

# What follows submission of wealth statement by judges?

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THE submission of wealth statement by the judges in the higher judiciary has been in the news for more than two weeks. Chief Justice A.B.M. Khairul Haque submitted his wealth statement to President Zillur Rahman on Thursday, leading the way for the judges of the Appellate Division and High Court Division to furnish their wealth statements to the CJ.

This is a highly timely step towards filling a transparency and accountability deficit in the highest echelons of judiciary and down below the pyramid. In its editorial of January 7, *Holiday* wrote: "Affording the nation a considerable measure of gratification, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court (CJ of Bangladesh), Justice A.B.M. Khairul Haque, has kindled optimism through his salutary act recently by submitting his wealth statement to President Zillur Rahman. This man of dignity deserves wholehearted applause for this commendable instance, which others may emulate in this era which once in a blue moon comes across such events of approbation contentment."

The move has been highly commended by the people and the media. In its editorial of January 1, *The Daily Star* wrote: "That which is regarded as a fundamental requirement of transparency and a guaranteed attribute of a functional and responsible democracy, unfortunately, had to await the initiative of a

high functionary of the state to be reminded of and be complied with. Chief Justice A.B.M. Khairul Haque submitted his wealth statement to President Zillur Rahman on Thursday, leading the way for the judges of the Appellate Division and High Court Division to furnish their wealth statements to the CJ.

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The question that arises is whether the wealth reports of the judges in the higher judiciary will be made public. What has so far transpired is that although the judges have agreed to submit their wealth statements to

Let us have a look into the disclosure of assets of judges in the higher judiciary in some countries, including India.

Available information suggests that the judges in the Supreme Court

*The judges' wealth reports have already been submitted or will to be submitted to the CJ. Since the judges also submit their wealth statements along with the income tax returns to the National Board of Revenue (NBR), a mechanism has to be found as to how the best utilisation of the wealth reports submitted by the judges can be ensured.*

of India decided in August 2009 to publish the details of their assets on the court's website. Press Trust of India says that the judges of the Delhi High Court began

declaring their assets and liabilities from February 2010 after the Supreme Court judges had done the same in September 2009.

Himanshi Dhawan's article "In US, disclosure of judges' wealth is mandatory" in *The Times of India* on August 24, 2009, says that many countries including the US have brought in legislation to make public disclosure of wealth by judges mandatory.

Argentina, Latvia, Mongolia and South Korea are some of the countries that have laid down legal procedures for disclosure (of judges' wealth). A report prepared by the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative pointed out that in Russia and Philippines, there were some restrictions to accessing information but not complete denial.

Following the reported decision of our Supreme Court judges not to make their wealth statements public, an English-language daily, in its editorial of January 5, wrote that the decision of the Supreme Court judges, made at a full court meeting on January 3, that they would submit

their wealth reports to the CJ but these reports would not be made public seemed to be at cross purposes with the very objective of the exercise itself. The judges observed in the meeting that the law did not permit disclosure of the wealth report of any tax payer, regardless of him or her being a judge or not. One may well ask then, as some judges actually did in the course of the meeting, what the necessity is for them to submit the wealth statement.

The question that may also come to anybody's mind is what the president will do with the CJ's wealth report. The same question arises in respect of the judges' wealth reports already submitted or to be submitted by them to the CJ. Since the judges also submit their wealth statements along with the income tax returns to the National Board of Revenue (NBR), a mechanism has to be found as to how the best utilisation of the wealth reports submitted by the judges can be ensured.

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# Containing price hike : A challenge for the government

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LESTER Brown, former president of World Watch institute in Washington, predicted that in about 2050, when the earth's population will have doubled to nearly 10 billion, the capacity of science to devise methods for coaxing more food out of the soil will be greatly diminished. The situation may be alarming as Brown indicated, with specific mention of the dire economic situation in some countries in the Asian region.

