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

Our migrant workers deserve justice

The state must prioritise protecting their dignity

According to the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET), Saudi Arabia is the top destination for overseas employment for both male and female Bangladeshi migrant workers. This makes the findings of the latest report by this daily all the more horrifying. The report details the experiences of Bangladeshi female migrant workers returning from Saudi Arabia, some dead and others physically and/or psychologically scarred, exposing a deeply troubling failure of our migration governance.

Some of the accounts of these women returnees are truly heartbreaking. One returnee alleged that she had been denied adequate food and medical treatment throughout her stay. An officer from BRAC's Migration Welfare Centre said nearly 90 percent of female Saudi returnees she had encountered had reported suffering physical or psychological abuse, including sexual abuse, food deprivation, excessive workload, restrictions on communication with families, and confiscation of phones and passports. Saudi Arabia is also the top destination country returning our workers in coffins. A Bonik Barta report found that, between 2017 and October 25, 2026, of the dead bodies of 1,065 female Bangladeshi migrant workers repatriated, at least 486 came from Saudi Arabia. Among those deaths, 112 were classified as suicide cases. Death certificates issued abroad are often accepted here without independent scrutiny. However, a 2023 RMMRU study documented serious doubts among bereaved families about the causes of death recorded on official certificates.

Independent post-mortem examinations must be made mandatory upon the repatriation of all migrant workers' bodies, both female and male, with proper forensic documentation to establish causes of death and identify possible injuries or signs of abuse.

It is a matter of great shame for us that this situation has persisted for years without any effective measures taken to put a stop to the inhumane treatment of our migrant workers—often celebrated as "remittance warriors"—at their countries of employment. An April 2026 report by this daily found that, between 2021 and 2025, women filed 2,036 complaints with BMET. Although 1,969 were marked resolved, only 14 of 110 agencies accused of wrongdoing in 2025 were compelled to pay compensation.

As experts have rightly pointed out, Bangladesh must rethink its approach to protecting migrant workers, beginning before they leave. BMET must independently verify foreign employers, job offers, employment contracts, salaries and working conditions, rather than relying primarily on recruitment agencies' assurances. Our diplomatic missions need adequately staffed and empowered labour wings, independently monitored shelters, round-the-clock emergency helplines, and regular, confidential contact with workers, particularly women employed in private households. The government has announced agreements with 22 law firms in 13 countries and has two safe homes in Saudi Arabia. Their effectiveness must be measured by how many workers they actually protect and how many perpetrators they help bring to justice.

Equally important is accountability when workers die abroad. Independent post-mortem examinations must be made mandatory upon the repatriation of all migrant workers' bodies, both female and male, with proper forensic documentation to establish causes of death and identify possible injuries or signs of abuse. Where evidence warrants, Bangladesh must demand further investigation and accountability from destination countries. Our remittance earners must not be treated with neglect any longer. The state must protect their rights with the same determination it promotes overseas employment.

Food inflation needs urgent remedy

Restart, expand TCB truck sales to provide essential support

A recent WFP report projected that the number of people facing acute food insecurity could reach 1.81 crore between September and December this year, up by 28 lakh from the beginning of the year. Meanwhile, inflation is reportedly set to see a 16-year high next year. In this situation, the six-month hiatus in the Trading Corporation of Bangladesh's (TCB) mobile truck sales has left many citizens without access to affordable essential food items. Besides distributing subsidised food items to around 75 lakh cardholders, TCB also sells edible oil, rice, flour, lentils and more at lower-than-retail prices via mobile trucks. Although the truck sales are meant to be occasional, with living costs rising over the last few years, more and more people have come to depend on this government initiative.

Per the latest guidelines, the TCB truck sales will primarily be held ahead of Eid-ul-Fitr and Eid-ul-Azha. TCB authorities also expect subsidies to decrease in the current fiscal year to Tk 2,400 crore, down from last year's Tk 2,700 crore. According to food ministry data, around 2.68 lakh tonnes of rice and wheat were allocated under the TCB's Open Market Sale (OMS) programme between July and October—26 percent less than the allocation in the same period last year. How sensible is it to downsize this crucial form of support when, according to the World Bank, the last four years have seen the addition of at least 80 lakh newly poor in Bangladesh? If anything, now would be the time for TCB to expand its OMS and truck sale programmes to provide support to those struggling to cope with the rising food prices.

While continuously hiked fuel costs are often cited as the main reason behind the inflation, prices have reportedly risen by more than the actual increase in costs. The low distribution of food through TCB is also concerning because the government's stock of rice and wheat has reportedly increased, with the current collective stock of the two items being higher than it was even last year. Not only should the government investigate whether the rise in food prices has been proportional to increasing fuel and transport costs, but it must also take the WFP's food insecurity projection into account and work accordingly to reduce its impact. It is the government's duty to ensure that the poorest can weather this period of food inflation.

