

Covid-19 testing expansion policy lost in bureaucracy

At this point, it seems we are waiting for Godot

ALMOST six and a half months after the first novel coronavirus case was reported in the country, the Covid-19 testing expansion policy of the government seems to have gotten lost in the deep, dark crevices of our bureaucracy. A draft policy, formulated in July to be passed and implemented on an urgent basis, has gone through multiple iterations involving different bodies of the health ministry, with considerable delays at each end. However, as of yet, there's no word on when, if ever, the policy will be finalised.

The final draft of the Covid-19 testing expansion policy recommended introducing antigen rapid testing to expand efforts to identify people infected with the novel virus. On August 24, the health minister himself stated that the government would start antigen rapid testing in public Covid-19 labs. But almost a month has passed without any significant developments in this regard; and without finalisation of the above-mentioned policy, the promise of convenient, fast and affordable testing for the masses remains a chimera. Time is of the essence when it comes to implementing the right policies to contain a pandemic—our policymakers, unfortunately, are completely oblivious of the need to move and act fast.

Meanwhile, while epidemiologists and the World Health Organization has insisted on the importance of mass testing, Bangladesh appears to be pursuing a Covid-19 testing reduction policy, conducting the lowest levels of testing in the world with just 10,465 tests per one million people. This is in addition to introducing a charge for tests which has, by and large, excluded the working class. We have yelled ourselves hoarse trying to convince our policymakers of the urgency of conducting mass tests which are accessible, reliable and efficient, and we must plead with them once again to finalise the policy within the shortest possible time so that we can finally start implementing what we should have done months ago.

There is simply no excuse for bureaucratic complacency when people's lives are on the line.

Finally a waste-based power plant

Govt's decision commendable

WE welcome the government's decision to set up the country's first ever waste-based power plant in Jalkuri in Narayanganj district. It was decided in a recent cabinet meeting that the state-run Bangladesh Power Development Board (BPDB) will set up the plant after signing agreements with a consortium of concerned companies. The deal would be signed for 20 years and BPDB would pay Tk 1,665.48 crore to the consortium to buy electricity from the plant during this period. The electricity per kilowatt-hour would cost Tk 17.60.

Over the last 20 years, we came across many initiatives by the government and BPDB to set up waste-based power plants. Unfortunately, none of them succeeded due to high cost, absence of policy support and a lack of coordination among government agencies. A waste-to-energy project, undertaken by BPDB in the recent past in Keraniganj municipal area, was cancelled because of the high cost of electricity tariff—Tk 40 per kilowatt hour—offered by the interested private firm, as well as a deficiency of solid waste. Last year, the government took initiatives to set up such plants with garbage collected from the city corporation areas of Dhaka and Chattogram. The first project was supposed to be implemented in the Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC) area on a pilot basis. But later, we did not get any update on this project.

Reportedly, the two dumping stations of Dhaka north and south city corporations at Aminbazar and Matuail are going to be filled within a very short time. It was also reported that the landfill in Aminbazar was operating without any environmental clearance. These landfills have been causing serious environmental pollution to the surrounding areas and water bodies, which must stop.

The country needs a sustainable waste management system and solid waste-based power plants could be one solution. If the Narayanganj project sees success, more such projects can be undertaken in our urban areas, particularly in Dhaka. We hope this time things will move positively and all the stakeholders concerned will be serious in implementing the project.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Of tears and turmoil

India's ban on onion exports, along with the decreasing stock of locally-grown onions, has given unscrupulous traders the chance to cash in. Onions prices have been volatile in the last few years but this time, prices shot up to Tk 100 per kg in different wholesale and kitchen markets. It seems that the government is yet to control or set up a plan on how to handle the consumers' plight. Due to this price hike, inflation will creep in and the purchasing power of the middle and lower classes will reduce. Their living standards will also erode. The government should have a long-term plan on how to produce the essential goods domestically in sufficient amounts and compensate the farmers during production, otherwise, the same plight will prevail in future.

Md Zillur Rahaman, Dhaka



Caught between the humble onion and regal Hilsa

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING



BRIG GEN SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN NDC, PSC (RETD)

I'M told that there is only one vegetable that can make people cry. And this tubular vegetable is making almost an entire nation cry, except those unscrupulous traders who shut the doors of their godowns as soon as India announced a moratorium on the export of onions. There is no dearth of onions in the country, the government would have us believe, but will someone explain how the price of onions has taken a quantum leap in a matter of 24 hours, if that is the case? If we have enough, then why should it take a month for the price to stabilise, as the commerce minister has said? Is it incapability or unwillingness to take to task the wholesalers, and even some retailers, who are hoarding onions to make hay at the expense of middle-income groups? The ban, we understand, is in disregard of the request that Bangladesh had made to India to not stop export of essential items abruptly and without informing Bangladesh.

