The Daily Star
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Don't leave Khulna at criminals' mercy

Intelligence-led operations needed to rein in the gangs wreaking havoc in the city

It is rather disturbing to see law and order deteriorating in Khulna over the past two years, with no effective security intervention. Since the political changeover in August 2024, the city has slowly descended into chaos, gripped by gang warfare, drug trafficking, extortion, and brazen killings. According to a report in this daily, nine criminal gangs are openly competing for control of territories and illegal businesses. And this crisis has been allowed to escalate despite repeated warnings and operations.

These gangs, which were once confined to smaller neighbourhoods, expanded their reach over the last two years, fighting over drug money, extortion, territorial control, and committing murder—sometimes in broad daylight. Between January 1 and November 14 this year, at least 79 people have been murdered in Khulna city and district. Between October 22 and November 12 alone, nine murders and 13 incidents of shooting were reported. One of these murders took place on the very day Prime Minister Tarique Rahman visited Khulna. Extortion has become the new normal in the city, with almost all the shops having paid some amount to the gangs.

This situation is a damning indictment of law enforcement's failure in Khulna. Police say they have been conducting special operations against these criminal gangs, yet they are struggling to dismantle them and bring the suspects to justice—something the district police chief acknowledged himself. In some high-profile murder cases, most of the accused remain at large months after the incidents. In fact, police personnel in the

Ordinary people have been living in a constant state of panic across the district. The fear of violent retribution has taken root so deep that it now deters people from reporting crimes and testifying in cases. Did Home Minister Salahuddin Ahmed take this into account when he asserted on Sunday that law and order across the country were under control?

Khulna district have been instructed not to travel alone at night, following an attack on an inspector. This goes to show how precarious security has become.

As a result, ordinary people have been living in a constant state of panic across the district. The fear of violent retribution has taken root so deep that it now deters people from reporting crimes and testifying in cases. Did Home Minister Salahuddin Ahmed take this into account when he asserted on Sunday that law and order across the country were under control? Why has he not visited the district despite so many reports detailing what has been going on? What is happening in Khulna is utterly unacceptable and the government cannot continue treating this as a problem inherited from the previous administration.

Several local leaders met Prime Minister Tarique Rahman on Saturday and briefed him on the crisis. Earlier on Thursday, senior law enforcement officials held a meeting where they decided to launch special joint operations and deploy 200 Ansar personnel, strengthen checkpoints, and increase patrols and intelligence surveillance. These moves, albeit delayed, must bring in tangible results. The government must take targeted initiatives and pursue intelligence-led operations to get a hold of the gang leaders, financiers, potential political patrons, and drug supply networks, alongside the recovery of illegal arms and providing adequate witness protection. Khulna's residents have been left at the mercy of criminals for far too long, and the government must demonstrate through sustained action that no criminal network is beyond its reach.

Closure of Shastho Batayon unfortunate

Restore the health hotline immediately, address failures causing closure

At a time when access to affordable medical care remains out of reach for many, particularly in rural and underserved areas, the sudden closure of Shastho Batayon helpline 16263—the government's free, round-the-clock telehealth service—is deeply concerning. Operated by private company Synesis IT, the service was shut down on November 12 after its contract with the Directorate General of Health Services expired on November 10. Public health experts have warned that the closure, without any alternative arrangements, will particularly affect low-income people.

Since its launch in 2015, Shastho Batayon has handled nearly three crore calls, demonstrating the enormous demand for accessible telehealth services. Its importance became particularly evident during the Covid-19 pandemic, when people unable to visit hospitals could seek medical advice over the phone. The service received more than 1.26 crore calls during the pandemic alone. Even this year, it received an average of over 6,000 calls a day between May and October. Through consultations with trained doctors, electronic prescriptions, and referrals to specialised hospitals, the hotline offered an affordable way to access medical advice without travelling or incurring additional expenses.

However, a prolonged funding vacuum has put the service at risk. While the fourth Health, Population and Nutrition Sector Programme, under which the service was funded, expired in June 2024, the proposed successor programme was scrapped in March 2025. Meanwhile, Synesis IT reportedly had around Tk 16 crore in unpaid bills as of November. The financial strain forced it to cut its workforce by 40 to 50 percent, reducing the hotline's capacity even before its closure.

We must ask: why did the authorities fail to clear the outstanding bills, secure sustainable funding, and did not begin the procurement process early enough to prevent this disruption? While the health ministry has assured that the service will resume soon, questions remain as to how such an essential public service could be allowed to collapse despite repeated warnings.

The government must immediately restore the service, clear outstanding dues, and ensure adequate resources and manpower for its effective operation. If the current arrangement is no longer viable, an alternative must be put in place without interrupting services. For the future, it must also establish a reliable funding mechanism and plan contract renewals and procurement well ahead of expiry dates.

Can COP31 restore confidence in global climate cooperation?

MACRO MIRROR



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FAHMIDA KHATUN

The 31st United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP31), being held in Antalya, Türkiye, has come at a difficult moment for international climate cooperation. While climate risks continue to grow, economic uncertainty, fiscal pressures, energy security concerns, geopolitical conflicts, and competing domestic priorities are making countries increasingly cautious about stronger climate and financial commitments. But the climate crisis cannot be addressed without coordinated action.

