Exercise restraint, act responsibly

Urges Editors' Council after PM aide tears up Amar Desh copy

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Editors' Council yesterday called for restraint and responsible conduct in expressing differences of opinion after a Facebook video clip showed PM's Political Assistant Rashed Khan tearing up a copy of the daily Amar Desh.

In a statement signed by its President Nurul Kabir and General Secretary Dewan Hanif Mahmud, the organisation said disagreeing with news reports or editorial opinions was a democratic right, but such differences should be expressed with responsibility, decency, and mutual respect.

Rashed posted the video clip on his Facebook page on Saturday, alleging that the newspaper had published misleading reports about him.

The council said Rashed, the PM's political assistant with the rank of secretary, was expected to exercise restraint and act responsibly in his statements and conduct.

"At the same time, it is equally important to ensure the professional standards, objectivity, ethics, and accountability of journalism," it added.

108 chortens, one extraordinary act of faith and unity

Over 40,000 volunteers unite in historic effort to advance Gelephu Mindfulness City

NAZIBA BASHER, *from GMC, Bhutan*

As wars rage, violence claims lives and unrest divides communities across the world, the tiny Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan yesterday offered a strikingly different picture -- one of thousands coming together in peace, prayer and shared purpose.

In Gelephu, near the Indian border, more than 40,000 volunteers built 108 sacred Buddhist chortens, or stupas, in a single day, in an extraordinary display of collective faith and determination.

The undertaking saw the completion of 15-metre-high chortens, spaced 108 metres apart, along a 12-kilometre stretch of the Mau Chhu river at Gelephu Mindfulness City (GMC).

The work was completed in nine hours. Around 20-24 people worked on each chorten. Materials were kept ready from beforehand and formal construction began at 3:00am and ended at 12:00pm. Announced by King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck on February 21, the project involved months of preparations, including clearing land, laying foundations at 108 sites, assembling materials and training volunteers.



Workers put the finishing touches on one of the 108 jangchub chortens built and consecrated in Bhutan's GMC yesterday. PHOTOS: BHUTAN ROYAL OFFICE FOR MEDIA

The work was carried out through zhabto, Bhutan's tradition of voluntary community service, involving students, farmers, doctors, monks, retirees and others.

Around 200,000 people gathered for the occasion, according to officials cited by AFP.

Holding glowing orbs against the darkness, spectators sat quietly on the ground and inside tents, chanting Om Mani Padme Hum, a six-syllable Sanskrit mantra associated with Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion. Widely recited in Tibetan Buddhism, it invokes compassion, wisdom and freedom from suffering. As the chanting continued into the evening, thousands of voices became one collective prayer.

The King, who spearheaded GMC, credited generations of Bhutanese, particularly the Fourth King, for preserving the nation's values.

"That is the Bhutanese spirit. That is the greatest accomplishment of this day and it is something we should all hold with great pride."

In Buddhist tradition, 108 symbolises spiritual completeness and enlightenment, reflected in prayer malas and the 108 volumes of the Kangyur, a collection of the Buddha's translated teachings. Each chorten contains sacred relics, scriptures, statues and offerings, collectively known as zung, within seven traditional architectural elements. These include Buddha relics from India and offerings from spiritual leaders, including the 12th Tai Situpa.

Estimated to cost $21 million, the structures embody the spiritual values guiding GMC's development.

Wage unrest paralyses RMG hubs

FROM PAGE 1

Meanwhile, police detained 30 people in Mirpur, alleging that leaders and activists of the Awami League, political activities of which are banned, and its affiliated bodies were exploiting the workers' protest.

Labour and Employment Minister Ariful Haque Chowdhury also alleged that several political organisations were instigating workers to destabilise the government and cause public suffering.

In Mirpur, several hundred RMG workers blocked roads in Mirpur-10, Mirpur-11, and Mirpur-14 from around 9:00am. Clashes erupted around 11:45am when police tried to disperse them, leading to chases, counter-chases, and exchanges of brick chunks.

Police fired teargas and sound grenades.

The unrest also forced the closure of Mirpur-10, Mirpur-11, and Pallabi metro stations for around two hours. Services resumed around 2:00pm.

Many pedestrians, including women and children, ran for safety, while shops remained closed and commuters struggled to reach their destinations. A three-month-old child in her mother's lap lost consciousness due to the teargas.

DMP Joint Commissioner Md Mohidul Islam alleged that anti-government elements had infiltrated the protests to create unrest.

He denied using truncheons and said nobody was detained during the operation to clear the roads.

However, police officials later confirmed that 30 people were detained in the Mirpur area.

Deputy Commissioner Hasan Mohammad Nasher Rikabdar said multiple cases would be filed over the torching of vehicles and attacks on police personnel.

