

Price hikes before Ramadan!

Illogical and unethical

IT is a trend that appears to be predictable but devoid of all logic – the spiraling of prices of essentials just before Ramadan. And like any other year, the government bodies give a declaration that there will be no price hikes before or during this holy month. Obviously those who are responsible for such irrational increases in basic food stuff such as edible oil, sugar, onions, garlic and lentils, do not give two hoots to either the natural forces of demand and supply nor the directives of the government.

Despite the usual gloomy predictions of ordinary citizens, there had been a glimmer of hope at the report from the commerce ministry, that conducted a market analysis in mid May, finding that the supply of these items was more than enough to meet the expected demand. Besides this the commerce minister had held a meeting with the concerned stakeholders including the wholesalers, retailers and the Bangladesh Chamber of Commerce and Industry. The minister directed the wholesalers and retailers to keep prices stable.

But the message has fallen on deaf ears and prices have shot up dramatically making consumers anxious all over again. The Consumers Association of Bangladesh (CAB) has stated that there is no rationale behind these price hikes except the greed of dishonest businessmen who do this through syndication. CAB has also attributed this trend to weak price monitoring of the State and lack of penalising those involved in this unscrupulous business.

We urge the government to follow up on its directives with necessary action. If the importers and producers are at fault they must be held accountable. If it is the wholesalers and retailers who are colluding to spike up the prices, they too have to be penalised. Whatever the factors are, the government must get to the bottom of it and stop this illogical, artificial, hike in prices.

Earthquake disaster management

Time to gear up our efforts

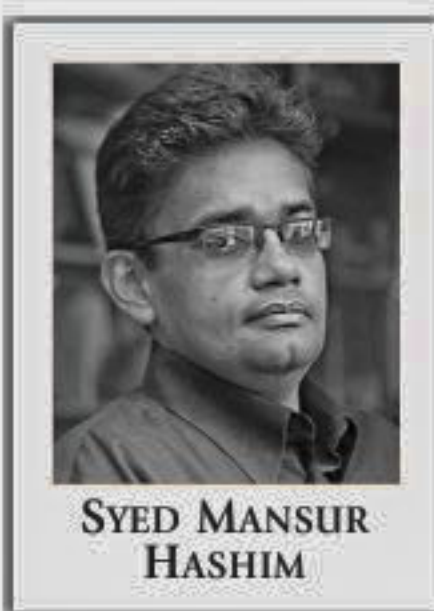
IT is indeed unsettling to note that when it comes to earthquake of a high magnitude, our disaster management preparedness is almost nonexistent. This is distressing as such a tremor in the Modhupur fault line will spell disaster for Dhaka, one of the most densely populated cities in the world. Experts at a seminar a few days ago said that an earthquake of 7.5 would kill around 1 lakh people, 1.6 lakh families would be displaced, not to mention the 72,000 buildings that would be razed to the ground in the capital alone.

The ever-increasing density of population in the city and unplanned urbanisation over the last couple of decades has certainly increased our vulnerabilities. It, however, defies any sense of logic that despite repeated calls to demolish structurally unsafe buildings, no such measure has been taken to that effect. Equally perturbing is the non-implementation of the building code and the lack of monitoring of new structures at their planning stages. To make it worse, land-owners, the developers, the authorities concerned, it seems, are oblivious of the catastrophe that lies in the wait for us.

It is better to be safe than sorry. Pulling down risky buildings, strictly enforcing the national building code and retrofitting important structures are the order of the day. It is also crucial to coordinate the disaster management efforts so that mock drills and other preparedness exercises can be seamlessly carried out. It is imperative that we prepare ourselves to promptly respond in case of eventualities. Also, appropriate acquisition of rescue equipments and gearing up operational modalities should be undertaken immediately.

COMMENTS

- David Warner applauds Bangladesh pacer Mustafizur Rahman (May 30, 2016)**
- Shamsul Alam
A great pair! Our best wishes for them and happy journey back home.
- Sujash Kumar Sarkar
He had to go to India for recognition.