Brown further predicted that by 2030 India will need to import 44 million tons of grain annually to feed its 1.5 billion people. By the same year, an increasingly prosperous and industrialised China will need to purchase 200 million tons of grain for its 1.6 billion people -- as much as is now exported by all the world's countries. The result will be a spike in food prices that will trigger wholesale social disintegration and chaos in Africa, Latin America and poor countries in Asia.

The world is now getting genuinely concerned at the prospect of declining food supply in consequence of rapid urbanisation, deforestation, loss of bio-diversity, pest attack, drought and excessive flooding, cyclone and tidal surge.

Food price hike in the country at the peak of *aman* harvesting season is quite alarming. Despite the fact that *aman* yield has increased by 3% from the previous year, price escalation continues to torment the middle class and poor consumers.

The present price spiral of rice in spite of satisfactory *aman harvest* is mostly due to stockpiling the millers. The wholesale traders and rice importers know that food production faced serious setback in most countries of Asia, some European

countries and Australia. Reports say that Indonesia and the Philippines are importing rice from Vietnam. India has also become very cautious in exporting food grain.

Despite the understanding reached with the government of India during our prime minister's last visit to Delhi for providing 3 lakh tons of rice and 2 lakh tons of wheat, there has been no breakthrough in making this food grain available to Bangladesh. Because of price hike in the international market, rice importing firms have failed to import 4 lakh 10 thousand tons of rice even after signing a contract with the government.

The food minister revealed that by April next the stock would be raised to 15 lakh tons with import of 2.5 lakh tons from Vietnam and 2 lakh tons waiting to be offloaded from the ships.

The price spiral of rice in the internal market was not altogether a surprise. The irony is that wholesale traders and importers know about the world market trends much before the concerned agencies, and manipulate the market as they like. The administration has hardly any control over these unscrupulous traders. Despite loud talk at the time of crisis, the move to activate TCB has hardly been effective.

The government must understand that if there is anything that sends shock waves and unnerves people as much as politics, it is unbridled price hike of essentials, especially food items. And if there is anything challenging in running a government, it is controlling the business world.

With fall in production due to drought, less rain, pest attack, saline intrusion in large areas of the south-west, and shrinkage of arable land, speculation brings about a high price rippling from the production field



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and drives up the price through all the hands the produce passes.

Even if the food minister rules out the possibility of a shortfall, there is no scope to be complacent. The population is growing by two million every year, and arable will shrink further because of city expansion, road construction and water logging in vast areas. To combat such a situation, rice yield needs to be increased from the present 2.74 tons per hectare to 3.74 tons per hectare through use of quality seeds and increment of cropping areas in both *boro* and transplant *aman* varieties through application of technological innovations.

The agencies concerned were not fully alive to the situation that had taken root much earlier. And when it went somewhat out of control, with coarse rice selling at Tk.35 per kg in the peak *aman* season, there was palpable movement in the concerned ministry. As it appears, when a crisis strikes we resort to ad hoc measures that create more problems.

Callousness and indifference have become a Bangladeshi trademark in governance. This it was on display again as the price of rice started shooting up in the harvesting season, contrary to public expectation. With public resentment mounting, the

concerned ministry rose to the occasion, allaying public fear and resentment by making a disclosure that government would import rice.

Being fully aware of the modus operandi of a section of businessmen, the government should have issued directives to the banks not to issue long term loans to the rice millers, which allowed them to make advance purchase from the producers. Market analysts are not sure that, after the foul game has been played, the prime minister's directive to the banks to do so will bear any positive result.

The price hike of rice, salt, and pulses causes a shock wave in the society. The opposition downplays the image and working standard of the ruling party through raising sensitive issues that directly affect the living of the ordinary people. It is worth mentioning here that in 1980, when the price of onion had spurted by a rupee per kg under Janata Party rule, it helped Indira Gandhi return to power. We have a lesson to learn from such historical facts.

It is certainly true that world economy and market trends today are extremely complex. But notwithstanding all such unpredictable and capricious market forces, there is certainly a large amount of analysis and statistical information available on many intricate issues. To ignore such information or to remain oblivious of production mechanism, supply situation, population growth, and last of all people's sufferings and resentment, and to live by slogans and rhetoric is to court disaster.

