

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR
LATE S. M. ALI

DHAKA THURSDAY SEPTEMBER 17, 2020, ASHWIN 2, 1427 BS

Indian onion export ban already making prices skyrocket

The authorities must monitor markets and create consumer confidence

INDIA'S decision to suspend the export of onions, which was announced on Monday evening, has triggered a steep rise in onion prices in Bangladesh, with prices rising nearly twofold in kitchen markets across the country. According to a report published in this daily on Wednesday, this is largely due to panic buying by consumers and price gouging by wholesalers, which occurred despite Bangladesh Trade and Tariff Commission (BTTC) officials saying that the country still has a surplus of onions in stock to meet local demand.

This is not the first time this has happened—we found ourselves in a similar situation earlier this year due to a similar ban on India's end, which lasted for five months and was eventually lifted on March 15. Bangladesh has requested the Indian government to withdraw the suspension of onion exports as soon as possible, and as of yesterday, farmers within the Indian state of Maharashtra were also creating unrest to protest this decision, since trucks carrying an estimated 25,000 tonnes of onion were stranded on the Bangladesh border with West Bengal, leading to a sharp decline in wholesale prices within India.

Despite the negative impacts on Bangladeshi markets and certain Indian states, it is difficult to speculate on whether there will be a change in Indian policy regarding this export ban. In the meantime, there are certain steps that we can take in the domestic arena, the first of which is to create consumer confidence so as to put a stop to panic buying. According to BTTC officials, a bumper crop in domestic onion production, a surplus stock of already imported onions and the decision to immediately import another one lakh tonne of onions from other countries will ensure affordable prices for consumers. In order to deal with the rising price of commodities, the Trading Corporation of Bangladesh has also started selling onions, lentil, sugar and soybean oil from 275 trucks at reasonable prices, which will continue until October 1. These are commendable steps and we urge the authorities to ensure that inefficiency and mismanagement do not hamper the process.

However, these steps will only work if the wholesalers are also held accountable. During the spike in onion prices in late 2019 and early 2020, several warehouses were fined by mobile courts for selling onions at exorbitant prices. This time around, the authorities must be even more vigilant in monitoring markets and ensuring such unethical practices are quickly nipped in the bud. The pandemic and seasonal floods have already had an impact on the prices of daily essentials. We must ensure that the rising prices of onions do not become one more burden on the lower-income groups who are struggling to cope during these difficult times.

Pay jute mill workers their dues and other benefits

Harassment of workers and delay in processing payments unacceptable

WE welcome the Bangladesh Jute Mills Corporation (BJMC) for starting the disbursement of due wages and other benefits of the laid-off and retired workers of 25 shuttered state-run jute mills. The government closed down the mills operating under the BJMC on July 1. The prime minister at that time directed the officials concerned to prepare a list of workers of the state-run jute mills and send their dues directly to their bank accounts. More than two months after the shutdown of the mills, the BJMC has finally started paying the workers. However, according to our report, the authorities handed over cheques to only 30 laid-off workers during the cheque disbursement ceremony on September 15, while around a hundred workers with their family members were not allowed inside the Karim Jute Mills Corporation where the ceremony took place.

Around 25,000 permanent workers lost their jobs as the government closed down these jute mills. Although they were supposed to get their dues and other financial benefits as soon as possible, many of them are now being harassed by the BJMC in the name of processing their payments. They are now worried whether they would ever get their dues and benefits. The workers have also complained that the entire process of payment has been carried out in an uncoordinated manner from the very beginning, which has exacerbated their sufferings. Many of them have been forced to leave their residences in Dhaka and return to their villages as they are now jobless.


According to the jute ministry's decision announced on June 28, the laid off permanent workers and retired workers should receive their dues directly in their bank accounts. While 50 percent of their dues will be paid through bank cheques, the other 50 percent will be paid through savings instruments. Many of the workers, however, have no idea about savings instruments and are finding it hard to submit various types of papers required by the mill authorities.

The BJMC and mill authorities should give clear guidelines to the workers on how to submit the required documents for the savings certificates instead of harassing them for those. The pace of the payment process is also not satisfactory. The BJMC should work efficiently and pay the workers as quickly as possible. They should not also forget about the temporary and substitute workers and allocate funds to compensate them.

The exodus of the helpless

Can this challenge be turned into an opportunity?

A CLOSER LOOK



TASNEEM TAYEB

OF businesses, offices, educational institutions, shops, eateries, factories and other livelihood-generating opportunities—both formal and informal—life came to a halt in the nation. And so did the livelihood for many. As a result, many who had once come to Dhaka—the bustling hub of the country—with neon dreams of a better life, had no choice but to go back to their roots, unable to make ends meet.

According to a survey conducted by Brac, the general holiday imposed to curb the spread of Covid-19 has left 51 percent of households with no income. A report published by a local daily suggests that around 50,000 people belonging to low-income groups had to leave Dhaka having no other option. Overcome by poverty, dejection and desperation, people from the lower to the middle strata of society had to make the return journey home.

