

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR  
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DHAKA MONDAY JUNE 8, 2020, JAISHTHA 25, 1427 BS

## Defalcation of relief material

*Is suspension enough?*

WHILE the government should be complimented for suspending 87 public representatives for allegedly misappropriating relief material meant for distribution among the very needy to scrape through the hard times caused by the pandemic, particularly when most of them belong to ruling party, one is constrained to ask whether suspending them from their present appointment is enough atonement for an action which is clearly a criminal offense. Besides misappropriation of relief goods, these people also indulged in nepotism in preparing the list for distribution of money and material.

Such activities had become apparent from the very start of the relief programme when reports of stealing and misappropriation began appearing in the media from nearly all parts of the country almost regularly. Those involved in this nefarious activity include UP chairmen, UP members—in fact 52 of the 87 are UP members—zila parishad members, municipality councillors and even an upazila parishad vice-chairman to boot!

The government had taken two very commendable steps to mitigate the plight of the poor in the rural areas to ensure food security. One is providing rice at Tk 10 per kg, and the other, setting up a hotline at national level for providing humanitarian and food assistance during this countrywide shutdown. It seems that some within the ruling party unfortunately, are doing their best to blunt the government's effort. Not only that, in one incident, a needy farmer was beaten up by an upazila chairman for seeking relief through the hotline.

One might say that this was only to be expected since, as our bitter experience shows, the distribution of relief and listing of the needy was left to the local functionaries who were all AL members. And that is like trusting one's chickens with the fox. The fate of the chicken is inevitable. In these very columns we had suggested that government's relief programmes should be strictly supervised to avoid "system loss". But apart from that, these people should be made an example of, particularly when the errant individuals happen to be public representatives who have little qualms about stealing food grains meant for the very people who have voted them into their office. Corruption is unpardonable at any time, more so when the country is passing through a crisis like this. Suspension is not enough. These people should face charges under the law, and be put behind bars, as any other citizen would be for such a crime.

## DMP commissioner's striking letter to the IGP about corruption

*An opportunity to start the much-awaited reform in the police*

WE commend the Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) commissioner for writing to the Inspector General of Police (IGP), requesting him to take action against a joint commissioner of the unit for offering him a bribe. The DMP chief termed the joint commissioner "a corrupt officer" in the letter, mentioning that there were graft allegations against him over various purchases and sought his immediate transfer.

It is a rare occasion when a head of DMP directly brings allegations against a police high-up. However, we wonder why he has sought the officials' transfer only. Why didn't he request for his suspension or even more severe action by bringing criminal charges against him for seeking a bribe? Even so, we would like to compliment the DMP chief for taking a step that we do not often hear of. And we all know that this is just the tip of the iceberg. There are lots of incidents of corruption inside the police force which have never been looked into. Now that the case has come up where corruption charges were brought against a DMP joint commissioner by none other than the DMP commissioner, it cannot be taken lightly.

According to a high official of the DMP, the official in question was posted as deputy commissioner of DMP back in 2012 and then worked as the DC (Finance), DC (Logistic) and then promoted to a joint commissioner of the unit. During these eight years, allegations rose against him for financial corruption but no step was taken against him.

Therefore, we urge the newly appointed IGP, who, upon assuming office declared that he would work hard to rid the police force of corruption, to take action against the official concerned. We would also want him to take this as an opportunity to start a reform process that will address the bigger question of corruption within the police force. This could be a historic task that he will perform which will positively contribute to making the police force morally stronger and more committed to people's welfare and security. It will also improve the public image of the police.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Protecting the rights of children

It is heart-breaking that during armed conflicts, children are among the worst affected. The six most common ways their rights are violated are: recruitment and use of children in war, killing, sexual violence, abduction, attacks on schools and hospitals and denial of humanitarian access for children. Millions of children globally are caught up in conflicts in which they are not just bystanders, but targets.

Having recently observed the International Day of Innocent Children Victims of Aggression on June 4, we should acknowledge the pain suffered by children throughout the world who have been victims of physical, mental and emotional abuse. People should voice their concerns about the inadequate protection of the rights of children across the globe and particularly in conflict zones.

Handsen Chikowore, by email



RMG NOTES

MOSTAFIZ UDDIN

THE Covid-19 pandemic is wreaking havoc throughout the global fashion industry. A recently updated report by McKinsey and Company and the Business of Fashion—"The State of Fashion 2020"—states that the global fashion industry will face a 27 percent to 30 percent contraction in business due to the outbreak of the virus. These stark predictions are borne out by the latest news that UK apparel retail contracted by 34 percent in the month of March alone.

