

Remove barriers to direct rice purchase from farmers

Govt should reform existing procurement system, eliminate middlemen

AFTER last year's debacle in procuring rice from the farmers, many of whom struggled to break even after being forced to sell rice at very low prices, it is heartening to know the government is taking steps to help them get fair prices this time around. It has reportedly decided to purchase eight lakh tonnes of Boro paddy (at Tk 26 per kg) directly from farmers starting from April 26. Last year, the amount was four lakh tonnes. If implemented, the increase will bring "price support" to the doorstep of many more farmers. Add to that the 11.5 lakh tonnes of milled rice to be procured from the millers from May 7 onwards. The harvest of Boro, the principal crop of the country, has already begun in the haor areas of Mymensingh and Sylhet divisions. In other regions, it will start from early May.

However, there are deep reservations about the effectiveness of the government's existing procurement process of selecting rice-growers through lottery. The lottery system allegedly benefits non-farmers such as traders and local political men, instead of small and marginal farmers and sharecroppers. According to farmers, political connections or bribes are often required to make it to the lottery list. Besides, farmers often cannot bring the moisture content of their freshly cut paddy below the required 14 percent, forcing them to sell their produce to the millers and middlemen at lower prices. If past trends hold and the current moisture content regulation is not relaxed, an otherwise well-intentioned initiative will fail to reach its goal. The government should heed calls for reforms in its procurement system and eliminate the middlemen in the trade by setting up purchasing centres in large paddy *haats* and buying it directly from the farmers—who are already staring down the barrel of a crisis thanks to inclement weather, shortage of harvest workers as well as impending flash floods.

Removing the barriers in rice procurement—and indeed production—is extremely important. Farmers need to be kept motivated particularly because they are the ones who stand between a possible famine (caused by the coronavirus) and our food security in the future. The PM has already voiced her concerns about this and urged all concerned to produce more food and keep sufficient stock of food grains in the country. The need for initiatives and reforms reflective of this urgency cannot be overemphasised.

Restaurant sector hit hard by the crisis

Huge number of workers struggling to make ends meet

THE restaurant business has predictably taken a big hit due to the coronavirus outbreak as people have remained mostly locked in their homes during the past weeks. The sector was one of the first affected in Bangladesh as the number of customers started dwindling since late February, forcing businesses to either lay off or send home their employees without pay.

The government has recently unveiled a plan to transfer Tk 2,000 in cash to 40 lakh families whose breadwinners have lost jobs because of the shutdown and it is believed that that includes workers from the hotel and restaurant sectors. However, it is likely that the amount is not enough. The number of food service establishments in the country is estimated to be around 60,000 where more than 15 lakh people are working. In Dhaka alone, there are approximately 10,000 restaurants that employ 3 lakh people, a huge percentage of whom are now unemployed. To support all these people and their families, the government will clearly need to increase the monetary value of the allotted relief package.

According to the general secretary of the Bangladesh Restaurant Owner's Association, a formal request from the authorities for a list of workers who should receive aid is yet to be made. It is important that the government acquires the list quickly having consulted with restaurant owners, as Ramadan and Eid are fast approaching and restaurant workers have been under substantial financial duress for some time now. The list is also important to ensure that no restaurant worker is left out and to guarantee that no one who is not a restaurant worker is able to take advantage of the situation and there is no misallocation of funds—as we have seen attempted already during this crisis in other sectors.

Finally, given that the current predicament may last a while longer, the government could consider exempting businesses from paying utility bills and the 15 percent VAT on rents for a few months at least to help them get back on their feet once it ends.

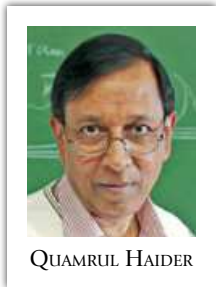
LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Cutting funds is not the solution

Recently, US President Trump suspended funding to the World Health Organization (WHO) over the coronavirus response; however, his claims are rather vague. The WHO is the only leading body with a robust network and expertise that can effectively face any situation in the health sector. During this pandemic, the world is dependent on the guidelines provided by WHO. Many have criticised Trump's halting of funds as it disrupts the global battle against Covid-19. Considering the present scenario, this is exactly the time when the WHO requires more funding, not less! I hope global leaders create all possible forms of pressure to change Trump's decision as early as possible.

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of the Universe which burst into existence 13.7 billion years ago, Earth is in its early middle age. It will live for another five billion years, when the Sun will become a Red Giant, swallowing the nearby planets and ending its luminous career by dwindling into a white dwarf.