In Gazipur, protesters blocked both sides of the Dhaka-Mymensingh and Gazipur-Chattogram highways near Bhogra Bypass around 1:00pm, triggering clashes with police.

They chased police personnel, forcing several to take shelter inside a factory. The workers also vandalised vehicles and smashed windowpanes of an office.

Belayet Hossain, additional commissioner of Gazipur Metropolitan Police, said police fired four to five sound grenades at several points to drive the demonstrators away.

Fires broke out at three locations, including a factory warehouse, in the Kaliakair's Palli Bidyut area around noon.

A police box was also torched at Konabari, while traffic on the Dhaka-Tangail highway came to a standstill.

Amjad Hossain, superintendent of Gazipur Industrial Police, said 45 garment factories declared holidays yesterday.

Five BGB platoons were deployed, with personnel instructed to remain stationed at seven locations, Chandra, Palli Bidyut, Safipur, Konabari, Mouchak, Naojor, and Bhogra Bypass, until November 7 under the supervision of five executive magistrates.

In Savar and Ashulia, the unrest forced at least 177 factories to declare holidays, said Mohammad Mominul Islam Bhuiyan, superintendent of Ashulia Industrial Police-1.

Around 11:00am, protesters gathered on the Abdullahpur-Baipail road in Narsinghpur to press for their demand.

The authorities of several factories, including those belonging to Sharmin Group, Ha-Meem Group, and Newage Group, subsequently declared holidays. Police and protesters also engaged in chases and counter-chases near Ananta Garments around noon.

In Hemayetpur, demonstrators blocked the Dhaka-Aricha highway around 3:00pm, causing long tailbacks. At one stage, they set fire to a security booth at the main gate of an AKH Group factory.

Police cleared the highway around 5:00pm.

Announcing the wage board formation at the Secretariat, Labour Minister Ariful questioned why RMG workers continued blocking roads despite the government's commitment to forming the board.

He said the government had held several meetings with workers, labour leaders, and factory owners over the preceding three days and had assured them that the board would be formed yesterday.

The minister claimed that an organising secretary of a banned student organisation had joined the protests posing as a worker.

However, when journalists asked him to identify the individual, he referred to photographs circulating on social media without providing a name.

The minister also questioned the decision to declare holidays at several factories, despite appeals from labour leaders for workers to continue working.

He also urged workers to return to their factories, saying the new board would now discuss and determine their wages.

He warned that factory closures could disrupt production and supply chains, delay shipments and payments from buyers, and ultimately affect workers' wages.

While the government and police blamed politically motivated outsiders for the violence, labour representatives pointed to workers' longstanding grievances over wages and employment practices.

Talking to The Daily Star, Khairul Mamun Mintu, legal affairs secretary of Bangladesh Garment and Sweater Workers' Trade Union Centre, said workers had three key demands, including a minimum wage of Tk 30,000.

He earlier attributed the unrest partly to the failure to form the wage board by October, as previously promised.

At Comfort Collection, operator Raju Ahmed said helpers at his factory received only Tk 8,000 to Tk 8,500 a month.

Workers also alleged that factories blacklist employees and dismiss them arbitrarily.

Nazma Akter, president of Sommilito Garments' Sramik Federation, said rising house rents, transport costs, gas bills, and other expenses had significantly increased workers' living costs.

BGMEA Vice-President Md Rezwan Selim and Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BKMEA) President Mohammad Hatem welcomed the initiative to review wages.

Hatem, however, said the industry was facing challenges from the global economic slowdown, energy shortages, rising production costs, and declining export orders.

He urged the new wage board to recommend a realistic wage structure through discussions, ensuring fair pay while maintaining the industry's competitiveness.



Garment workers block the Dhaka-Tangail Highway in Gazipur's Kaliakair around noon yesterday. The workers' unrest in the area triggered arson at at least three locations, including a factory warehouse, sparked clashes with police, and caused long tailbacks on major highways. PHOTO: STAR

NEW BOARD

The government formed a six-member wage board, led by Senior District and Sessions Judge Sheikh Ashfaqur Rahman.

The other members are Dhaka University Prof Mosleh Uddin Ahmed as the independent representative; Asif Ayub of the Bangladesh Employers' Federation and ABM Shamsuddin of the BGMEA as employers' representatives; and Anwar Hossain of Bangladesh Jatiyatabadi Sramik Dal and Babul Akhter of Bangladesh Garments and Industrial Sramik Federation as workers' representatives.

The appointments were made under the Bangladesh Labour Act, 2006, as amended in 2026.

The labour minister urged the members to complete the process quickly, but no deadline was set for submitting wage recommendations.

Under the amended labour law, wages across sectors are to be reviewed every three years to account for inflation. The garment sector's wage structure is due for review this December.

[Our Savar and Gazipur correspondents contributed to this report.]

