

Keeping prices of essentials in check

Deal with the issue at the manipulators' level

Commerce ministry mobile team, tasked to keep a tab on prices of essentials, faced severe resistance from local shop owners at Karwan Bazaar the other day. The team was barricaded by disgruntled traders till relieved by a RAB contingent. The team had to leave the place without conducting their task of market monitoring any further.

The reason for the violent reaction of the traders, reportedly, was that a sugar retailer was fined for selling sugar at a rate of Taka 4 or 5 per kg higher than that fixed by the government. The same shop was fined once before not long ago for the same reason. Selling goods at prices higher than that fixed by the government is a punishable offence, but the issue is not as simplistic as it appears.

The ministry of commerce has been operating mobile teams for sometime with a view to monitoring the retail market, hoping to keep the prices of essential in check. That is perhaps a good idea from the point of view of the consumers who are the hapless victims of unbridled manipulation of prices by traders of all hues. Unfortunately, in spite of hefty fines in some cases, market raids have not really produced the desired result and the reaction of the traders in Karwan Bazaar was perhaps something that was waiting to happen.

Regrettably, there is great disconnect between the retail and wholesale market because the wholesalers are caring two hoots for the rate fixed by the government and allegedly selling to the retailers at a good deal higher price than they ought to. To top it all, they refuse to provide sale receipt to the retailers, violating another legal requirement, that of keeping record of all transactions. And here, it is for the wholesalers who have a case to answer and perhaps not so much as the retailers.

Given that the peculiar state of the market in Bangladesh where the normal market mechanisms are never allowed to operate freely, and which defies all economic laws and principles and government directives, monitoring the retailers only may not help keep prices in check. On the contrary it may be prove counterproductive as we saw happen.

It is regrettable, but true that we are under the dreadful grip of syndicates that manipulate and control prices, and the nexus between the middlemen and extortionists. And this becomes even more severe during the period of religious festivity. And unless these are eradicated through government intervention, not by force, or by pecuniary penalty only, no amount of monitoring will deliver. And here there is the need for more active role of the TCB, which for some reason has been kept ineffective. It is also true that there is an odious link between the syndicates and some powerful quarters, and unless this umbilical is severed we will not be able to rid ourselves of the sufferings of price distortions.

Schools without the basics of education

Child Parliament survey is an eye opener for us

It has never been a matter of surprise that a large number of government as well as private schools and madrasas at the primary and secondary levels have operated at a poor level. Apart from the quality of education imparted in such institutions, there have been the questions relating to the basics which underpin their working. These worries are now once again borne out by a survey carried out by young people themselves. The Child Parliament, in association with Save the Children Australia, informs us of the pitiable conditions in which 512 schools across the country happen to be trapped. One could be sure that there are hundreds of similar schools in Bangladesh. These 512 schools simply happen to be symbolic of the bad way in which we educate our children.

These are the facts which emerge from the survey: school buildings are shabby and largely located in a noisy environment, teachers are often callous and cruel and girl students are often the target of stalking, something that ends with parents marrying off the minor girls. Many of the schools surveyed have no walls and have roofs that are damaged. In an overwhelming number of instances, the compounds of the schools are always waterlogged. The annual floods only add to their misery. A pretty good number of these schools are situated right beside busy streets, noise from which naturally affects the learning process on the part of the young. Additionally, some schools have video shops and cinemas located nearby, the implication being that movies can easily tempt the young into conditions they find hard to resist. And where teachers ought to be imparting moral lessons to the young, they are found --- 68 per cent of the students have made the allegation --- to be exercising corporal punishment that militates against the principles of enlightened education. A very large body of teachers converse on mobile phones in the classroom when they should be focusing on the lessons. A more serious failing in the schools is the patently discriminatory treatment meted out to the children of sex workers and tea garden labourers.

The results of the survey should be an eye opener for the education authorities. Education is basic to a nation's progress, but when the very basics on which education rests are missing or are not assured, it is the future of a society which is imperilled. The Child Parliament and Save the Children Australia have done a good job. The rest remains to be done by society and government together. Unless we correct such conditions in our schools, unless we invest in education, talk of future prosperity and happiness will sound hollow.

Saviour, not slave

Our government in general and the foreign missions in particular mostly play the role of the silent bystander when our migrant workers face any difficulties in foreign lands. The government cannot avoid its responsibility of ensuring the minimum dignity of our migrant workers, who are not slaves but saviours of our economy.

A.N.M NURUL HAQUE

Ben Anderson of BBC has made a short documentary entitled "The Slaves of Dubai," visualising the heart-rending plight of South Asian workers who arrived in Dubai in the hope of alleviating their abject poverty, but ended up becoming virtually bonded labour.

These modern slaves include a large number of our migrant workers, who are working there as construction labour in inhuman conditions. Anderson tried to interview one such migrant worker from Bangladesh who, being unable to express the level and depth of his woes in words, only broke down in tears during the interview.

