

Holding down prices

Benefits of increased supply yet to accrue

PRICES of consumer items for Ramadan are on the rise owing to increase in demand which would normally imply that supply might not be enough to cater to the demand. But that is not the case as the market does not show any dearth of commodities; in fact it looks plentiful. There is, of course, an added dimension i.e. bulk or panic buying to the demand side which is instrumental in pushing up prices. For instance, consumers started buying commodities like onion, potato, sugar, lentil etc to store them for fear of any price hike during Ramadan.

A mix of countervailing measures need to be taken: first, consumers better apply some self-discipline and not resort to bulk buying out of sympathy for the people with limited purchasing power and also because they should not be unwittingly any party to the price hike through a simulated high demand situation. Secondly, public and private sector importers should try to be a step ahead of the market demand allowing for the fact that people will be buying more during Ramadan in any case. That is exactly where they can spread their profits thin over wide ranging and heightened demands and still earn significant amounts at the end of the day. They can hold their profit motive within limits in keeping with the Ramadan spirit.

The government has taken steps to strengthen the supply side. The BDR have started selling some essential commodities from one hundred outlets in the city. The members of the Ansar and private sector traders are to operate another 100 retail outlets in the city. Very importantly, the state-owned Trading Corporation of Bangladesh (TCB) are to sell some essential commodities at fair prices in four divisional cities including Dhaka. In the capital city they will sell the items from 46 spots through trucks.

These dispersed marketing arrangements are likely to cool off the prices somewhat. But they are urban centred so that there is a need for further dispersal of the network to include the rural areas with an emphasis on traditional market mechanisms.

Domestic violence

Implement legal framework at the earliest

RESEARCH findings of a number of relevant governmental and non-governmental organisations as well as UN agencies strongly point to the fact that domestic violence has taken an epidemic form in Bangladesh. A large number of women and children fall victim to atrocities committed on them by close relations at home or by strangers outside, which often result in deaths and disfigurement. These issues came up for discussion at a workshop styled 'National Workshop on Domestic Violence Legislation', jointly organised by CARE and ActionAid, Bangladesh.

Legal experts and rights activists deliberated on the critical issues incorporated in the draft 'Domestic Violence Bill' submitted by the Law Commission in 2006 and reiterated the need to monitor the implementation of the bill. We cannot but agree with the experts that there is the need for effective legislation as well as wider people's awareness to help curb the incidence of domestic violence in the country.

A look at the regional statistical figures would reveal that, in general, one in two women in South Asia experience violence of some kind in the hands of their husbands. Specifically, in Bangladesh, between 50 and 60 per cent of women experience some form of domestic violence (ICDDR,B). One Stop Crisis Centre, a Bangladesh-based NGO, reveals that almost 70 per cent of sexual abuse occurs within their own homes. An estimated 200 women are murdered each year in Bangladesh from dowry related violence, says Oxfam Australia. The Sri Lankan Ministry of Child Development and Women's Empowerment says that 60 per cent of women, including 44 per cent pregnant women, become victims of domestic violence. The National Family Health Survey (NFHS-II) of India reveals that as many as 70 per cent of married women in India between the age of 15 and 49 are victims of beating, rape or coerced sex. In Pakistan, around 80 per cent women suffer violence within their homes (Human Rights Commission of Pakistan). According to Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) more than 50 per cent of women are victims of abuse within their homes. And according to a UNICEF report, nearly 275 million children worldwide witness abuse in their everyday life. In South Asia, the estimates range from 40.8 million to 88 million children.

There can be no second thought on the question of curbing violence on women and children - two most vulnerable groups in our society. We therefore feel the call for disseminating information on the nature of domestic violence, right to freedom from violence and available remedies is a timely one that needs to be implemented at the earliest.

Let us get our act together on jute



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

than one the mainstay of our rural economy. It has played an invaluable part with regard to providing employment and income generation to millions of farmers. In many parts of the country, jute stalks have also been the ideal source of alternative energy.

The primacy of this industry continued through the 1960s into the 1970s. In 1972-73, a survey indicated that the industry was directly or indirectly involved in providing income to nearly 13 million people, in producing about 450,000 metric tons of jute prod-

that year producing about 500,000 metric tons of hessian, sacking, CBC, carpet and yarn and earned in the process about US\$ 300 million. This improvement was also made possible by the Bangladesh Bank according to the commercial banks facilities that were fair and equitable in nature. This movement forward encouraged this sector and the entrepreneurs associated with it.

One drawback however continued to haunt the scene. This fatal factor related to the cost of carrying the huge debt burden of jute mills

however did not move smoothly. After disbursing the first tranche of US\$50 million, the World Bank felt that the government had not fulfilled all its obligations. Consequently, all further disbursements stopped. One can only assume that it was probably due to incompetence on the part of the relevant authorities associated with the implementation of the Programme. What was required was proper planning and seriousness and that was lacking. Political partisanship also cast its shadow.

It is difficult to accept that jute can be on the way out in this coun-

about using jute with a plastic base to create construction sheeting and dividers as an alternative to wooden boards. I have seen this being already attempted in Europe. (c) Making it mandatory to pack food grains, sugar, fertilizer and cement in jute bags. This will increase consumption and demand for the product. (d) Supplying gas to jute industrial units at the same rate as paid for the Power Development Board. (e) Being more careful in spreading the message that the Ministry of Jute is not a dumping ground for bureaucrats. It is unfortunate that postings as Secretary to the Ministry lasts for less than the desired tenure, thus creating an impression of lack of seriousness and a breakdown in the planning of strategy or a perspective plan.

We have to get out together.

There is no reason for the authorities concerned to consign jute to the back burner. A more pro-active national agenda needs to be agreed upon through consensus among the principal stakeholders -- political parties, the labour force and the private entrepreneurs. It will not be correct to just close down jute mills, lay-off workers and privatise the industry. Government has to go beyond that and find responsible solutions that are not only profitable but also a generator of employment.

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