

Making rice import costlier

A welcome move

THE government's decision to impose an additional 10 percent duty on the import of rice is timely as farmers are suffering due to low market prices of Boro which constitutes a lion's share of the country's annual rice production. Considering the 20 percent tariff on rice import already in place, which has resulted in a significant drop in its import by private traders, the move is likely to have a positive effect.

Farmers are still worried, though. There are complaints of rice coming in both through formal and informal channels at cheaper rates—rice that some Indian granaries are allegedly trying to discard from old stock. And there is the perennial problem of the middleman, who acts as a barrier limiting access of the farmers to the market, robbing them of the fruits of their labour.

The government should immediately declare the price and volume of procurement of Boro, which has a significant impact on determining the prices in the wholesale and retail markets. It should also discourage LCs through which crops and vegetables are often imported by businessmen which often has a negative impact on local markets. Subsidies should be given on agricultural inputs such as seed, fertiliser and pesticide. Last but not least, farmers will have to be empowered to form organised forums which will enable them to bargain prices.

If these kinds of support are not given to farmers in a market economy, how can they compete with cheap, imported products? We tend to think that agriculture is an issue that concerns only peasants. It should be looked at as a national issue to remove the woes of the farmers.

Climate deal signed

The proof will be in the implementing

WE welcome the signing of the Paris Climate deal on April 22. Actions not pledges are what are needed to combat climate change. Despite massive opposition at home, President Obama signed the deal through an executive decision bypassing Congress, and China has also put ink to paper. Hailed as a "new covenant with the future" by the UN chief, much work remains to be done. The agreement will only come into force when all 55 countries responsible for 55 percent of global greenhouse emissions ratify it. However, as things stand now, those countries that have become part of the deal account for the 93 percent of all greenhouse gases emitted annually.

With the two biggest polluters, i.e. China and the United States on board, we are hoping that others will join too, so that the deal can become operational as early as 2017. The push for quick ratification becomes all the more relevant as we have witnessed that the month of March has perhaps been one of the warmest in recent history and with the increasing propensity of natural disasters including floods, storms and droughts, the need to get a move on to seal the deal has been a top agenda for policymakers worldwide.

While the modalities for pollution control need to be worked out, it is evident that we can no longer afford to go on poisoning the earth's environment indiscriminately. That the world is coming together for the sake of self preservation is good news. What we need now is movement to make the changes binding and hold polluters accountable for their actions.

THREE YEARS AFTER RANA PLAZA

What can be done for victims still fighting for survival?

SHEIKH NAZMUL HUDA, DESDEMONA KHAN, LABIN RAHMAN and JOHN RICHARDS

THREE years have elapsed since the collapse of Rana Plaza, Savar, on a fine morning of April 24, 2013. The disaster, one of the deadliest in the world's industrial history in two centuries, claimed the lives of 1,135 men and women and injured another 2,500, nearly 200 of whom severe enough to keep them hospitalised for months.

In the months following the accident, we, along with other colleagues, surveyed many such survivors with serious injuries. The victims were in the prime of their lives, their mean age being only 26. Two thirds were female and they were much younger than their male counterparts. Over 60 percent of the victims were married and 12 percent were either widows or divorcees.

Currently, we are following up with another survey, contacting as many as possible of those we had met in the summer of 2013. As may be apprehended, given the severity of the disaster, many survivors now face grave difficulties. It is encapsulated by Jorina's bitter comment: "I think it would have been better if they had cut off my legs. These legs are now the bane of my life. I am completely unable to walk and they are heavy. I can't move about as I wish to. All the time I have to use a wheelchair." She comes from Naogaon, a northern district. There was nobody to look after her. "My daughter and son-in-law stay with me. I have two grand-daughters too, but there is not enough room for all of us to stay together in a one-room house. So I live on the verandah, I have to also sleep there."

Soon after the collapse, the United Nations reviewed Dhaka's capacity for undertaking a major rescue operation and offered to help out. The Bangladesh Government expressed their confidence in managing the situation and refused their offer. A large number of deeply motivated but untrained volunteers played a key role in medical evacuation and rescue operations there. The Army, the fire service and other national agencies were also active part of these efforts.