Although Earth is very small—a mote of dust—in the vast cosmic arena, it is the only planet that is filled with exquisite beauty, a cornucopia of boisterous wildlife slithering, scampering, soaring and swimming all over the planet. It showcases timeless marvels—a panoply of wonders—sculpted by Nature over millions of years. It is home to towering mountains, alpine glaciers, lush green rainforests, subtropical wilderness and millennia-old humongous trees, gushing geysers, beautiful coral reefs, lofty waterfalls and pristine lakes. The Earth is also home to incredible sandstone arches, deep canyons, varicoloured petrified wood and multi-hued badlands, massive caves filled with imposing stalagmites and stalactites, sparsely vegetated and colourfully painted deserts, gigantic sand dunes, and hundreds of species of flora and fauna.

Evidence of life—bacteria and single-



El Arco, Sea of Cortez, Mexico.

celled organisms—date to 3.85 billion years ago. Since then, life suffered wave after wave of cataclysmic extinctions. The dinosaurs are perhaps the most famous extinct creatures who roamed the Earth's surface unchallenged during the Mesozoic Era. After surviving for nearly 165 million years, they became victims of the greatest mass deaths in the history of our planet 65 million years ago when a large asteroid hit the Earth.

About 25 million years ago, most of the present day species emerged. Now, fast forward to about two million years ago and we see the evolution of our ancestors—upright, biped, primate mammals. Evidence shows that modern humans originated in Africa within the past 200,000 years, yet there was no move toward high level civilisation. It was the Sumerians of Mesopotamia who developed the world's first civilisation roughly 6,000 years ago.

We have had the planet to ourselves for a small fraction of time. During this short time interval, we outfoxed other species in the game of survival. Maybe they ran out of luck in evolution's lottery, or perhaps sometime in the distant past, we became completely dissociated from the checks and balances between man and nature and became a super-predator.

Since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution circa 1760, we made a toxic mess of our natural environment, resulting in an ever-hotter climate, melting glaciers, rising sea levels, widespread droughts, frequent and much wilder storms, crop failures and tens of millions of climate refugees. Our unrestrained use of fossil fuels for more than a century had been slowly pushing the planet toward climatological catastrophe.

Today, we are fixated on enjoying the present and refusing to account for the consequences of our actions on tomorrow. Social scientists interpret this type of behaviour as frontier ethic, prevalent in Western culture as well as others. This ethic embraces a rather narrow view of humans in the environment and even a narrower view of nature. It is characterised by three

tenets.

The first is that the Earth has an infinite supply of resources for exclusive human use. There is always more and it is all for us; humans are apart from nature and immune to natural laws; and human success derives from the control of nature.

This tenet no doubt evolved in the prehistoric time when human numbers were small and the Earth's resources did indeed appear inexhaustible. Not

even attempted to introduce daylight saving time from December 2009, bringing time back by one hour and giving us more work hours during daylight, but unfortunately this was discontinued in March 2010.

Earth Day is now observed globally, and a good number of countries also celebrate Earth Week to focus on environmental issues. Today, 193 countries are observing Earth Day, with this year's theme being "Climate Action". This huge digital civic celebration will demand that world leaders take science seriously, listen to their people and push for action at every level of society to stop the rising tide of climate change. This campaign intends to activate at least a billion people in climate action—a worldwide campaign to remove billions of pieces of trash, reduce waste and plastic pollution, improve habitats and prevent harm to wildlife and humans. The largest ever global citizen science initiative will be taken on this day regarding the health and wellbeing of the environment. This global campaign will also bring together artists in every discipline from around the world, using the power of their art to express our common humanity. A huge digital platform has been set up for different age groups to educate, motivate and involve people in their many innovative activities.

Due to a transport shutdown, which includes movement via air and sea as well as roads, and the shutting down of mills and factories, as well as the lockdown of cities, districts and provinces—a number of positive environmental impacts have been witnessed. The people of northern Punjab can now glimpse the Himalayas, and the air quality of Dhaka has significantly improved. We can list many such cases, but we cannot ignore the catastrophic loss of life and the economic shutdown that has come with it.

The coronavirus pandemic has also

any more. The massive increase in economic activity and the upsurge in population growth in the last 200 years have brought us face-to-face with the planet's limitations.

The second tenet sought to position humankind outside the realm of nature. Many people still continue to view human beings as separate from nature and persist in thinking we can do whatever we please without harming the planet. To the contrary, our independence is an illusion, engendered by our remoteness from a world we see through rose-coloured



Teton Mountains, Wyoming, USA.

