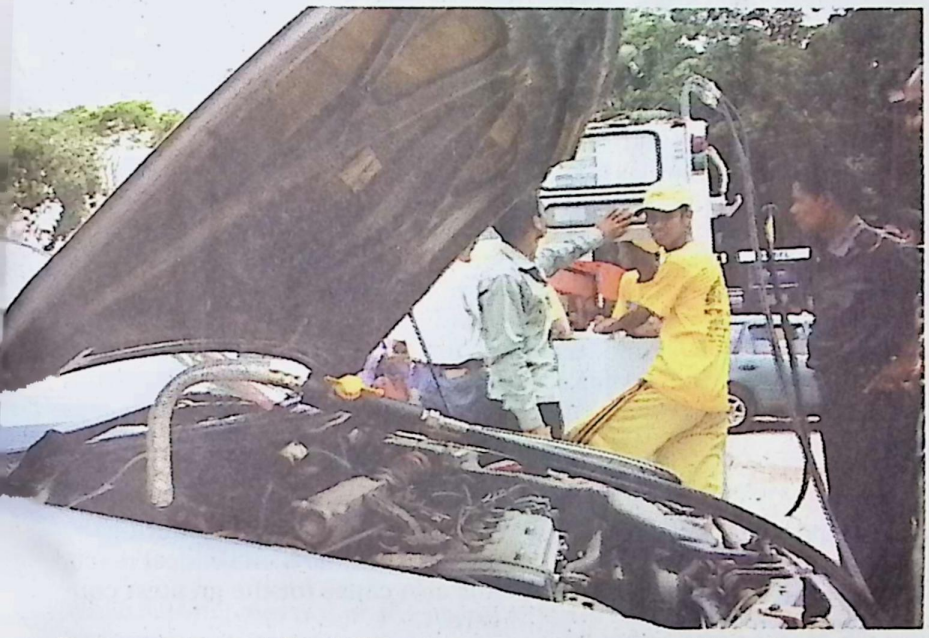
vive," on the verge of tears he says, "only Allah knows when this inequality will be dealt with." Abdul Mannan yet another day labourer chimes in saying, "the situation is so bad that that we cannot do any one thing properly. We can't pay the rent fully or pay for our food fully, what do we do? Everyone says go back to the village, but nothing is waiting for us there either." He makes a startling revelation:"I have not eaten any kind of meat in the last six weeks, with prices and my income the way it is it will be a long time before I eat meat again. Before I do that I need to pay a full month's rent and expenses." He adds that he has heard of a few people even hunting down crows to eat them.



The unexpected doubling of CNG rates was something we could have done without.

Shormi Khan a middle-income housewife is one of the many people who has felt the full pinch of the current cost of living. She says, "my husband's income always managed to get us through, somehow we always managed to scrape a living. His salary in Sonali Bank was enough for us, but now we have to shift houses, as we can no longer afford to live in Mirpur. We are going to shift to a two-bedroom apartment in Mohammadpur next month because there was no way we could pay the rent here. That causes more problems as now he will need more money on transport to and from work." She claims house rents have not gone up even claiming they have fallen a little but that is not good enough if 70% of a family's income is simply spent in feeding itself. That is the situation she must live with now.

The sky-high prices of essentials has hit more than just the households. A hotelier from Cox's Bazaar preferring to be unnamed says, "with the way prices have been fewer people have the money to spend on vacations and hotels here have been suffering as a consequence. Some people came to me a few weeks ago and told me they could not pay the full room rent and yet I still took them, in times like these one needs to take any customer that comes one's way." He has also had to lay off five members of his staff since the beginning of the year, as business has not been good enough to keep them on. The situation touches everyone, not the just the farmers and the housewives.

The real question now is, what can be considered a reasonable income that will fulfil the basic needs of the masses. Anu Mohammad says, "There was a time when Tk 8000 a month was something to look forward to, but now those people live on the very edge of the poverty line, most of them below it. People are being paid decent salaries and they are still poor, just imagine what the rest of the country has to go through!" He goes on to say that this is a cumulative crisis and that employment opportunities will only be created through expansion in new areas. Bangladesh's problems stem from being over import oriented as Mohammad adds, "import-export - everything has been reduced to this! This is the problem of business." He also goes on to say, "For us to get out of this mess the (product-oriented) private sector must be increased, the current new liberal approach (which overemphasises on service sectors) is not the way forward." Professor Mahmud says, "I believe the economy of Bangladesh has the strength and resilience to get through these tough times, but the time to act is now." The way forward will not be easy, but it does not necessarily have to be too tough either. It will take a strong government to control food and energy for things to be set in motion, but even that may remain a pipe dream.

The problems with the cost of living today will come to light in a few years when Bangladesh has a few million under nourished and stunted children. Already those who could earlier afford it have stopped feeding their children milk or at least cutting the amount down, others have reduced the total amount of food, especially meat, altogether, which deprives children from essential nutrients for growth. With the way things are more and more of those malnourished children are being and will be forced to work from an early age, which would lead to more stunted children. The cost of living must be looked into today, not for those who have the luxury of spending Tk10 on this newspaper, but the 100 million others who are struggling to cope with the unbearable cost of living, which may cost them their lives.