New e-rickshaw rules were long overdue, but they leave critical gaps



Dhrubo Alam is deputy transport planner at Dhaka Transport Coordination Authority.

■ **DHRUBO ALAM**

Ataur Rahman, 60, was killed in Kapasia, Gazipur on August 20, 2026. His battery-run rickshaw, worth about Tk 1.4 lakh, was taken by three men (who were later arrested for the murder) and sold for Tk 42,000. His case is one of at least 404 recorded in a recent tally based on police records of battery-run rickshaw drivers murdered between 2020 and October 20, 2026. Put another way, an e-rickshaw driver has been killed by muggers roughly every six days for nearly seven years. The method used in these killings is well known to investigators. The rickshaw is usually hailed by someone posing as a passenger, who then asks the driver to go somewhere quiet before attacking them, mostly under the cover of darkness. The vehicle is then sold whole or stripped for parts within hours. These rickshaws have been described by some as "liquid money," since nothing on them shows who owns them.

Against this backdrop, the Local Government Division (LGD) issued the Three-Wheeled Low-Speed Battery-Operated Rickshaw (E-Rickshaw) Movement Rules, 2026 through a gazette notification on October 29, making their registration compulsory in every city corporation area. No e-rickshaw can now ply without registration in these areas. National highways, expressways, BRT corridors, and major bus routes have also been declared off-limits to these vehicles, and each registered e-rickshaw must carry a QR-coded plate.

Although these changes are significant on paper, a close reading of the 12-page gazette suggests that it has been written almost entirely around the vehicle in question, while the person at the handlebar is barely mentioned.

A close reading of the 12-page gazette issued by LGD suggests that it has been written almost entirely around the three-wheeled low-speed battery-operated rickshaw, while the person at the handlebar is barely mentioned.

The first gap appears in licensing. Under Rule 2, "licence" is defined only in relation to manufacturing or charging points, with no provision for a driver's licence or permit of any kind. The application form in Schedule 1 asks the owner for details down to their educational qualification and motor number, but nothing is asked about who will drive the vehicle. The same concern has been echoed by the drivers' and owners' association as well. Training, meanwhile, has been left optional: under Rule 10, courses on traffic law, road safety, and battery maintenance "may" be arranged by the authorities. Insurance has also been deferred, with Rule 4(14) stating that e-rickshaws will be brought under it "in phases." The application form asks for a policy number only, "if any." Equally importantly, there appears to be no provision for life insurance for drivers—the protection that would have mattered most to the families of murdered drivers.

Penalties are another area where the rules seem incomplete. The offences are listed in Rule 19, ranging from driving an unregistered vehicle and overloading to using an unapproved battery and fleeing after a crash. Beyond stating that legal action "may be taken," however, the rules specify neither fines nor suspension periods. The duty placed on drivers by Rule 18—to stop after a crash, help the injured, and inform the police—is sensible but may prove difficult to enforce when drivers' identities are not recorded. There is also a geographic gap: under Rule 1(2), the rules apply only within city corporation areas. Of the 404 murders reviewed by New Age, only 26 were recorded inside Dhaka city (which topped the list), suggesting that many of the others likely occurred on peri-urban and rural roads beyond city corporation limits.

The QR-coded plate could perhaps do the most for driver safety by turning an otherwise anonymous asset into traceable property. A code is useful only if it can be checked against a reliable record, however. As an LGD official has acknowledged, there is currently no central database. Instead, records are to be maintained separately by each city corporation and by fitness-certificate issuers under Rule 4(12). Under this arrangement, a stolen registered rickshaw could still be broken up in a backstreet garage, with its battery and motor sold separately, without anyone involved in the transaction being required to verify its registration.

That said, there may still be time for these gaps to be addressed, as registration has barely begun. DSCC, for example, opened registration counters on November 3 and around 700 forms had been sold by the following day. However, no rickshaw was registered by the end of that week. There has been hardly any update from the other city corporations.

Of course, any discussion about the regulation of battery-run rickshaws would be incomplete without addressing the principal concern: passenger safety. There is no agreed-upon figure for the harm caused to passengers by these vehicles. A study by the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) attributed 21.01 percent of road fatalities in 2024 to battery-powered three-wheelers while, according to Bangladesh Jatri Kalyan Samity's June 2026 count, battery rickshaws and easy-bikes accounted for 14.96 percent of the vehicles involved in crashes. The two figures measure different things, and neither comes from an official system that records e-rickshaws separately. Setting appropriate speed limits, zone sizes, and fleet caps is difficult without reliable data.

