Without reform, we can't escape the low growth trap

MACRO MIRROR



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The latest growth forecasts from international organisations are troubling: Bangladesh may not just grow more slowly this year, but its economy could remain weak for years—unless its underlying problems are addressed. In its October 2026 report, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) projected the growth to be 3.2 percent in FY2026-27, down from 4.3 percent in April. It expects growth to fall to 2.2 percent in FY2027-28, then recover gradually to around 3 percent by FY2030-31. The World Bank forecasts 3.4 percent growth and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) 4 percent, compared with the government's projection of 6.5 percent growth in FY2026-27. The IMF also projects an average inflation of 10.9 percent, whereas the government has projected inflation to be 7.5 percent in FY2026-27.

These forecasts are not certainties, nor do they make the government's target impossible. But they show how far the economy's current course is from the recovery the country needs. While the IMF, World Bank and ADB all differ in their estimates, they all point to weak growth and persistent inflation. This convergence should prompt an honest assessment of what is holding the economy back. After eight months in power, the government should treat the current economic context as a serious crisis, one that requires coordinated action and deep structural reforms.

Both international and domestic factors contribute to the country's weaker outlook. Immediate pressures include conflicts in the Middle East, rising energy costs, and disruptions in major trade routes. These factors raise import, transport and production costs. Bangladesh is particularly exposed because it depends heavily on imported energy. Weaker demand in export markets and uncertainty in global trade can further constrain manufacturers. The IMF also identifies conflict, trade tensions, and fiscal vulnerabilities as risks to the global outlook, projecting a 3.1 percent growth.

Domestic obstacles are more persistent. Investment has weakened, businesses face high borrowing and operating costs, and policy uncertainty has undermined confidence. The World Bank reports that private investment contracted for the second consecutive year due to energy shortages, banking sector weaknesses, low revenue collection, and limited public investment capacity. Even when a business sees an opportunity, it may hesitate to invest if it cannot count on a reliable energy supply, access affordable credit, or predict the rules it will face.

Banking problems are central to this impasse. Non-performing loans (NPLs) constituted 32.78 percent of total outstanding loans as of June 2026. A banking system weighed down by bad loans and weak governance cannot reliably channel savings to productive firms. At the same time, businesses with heavy debt or falling revenues may be unable to borrow to invest. Their balance sheet problems reinforce the banks' vulnerabilities, and vice versa. New credit alone will not solve the problem while losses remain unrecognised, and viable businesses cannot be distinguished from borrowers unable to repay.

The cost of weak growth is already being borne by households. According to World Bank estimates, around 21 lakh more people fell into poverty in FY2025-26 than in the previous fiscal year. High inflation has reduced the real value of wages, while weak labour demand has shrunk income opportunities. Meanwhile, job creation stalled and women lost jobs; female labour force participation fell from 42.8 percent in 2022 to 38.4 percent in 2024, according to the World Bank's Bangladesh Development Update in October 2026. Remittances have helped families and supported foreign exchange inflows. But they cannot substitute for employment generated by investment and productive businesses.

The ongoing fiscal pressures also make reform increasingly urgent. Revenue collection stood at around 8 percent of GDP in FY2025-26. This constrains the resources available to finance services, infrastructure, and household support. Interest payments also absorb funds that could otherwise be directed to development priorities. Public debt continues to rise, while a wider current account deficit and higher energy import costs could put further pressure on the taka. Depreciation is a risk, not a certainty, but prolonged financial sector problems and weak external inflows could make stability harder to maintain.

The next phase should be built around a few measurable commitments. First, ensuring discipline in the banking sector is crucial because banks must safeguard depositors' money and channel credit to productive businesses. The Bangladesh Bank should publish the findings of its asset quality reviews and require weak banks to submit time-bound plans to recognise losses, recover loans, and meet capital requirements. Taxpayers' money should not be used to bail out banks or companies without strict conditions and a credible recovery plan. Any public support for banks must be tied to stronger governance, accountability and measurable progress in recovering bad loans. Indebted companies that remain viable should be offered a transparent, time-bound path to restore their finances.

Second, fiscal and monetary policies should promote stability while safeguarding productive activity. The government should curb low priority spending and avoid excessive domestic borrowing as the monetary policy focuses on containing persistent inflation. It should broaden the tax base, review exemptions, and strengthen compliance through digital records and risk-based audits. The National Board of Revenue should publish its transition plan and timetable. If agreed, a future IMF programme, which the government is currently negotiating, should support a Bangladesh-led reform agenda the country can implement. Measures should be sequenced according to domestic conditions, with realistic milestones and safeguards for vulnerable groups.

Third, the government must ensure that public spending delivers lasting results. Infrastructure projects should undergo rigorous appraisal and begin only once land, designs, financing, and procurement arrangements are in place. Project costs, progress and expected outcomes, and fund maintenance alongside construction should be made public. Ministries should regularly report what public money has delivered. Increased spending alone will not sustain growth if projects are delayed, poorly selected, or fail to improve transport, energy, logistics, or access to services.