Many news outlets, including this newspaper, published photos of families making desperate journeys—often literally—the young and the old huddled together on the backs of trucks, at the top of trains and busses, on the edges of steamers and overcrowded dingy boats, going back to their villages in search of sustenance. In other cases, the main earning members of a family—often the

While this forced migration from the city is causing a significant challenge, it can also be turned into an opportunity to develop living and livelihood conditions outside Dhaka.

sole one—had to send their dependents back to the villages since daily essentials there would be more affordable. At least back home, they will have something to eat, something to live on.

What happens now to those who have gone back to their ancestral homes? What can we do to make their lives easy in their native places? And can the government transform this tragedy into an opportunity by driving the decentralisation agenda?

“Decentralisation is about power. If local governments are not empowered, then actually what will happen is, people like us who will be left behind in Dhaka will have a bit more comfortable life. But the goal of decentralisation will not be

decentralise means to give appropriate powers and responsibilities to local governments. If we take a look at the budgets, including this year's budget, we don't see much. The people leaving Dhaka by itself is not an opportunity. If a strong local government reform agenda can be driven in the context of the relocation of population, including financial empowerment of these bodies, only then can this be transformed into an opportunity.”

However, while sharing his concern regarding this, Dr Rahman feared that the government neither has the track record nor the political orientation to undertake a massive rehabilitation of the people who have relocated outside Dhaka.



File photo of passengers waiting on the platform of Kamalapur Railway Station to leave Dhaka, amid the coronavirus crisis.

PHOTO: THE DAILY STAR


achieved,” said prominent economist and chairperson of Brac, Dr Hossain Zillur Rahman, while discussing this issue with this writer.

He further added: “I think the government can capitalise on this opportunity if they simultaneously revisit the whole issue of stronger local governments, although the trend is rather towards the opposite. We can now see that the power of local governments is very limited. Party-based local elections that are now taking place have further marginalised this system. Before, there used to be a sort of local democracy within the party. Now due to party symbol, whoever is nominated from the top, that person is elected. So it has in fact further reduced the political competition even among the same party base. So, conducting local election under party symbol has also been a strong barrier to more meaningful decentralisation. To

He, therefore, suggested that “what they can do is create a more supportive environment, because the people in our country are working to change their lot on their own. All they are looking for is a more supportive environment. And this is within the capacity of the government. If the government can create a supportive environment, people will find their own solutions.”

And indeed the government can, and need to, support these people. According to architect and urban planner Salma A Shafi, who is also the general secretary of the Centre for Urban Studies, Dhaka, incentives can be provided to encourage establishment of new industries outside Dhaka to provide employment opportunities to the people who are having to move out of Dhaka.

“Jobs need to be made available for the people who are leaving Dhaka. Some industries can be established outside



PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

Gandhi when she carried out a major organisational reshuffle on September 11. If there is one man who grabbed the unanimous highlight of the changes, it was Ghulam Nabi Azad whose is undoubtedly the biggest name among the 23 party leaders who questioned the leadership of the Gandhi clan in a letter to Sonia in August. Azad has been removed as General Secretary although he was retained as a member of the party's highest decision-making forum, the Congress Working Committee (CWC).

Not just Azad—his senior party colleagues Motilal Vora, Ambika Soni and Mallikarjun Kharge too have been removed as general secretaries. Some commentators have tended to see this as the start of the phase-out of the party's old guard. The CWC has been reconstituted and P Chidambaram, Tariq Anwar, Randeep Surjewala, and Jitendra Singh have been named as its regular members. Sonia also set up a committee of leaders to help her in steering the party towards a session of the All India Congress Committee where a full-fledged president of the party is expected to be elected. The committee also has in it Gandhi family loyalists like Ahmed Patel, AK Antony, Randeep Singh Surjewala, Ambika Soni and KC Venugopal.

But a much more important message of Sonia's organisational rejig is the importance given to an array of leaders who are considered close to her son Rahul Gandhi, who resigned as Congress President soon after the party's dismal performance in the general elections last year. Just look at the names of at least Rahul-loyalist leaders: Venugopal, Surjewala, Jitendra Singh, Shaktisinh Gohil, Ajay Maken, Manickam Tagore,

Rajeev Satav and RPN Singh. Surjewala is the biggest winner of the reshuffle as he has been named as General Secretary in charge of the party's affairs in the southern state of Karnataka, inducted as a member of the special committee to oversee organisational changes, besides retaining his responsibilities as the party's chief spokesperson.

Venugopal too is a member of most of the committees. Jitendra Singh has been made in-charge of Congress affairs

where the party lost power some months ago. Wasnik has also been included in the committee formed by Sonia to oversee the party's organisational elections. But Wasnik's presence in the committee does not go beyond tokenism as it has been made abundantly clear that the committee is a temporary mechanism for ensuring the logistics of organisational poll.