Though the rescue operations continued for more than two weeks, almost three fourths of our respondents, fortunately, got rescued on the first day, namely on April 24, 2013. A good 10 percent were rescued on the second day and on the third day another 10 percent of our respondents were dragged out of the debris. According to our data, more than one-third of the victims were found unconscious on rescue. As many as 30 percent of the injured had fractures of one or more limbs. Approximately 20 percent had spinal or head injury. One-



PHOTO: RAHUL-TALUKDER

fifth of the seriously injured required amputation of one or more limbs.

Hospitals and clinics in the neighbourhood proved the best; these institutions, coming out of everywhere, provided critical services to the survivors. Enam Medical College Hospital, Savar, has been the most common destination of the injured. Approximately half were directly taken to this non-governmental establishment. Less than 20 percent were taken to CMH (Combined Military Hospital) Savar, devoted exclusively to the armed services of the nation otherwise. After four weeks of the tragedy, we encountered many victims being transferred to CRP (Centre for Rehabilitation of the Paralysed), Savar, one of the best centres in Bangladesh for treatment of spinal injuries.

Approximately one fourth of the seriously injured suffered spinal injuries. Initial medical assessments diagnosed nearly half of these downright. However, only three were referred to CRP for initial treatment. Despite close reach and access to CRP, some complicated cases were sent to smaller hospitals where neither requisite skills nor logistics for advanced care of spinal fractures and other complications were handy. Spinal injuries, for instance, need immediate immobilisation for minimising neurological and other kinds of damage. In many cases that did not happen. The victims often had other injuries (like

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bleeding, soft tissue infections, fractured limb etc.) that could be handled in multi-disciplinary hospitals. Nevertheless, immediate mobilisation after the rescue could perhaps have prevented paralysis in some cases. Optimal emergency treatment requires effective triage (a process for quick assessment of the type or the urgency of medical problems) where many cases are brought in for treatment. It seems the triage at the site of Rana Plaza could have been better.

Immediate medical care was provided generously by hospitals, community organisations and people in general. This is less evident in terms of long-term care,

however. Three years into the catastrophe, we encountered many victims in need of physical and occupational therapy. Others are experiencing post-trauma stress disorder and stand in need of psychiatric help. Many are not gainfully employed anymore. Most have returned to their native villages, taking with them the trauma and consequences of the catastrophe.

Among the survivors we recently met, was a woman, whose arm was amputated from her shoulder. While under treatment she became pregnant. Her baby is now less than three years old and it is very difficult for the mother to take care of her child with only one arm. Once, while taking the baby for vaccination, the baby fell and was injured. No one in the hospital had counselled her on the techniques of managing with one arm only. This case serves to illustrate the importance of addressing the long-term needs of survivors.

What is missing is a systematic initiative for their long-term rehabilitation and wellbeing. It's a shared responsibility no one can ignore. The garments industry, state health services, NGOs and, not least, civil society itself, can neither deny nor evade their call of duty.

The writers are members of a research collective directed by Prof. John Richards, School of Public Policy, Simon Fraser University, Canada.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Kuldip Nayar's op-ed

Renowned Indian writer/journalist/retired diplomat Kuldip Nayar in his latest op-ed "The Kohinoor Story" published in The Daily Star on April 21, has written something grossly inaccurate, historically. I cite the following paragraph, which doesn't make any sense at all: "Lord Dalhousie did not only take Dalip Singh to Britain after converting his religion but also appropriated the Kohinoor as a 'possession' of the British. He was so careful about the protection of the diamond that he did not take the usual Suez Canal route to London but went around South Africa, nearly twice the distance."

Nayar is a very respectable writer, but he was simply carried away by a myth, which can only raise eyebrows and make people laugh! Lord Dalhousie couldn't have accompanied Maharaja Dalip Singh to Britain after the Suez Canal has already been opened. Dalhousie died in 1860 (he was only 48) and the Suez Canal was officially opened in November 1869, nine years after Dalhousie's death. So, he couldn't have avoided the Canal which didn't exist during Dalhousie's lifetime!

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CARBON TAX?

Is there a slam-dunk case for it?