This not the first taste of epiphora infused by onion shortages that Bangladeshis in general have suffered. More than a decade ago, there was an acute shortage of onion, that too during the month of Ramadan—the result of a combination of woefully poor planning, machinations and market manipulation by local traders (that being the regular feature of the month of fasting), over-reliance on a single source, and the Indian decision to turn off the tap, abruptly, as has been done this time too. The same thing happened last year also.

The Modi decision is more political than economic, and has little to do with demand and supply. It has more to do with the forthcoming state elections in Bihar and Madhya Pradesh, according to an Indian daily. Hundreds of tonnes of onions, purchased from India and already paid for, are rotting in dozens of trucks on the other side of the Benapole border. There is no earthly reason why they cannot enter Bangladesh unless, of course, the Modi order comes with a retrospective effect. The South Block, we are told, has been taken by surprise by the decision to ban onion exports to Bangladesh, and are even repentant, according to our foreign minister. But one wonders if the embarrassment would stimulate the bureaucrats there enough to counsel the government to rescind its decision. Our government sent a note immediately to the Indian government expressing "deep concern" and requesting it to reconsider its decision. What is of note is not so much the request to review the ban but the apprehension expressed in the text of the letter that the Indian decision is likely to weaken the basis of the mutual understanding agreed to in 2019 and 2020.

Now now! Can a vegetable come in the way of a relationship that has reached a level that (at the risk of sounding Trump-like) no one has ever seen before, particularly at a time when Bangladesh has made a very magnanimous decision



SHAMSAD MORTUZA

in his *Ode to the Onion*, the Chilean Nobel laureate poet Pablo Neruda praises onions as "the miracle" that happens under the earth. He compares the birth of an onion—the way it grows, covered in dew while being under the ground—with the birth of Aphrodite. In his poetic rendition, onions "make us cry without hurting us." The poet's ability to see the extraordinary features beyond the ordinary vegetable is remarkable. As a diplomat who was posted in Rangoon in British India as well as in Ceylon (Sri Lanka), and as someone who had traveled extensively throughout South Asia, Neruda knew a thing or two about the "luminous flask" served "upon the table of the poor". He even goes to the extent of claiming that this vegetable with the fragrance of the earth is "destined to shine." However, I do not think even the diplomat-cum-poet expected onions to occupy the central stage of realpolitik.

On Monday, the Indian Directorate General of Foreign Trade (DGFT) issued an urgent notice prohibiting the export of all varieties of onion. According to the Indian Express, the export ban was triggered by a spike in the Consumer Price Index (CPI) and the crossing of the "psychological barrier" of Rs 30 per kilo of onion in the wholesale market. The supply chain of Indian onions, we are told, is disrupted by heavy rain that has washed away the harvest in the southern states, with the market relying on the onions stored in Maharashtra. India's nose squinting response is understandable, because they are acting on a collective memory. They