The Daily Star report carried on August 30 said at least 44 Bangladeshi workers have been languishing in the United Arab Emirates for the last five months after they sued their employers for not paying wages for nearly one year. The workers, living in two camps in Sharjah, can neither find new jobs nor have money to return home.

The migrant Bangladeshi workers are always subjected to many kinds of harassments and exploitation at the hands of their foreign employers. In many cases they are even tortured like the ancient slaves by their overseas employers and forced to live and work in inhuman conditions.

The woes of thousands of our migrant workers in the Middle East and Gulf areas are extremely shocking. A large number of workers, who were deported from Kuwait blood stained and empty-handed a few months back, brought to light the terrible torture and difficulties they faced in foreign lands.

Sadly, they do not get redress for the torture and exploitation they are subjected to in many countries, because of the government's and the overseas missions' failure to protect their rights. The allegations are there that officials of the Bangladesh missions abroad do not even grace the migrant workers with their attendance whenever they are in distress, let alone extend a helping hand.

The overseas employment sector is the engine of the country's economic prosperity. Our economy has been able to tide-over the global downturn largely because of this sector. Currently, nearly 60 lakh people are working abroad and the government has a plan to send 5 lakh more during the current financial year.

The remittances from our migrant workers have grown at an average rate of 17% since 2001, which surged to 32% and



reached a record high of nearly \$10.72 billion in 2009. Remittance earning last year stood at Tk.78,000 crore, while the total budget of the country was around Tk.100,000 crore.

Remittances by our migrant workers contribute to 12% of the GDP, which is six times higher than the foreign development assistance and eleven times more than foreign direct investment. The country's foreign exchange reserve crossed \$11.02 billion mark on July 8 for the first time, thanks to a robust growth of inward remittance as well as decreasing import payment.

But the migrant workers have virtually no say in the government's economic policy making, while the multilateral donors continue to dictate the policy making by dint of the pittance that they dole out in the name of development assistance.

Despite some recent encouraging developments, there is also disquieting news of the manpower export sector. The country, which is eyeing increasing remittance flow through exporting more workers to new

destinations, may face stiff challenges unless it ensures sending of skilled workers abroad.

Overseas employment in the first six months of the on-going calendar year grew at its slowest pace in four years and the sector sees no sign of market restoration in its traditional job destinations. Only 202,824 workers found jobs abroad in the first half of this year against 335,403 in 2007, 475,896 in 2008 and 250,900 in 2009 in the corresponding periods.

the saying "good counsel to a rogue bears no fruit" perfectly fits the dishonest manpower agents who have made a mess of the affair.

Everybody in the government speaks proudly and loudly of the robust remittance growth, but nobody gives a serious thought to the welfare of those saviours of our economy, who work like slaves in foreign lands, enduring terrible torture and difficulties to provide a strong boost to the country's prosperity. The government's

Malaysia, which took more than half a million workers in 2007 and 2008, accepted no new Bangladeshi workers for a year, whereas Saudi Arabia, which employs more than two million Bangladeshis, signed up only 2,255 in the first quarter of the current calendar year, against 4,180 in 2009 and 48,053 in 2008. The decline in worker intake by these two countries has not been subtle so as to evade the government's attention.

Justifiably, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has blamed a section of the manpower recruiting agencies for the miserable condition of the migrant workers abroad. She asked the recruiting agencies to take into consideration the human aspect above profit earning while sending workers abroad with employment.

"Some of you take the path of fraudulence and forgery in sending workers abroad. For the sake of Almighty Allah, please stop such activities," said the prime minister when the newly elected executive committee of the manpower recruiting agents met her recently at her office. But

action in this regard seems to be limited to rhetoric.

However, it is an encouraging development that the government has adopted a plan to export manpower under its direct management. If this can be done effectively, the job seekers abroad will be benefited most, as they will have to spend less for the purpose, and anomalies, cheating and exploitation in manpower export will be checked to a great extent.

Bangladesh is critically dependent on the largesse of remittances by its migrant workers. But our migrant workers are among the most vulnerable foreign workforce groups. This is because our government in general and the foreign missions in particular mostly play the role of the silent bystander when our migrant workers face any difficulties in foreign lands. The government cannot avoid its responsibility of ensuring the minimum dignity of our migrant workers, who are not slaves but saviours of our economy.

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Natural calamity and social crisis

Even worse than the economic devastation is the human tragedy. Pakistan's poor are the greatest victims -- as happens in natural disasters everywhere. The social impact of calamities is always unevenly distributed

PRAFUL BIDWAI

IT'S impossible not to be moved by the human misery and devastation caused by the floods in Pakistan. An area the size of England is submerged. Twenty million people are affected -- even more than by the 2004 tsunami in Asia.

The flood's economic damage is staggering: 5 million homes destroyed, 7,000 schools washed away, 8,000 kilometres of roads and railways ripped up, hundreds of thousands of bridges and electric pylons uprooted, millions of hectares of land with standing crops inundated.

It will take Pakistan many years to rebuild its infrastructure. Only half of the international aid needed for immediate relief has arrived.

