

Bangladesh as a transit for drug smuggling

Masterminds of the drug trade have to be caught

WHILE investigating a case filed after the recovery of 12.32 kg of amphetamine powder from the cargo village area of Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport last month, the Department of Narcotics Control found that a transnational syndicate is using Bangladesh as a route to smuggle amphetamine powder to other countries. The powder is initially being smuggled into Bangladesh from India, and in this particular case, was meant to be flown to Australia via Malaysia. The presence of such a syndicate is extremely worrying. However, a number of international media reports had previously revealed similar suspicions.

For example, some international media reports had suggested that Bangladesh was being used as a transit to smuggle drugs to places like South America and the Middle East—and in the process of doing so, some of the drugs were being diverted for domestic consumption. Since around 2008, Bangladesh has witnessed an explosion in the trafficking of yaba into the country and its consumption. The social cost this has had on Bangladesh has been enormous.

Now that the DNC has confirmed the existence of a transnational drug ring that is using Bangladesh as a transit to smuggle narcotics (or their preparatory substances), the authorities must take effective steps to prevent these drugs from coming in. For one, it would be naïve to believe that there aren't more such syndicates. And ignoring the restrictions and costs that might be slapped on Bangladesh by authorities in other countries in order to stem the flow of drugs that are being smuggled to their countries from Bangladesh would be suicidal. Moreover, a lot of the drugs will slip into the domestic market as well as lead to the establishment of other illegal practices, such as human trafficking (for the purpose of carrying the narcotics across borders), weapons trafficking and money laundering.

We urge the authorities to investigate this matter with a fine-tooth comb. We believe it to be impossible for such sophisticated operations to function without any assistance from some internal sources or influential quarters. And the only way these operations can be dealt a serious blow is for the authorities to apprehend the real masterminds behind the drug trade. At the same time, it is extremely difficult for any government to deal with transnational criminal syndicates on their own, due to a number of jurisdictional factors. Therefore, it is essential that the Bangladesh government seek assistance of other governments and agencies to stop these syndicates from functioning on and using its territory.

Rural indigenous women farmers must be recognised

Govt must support them during this crisis

OCTOBER 15 marked the International Day of Rural Women. According to the United Nations, the Day was established to recognise "the critical role and contribution of rural women, including indigenous women, in enhancing agricultural and rural development, improving food security and eradicating rural poverty." From domestic work and rearing livestock to farming vegetables, rural indigenous women, especially in the districts of Chattogram Hill Tracts (CHT), play an integral role in ensuring sustainability and rural development. Many of them are involved in farming, but the pandemic-induced shutdown has burdened them with added hardship as it became more difficult to sell their produce. However, if the women farmers are registered in the digital database of the Department of Agriculture Extension (DAE), they would then become eligible for state support, which aims to enhance their livelihoods. Also, many indigenous women farmers are not yet aware of the fact that the government is providing a Tk 5,000 crore stimulus package to small and medium farmers in rural regions.

Although women farmers rank higher in number than their male counterparts, they usually remain as unregistered farmers. In some cases, their husbands are registered in the database—as DAE enlists only one name from an agricultural family—and therefore, the men are the recipients of the benefits. An overwhelming majority of women are kept out of the loop in terms of any state support such as agricultural cards, seeds, fertilisers, or low-interest loans, when in fact they too are toiling day and night to make important contributions to the country's society, agriculture and subsistence economy.

As the DAE lacks specific data on the rural indigenous women's farming activities, they must immediately make a comprehensive list of these women farmers. The government along with NGOs and other agencies can work out policies to protect the rights, healthcare and economic development of the rural indigenous women. Indigenous communities going through financial hardship at this time must be supported by the government. When it comes to indigenous female farmers, extra attention must be paid so that they are not left out of the government's rescue package as they play an important part in contributing to the production of food and to our economy.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

No room for complacency

According to a survey by the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR), around 45 percent of people surveyed in Dhaka were found to be carrying Covid-19 antibody. And the presence of such antibody among slum-dwellers was about 74 percent. At a time when many countries have been hit by the second wave (we have been cautioned too), such news gives us hope. It means we might be on the way to develop herd immunity. However, 82 percent of the Covid-19 cases surveyed were asymptomatic. That means we must still remain extremely careful and not take the virus lightly, as seems to be case with many on the streets.