SYED MANSUR HASHIM

DURING our prime minister's visit to the G7 Outreach Meeting, a few things became clear about Japanese involvement in Bangladesh. It is

good to hear from Premier Abe that Japan will be releasing US\$1.5 billion in investments this year. The two major Japanese projects, i.e. the Matarbari coal-based power plant and the Dhaka Metro Rail are on track and there is now talk of a feasibility study to be conducted on the proposed airport at Charjanazat on the far side of the Padma Bridge. From what has been printed in this paper, we understand that the Japanese government, in principle, has agreed to look into the building of a third terminal at Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport by 2019. All this points to a deepening of economic ties between the two countries which can only be good for Bangladesh; as Japan has been one of our best friends since independence.

It is good news for us since besides China and India we can look forward to Japan stepping up investments that will address our core weaknesses, i.e. infrastructure and skills development. Indeed, that Premier Abe has gone on record to talk about "a dedicated railway bridge alongside the existing Bangabandhu Bridge, development of cross-border connectivity and a number of some other projects would be included under the quality infrastructure development initiative," all points to the importance Japan is attaching to a long-

term vision for Bangladesh. Looking beyond what Japan is interested in, if we can get Japanese assistance in the areas that have been highlighted by Bangladesh as areas where we need help, i.e. energy efficiency, we could be looking at saving precious natural gas reserves – a fast depleting resource that must be used more efficiently, to last long enough before the coal-based plants come online to form the backbone of Bangladesh's future energy security.

It is high time Bangladeshi policymakers realised the potential of greater Japanese participation in taking

areas open for collaboration – from roads and highways, and railway, industry (readymade garments to pharmaceuticals), "skills development" of a largely young population and so on and so forth.

Getting back to the issue of infrastructure, we need to focus on delivery (instead of just public statements). Whilst our premier surely means when she says the government is sincere in ensuring full cooperation to fast-track these projects, our experience tells us that the institutions (like Board of Investment) dedicated to manage

and as we understand it, Vietnam got that investment. What a complete and utter waste! That factory, which was supposed to be built in Bangladesh, is apparently generating phones that are generating hundreds of millions of dollars in sales annually.

So while the Japanese premier and our premier appear to be committed to moving Bangladesh towards a middle-income country by 2021, we had better get our act together on critical issues such as land allocation, permits needed by industry for power, etc. and basically reduce lead times to get a project up and running. "Time is money" as the saying goes. And until we can stop acting like geriatric pencil pushers when it comes to reducing the cost of doing business, all this talk of mega projects will not be materialising anytime soon.

Having a system that does not prioritise efficiency, we come back to square one in terms of taking critical decisions at the right time and meeting project deadlines – all fundamental prerequisites for any government that wishes to take giant steps on the road to economic development.

At the end of the day, the golden opportunities we have been presented with by development partners like Japan are simply too big to pass on by because we can't get our act together. Failure is simply not an option for a nation of 160 million. We stand at a crossroads where we can choose to move forward or be relegated to the annals of history as a people who were on the verge of taking off to a new path, but failed because our policymakers failed to step up – like the Japanese have stepped up.

The writer is Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.

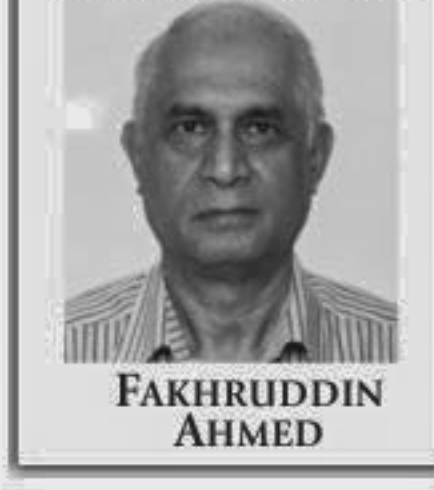
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our economic interests forward. That Japan believes in putting its money where its mouth is comes through in the Matarbari project where the \$3.7 billion will be financed through JICA (Japanese International Cooperation Agency). The government deserves credit in successfully handling the deep sea port construction contract – over which all the major development partners including India, China and trading partner, the United States had been bickering over. This still leaves many

foreign investments have been sorely lacking in one area, i.e. getting paperwork done on time. With such lacklustre performance, all the good intentions of the government go nowhere and prospective foreign investors move on to greener pastures. One of the best examples would be the Samsung fiasco a few years ago. Samsung had wanted to invest in a new factory to produce smart phones in the country's Korean EPZ. But thanks to our foot dragging, we lost that opportunity,

Recent killings tarnish Bangladesh's tolerant image

LETTER FROM AMERICA



FAKHRUDDIN AHMED

NOT only the European Union, but the rest of the world is also beginning to express concern about the spate of killings by extremists in Bangladesh over the last three years.