With global lockdowns and social distancing becoming the new norm, consumers are housebound, high street retail stores are closed, and brands and retailers are faced with an ever-mounting level of inventory. Even the upturn in online sales is not enough to dent the shortfall in sales that the Covid-19 pandemic has caused.

As a result, companies are cancelling or delaying orders with their supply chain partners and garment manufacturers and the backward linkage supply chain of the apparel industry are struggling for financial survival. Production and payments have come to a standstill and the apparel manufacturing industry can no longer predict what the future holds.

Now, more than ever, the apparel manufacturing community needs the support from their buying partners and central to this is an open and empathetic system of communication.

Communication between retailers and brands and their apparel supply chain partners is key. Whilst apparel manufacturers globally are aware of the devastating effects of the pandemic upon immediate trade, they need to have an

insight into what their business partners are planning going forward. Buyers and their sourcing and purchasing teams need to be engaging with manufacturers.

The only way for the apparel industry to survive this crisis is for all parties to unite to find a sustainable way which would mitigate the financial impact of the pandemic and to ensure that it is distributed amongst all stakeholders, rather than solely impacting apparel

will fight this crisis together and that they will be treated in an ethical, moral manner.

A true partnership can overcome many problems and the panic that ran through the apparel manufacturing community over the last few weeks can be overcome if manufacturers feel that their purchasing partners are not turning their backs on them.

**Developing a cohesive plan to restart business:** A detailed business plan from



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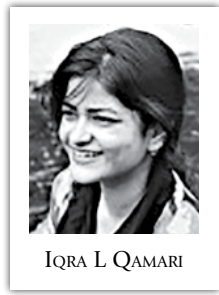
manufacturers and their suppliers. Some suggestions that could be considered for a fairer, more equitable course of action are:

**Assurance of business and provision of moral support:** Many apparel manufacturers have been working and developing relationships with their clients over a number of years. What they are now seeking, during these dark times, are assurances from their customers that they

all customers is a must. Through open dialogue with apparel supply chain partners, customers can develop a plan for the intake or re-phasing of production, negotiate acceptable revisions to payment plans, discuss ways to mitigate any financial losses and how to use, or pay for, raw materials purchased on their behalf. Lack of, or delay in, any plan or any discourse just adds fuel to the fire,

# Youth Policy Forum's Budget 2020 Dialogue

*Key takeaways from what the experts had to say*



IQRA L. QAMARI

distinguished experts of political and non-political backgrounds gathered to analyse the policy proposals presented by teams of young specialists from YPF.

The panel included MA Mannan, Minister of Planning; Saber Hossain Chowdhury, MP of Bangladesh Awami League; Dr Fahmida Khatun, Executive Director of Centre for Policy Dialogue; Khandaker Mukhtadir, advisor to BNP chairperson; Barrister Nihad Kabir, Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce and Industry; and Dr Mohammad Tareque, former Finance Secretary and Director of Bangladesh Institute of Government and Management. The session was moderated by Dr Akhtar Mahmood, renowned economist and advisor to YPF.

The floor was first given to YPF's team of young professionals and students. Keeping the ongoing pandemic in mind, they presented socio-economic concerns and budget-relevant solutions. The crisis has led to deflationary shock to the economy and will be an integral consideration in this year's national budget. The subsequent discussion between YPF teams and the esteemed speakers showed there were many practical policy solutions that could

improve six critical sectors—healthcare, social protection, agriculture and food security, education and employment, infrastructure and energy and macro fiscal management.

**Healthcare** YPF Team identified lack of resources, inter-ministerial coordination, and mental health treatment facilities as key challenges. MA Mannan agreed with the team's suggestion for an independent monitoring body to regulate pricing in the medicine market. He highlighted the need for a regulatory agency in light of the pandemic, "A vaccine, if and when it hits the market, should be a global good—not an intellectual property right."

Khandaker Mukhtadir said, "The real figure of infected cases cannot be gauged clearly because of insufficient testing

"The 2.5 percent of the budget allocated to social security is a misleading figure because it also includes pension for government workers and scholarship for education and if these factors are excluded, the percentage drops to 1.5 percent." She recommended that the 2.5 percent be dedicated solely to social security.

Barrister Nihad Kabir addressed the flaws in the distribution channels of relief funds and suggested BCCI and Bangladesh Bank coordinate more closely to address the issue. Dr Akhtar Mahmood also pointed out that increasing resource allocation must come with increased monitoring to prevent leakage. MA Mannan said, "Corruption happens when the allocations reach grassroot levels. We are trying to prevent those small disseminations, and that will reduce



and limitations in the health sector." He recommended establishing district-level field hospitals, containing ICUs and oxygen support, and conducting a crash course to train medical professionals in the fight against Covid-19.