Nipa Chakma, Chattogram



HASEEB MD IRFANULLAH

have food security.

In the middle of the pandemic, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) published the 2020 State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World report which notes that before the pandemic hit the globe, almost 10 percent of the world population (about 750 million people) were facing severe food insecurity. The worst scenario predicts up to 828 million people to be undernourished in 2020; 132 million of them would suffer because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The pandemic affected our food system and food security primarily within countries, and in different ways. The global food price by and large remained stable. But, at the retail level, different food items saw increased pricing.

Restricted economic activities significantly decreased the earnings of the lower-income groups. This in turn affected their purchasing power leading to a severe food crisis. A study done in July 2020 estimated that 87 percent of vulnerable families in Bangladesh were passing through a nutritional crisis. If the World Bank's latest prediction is right, this pandemic may push an additional 115 million people in the world into extreme poverty in 2020—a rise that did not happen in the last 20 years—increasing social inequality and food insecurity worldwide.

The pandemic also hindered the food supply chain all over the world due to transport restrictions within a country and export-import restrictions between countries. Many producers, especially those that dealt with perishable items such as vegetables, fruits and milk, also lost their businesses due to low prices of the produce.

Moreover, while millions of people go to bed hungry, disruption in food supply increased food waste globally. Before the pandemic, the FAO reported, food waste was responsible for 8 percent of the total global carbon emission. This has been worsened by the pandemic.

To immediately respond to the pandemic-forced food crisis, governments and their agencies established food

support systems. The government of Bangladesh, for example, provided food support to tens of millions of its citizens. In April, the government allocated Tk 50 billion to small and medium farmers as soft loan to reduce the negative impact of Covid-19 on agriculture.

All around the world, including Bangladesh, numerous businesses and not-for-profit organisations adopted innovations to reduce food waste, improve the food distribution system, and manage

Tk 11 billion worth of damage). Between late June and mid-August, devastating monsoon floods put half of the country under water. The ministry of agriculture estimated crop damage worth Tk 13.23 billion.

Despite all odds posed by the pandemic, I saw an encouraging food situation in the country as I listened to the secretary of the ministry of agriculture speaking at a public meeting, organised by Bangladesh Institute of Research and



We need a resilient food system that will function amidst global shocks like the pandemic, natural disasters, conflicts and economic stresses.

FILE PHOTO: STAR

and repurpose extra food. Community-based networks were created to donate food to the people in need, via food banks and charities, especially in the areas where unemployment rose high due to the lockdown.

Bangladesh also faced an unprecedented challenge during the early months of the nationwide lockdown—harvesting *boro* rice from 4.8 million hectares of land. This urgency prompted the opening of agro-related transports in late April, allowing labourer movement, and ensured emergency purchase and deployment of rice harvesters. The successful harvest and storage initiatives eased the pressure on the country's food grain supply, which was otherwise stressed by panic buying.

This year, there was no flash flood before the *boro* harvest, which was a blessing for Bangladesh. But it was not the case after the harvest. The super-cyclone Amphan rampaged the south-western part of the country on May 20. It damaged 176 thousand hectares of cropland, washed away 10,000 shrimp farms, and caused heavy damage to infrastructures (totalling

Training on Applied Nutrition (BIRTAN) in Dhaka in early October. This year, for example, Bangladesh is cultivating *aus* rice in 1.3 million hectares of land and *T-aman* rice in 5.5 million hectares, both exceeding the regular annual targets. Bangladesh usually cultivates hybrid rice varieties in 0.9 million hectares of land; this year, to overcome the flood damage, 1.2 million hectares have been targeted with the provision to supply free seeds to the farmers.