A wage board that could've come sooner

FROM PAGE 1

Notwithstanding the typical excuse of the garment factory owners that "business is bad", this time there may be some truth to it -- a point that they will very likely exploit. At the same time, garment factory workers' demand, which may be considered as their initial negotiating position, will likely have room for negotiation but not very much since they have actually seen their real income erode over the last three years, when a new wage structure had been implemented.

As for the government, it appears to have got off on the wrong foot, responding decisively only after workers began blocking roads and factories were forced to shut down. With many factories having already shut down for numerous reasons, leaving thousands of unemployed RMG workers, the situation can be said to have been ripe for an outburst that this delay triggered. Reports of growing unrest had been circulating for some time, yet there seemed to be little sense of urgency in addressing the situation.

Earlier intervention could well have prevented the closure of hundreds of factories, spared commuters in and around Dhaka considerable inconvenience, and averted unnecessary production losses at an already difficult time. The government had announced plans to form a new wage board two weeks earlier, on October 15. There is little justification for delaying the final decision until unrest had escalated to this point.

The government would be particularly pressed to come with a pay hike befitting these difficult times since it has only recently given its own employees a most generous raise, which will surely lead to inflation further.

3 more years, no room for complacency

FROM PAGE 1

"Reforms are the centre point for Bangladesh. If the reforms are not completed, the country's trustworthiness will be under question."

"An 'exceptional' decision demands 'exceptional' performance. The extension is not a precedent; the CDP has said it will not support another request," he said.

Mustafizur Rahman, also a distinguished fellow of the CPD, likewise said there would be no further deferment. He added that under the criteria adopted in 1990, a country with a population of 75 million is not allowed deferment.

The CPD pointed to several indicators showing how much remains to be done.

The tax revenue-to-GDP ratio stands at 6.9 percent, having met 80.7 percent of the annual target, while the target for FY27 is to take the ratio to 9.2 percent.

In the banking sector, non-performing loans account for 32.8 percent of all loans, and private investment is still only 21.5 percent of GDP.

RMG continues to account for 80.6 percent of exports, and load shedding reached a record high on August 10 this year.

In logistics, Bangladesh ranks 88th out of 139 countries in the Logistics Performance Index, which covers port turnaround time, transportation and warehousing.

Only around 1 percent of GDP is spent on social protection.

Debapriya said the Smooth Transition Strategy (STS) needs a clear reform pathway in which public finance, energy, social protection, and logistics reforms drive diversification, productivity, and competitiveness.

He said the strategy should include a plan to phase out non-allowable fiscal measures. The government should identify every measure Bangladesh can use only as an LDC, such as export cash incentives, and set a timeline to phase each out before November 2029.

On implementation, he said, "Strong on documents, weaker on delivery. Bangladesh has been more adept at drafting commitments than at delivering them; the final STS came only in 2025."

He said the political transition had been recognised, which is a rare acceptance under the graduation rules, and that the issue is capacity, not political will.

He called the government's press note welcome but incomplete, as it left out the exceptional basis for the deferment and the reform expectation. The action plan should be published, he said.

Debapriya suggested that the prime minister's office, rather than the Economic Relations Division (ERD) or other agencies, monitor the reforms so that they happen in real terms.

The STS needs coordination by the prime minister's office, as it is beyond the ERD's mandate and competence, he said.

He proposed that the government launch a dashboard there on progress of the graduation reform agenda and revisit the structure of the National Graduation Monitoring and Coordination Committee.

Graduation is a whole-of-government task, he said, and should proceed in partnership with the private sector, domestic and foreign, and with development partners.

Lawmakers, technical experts and analysts should also be engaged in the reform process, and the need for a special parliamentary committee on LDC graduation should be assessed.

Mustafizur said the deferment should be seen as an opportunity to make graduation sustainable after 2029, and graduation should be inclusive, covering small and medium enterprises, not only big companies.

Export diversification is possible even within textiles and garments, he said, as the global market is worth more than $1.2 trillion and Bangladesh can raise its share in the garment segment.

CPD Executive Director Nazneen Ahmed said the think tank has been tracking progress on the reforms in key areas as a citizens' platform.

She stressed three issues for a smooth graduation: preparedness, macroeconomic stability, and maintaining an environment conducive to investment and business.

In his keynote paper on trade reforms, CPD Additional Director (Research) Towfiqul Islam Khan said engagement with the EU has advanced, but GSP+ with relief from the textile and clothing safeguard remains unresolved.

The UK's Developing Countries Trading Scheme (DCTS) now allows single-stage transformation for apparel, but no comparable relaxation has been confirmed under the EU's GSP+.

The Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) with Japan was signed on February 6, 2026 but is not yet in force, pending approval by Japan's parliament and domestic legal procedures.

A comprehensive economic partnership agreement (CEPA) has been discussed as a way to retain South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) benefits, but no progress on continued duty-free access has been confirmed.