Recent scientific findings indicate that global temperatures could exceed the 1.5 degrees Celsius threshold above pre-industrial levels within the next few years. Even if countries fully implement existing climate plans and meet their additional net-zero commitments, global warming could still rise to around 1.8 degrees Celsius. This implies that the severity of climate change impacts due to higher temperatures may be irreversible. Hence, for climate-vulnerable countries like Bangladesh, the negotiations at COP31 are beyond climate concerns and include issues such as economic growth, fiscal stability, food security, infrastructure, employment, and livelihoods.

Beyond the high temperature concerns, climate finance is central to the conference because the gap between what the developing countries need and the available resources is striking. At COP29 in Baku, Azerbaijan, in 2024, countries agreed to mobilise $300 billion annually for developing countries by 2035, along with the broader objective of scaling climate finance to $1.3 trillion annually from all sources. At COP30 in Belém, Brazil, in 2025, there was a call to triple international public adaptation finance by 2035. However, climate finance commitments fall substantially short of estimated requirements. Developing countries are estimated to require about $305 billion annually for adaptation by 2035, and international public adaptation finance mobilised was only $28.2 to $31.7 billion in 2024. Even if the current flow of climate finance is tripled, it will meet only about 20 to 29 percent of estimated requirements.

When it comes to financing challenges, it is not only the volume but also the terms and accessibility that matter. Investments in adaptation often deliver substantial social benefits but may not generate commercial returns. Coastal protection, flood management, cyclone shelters, and climate-resilient public infrastructure cannot reasonably be expected to recover their costs through user charges. Consequently, relying on commercial loans to fund adaptation can add to debt burdens. This is especially problematic for developing economies already facing fiscal pressures and rising debt-service obligations. COP31 should therefore establish clear arrangements for delivering existing finance commitments. More emphasis is needed on grants, concessional resources, predictable disbursements, and transparent accounting.

The Global Goal on Adaptation (GGA) is another important negotiating issue. The aim of GGA is to strengthen the capacity of countries to adapt to climate change, reduce vulnerability, and build resilience. At COP30 in Belém, countries adopted 59 indicators, which are to be refined before COP32 in Addis Ababa in 2027. Countries have to determine how to measure progress and support implementation, as measuring adaptation is more complicated than measuring emissions. There are disagreements over indicators, implementation, and financing. Therefore, COP31 has to advance operational arrangements and ensure predictable, accessible adaptation finance. Vulnerable countries such as Bangladesh should be supported with adequate resources to strengthen climate resilience, protect livelihoods, and implement national adaptation priorities effectively.

The Fund for Responding to Loss and Damage received 176 funding requests from 119 countries, totalling $2.8 billion, but its initial allocation was only $342 million. This underscores the severe shortage of resources available to climate-vulnerable developing countries. For Bangladesh and other vulnerable economies, COP31 should prioritise additional, predictable, grant-based financing and simpler procedures for accessing funds.

The energy transition is another key issue at COP31, where discussions focus on cleaner energy systems, electrification, energy efficiency, and methane reduction. Türkiye's COP31 presidency has proposed the voluntary 35-by-35 Global Electrification Pledge to accelerate electrification and improve energy efficiency. This aims to raise electricity's share of global final energy consumption from about 23 percent to 35 percent by 2035.

For Bangladesh, the energy transition is crucial for both environmental necessity and economic competitiveness. High dependence on imported fossil fuels makes the economy vulnerable to international energy price volatility, increases foreign exchange pressures, and creates supply disruptions. The country needs investment in renewable energy, energy-efficient technologies, and modern transmission infrastructure. Domestic energy resources are essential for improving energy security, reducing production costs over time, and strengthening economic resilience. However, the energy transition must be managed carefully to ensure reliable, affordable energy for industries and households.

The energy transition has become increasingly linked to export competitiveness. International buyers are placing greater emphasis on carbon emissions, renewable energy use, and environmental standards. The RMG and other export sectors must adopt cleaner production processes to retain their global market share, as sustainable production and consumption are high on the agenda and developed countries have set net-zero targets by 2050. This requires affordable renewable electricity, technological upgrading, investment finance, and skills development.

At COP30 in Belém, countries agreed to establish a just transition mechanism. A just energy transition balances environmental goals with competitiveness, jobs, affordability, and poverty reduction; and climate-related trade rules must not impose additional burdens on developing country exporters.



The global community expects stronger political commitments and concrete measures to accelerate climate action in the remaining days of COP31.
FILE PHOTO: **REUTERS/MURAD SEZER**

In the coming days, as negotiations intensify at COP31, the global community expects stronger political commitments, broader consensus on unresolved issues, and concrete measures to accelerate climate action. More specifically, attention will focus on whether countries can bridge differences over climate finance, adaptation, loss and damage, emissions reductions, and a just energy transition. Hence, the remaining negotiations offer an opportunity to build trust and demonstrate a shared commitment to addressing the climate crisis. However, substantive and meaningful outcomes will require political will, adequate resources, technological capabilities, and clear implementation plans. Discussions in Antalya could renew confidence in multilateral cooperation and rebuild trust for more ambitious and equitable climate action in the years ahead.