Recalling that, in spite of all the pledges of *dal bhat* that the BNP-Jamaat alliance government made in its election manifesto in 2001, the grand plan remained a dream, a wish-list and an illusion. Whether it's a case of *masur dal* or sugar or onion

or potato, the concerned authorities have hardly cared to collect any statistics that could give them an understanding about the production cum consumption data.

The basic problem is that in spite of the fact that agriculture is the mainstay of our economy, and a vital sector that continues to brighten our lives, it has remained neglected for the last three decades. It is only now that the present government has started injecting blood into this sector.

With fish, meat and chicken prices touching the roof, poor people in the country do not look for anything beyond *dal-bhat* for their survival, but unhappily food grain production has fallen drastically in absence of logistic support and shrinking arable land. Even when the population has crossed 160 million from 130 million in just about five years, the administration remains with the statistics of demand and supply they had decades ago.

While the government effort to arrest the artificial rice price hike attempted by some manipulators has been most welcome, such measures for other food items are also needed.

The economic crisis is the legacy of decades of stagnation caused by authoritarian rule. But prices of essentials now are certainly outrageous. Even though the government introduces new pay scales as crises mount every three or four years, it means little pay-off when prices keep rising. And for those outside government service, especially the poor and the middle class without any salaried job, the suffering beggars description.

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# Eight oddest true tales of 2010



A few days ago, on New Year's Eve, a Sicilian guy stole candies so he could be jailed and thus have a cast-iron excuse to miss dinner with his relatives. I can understand that.

That was the final weird story in 12 months of bizarre tales.

It was the year in which a suicidal man in China

decided to take sleeping pills and jump off a bridge, but succeeded only in falling asleep at his leaping-off point.

And 2010 saw an "armed" robber in America holding up a store with a banana -- and then eating the evidence before cops arrived.

Who can forget the launch in India of a fertilizer program to pay people to poop for cash?

Or the fugitives in Argentina who escaped from the police by wearing sheepskins and standing in a flock going baa-aa-aa?

In Asia, the most wonderfully crazy country of 2010 was China, a nation whose leaders planted a flag at the bottom of the sea, presumably to inform Ariel and the other mermaids that the Motherland now claimed the oceans.

Also in China, the government set up an official dating website for single citizens under the headline: "Are you still single and bitter?"

But among all the tales of global weirdness, there was one running theme that readers kept returning to: the

descent of the air travel community into madness.

Two women tried to smuggle a dead relative wearing sunglasses onto a flight from Britain to Germany.

On the other side of the world, a young Chinese guy boarded a plane wearing the latex head of an old European, and then took his head off halfway through the flight.

And those were the comparatively normal bits of the air travel experience.

The real drama was at ground level, where airports around the world started to adopt procedures where everyone had to choose between being photographed naked or groped by a stranger.

Well, here's good news. Reader Lift Lurker (known as Otis Schindler in the printed versions of this column) has come up with a proposal to make passengers welcome the full body scan.

You simply program the machines to deliver useful information, like a body fat analysis: "You have three times the normal body fat in your thighs. To lose it, cycle

10 hours a day for 10 days."

The machine could even store the data and give you follow-ups: "Your behind has increased 22 percent since your previous overseas trip."

For anyone who really doesn't want to be photographed naked, Lift Lurker suggests making an undergarment out of the reflective material that lines the outside of the Stealth bomber aircraft. "When security officers ask why you are invisible, you just say: 'Vampires don't show up on those things.'"

Reader Graham Ford sent in some slogans to give 2011 travelers a smile at the airport security gate.

At the body scanner: "Can't see London, can't see France, until we see your underpants."

And here's a slogan for the "enhanced pat-down" station: "Don't worry: my hands are still warm from the previous guy."

Will 2011 be as bizarre as 2010? It'll be wilder. Predictions will appear in this space on Wednesday.

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