No formal negotiating rounds have been confirmed, and less-than-full reciprocity has not yet been adopted as a negotiating principle, Towfiqul said.

Bangladesh's accession to the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) is under way, and a CEPA has been signed with South Korea. RCEP admission needs full consensus, he said.

Another friend of Tahsif placed on remand

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Dip, 23. He was placed on a four-day remand on Saturday.

Dip and Disha were with Tahsif on the night of October 27, when he went missing.

The three had visited several places and had food together before Disha was dropped off at her home.

"Two people have been arrested in connection with the incident. We have both in custody for further questioning. We hope to solve the case soon," said Inspector Firoz Alam of the Tongi river police outpost, who is the investigating officer in the case.

In a forwarding report submitted to the court, police said investigators examining CCTV footage from several locations in Uttara found that Tahsif had visited Nest Bar and Restaurant on his motorcycle with Disha riding in the pillion on the night of October 27. Dip also arrived shortly on another motorcycle.

They also visited a fast food chain several times that evening, it added.

The footage further showed Disha accompanying Tahsif to a motorcycle garage, the report said.

A police source said Disha was later dropped off at her home, after which Tahsif and Dip went to the Mazar Basti area of Tongi.

Samples have been sent for viscera and toxicological tests to determine whether any poison, drugs or alcohol were present in the victim's body, the source added.

"Dip is currently in police custody on remand. It is necessary to cross-check the statements of Disha and Dip," the forwarding report said.

Investigators also found evidence of multiple phone conversations between Tahsif and Disha after examining his call records, it added.

Investigators said Dip had called Tahsif around 6:00am on October 27 and taken him out of his house.

On October 28, around 4:30pm, police received information through the National Emergency Service 999 that a body was floating in the Turag near Rajabari Ghat in Uttarkhan, Dhaka.

"While preparing the inquest report, the deceased was identified from an iPhone found in the pocket of his trousers. It was learned that the deceased was a former Bangladesh Air Force officer," a police forwarding report said.

Tahsif's father, KM Eneyetul Karim, filed a murder case against unknown persons with Uttarkhan Police Station on Saturday, alleging that his son had been killed and his body dumped in the river to conceal the crime.

A climate of fear

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and double the 44 recorded in the third quarter of 2023.

Data from Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK), which tracks individual victims rather than incidents, reflects a similar pattern.

ASK recorded that 531 journalists were harassed in 2024 and 381 in 2025, surpassing any single year between 2017 and 2023.

In the first nine months of this year, 315 journalists faced harassment.

Notably, harassment by law enforcers has risen every year since 2024, from 15 cases that year to 23 in 2025 and 42 in the first nine months of 2026 alone, already exceeding any full year since at least 2017, according to ASK.

Harassment by political activists, meanwhile, has shifted with the change in power.

From 2017 to 2024, ASK attributed most of such incidents to Awami League activists, peaking at 70 in 2018.

In 2025 and 2026, almost all political attacks were blamed on activists of the BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami, who accounted for 27 and 22 cases respectively between January and September this year.

Including the February national election period, the combined tally of attacks by political activists is on track to reach around 67 this year, the highest since 2018.

Physical assaults on journalists while on duty also more than doubled after 2024, jumping from 54 that year to 118 in 2025, and remaining high at 88 in the first nine months of 2026.

Journalists in the districts are always more vulnerable, said Iftekharuzzaman, executive director of Transparency International Bangladesh.

"One of the main reasons journalists in this country face harassment and violence is that our political culture lacks the courage to tolerate dissent. It is worse at the grassroots, where there is less protection."

While political freedom has increased since the uprising, the culture of tolerating criticism remains absent from the country's politics.

"It was lost, and you could say it has not been restored. The mindset that 'my critic is always my enemy' is what we are seeing here," he added.

Meanwhile, more than 10 months after mobs vandalised and set fire to the offices of Prothom Alo and The Daily Star, investigators have yet to submit a charge sheet.

Visiting the fire-ravaged Prothom Alo building on February 28, Home Minister Salahuddin Ahmed announced that he had instructed police to submit the charge sheets within two months, calling for "exemplary punishment" for the perpetrators.

That April 28 deadline came and went.

By June, police had arrested 37 suspects across the two cases, with no new arrests made in the preceding months.

According to an earlier Daily Star report, at least 17 of those arrested in the Prothom Alo case secured bail, including controversial speaker Ataur Rahman Bikrampuri, who obtained bail in both cases, as courts noted that the accused were neither named in the initial complaints nor apprehended from the scene.

Submission deadlines for the probe reports were repeatedly pushed back. The last deadline was October 25, which the police failed to comply with.

"It is truly surprising and unacceptable as well that the probe into the criminal act of arson against two newspapers has stalled," said Nurul Kabir, president of the Editors' Council and editor of New Age.