In 1979, the FAO member countries established October 16 as the World Food Day. Coming in the wake of Covid-19, this year's theme is "Grow, Nourish, Sustain. Together." Over the past four decades, we have achieved a lot by tackling famine, hunger, and malnutrition. But there have been depressing trends that show our fight for global food security is far from over. The global data also indicates that we are going to fail to achieve the second Sustainable Development Goal of zero hunger by 2030, unless drastic actions are taken to improve our food system.

Our experience of maintaining food supply during the pandemic, the grave

WFP's Nobel Peace Prize underscores the need to combat hunger first

MOHAMMED PARVEZ IMDAD

THE Nobel Committee awarded this year's Nobel Peace Prize to World Food Program (WFP) "for its efforts to combat hunger, for its contribution to bettering conditions for peace in conflict-affected areas and for acting as a driving force in efforts to prevent the use of hunger as a weapon of war and conflict." This is all the more relevant in these times as recession and economic uncertainties loom large. The award may also be viewed as the Nobel Committee's priority reminder to countries and international development organisations to be alert to probable hunger and famine, should the pandemic linger further.

The award also highlights the importance of placing additional focus on food security, especially in developing countries. In the current context, bilateral and multilateral development assistance should ensure higher budgetary support to countries in transition from Least Developed and Developing statuses to Mid-Income categories.

Another critical implication that warrants attention is renewed focus on poverty and inequality. There are concerns that poverty might rise to critical levels due to rising unemployment and declining incomes. The addition of new poor may aggravate poverty levels. Based on the Global Hunger Index (by the International Food Policy Research Institute), regions that are conflict-ridden and most critically exposed to environment challenges are prone to hunger and famine.

Some pertinent questions would relate to considering whether hunger should be assessed along with food security. Food security would be a necessary element to ensure hunger prevention but may not be sufficient to combat hunger in the long run. There is a renewed global thrust on checking hunger with a focused approach. This year's Nobel Peace Award gives further indication that food policy and programme impacts should view hunger prevention both as strategy and outcome. It is important to emphasise the responsiveness and efficiency with which the WFP undertook and implemented effective and results-based programmes to help countries counter the pandemic. WFP's Mid Term Program Framework (MTPF) envisions sustainable programmes that build on three pillars of emergency intervention: support to national social protection systems, improved basic services delivery, and efficient food management without

disruption. WFP also closely reviewed implications of the pandemic on the world's poorest in terms of food security, monitored trends in country economic indicators for required interventions, and reached out to countries to support respective national efforts in checking tendencies towards hunger.

Regions and communities adversely affected by climate change, environmental degradation, disasters and conflicts face greater risks of hunger and famine. This is mainly due to massive disruptions in production and supplies, insufficient

in poverty and inequalities to reduce hunger and malnutrition in a sustainable manner. Poverty reduction programmes should relate to investments in food security and sustainable transformation in agriculture.

The UN may consider specific initiatives in this context, such as convening World Hunger Forum and Global Commission on Preventing Hunger through close coordination of WFP, FAO and IFPRI. The UN could facilitate a structured operational mechanism that would align national and regional initiatives. An International Food



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access and uneven distribution. UN reports confirm over 80 percent of the world's hungry live in disaster-prone and conflict-driven countries. While resolving conflicts and promoting environment would be useful solutions to preventing hunger, it is extremely important to review and address the key causes of global hunger—rising inequalities, unequal distribution of assets and resources, landlessness, severe lack of access to credit, declining incomes and inadequate employment opportunities. The situation worsens when disadvantaged and vulnerable groups cannot afford minimum access to land, farming inputs and agricultural resources, resulting in reduced access to food.