Barrister Nihad Kabir stressed on a collaboration of the private and public sector in these trying times saying, "The private sector can be involved when the public sector faces a shortage of beds."

**Social protection** Bangladesh's social protection sector suffers from targeting mistakes and benefit leakage. There is also a lack of coverage for informal sector workers and an existing framework that widens gender disparity. YPF found that integrating centralised MIS into a digital database system could improve targeting and implementation. Saber Hossain Chowdhury sees merit in digitalising analogue systems to make the mechanism more efficient: "However, I'm sceptical about the statistical accuracy, barring which, the transformation may not come to fruition." According to Dr Fahmida Khatun,

corruption further."

**Agriculture and food security** The threats looming over this sector are declining demand and a disarranged supply chain for agricultural goods. Khandaker Mukhtadir remarked on the need for effective cost analysis that would set a fair price for farmers, which in turn would incentivise them. This point was agreed upon by Dr Khatun who suggested similar solutions and proper implementation of technology, in the face of a food crisis forewarned by World Food Programme.

Dr Tareque mentioned the importance of Bangladesh's arable lands, which help maintain food security but are now shrinking in size. "We have to protect these lands, otherwise it may lead to a massive crisis."

**Education and employment** The shockwave of this pandemic has caused serious bottleneck for students and workers due to high dropout rates and job losses. Saber Hossain Chowdhury commented on how the country's employment rate was not impressive, given the extent of its economic

spreading a feeling of uncertainty and fear amongst apparel manufacturers.

**Equitable distribution of the financial burden:** The financial responsibilities and burden need to be properly distributed across customers, manufacturers, raw material producers and the associated supply chain. As most raw material suppliers used by apparel manufacturers are buyer-nominated, the buyers need to be talking with them to request the re-phasing of their payment terms to relieve the financial burden on garment manufacturers. A plan to utilise raw materials that have been produced for a particular order from a buyer and are now not required, needs to be devised through interaction between customers and their manufacturing partners.

**Using corporate social responsibility (CSR) funds for workers' wages:** Many brands and retailers have their own CSR fund established. One way of relieving the financial duress suffered by apparel manufacturers could be that customers come forward to help contribute towards the wages of workers at their manufacturing partners' factories. This allocation of support would be proportional on what percentage of any given manufacturer's capacity was allocated to a specific customer.

The effects of Covid-19 will be suffered by the apparel industry for the foreseeable future. The above suggestions show some of the ways that buyers can be proactive about opening discourse with apparel manufacturers. In order to mitigate the effects of the pandemic upon the sector, now is the time for customers to engage with their apparel supply chain partners to ensure that, when the crisis has passed, the industry is in a fit enough state to begin operating as efficiently as possible in the post-Covid-19 environment.

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progression. In the context of education, he insisted on a higher budget allocation for the education sector. He said, "At least 5 percent should be allocated to the education sector (along with the health sector), or else we will be failing ourselves."

MA Mannan recognised the shortcoming in our education system but also applauded the considerable achievements the sector has achieved over the years. Dr Tareque stressed on the importance of setting up a national research fund for the sole purpose of promoting pure science subjects. "Research is the secret of first-rate innovation and development," he concluded.

**Infrastructure and energy** MA Mannan talked about the challenges posed by union groups that the energy sector oftentimes faces. He further commented on the extensive provision of electricity supply, which, although fluctuating, has been successful in covering up to 95 percent of national households.

Khandaker Mukhtadir recommended the government take over diesel power plants, inclusive of their loans, and reach an agreement—a contract which can reduce cost greatly.

**Macro fiscal management** The government is dealing with a great predicament due to the pandemic. The urgency to generate revenues must be pitted against the need to relax taxation to keep the economy afloat. On that note, Saber Hossain Chowdhury commented that specific tax could be levied on tobacco products without raising their price, to generate more revenue. He further mentioned how the placement of inheritance tax and preventi of money laundering has become imperative.

Barrister Nihad Kabir strongly urged government agencies to prioritise the wellbeing of individuals over strictly maintaining a budget deficit. Both, she and Dr Fahmida Khatun, reached the same conclusion that more money should be injected into by the government to raise aggregate demand, sustain consumption and protect the domestic economy. "This is not a year for budgeting as usual. Let us get this straight: government needs to be the biggest investor this year," said Nihad Kabir.

For his concluding remarks, MA Mannan agreed with the rest of the panellists regarding the proper allocation of resources, utilisation of technology and focusing on revenue generating streams rather than the budget deficit margin. The dialogue ended on a high note, packed with commitments of future collaborations with Youth Policy Forum and civil society as a whole.

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