It must also be pointed out that another man who continues as General



Will Rahul Gandhi be back at the helm of Congress once again?

PHOTO: REUTERS

in the north-eastern state of Assam, which is about to witness fresh assembly polls next year when the battle will be between the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party and the Congress. The reshuffle has seen either entry or elevation of some Rahul supporters in the party's secretariat. The party's Central Election Authority reconstituted by Sonia is headed by Madhusudan Mistry, who is known to be close to Rahul, and has two other members who are acolytes of the Gandhi family scion.

In all fairness, it must be noted that Sonia also brought in Mukul Wasnik, who was among the signatories to the letter that called for leadership change, as a General Secretary and given him the charge of party affairs in Madhya Pradesh

Secretary is Jitin Prasada, who too was among the 23 leaders who shot off the letter in what was seen as a banner of revolt against the Gandhi family and demanded an overhaul of the party, internal elections in the organisational hierarchy from the grassroots to the top, and a ‘full-time, visible leadership’. But Prasada was shifted as General Secretary in charge of India's politically most crucial state, Uttar Pradesh, to West Bengal where fresh assembly elections are due next year. While the Congress has a big stake in Madhya Pradesh politics because it is the only principal challenger to the BJP in the Hindi heartland state, the 135-year-old party has over the decades been reduced to a marginal player in West Bengal.

Dhaka to create job opportunities for those who are moving out. The industries should also provide housing provision for the people they are going to employ. To this end, incentives can also be provided. Why can we not have vegetable canning, food canning, fish canning plants in the rural areas? If each of these plants can employ 50 to 100 people and provide them with housing facilities, then we will be able to find solution to the current problems.” Salma Shafi added.

Along with these, the government also needs to develop the healthcare, educational, and recreational infrastructures outside Dhaka so that those who have been forced to migrate to their ancestral land can live a decent life there.

Good schools, colleges, and universities, modern hospitals, AC shopping malls, fancy restaurants, good movie theatres, clean amusement parks and zoo, along with improved physical and digital connectivity, well-paid jobs, decent housing, and of course an empowered local government, will not only provide people with healthy and satisfying living conditions outside of Dhaka, but also will organically push forward decentralisation. People now are having to relocate from Dhaka because of lack of livelihood opportunities. But once these metrics are improved and required measures implemented, people will voluntarily want to spread out of Dhaka.

While this forced migration from the city is causing a significant challenge, it can also be turned into an opportunity to develop living and livelihood conditions outside Dhaka. This will automatically drive the capital's much-needed decentralisation agenda. Also the government needs to look at the issue of planned allocation of jobs and housing in the rural and urban townships to ensure equitable access to decent living and jobs for everyone.

However, to do this, strong political will would be required. The government would need to make sure that the district administration and local governments rise above their power struggles and work in tandem to create congenial and liveable environment at the local levels. The government would be required to empower the local administration both in terms of decision-making abilities and financial authorities so that they can take appropriate measures that are suitable for their local contexts to create sustainable livelihood generation opportunities for the local inhabitants.

The question remains: does the government have the appetite to drive such an overarching change?

.....

Tasneem Tayeb is a columnist for The Daily Star. Her Twitter handle is: @TayebTasneem

.....

Pallab Bhattacharya is a special correspondent of The Daily Star. He writes from New Delhi, India.

.....

Though the letter by the 23 leaders had also suggested that the Gandhi family would always be a part of collective decision making, there was little doubt that its thrust was a critique of the Gandhis, especially Rahul Gandhi, who quit as President last year over the Congress's election defeat. Over the past few months, the Congress has been sharply divided between the old guard and the new generation of leaders, many of whom would like to see him back to the top job.

Sonia's September 11 organisational reshuffle, which has once again showed the culture of selection as opposed to election in the running of the Congress, has sparked speculations in political circles if she has begun the spadework for bringing Rahul back in the saddle as party president by building a Team Rahul. Is the script being readied for Rahul's second appointment as the party head? Sonia quit as the party chief in 2017 after being in the post for 19 years at a stretch, and then Rahul took over the mantle from her in December 2017 in what represented a generational shift. And when Rahul stepped down and refused to withdraw his resignation in the wake of the party's electoral debacle, the baton once again passed to his mother, albeit in an interim capacity. And if Rahul gets back the party presidency in the All India Congress Committee session, possibly sometime early next year, it will once again drive home the message of indispensability of a Gandhi family member to lead the party.

Murmurs of discontent are already in public domain about Sonia's organisational changes. Kapil Sibal, a legal luminary and one of the party's senior-most leaders, in an interview to The Indian Express has said that Article 14 of the party's Constitution provides for All India Congress Committee's (AICC) election of 12 of the 23 members of the Congress Working Committee. But that has not happened, Sibal said, and made it a point to be caustic: “if nominations are the norm and elections are anathema, then we might as well change the Constitution of the Congress party.”

.....