The International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) and USAID's "Food For Peace and Feed The Future" findings emphasise higher investments in agriculture and food security to reduce risks of hunger. The United Nation's "End Hunger by 2030" suggests drastic reduction

Bank & Global Institute For Initiatives and Research on Hunger and Famine would add value and ensure credible and efficient outcomes in this regard. The UN may like to consider these proposed initiatives in the medium term.

In view of the current pandemic, from country perspectives, the key element would be to extend structured support to most vulnerable groups and segments of the population that are more prone to hunger risks. They include poor women and children, other vulnerable groups, unemployed individuals and communities without access to credit and resources for livelihood. This pandemic resulted in intensifying poverty and inequalities that would deepen levels of indebtedness and deprivation leading to increased hunger. The existing bilateral and multilateral development discourse should concentrate on strengthening respective country programmes to address these concerns.

Due to Covid-19, there is a need

poverty scenarios due to economic shocks, increasing natural calamities under the changing climate, and socioeconomic and political challenges around food demand (re)defining our food system in the Covid-19's new normal.

We need a food system that will maintain its functions and structures against global shocks like the pandemic, frequent natural disasters, conflicts, economic stresses, and the climate change. It will adapt to the changing situations and transform to respond to the changes as needed. We need a resilient food system.

Our food system should be supportive to the small and medium farmers, on the one hand, and the poor consumers, on the other. Bangladesh superbly reduced poverty from 40 percent in 2005 to 20.5 percent in 2019. By June 2020, Covid-19 pushed the poverty level up to 29.5 percent, according to the General Economic Division of Bangladesh. Our food system needs to appreciate this reality. Our post-pandemic recovery plans and the Eighth Five-Year Plan need to revitalise livelihood opportunities for the poor to bring them out of the poverty trap.

Actions supported by technologies, innovations, and new knowledge are crucial for a resilient food system. Our food production should sustainably manage soil and water, and use chemicals to nurture and protect crops without harming the nature with pollution and greenhouse gas emission. It should use crop improvement technologies—such as biotechnology—to invent crops to cope with diseases, heatwaves, floods, droughts, and salinity, as well as with better nutritional quality.

Appropriate and timely weather information and good early disaster warnings are vital for food production. Our food system needs affordable technologies to reduce food waste in the processes of harvest, storage, and utilisation. We also need advanced tools and techniques to monitor and stabilise food price and to identify and track food safety related crimes. We need innovations to identify the people facing food crisis and to reach out to them without delay.

A plate of food is not only a source of nutrition but also a sculpture created by numerous people—farmers, labourers, suppliers, financiers, scientists, agricultural extensionists, sellers, policymakers, cooks, and diners—and by their knowledge, experience, tradition, and devotion. We must not forget to put a human face on a resilient food system.

Dr Haseeb Md Irfanullah is an independent consultant working on environment, climate change, and research systems. His Twitter handle is @hmirfanullah

to consider enhanced safety nets and broadened social protection programmes to cover all sections of the population confronted with critical inadequacies of inputs, resources and opportunities. The issue here is to ensure the effectiveness of current protection mechanisms based on how these have worked so far, and addressing deficiencies and subsequently reshaping these in accordance with best practices. It would be pertinent to expand conventional safety net programmes to welfare net programmes that would enable convenient access to basic needs

including food and shelter and easy credit access. Policy interventions should aim at mitigating risks and concerns due to the addition of new poor (for instance, loss of jobs, rising unemployment and drastic reduction in employment or reduced opportunities for inter-sector transfer of skills). To address these, entrepreneurship expansion support and easy credit access are credible and effective solutions.

It is also crucial to enhance the efficiencies of institutions and improve management and governance frameworks within country systems as well as within the ambit of development partnership. Performance-driven and results-based approaches, extensive coordination of government and NGO programmes, comprehensive community engagement and extensive stakeholder participation and buy-in should also be useful.

Dr Mohammed Parvez Imdad is an economist, governance specialist and former national and international civil servant. Email: mpinayefnmdad@gmail.com