News organisations such as the BBC and CNN feature these killings prominently in their newscasts. The initial killing of bloggers has now escalated into killing of foreign aid workers, religious minorities and academics. In April and May alone, a university professor in Rajshahi, two LGBT activists in Dhaka, a Hindu tailor in Tangail and a Buddhist monk in Bandarban were hacked to death.

Although the so-called Islamic State has claimed responsibility for most of these attacks, the Bangladesh government blames the opposition parties and insists that there is no presence of ISIS in the country. Mere accusations are not enough. If the government has proof that the members of opposition parties are indeed responsible for these heinous crimes, it should arrest and prosecute the perpetrators. Until that happens, one has to take ISIS's claim of responsibility seriously. Brutality is ISIS's modus operandi.

In the aftermath of some of these savage murders, especially that of bloggers, the government seemed to imply that the writings of the victims may have had something to do with their fate. After a horrendous murder, everyone's sympathy and empathy should be focused entirely on the victim and his family. It is unseemly to imply that the victim was somehow complicit in his own murder. It is preposterous to suggest that the murdered minorities were somehow "insulting Islam." Extremists do not seem to understand that the tenets of Islam, the world's fastest growing religion, are far too powerful to be perturbed by the utterances of its detractors. Besides, the

holy Qur'an repeatedly states that there is no compulsion in religion.

There is a reservoir of goodwill for Bangladesh in the world. Bangladesh is applauded for spearheading women's empowerment, democracy and communal harmony. As a moderate Muslim-majority nation, Bangladesh is hailed as a paragon not only for other Muslim-majority nations, but also for the developing world as a whole.

Roughly twenty million Bangladeshis are Hindus. Bangladesh has the world's third largest Hindu population, after India and Nepal. There are about a

mistake by considering ISIS as a theological force. 126 top Muslim scholars of the world issued a fatwa in 2014, denouncing ISIS's misinterpretation of Islam. What a waste of time! ISIS does not give two hoots about the fundamental tenets of Islam.

ISIS or many Islamic extremist organisations did not arise out of a theological dispute among Muslims; it arose as a consequence of the Western invasion of the Middle East. The America-led war to oust the Soviets from Afghanistan spawned the Taliban. Gulf War in 1991 hatched al Qaeda, while the Iraq invasion in 2003 sired ISIS. Radical

"Daesh" (one who sows discord) are considered derogatory in Arabic.

The terrorist organisation Daesh is a transient nuisance; it does not pose an existential threat to the world. Territories under Daesh's control are continually shrinking in Iraq and Syria. Daesh will fail because there are not enough buyers for what it is selling – rape, mindless mayhem and brutality.

Daesh is a bunch of retail terrorists similar to two Muslim terror groups of the past – the "Assassins", who operated in the modern day Iran, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, and the "Thugs" who terrorised the Indian subcontinent between 1356 and 1870. (An excellent account of the operations of the "Thugs" can be found in Dr. Nazimuddin Ahmed's seminal book, *Mrittuyudoot*, [Agents of Death], The University Press Ltd, 2004). The "Assassins" were obliterated by the invading Mongols, and the "Thugs", who were devotees of the Hindu goddess Kali despite being Muslims, were infiltrated and crushed by the British. Like the "Assassins" and the "Thugs," Daesh will also pass into oblivion, but only if the world stands up to it.

During my visit to Bangladesh in April and May this year, I noticed some reluctance on the part of the general public to confront the menace. The attitude that it does not affect me or my community, which thereby absolves one of their responsibility to confront these terrorists, is a harmful one. This attitude will sadly only act to prolong Daesh's reign of terror. This mindset is reminiscent of the famous saying of Hitler's foe, German Protestant pastor Martin Niemöller, who spent the last seven years of Hitler's rule in a concentration camp: "First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out— Because I was not a Socialist./ Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out— Because I was not a Trade Unionist./ Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out— Because I was not a Jew./ Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me."