DR. ABDULLAH SHIBLI

BANGLADESH Government Proposes a Tk. 15 Carbon Tax". This headline would have been unthinkable even a decade ago. However, it appears that we are inching closer towards rolling out a tax that will have impact across the board! *The Daily Star* carried a news item on April 13, 2016 with the headline "WB recommends carbon tax on fuel". Carbon tax has been on the table for many years, but the drive to reevaluate this measure got a strong boost recently with the decline in price of crude oil. In an Op-ed in this newspaper on March 3, this commentator made a strong case for considering a carbon tax in the article "Petroleum price: Reduce price and add a green tax". Since the government is reported to be "now examining the proposal of the WB", as the DS report notes, it is worth taking another look at this economic tool.

A carbon tax is added to fossil fuel to offset the damage caused by emission of carbon dioxide. In August 1994, in a report to the Tariff Commission of the Government of Bangladesh, I proposed a carbon tax. The study was funded by UNDP under a grant, and I made the case even though I was aware that it would get nowhere in a fuel-deficient country, and I was equally cognizant that it is always a tricky issue to tax an essential item like kerosene and diesel. Who in their right mind would suggest another tax? In many other countries, including the USA, carbon tax has not proved to be a popular instrument to address climate change, and the Obama Administration could never get the approval of the Congress or the electorate.

For Bangladesh, a carbon tax could increase the price of all fuels: coal, motor oil, furnace oil, biofuels, aviation fuel, diesel, and natural gas. It might prove to be a very politically risky move, and voters might ask: what do we get in return for higher price of electricity, octane, and construction materials? While many countries around the world have instituted a carbon or green tax, very few countries have reported success. Little did anyone anticipate the resistance the idea would generate regardless of the economic soundness of the policy! Of the few countries which went ahead with carbon tax, a



number of them had to either scrap the plan or scale it back. Australia on July 1, 2012 passed a carbon tax bill and implemented it, but then the people decided to abolish it in a referendum on July 17, 2014.

When the idea of imposing a carbon tax was first proposed, many labelled it a win-win proposition or an example of a low-hanging fruit. Why so? Unlike air which is free, using coal emits soot and carbon dioxide and needs to be paid for. But the tax would also allow the government to collect the revenue and allocate the funds for improvement of the environment and mitigate the effects of carbon in the environment. In developed countries, some governments have reduced income tax or subsidised low-income families. Some others have set up Green Projects or undertaken projects to save wild-

life, e.g. elephants in India.

The recently concluded Paris Climate Agreement stipulates that signatory countries must take measures voluntarily as per their national climate action plans. Not surprisingly, some dissensions within the ranks have already come to the surface. At a meeting of the BASIC (Brazil, South Africa, India and China) countries, India's Environment Minister Prakash Javadeka opposed any surcharge on aviation fuel. "It will impose inappropriate economic burden on developing countries," he said.

There are many issues that must be resolved before Bangladesh can take a decision on carbon tax. A national consensus has to be reached on the disposal of the tax money collected. Does the cash go towards funding environmental projects which may ultimately prove a waste or provide relief to the poor in the form of lower VAT tax? The latter would be strongly opposed by environmentalists. In 2010, Bangladesh was on the verge of adopting carbon tax, but support has waned in recent years. One important reason for this disinterest is carbon tax hurts the pocket book of the average consumer. And then coal, which is the biggest source of CO2, will be hit hard. Another unintended consequence may be increased use of biomass. An example is the case of Sweden's carbon tax which has resulted in increased biomass use for heating and industry, because these fuels are classified as renewable. For Bangladesh, a carbon tax will unquestionably increase the consumption of firewood, biomass, bagasse, and agricultural waste. And then there is the case of electricity price. Almost all of our electricity is currently sourced from fossil-fuel burning power plants. Where do we make exemptions? Are natural-gas plants given a free pass?

So, to answer the questions raised at the outset: do the advocates of carbon tax have a slam and dunk case? Not really. And to use a well-worn cliché, the devil is in the details. There are two critical components: start slow and be prepared to fail. Also, the government should consider reducing tax to make the carbon tax revenue neutral, if possible.

The writer is an economist and the author of a recent book, *Economics is Fun: Essays for the Masses*.

COMMENTS

"Won't allow industries on farmland, says PM"
(April 20, 2016)

Sikander Khan

But people are making industries on farmlands, removing the fertile top soil for making bricks, cutting down trees indiscriminately and what not! We want actions, not words.