Even worse than the economic devastation is the human tragedy. Pakistan's poor are the greatest victims -- as happens in natural disasters everywhere. The social impact of calamities is always unevenly distributed. The poor live in inferior habitats in vulnerable and insecure areas. Their reach to relief administrations is far weaker than that of the middle class.

It's heart-rending to see Pakistan's already battered people being attacked by water-borne diseases. Especially distressing is the plight of children, who account for two-fifths of the victims and are especially vulnerable.

Elementary ethical considerations -- and common bonds of humanity -- demand that the world respond to Pakistan's crisis with urgency and generosity.

This disaster could well have occurred in

India. India and Pakistan belong to the same geographical region, agro-climatic zones and ecosystem. They share the waters of the Indus river system, and more.

Both are more vulnerable to long-term climate change and short-term erratic weather patterns than much of the world. Their administrative structures are inherited from the same colonial bureaucracy, notorious for its hostility towards people.

That's another reason why India's government and citizens must express solidarity with Pakistanis. But there are other reasons too.

This calamity's effects will shape South Asia's evolution and India-Pakistan relations for many years. Pakistan is critical to the fate of Afghanistan, itself part of the crucible in which world history is being remade.

Without Islamabad's cooperation, the US cannot prosecute (or even securely end) its fraught war against al-Qaeda/Taliban. Afghanistan will remain pivotal to relations between the West and Islam, with momentous consequences for security and terrorism.

The floods will intensify Pakistan's fragility. The country already meets many Western criteria of a failing (if not failed) state. Pakistan's failure is in nobody's interest, least of all India's. It will disgorge serious problems (and their carriers), including religion-based extremism, on India's borders, with horrifying consequences.

The global public must work for a democratic Pakistan where jihadi extremism is quelled, the army accepts civilian supremacy, and power distribution across ethnic

groups and provinces is balanced.

The floods will probably heighten social discontent, weaken Pakistan's unity, and change the civil-military balance. They have destroyed numerous physical links that bind Pakistan, including roads, electricity and telecommunications.

Large-scale migration out of inundated areas is creating new tensions. If Pakistan doesn't receive enough aid quickly, there could be food riots.

The civilian government's performance on relief and rehabilitation will determine its credibility. Already, there are protests against corruption in relief distribution.

Like the RSS in India, jihadi groups, from Jamaat-ud-Dawa and Jaish-e-Mohammed to Harkatul Mujahideen and Sipah-e-Sahaba, have fully mobilised themselves to deliver aid -- and exploit the chance to build their bases.

The army's rescue and relief operation -- fairly efficient, like in most countries -- cannot justify support for martial law, as demanded by the Muttahida Qaumi Movement's Altaf Hussain. The public is angry that the army's northwestern anti-militant offensive since 2009 has displaced 2 million people. Mr. Hussain's demand is meant to curry favour with the army.

The army's preoccupation with flood relief will limit its role in the Afghanistan war as the US's principal fighting ally. This could enormously complicate US war plans in Afghanistan.

Washington has no strategy to deal with the emerging situation. It reckons that donating aid to Pakistan will prevent it from collapsing and earn itself some goodwill. This won't be easy. Most Pakistanis regard the US as an "enemy country," more than many do India.

Commentators like Ahmed Rashid say that large parts of Pakistan cut off by the floods "will be taken over by the Pakistani Taliban, and affiliated extremist groups, and governance will collapse. ... All this will dramatically loosen the state's control over outlying areas... which could be captured

quickly by local Taliban. Pakistan will become ... a failed state with nuclear weapons ..."

This hasn't happened. But the Taliban's influence will grow if the status quo continues. To help prevent this, the international community must offer Pakistan generous assistance and personnel support. And Pakistan's rulers must ensure that the aid will provide a moderate secular alternative to extremist-run relief operations.

Besides a humanitarian obligation, India has a high stake in such an outcome. India is uniquely placed to quickly deliver foodgrains, clothes, tents, rubber dinghies and other material to Pakistan.

Yet, India has only offered a paltry \$25 million. And Pakistan hesitated for weeks before saying -- under US pressure -- it will take the aid only if it's routed through the United Nations.

Neither government has shown moral clarity, maturity or grace. India, which is far better off than Pakistan, has diminished itself with its paltry offer.

Pakistan's rulers have no moral right to refuse humanitarian aid for their citizens whom they can't help enough. The people come first. Narrow political considerations of "sovereignty," which detach it from the people, are irrelevant.

India must redeem itself by raising its offer to the hundreds-of-millions level. India can afford it. It is India's neighbourly duty to help the Pakistani people. In the process, India could earn their goodwill, or at least temper Pakistani hostility towards itself.

Whether this happens or not, India must show generosity and solidarity with the Pakistani people -- regardless of poor bilateral relations, Islamabad's covert support to extremists in Afghanistan, its own northwest and elsewhere, and the recent breakdown of foreign minister-level talks.

Solidarity with people is never wasted.

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