The writer is a Rhodes Scholar.

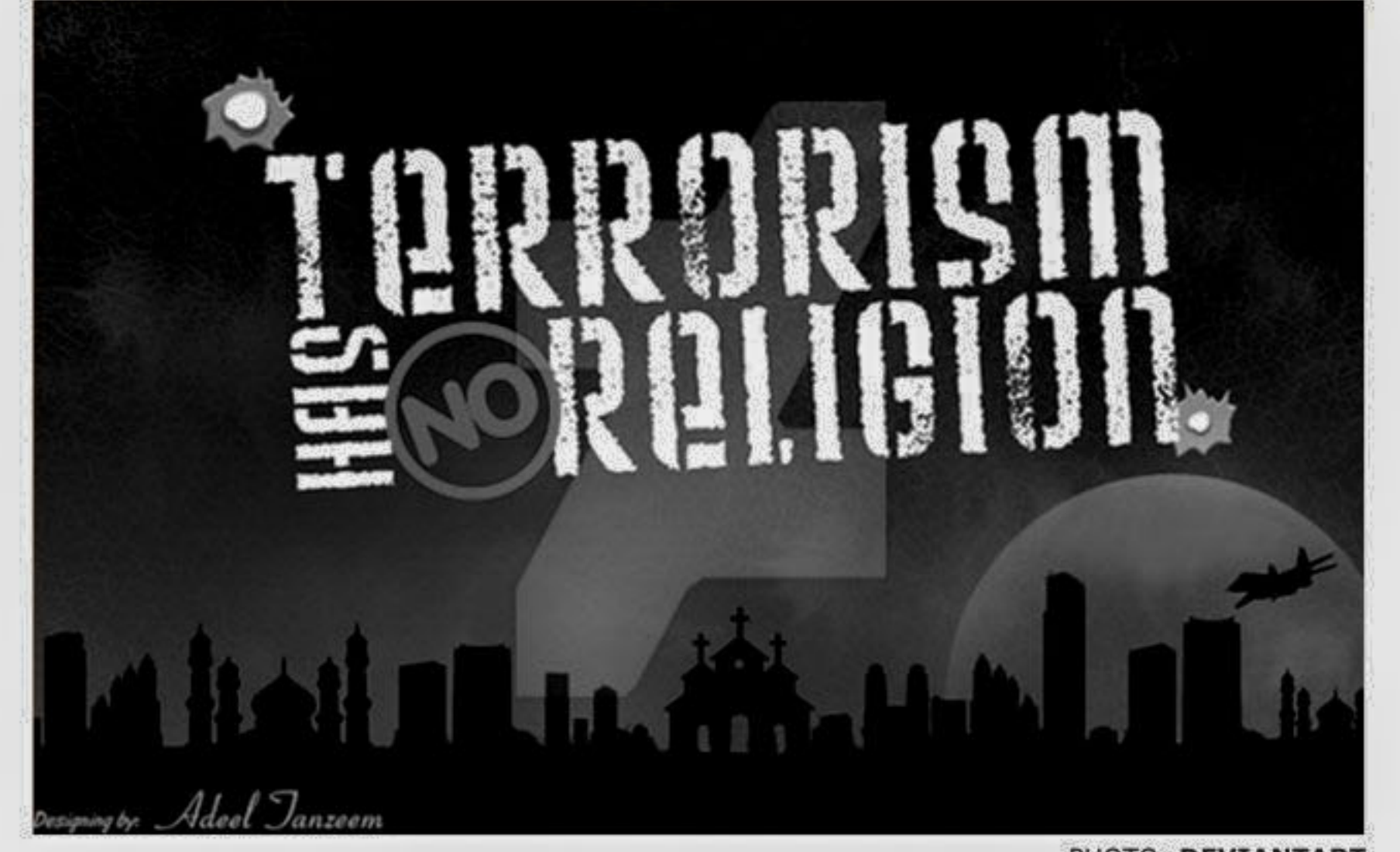


PHOTO: DEVIANTART

million Buddhist Bangladeshis – ranking Bangladesh among the top fifteen countries in the world in terms of Buddhist population. Bangladesh also has 700,000 Christians among its citizens. Exposure to citizens who practice the world's top four religions – Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity – essentially makes Bangladesh a moderate and tolerant nation. This is Bangladesh's most precious heritage. This is what ISIS is attempting to undermine. ISIS terrorists must not be allowed to spoil Bangladesh's communal harmony. The Muslim world made a huge

Muslim terror apparently did not exist in the US before the 1991 Gulf War.