Under these circumstances, several steps could help address the shortcomings. Drivers could be registered alongside the vehicles. A photo-bearing driver card or licence, linked to the vehicle's QR-coded plate and issued after a short compulsory training course, would cost relatively little. Rule 10's permissive "may" could then be replaced with a definitive "shall". A single national registry could also be established before registration expands, linked to NIDs and made searchable by the police. If garages and scrap dealers were required to check the registry before buying a vehicle or motor, and purchasing an unverified one were made an offence, the resale trade that often drives these muggings could be hit hard.

It would also help to attach a schedule of fines and suspensions to Rule 19, giving traffic police something definite to enforce. If e-rickshaws were recorded as a separate vehicle type in police crash reports and hospital records, future discussions of their safety could begin with a shared set of figures. The promised rules for pourashavas and upazilas, where many rickshaw muggings likely occur, should also be issued without delay.

The LGD gazette has created a legal framework for e-rickshaws but it has yet to establish clearly who is driving them or what protection the state owes those drivers and their passengers in the event of an accident or other unforeseen incident.



On October 29, the Local Government Division issued the Three-Wheeled Low-Speed Battery-Operated Rickshaw (E-Rickshaw) Movement Rules, 2026 through a gazette notification. FILE PHOTO: **STAR**

The danger of defining young lives by exam results



Shah Md Saad Abdullah is an undergraduate student at BRAC University.

■ **SHAH MD SAAD ABDULLAH**

On October 31, a total of 1,240,798 students sat this year's HSC and equivalent examinations, and 646,685 passed. The pass rate of 52.12 percent is the lowest in 22 years. Roughly 594,000 candidates failed in one or more subjects, 293 institutions recorded no passes, and the number of GPA-5 achievers fell to 40,084 from 69,097.

On the same day, two students, in Satkhira and Lakshmipur, reportedly died by suicide after learning that they had failed. Two deaths do not establish a trend, but this is not new. After the results this August, Aachol Foundation counted at least 10 students' deaths by suicide reported in the media within a week, and it points to the days around results as a period of increased risk.

The government attributes the decline in results to impartial marking and gaps in student learning, while others point to weak foundations and teacher shortages. Inflated grades helped no one, but a system that raises its standards without raising its support makes result day heavier for the students. Roughly 423,000 students who failed one or two subjects will get another chance, with retakes due in early December. But 171,000 students who failed three or more subjects will be left out. In the last admission cycle, Chittagong University received 233,327 applications for just 4,165 seats, or roughly 56 applicants per seat. The overwhelming majority will fail to secure admission. Yet beyond celebrating those who succeed, we must ask what message this fiercely competitive system sends to those who are left behind.

We are often taught from a young age that failure isn't an option. Encouraged by families, schools, and coaching centres to compete, students will choose subjects that will look good on paper. Many won't ever know what they're interested in.

The cost is visible. A 2026 survey of 1,500 university students in Dhaka, conducted at a youth wellness festival, found that nearly two in three feel stressed almost every day, with family expectations and career uncertainty among the causes. Aachol Foundation counted 403 student suicides in 2025 and associated 72 of them with academic pressure, mostly among school and college students. However, Aachal Foundation stated that failure in an examination should not define a student's future and worth. Failure leaves a wound, a lesson, and a chance to repair. How a young person responds depends largely on whether those around them see the situation as a new beginning or the end of the road.

Regret, however, is different from the disappointment of failure. It does not necessarily emerge on the day results are announced. Instead, it builds over the years, from the subjects we never studied, the risks we never took, and the paths we followed simply to meet others' expectations. Such regret can shape a person's life in ways that are quieter but more enduring than the pain of failure. A student who fails while pursuing their own aspirations can at least find satisfaction in having tried. But one who succeeds in a field they never wanted to pursue may spend years wondering what life could have been like had they followed their own ambitions.

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This does not mean that effort and competition are undesirable. Merit matters, and university seats are limited. However, an education system in which most applicants inevitably fail to secure admission must do more than simply rank students according to their performance. It must also help those who are unsuccessful recognise that failing an admission test does not mean failing in life. Three measures could help address this challenge.

First, the education ministry should direct boards and universities to plan for result days carefully. Experts have urged a coordinated response from the education system, families, society, and mental health services. Counselling should be available before and after results are published. Secondly, schools and colleges should employ trained counsellors and make their services a priority. Students cannot take advantage of resources that are not available.

Most importantly, parents and teachers should widen their definition of a good result. A family conversation that picks up from "what do you want to do?" instead of "what will people say?" gives the child the rarest gift: the right to their own life.

Young people have their part to play. Choosing for yourself doesn't guarantee success and carries a real risk of failure. But that risk is theirs, and it stops when the result is announced. The alternative, a life built to satisfy someone else's idea of success, has no result day and no end.

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