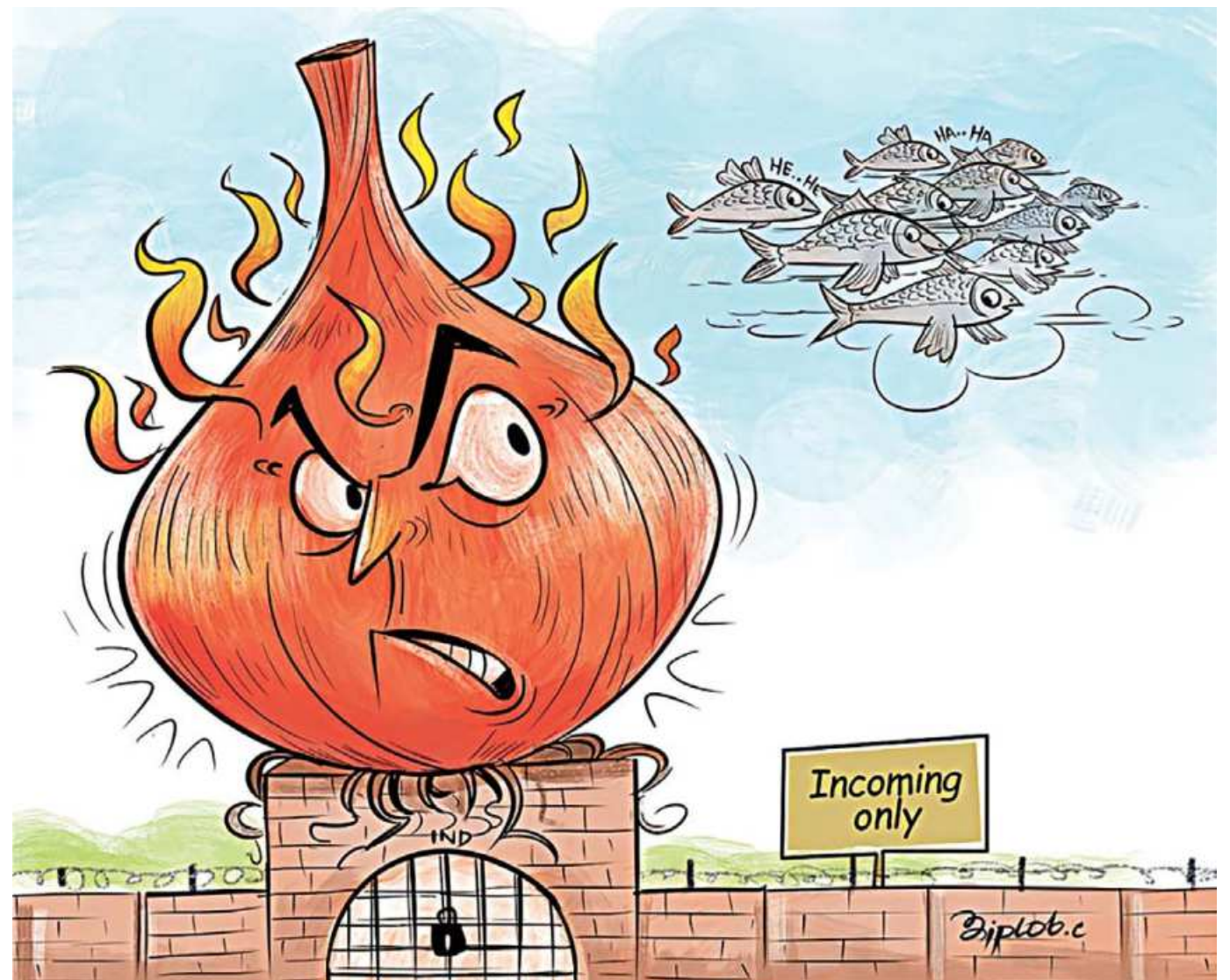
to export Hilsa to India (or is it a gift?), temporarily lifting the ban on Hilsa export that has been in place since 2012, keeping Durga Puja in mind? The news was headlined in the *Times of India* like so—"Durga Puja Gift from Hasina: 500 Tonnes of Hilsa." This is in "tonnes" and not "tons", mind you! That too at a time when there is high demand for the fish in Bangladesh as well. The ban in 2012 came at a time when export of Hilsa to India was fetching us three billion US dollars annually, but the loss of three

We were promised reciprocal benefits if Bangladesh were to provide transit to India, which would offset the humongous trade deficit we have with the country. But benefits on the same level are yet to be seen, especially as far as the trade balance is concerned.

There is no doubt that the Bangladesh-India friendship is at its peak now, and the horizon of our friendship is extending evermore. But we should not forget that what we have conceded to be used by India are our strategic assets, and

of our national interests.

With the new transport facilities under the rubric of surface transport, Indian goods are entering the Indian north east quicker than in the past since the distance has been reduced by almost 1,600 kilometres. But the underlying issue is that Bangladeshi products, which had a good market in the north east heretofore, will lose out to Indian products. Have our planners taken into reckoning the consequential loss of market and its effect on our foreign exchange earnings while



billion in export earnings was endured to save the fish from annihilation due to over-fishing. In fact, the onion ban came only a day after Bangladesh announced the Hilsa export! Irony?

But this is not the only instance of magnanimity that Bangladesh has shown to India. Apart from the steps Bangladesh has taken to allay many of India's security concerns immediately after the Awami League took over the reins of the government in 2009, many of India's strategic concerns have been addressed to India's full satisfaction. Starting from the transit facility through Bangladesh, a longtime Indian objective, to the expansion of the riverine routes and lastly, direct movement of Indian goods from Kolkata port through Chattogram to the Indian north east. We have even risked one of the most important endowments of nature to Bangladesh, the Sundarbans, to set up a coal fired power plant there, to be built jointly by the two countries.

the return accruing to Bangladesh should be in equal measure of that which accrues to India. Surely our facilities are not for free, but is everything that we are getting in return adequate recompense for what we are giving? India is not a landlocked country, and Bangladesh is under no obligation to grant all that it has to India in terms of transit, although the current multimodal transport network has come under the rubric of regional connectivity under the ambit of the Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal Initiative (BBIN).