Finally, restoring confidence requires dependable energy and predictable investment rules. The government should publish the status, costs and completion dates of the solar tenders, disclose power purchase agreements, and review capacity payments. It should strengthen efforts to expand domestic gas exploration, upgrade the grid, and expand renewable energy connections. It should also speed up business approvals and customs procedures, make them more predictable, and link skills programmes to employers' needs. Supporting the RMG industry while enabling new export sectors would reduce concentration and create more opportunities for job growth.

Bangladesh does not need a one-size-fits-all policy package; it needs politically owned reforms that address the interplay among banks, indebted businesses, energy costs, weak revenue collection, and poor investment. The government should be transparent to the public about the scale of the challenges, report progress, and explain the costs of delay.

Building towards a trillion-dollar economy depends on sustained growth in productivity, investment, exports, and employment. Bangladesh cannot overcome low growth, high inflation and weak job creation unless it tackles the long-recognised obstacles that it has only partially addressed. The government must now translate laws, commissions and policy announcements into measurable results. Doing so will require difficult decisions and resistance to vested interests. But without these reforms, the country may face prolonged stagflation.



VISUAL: **SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR**

Our dengue response needs a fundamental overhaul



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As of October 25, dengue claimed 384 lives in Bangladesh this year. Just how grim the situation has become is clear from the 123,948 patients admitted to hospitals so far. Year after year, vast sums of money are spent on mosquito control, accompanied by cosmetic, often high-profile drives launched with great fanfare. Yet the same disaster keeps returning. There is no room left to shift the blame for this persistent failure. Structural weaknesses in our prevention system have proven as dangerous as the mosquito. At its core, a lack of sound planning, execution, and coordination needed for such a multidimensional public health threat is what makes its recurrence predictable every year.

Figures from recent years illustrate the chronic nature of this crisis. In 2023, the country recorded 1,705 dengue deaths and more than 321,000 hospitalisations. Deaths declined to 575 in 2024 and 413 in 2025, but both years still saw more than 100,000 hospitalisations. In October 2026, hospitals continued to admit thousands of dengue patients. These figures raise serious questions about how effectively lessons from previous outbreaks have been translated into sustained mosquito-control efforts.

The biggest flaw in our dengue response is that it is still largely reactive rather than preventive. Authorities launch drives after hospital admissions surge. Finding high-risk zones before the monsoon is patchy at best. Dhaka South's May survey found Aedes density above the threshold in 63 of its 75 wards. Dhaka North, which gets far more of the mosquito-control budget, had run no formal survey as of June.

The methods being used are also not sufficiently scientific. There is an overreliance on fogging, whereas mechanisms for larval control, eliminating breeding grounds, and testing the efficacy of insecticides remain weak. There are no clear benchmarks to measure what these drives actually achieve. On top of that, gaps in surveillance and data use are glaring. Above all, although responsibilities are divided among the health department, city corporations, and local government bodies, their coordination is weak. Without an overhaul of these operations, there is no way out of this crisis.

Moreover, unplanned urbanisation and poor civic management cannot escape blame. Stagnant water at construction sites, poor drainage systems, discarded containers, and uncollected solid waste serve as prime breeding grounds for Aedes mosquitoes. While unusual shifts in temperature, rainfall, and humidity driven by climate change are indeed creating favourable conditions for mosquitoes to thrive, climate change alone cannot be an excuse. It is the mismanagement of urban infrastructure and institutional failure to respond and maintain year-round mosquito control that help the crisis persist.

In June, the health minister announced that private hospitals would reserve 10 percent of their beds for free dengue treatment, waive consultation fees for patients receiving treatment in those beds, and offer discounts of up to 80 percent on diagnostic tests. In July, the government also made dengue NS1 tests free at public hospitals until December 31. The health minister subsequently told parliament that private hospital owners had agreed to comply with the directives. However, as of October, there is still no publicly available comprehensive assessment showing how many private hospitals have implemented these measures.

City corporations, the Directorate General of Health Services, and local government institutions each have distinct responsibilities. Huge budgets are allocated, but the public does not know what each agency did, or how success was measured.

Breaking out of this cycle requires adopting effective solutions. Prevention must be built as a year-round effort. High-risk areas need to be mapped before the monsoon, and breeding grounds must be cleared regularly. Greater emphasis must be placed on science-based mosquito control. Monitoring mosquito density, destroying larvae through appropriate methods, and routinely testing whether insecticides actually work are essential. Integrated urban management also needs to be ensured through regular waste removal and strict inspections of construction sites. At the same time, setting specific targets, publishing regular progress reports, and expanding treatment capacity are necessary to improve the response. Effective dengue prevention demands sustained planning, coordination, and accountability at all levels.

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