The nomenclature "Islamic State" makes many in the West mistakenly believe that ISIS actually represents mainstream Islam. ISIS is a terrorist death cult that has very little to do with Islam. Thus, to win the propaganda war against ISIS, the world should refer to ISIS by its Arabic acronym, "Daesh."

"Daesh" stands for "al-Dawla al-Islamiya al-Iraq al-Sham" (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant). ISIL or ISIS has threatened to "cut out the tongues" of anyone using the word, because two similar-sounding words, "Daes" (one who crushes something underfoot) and

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Rejoinder

I refer to the commentary by Dr. Sebastian Groh of Saturday 28 May, responding to my article, "Bringing Electricity to More Bangladeshis".

The point of my article was to highlight new findings from distinguished economists from the University of California, Berkeley, Asian Development Bank, and East-West University in Dhaka. Their research was commissioned by Copenhagen Consensus and BRAC to identify opportunities to get more energy and hence more opportunities for Bangladesh, as part of a broader project to identify a wide range of smart policy options for the country.

I pointed out in my article that research suggests that solar panels are not a bad investment – each taka will return almost two takas in social returns – but diesel

generators could have higher returns, helping more Bangladeshis, for a lower cost.

Dr. Groh, the head of a solar consultancy company, dismisses such advice. I worry at any attempts to shut down policy discussion, because I think it's important for everyone – from solar panel salespeople to farmers to the general public – to talk about what works best.

My article pointed out that efforts to use solar lighting have been "seen as a remarkable development success". I noted that there are some technologies that could be better than solar home systems. I think it's unconstructive and over-the-top for Dr. Groh to equate this with "a public defamation of all efforts" to distribute solar in Bangladesh.

The specific research paper on lighting options for Bangladesh was written by A.K. Enamul Haque, Professor of Economics at the East-West University in Dhaka – also a

co-writer of the World Bank report on solar in Bangladesh. Professor Haque may wish to engage with Dr. Groh's technical disagreements.

However, broadly speaking, I would note that Dr. Groh appears not to have read the referenced academic papers that are freely available on the Bangladesh Priorities website.

He finds the academics' climate impact too small for his taste, and says it "raises the question of how these ... climate costs were actually calculated." It is made clear in the paper that these costs are calculated as the extra amount of CO₂ emitted multiplied by the social cost of carbon, as estimated by the biggest meta-study of all peer-reviewed estimates.

Dr. Groh takes issue with my point that money spent on solar electrification is money that can't be spent on diesel

electrification. So much so that he quotes the entirety of my argument: "[g]iven that diesel is five times cheaper [than solar], all the money spent on solar energy for 3 million households could have powered 16 million households with diesel. Smarter spending could have helped 13 million more Bangladeshi households get power cheaper. This shows why it's crucial to study costs and benefits of alternative policies, rather than simply doing what seems to be in trend at the moment."

He then states that it is actually now 4 million households, not 3 million. I thank him for the update. However, I am surprised. Since my argument was a simple comparison of impacts, Groh's larger number simply makes my argument stronger.

Instead of powering 4 million households with solar, the research by

Professor Haque shows that we might have powered 21 million people with diesel – so Groh's correction means we could now have forgone helping 17 million Bangladeshis getting cheaper access to electricity.

Bangladesh Priorities has promoted a conversation at all levels on what works for Bangladesh – and I welcome Dr. Groh's commentary as part of that. This discussion is taking place in the pages of The Daily Star as well as in the offices of ministries and policy think-tanks. It is including young people, a Nobel laureate economist, thought leaders, academics, NGOs, officials, and now a representative of the solar industry. It is very healthy to have such a robust discussion on the vital issue of Bangladesh's future.

Dr. Bjorn Lomborg
President
Copenhagen Consensus