PHOTO: MAHJABEEN HAIDER

glasses and thermo-paned windows.

As for the third tenet, industrialised nations view nature as a force that must be conquered and subjugated. Hence, we manipulated wildlife, fisheries, land, rivers, oceans and forests like so many pieces in a board game, until the environment reached a dangerous point of disequilibrium.

Over the years, the frontier ethic permeated our lives so much that we became more remote from the natural world outside our artificial environments. It influences our personal goals and expectations without thinking about the effects on the long-term health of the planet.

It cannot be overemphasised that the fate of the planet, our home, and the millions of species that share it with us, as well as the fate of all future generations, lies in our hands. Do we realise that because of resource and ozone depletion, global warming and other problems, the human species will be wiped off the face of the planet if we do not change our lifestyles? At the least, things will deteriorate to the extent that we could lose centuries of technological and economic progress in the next few decades. Our wonderfully diverse biological world, the product of billions of years of evolution, could be eradicated in a fraction of the Earth's history.

So, what should we do to keep the planet habitable for our future generations? Scientists have urged world leaders in vain to combat global-warming emissions, which have only continued

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brought forward some extra challenges in terms of the environment. Globally, millions of personal protective equipment (PPE) are being used; the question of hygienic disposal of this PPE, including gloves and masks, is very important. Almost all of them are not biodegradable and can lead to generating greater medical waste.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has also prescribed washing hands for 20 seconds with soap frequently, and product stock is running low in departmental stores and grocery shops. Concerned factories are working day and night, doing good business while catering to this huge demand. Likewise, the use of sanitisers has increased many fold. We know the main ingredients of sanitiser is alcohol and glycerin. A huge quantity of cleaning materials like bleaching powder and phenyl are being used globally, which ultimately goes back into canals and rivers. Without any doubt, these will cause harm

to soar upward. Should we instead rely on a pandemic, such as the coronavirus that is shutting down countries across the globe, slowing down economic activities, halting industrial productions and travel, thereby causing a significant decline in air pollution and carbon/nitrogen emissions all over the world?

The coronavirus pandemic is a tragedy—a palpable human nightmare unfolding in overloaded hospitals with alarming speed, racing toward a horizon darkened by economic disaster and chock-full of signs showing more sufferings

to come. This global crisis is also an eye-opener for the other global crisis, the slower one with even higher stakes—anthropogenic climate change.

The cure due to coronavirus is temporary and totally unacceptable, whereas the threat from the adverse effects of climate change will remain with us for years, unless we shape up pronto. Nevertheless, coronavirus should make us wonder if lessons learned from the pandemic might be the beginning of a meaningful shift from business-as-usual attitude.

On this International Mother Earth Day, let us pause for a moment and imagine what the Earth would look like when it will be bereft of mirth, when there will be no wilderness and wildlife, when lakes will be filled with sudsy waters, when coastlines will become unrecognisable and when the air will become a witch's brew. Can our planet still be called Earth? The answer is no, because we do not have the insight to predict the consequences of our frontier mentality and exercise restraint where we must.

I end the piece with the following words of wisdom from the Native American Chief Seattle. "The Earth does not belong to man, man belongs to the Earth. All things are connected like the blood that unites us all. Man did not weave the web of life, he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself."

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to rivers and the different fish and other aquatic species that populate these waters. Only time will tell what impact all these various substances will have.

Soaps in general are biodegradable but detergents contain phosphate, which contributes to the growth of algae in water bodies. Aquatic animals are deprived of oxygen as a result. Aquatic animals and water plants can also be severely affected by common household detergent. Detergent makes the process of water purification more difficult as well. Some antibacterial soaps contain additives like Triclocarban (TCC) and Triclosan (TCS) that are not easily degradable and contaminate lakes, canals and rivers, which may cause health hazards in different ways. Alcohol based hand sanitisers have a lower chance of polluting the environment as it evaporates, but prolonged use over a long period may cause harm to the skin. Even then, after using hand sanitisers as and when possible, experts still advise the cleaning of hands with soap and water. We need to be very careful when using cleansing materials to disinfect as well.

On this Earth Day, let us commit to reducing pollution, energy efficiency, using more solar and wind energy, plastic and polythene prohibition, cleaning our canals and rivers, less travel and greater use of tele/video-conferencing, saving water, reducing, recycling and re-using (3R), using less paper, using bicycles to travel and planting more trees.

The founder of the modern scouting movement Lord Baden-Powell once said, "Try to leave this world a little better than you found it". Let us try to implement that in our everyday life—practice doing more with less and think of all the things we can do without.

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