As behooves a good and considerate neighbour, Bangladesh has perhaps done its bit; many would say even more. Reportedly, we have been very generous in the use of infrastructure facilities and under the new protocol that allows the use of Chattogram port, Indian vessels would get priority for berthing over others. There ought to be a reappraisal of what Bangladesh has gained in monetary and strategic terms exactly, and how much that has ensured the strengthening

determining the charges levied on Indian freight carriers for using our territory, either by road, rail and water? Shouldn't a part of the money saved in reduced travel distance come to Bangladesh too?

Also, it seems that we took no lessons from the onion saga last year. Over-reliance on a single source should be avoided, and this applies to not only India but to other countries also. The Indian decision gives us an opportunity to become self reliant in onions as we have become in the case of cattle. It may not always be prudent to go by the theory of comparative cost. One should also consider the theory of comparative advantage even when importing essential goods. What is cheaper may turn out to be costlier in the long run, and the loss is not only in terms of money and opportunity costs. The sufferings that people endure cannot be monetised.

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No onion, no cry

know, "when the cost of onions goes up, governments can come down".

It is a tricky call for the Modi government because they are planning to amend a bill involving the storage of essentials. The farmers are apprehensive that such an amendment will put them at the mercy of corporate bosses. The farmers of course feel that they never get fair prices because of the opportunist middle men. The absence of exports will further force the sellers to sell their products at rock-bottom prices. Protesting the three farm

was upset over the breach of "unwritten understanding" and asking India to resume onion exports. During a VIP visit to India in January, India and Bangladesh reached an agreement that New Delhi would keep Dhaka informed of its future onion export plans. The sudden decision to ban export without any prior warning has put the importing country Bangladesh in an awkward position; the commerce minister responded with an assurance that the country has enough onions to meet local demands for the next three months, while the foreign minister has assuaged the cry over the pungent bulb by mentioning that his counterparts are "extremely repentant". It would have been nice to hear the repentance in a foreign voice, rather than our own.

"Onionomics", the food economy, especially when it involves an essential part of the everyday diet of millions of people in the region, is ultimately linked with our regional politics. The banning of onions became a huge issue last October when the prices of the kitchen product skyrocketed in India following a heavy monsoon. The decision exposed the pitfalls of heavy reliance of the farm economy on the vagaries of weather. The meteorological weather soon turned political as India was forced to import onions from Turkey, despite President Erdogan's vocal stance against the annexation of Jammu and Kashmir, stripping the states of their constitutional status.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina made light of the situation by telling our Indian neighbours, "I wish you had informed us before suddenly putting a halt in export of onions. I had to tell my cook I have no other option but to have my food without onions. I would request India to please inform us beforehand while taking such an action. After all, we are neighbours." We had to also reach out to our belligerent neighbour Myanmar

seeking onions, sensing that it would take time to get onions from Turkey and Egypt.

I think as a nation, we need to peel the many layers of onion politics and address the core issue. Onion is a very volatile cash crop, and we have a poor storage system. It is very difficult to predict its prices. Because of its 85 percent water content, it is difficult to store onions as they start losing weight fast and can soon perish. Prices of onion vary depending on unseasonal rain and manipulation of supply lines. While the natural causes make the consumers and farmers suffer, they give excuses the traders and retailers to gain. The shortage of supplies often leads to 400 to 500 percent increase in price of onions by the time the crop reaches retailers, and the middle men happily lap up the profit margins.

Since few Bangladeshi kitchens can do without the pungent bulb, there should be new ways of making this perishable item available to consumers. Given the shortage of cold storage, one way to check the volatility of onion prices is to have food processing plants where these bulbs could be dehydrated and bottled.

When we look at the ministry level response to the price of onions, we do realise that they are alert about the situation. However, the government should be equally alert when the prices fall. Buying onions from local farmers at a fair price instead of being at the mercy of exporters should be one of our priorities.

At the same time, we should take our cue from the nationalistic steps of our neighbours. Becoming self-sufficient in onion production is the only way we can stop crying over the vegetable that has the reputation of causing tears. The title of my piece thus twists Bob Marley's song, and says, "no onions, no cry!"

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