How to ensure Gram Sarkar 2.0 helps citizens



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HOSSAIN ZILLUR RAHMAN

In 2004, we spoke of a familiar cycle in Bangladesh's decentralisation efforts—governments announce reforms, establish institutions, and gradually return to bureaucratic business as usual. Local government remains weak, and the next government starts afresh. After 22 years, the proposed Gram Sarkar Act, 2026, raises an uncomfortable question: are we about to repeat that cycle?

The BNP government has proposed the placement of a 17-member Gram Sarkar in each of the country's 41,112 wards under 4,568 unions, according to a draft of the act prepared by the Local Government Division (LGD). Its objectives include greater public participation, improved services, and stronger local accountability. These are worthwhile goals, but Bangladesh's experience suggests that creating institutions is easier than making them work.

Gram Sarkar was introduced in 1980, followed by Gram Parishad legislation in 1997, and the Gram Sarkar Act, 2003. The latter faced constitutional challenge, with the High Court ruling against it in 2005. The ruling was subsequently stayed pending appeal. The Union Parishad Act, 2009 then established ward sabhas as statutory forums for grassroots participation.

Ward sabhas are meant to identify development priorities, scrutinise beneficiary lists, and review local projects. Union parishads also have standing committees covering a wide range of public services. But these arrangements have struggled to function as intended. And before the introduction of another institution, we need to understand why previous ones did not work out.

In 2003, the Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC) examined the Gram Sarkar strategy through grassroots consultations and a review of rural development initiatives. PPRC recognised the potential for bringing communities closer to local decision-making but warned against overlapping responsibilities, arbitrary selection, and inadequate resources. Its central recommendation was to retain functional authority with union parishads while using village-level bodies to strengthen consultation, planning, and accountability. Those concerns have lost none of their relevance today. A permanent ward-level organisation could serve a useful purpose. It might improve local information, follow up on public decisions, and give neglected communities a stronger voice. The government's expectation that grassroots participation could improve service delivery deserves consideration. But two risks require particular attention: hassle/harassment and governance capacity.

Consider a widow seeking an allowance or a farmer applying for government assistance. Both may already have to deal with several offices and intermediaries. Will Gram Sarkar make their dealings simpler, or introduce yet another official whose recommendation will have to be secured? The concerns extend beyond financial extortion to repeated visits, conflicting instructions, and uncertainty over who can decide to impose real costs on citizens. Transparency International Bangladesh's 2025 household survey found that the 32.3 percent of households which experienced corruption did not complain, citing fear of harassment or further complications.

The proposed Gram Sarkar would assist with processes for welfare programmes, government benefit cards, and local dispute resolution. But unless responsibilities and grievance procedures are clearly defined, these functions could create additional opportunities for discretion and harassment.

Governance capacity presents a second

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concern. The draft assigns responsibilities spanning infrastructure, agriculture, education, health, and social protection. It provides for subject committees and further sub-committees across more than 41,000 wards. But who will support this extensive network? Union parishads already face constraints in staffing, finance, and authority. Many relevant services depend on government departments operating through separate administrative chains. Meetings, records, accounts, and supervision require time and resources. The draft act provides for financial contributions from union parishads but no predictable funding formula matching the proposed responsibilities.

This brings us to the deeper weakness of decentralisation in Bangladesh. Successive reforms have expanded local responsibilities without sufficiently addressing the concentration of administrative and financial authority. Elected local representatives are expected to answer for services over which they often exercise limited control. Adding another body may further complicate local governance without addressing its underlying weaknesses.

In earlier reform programmes, direct fiscal transfers, institutional training and stronger financial accountability have improved union parishad performance. These experiences deserve greater attention than they have received.

The government should first establish what Gram Sarkar would contribute beyond existing ward sabhas and union parishad committees. It should clarify how responsibilities, resources, and accountability would be divided. A limited first operating phase, independently evaluated, could test whether the proposed arrangement improves citizens' access to services before nationwide implementation. The test should explore specific questions: are services easier to obtain? Are public decisions more transparent? Do citizens receive effective remedies? Is local government better equipped to act?

Bangladesh has spent decades changing the structure of local government without sufficiently changing how it works. The Gram Sarkar proposal offers another opportunity to confront that failure. We should judge it not by the number of bodies established, but by the capacity built, the authority clarified, and the difficulties removed from citizens' lives.

The Daily Star Reg. No. DA 781 | **EDITOR & PUBLISHER: Mahfuz Anam** Printed by him on behalf of Mediaworld Ltd at Transcraft Ltd, 229, Tejgaon Industrial Area, editor@thedailystar.net | **Registered & Head Offices:** The Daily Star Centre 64-65 Kazi Nazrul Islam Avenue, Dhaka-1215 Phone: 09610222222 | **Newsroom:** Fax- 58156306 reporting@thedailystar.net | **Advertisement:** 01711623910 advertisement@thedailystar.net GPO Box: 3257 | **Subscription:** 01711623906 | thedailystar.net bangla.thedailystar.net/