

Timely reminder to the police

Serve and protect the people

WE take note of two comments made by the president and the prime minister in their address marking the inauguration of Police Week-2018. One is that the police should serve the people without harassment and the other is that the police must be accountable for their actions.

It is unfortunate that because of past events, people nowadays are afraid to seek help from the police fearing harassment, intimidation, etc. This does not bode well for the state of law and order in the country. Therefore, as the president said, the police must now put in extra effort to regain the trust of the people that they are there to serve, as it is a constitutional right of the people to get police service.

In regard to the second point, it must be remembered that accountability is very much a function of both the government and the police. So, as much as police high-ups must be held accountable for the actions of their subordinates, the government too must take responsibility when it comes to monitoring the activity of law enforcers, while granting the police the autonomy that it requires to serve the people.

At the same time, we also acknowledge that most in the police are honest men and women who work tirelessly for the people. And that sometimes a few bad apples from within the force and their misdeeds overshadow their good work, which is why the police must take corrective measures and stringent actions against those within its ranks that commit any form of crimes.

Violence against children shoots up

Laws need to be less vague

ACCORDING to a report published by Bangladesh Shishu Adhikar Forum (BSAF), an average of 28 children are murdered and 49 raped in the country every month. Those are horrendous figures for a country where nearly half the population is made up of children! Indeed, going by data published by BSAF, the number of children raped and killed in the outgoing year was 28 and 33 percent higher than in 2016. What is also disturbing is that the law that was passed, the Child Marriage Restraint Act 2017, has a provision in it that allows for marriage of underage children under "special circumstances". This provision, activists say, has actually increased violence against children.

Are we not opening the doors to the possibility of more sexual abuse of children when we have vagueness in the law that allows for "special circumstances" that allows for underage children to be married off after a particular incident of violence has been committed? The facts speak for themselves. With a rise of over seven percent in child rights violation in 2017 over 2016, we need less vagueness and more concrete actions.

Indeed, these sentiments have been echoed by the head of the National Human Rights Commission who has stated on record that we are yet to formulate rules that will govern the Children Act 2013 that would pave the way for setting up a child directorate. All this foot-dragging at the policymaking level is making it possible for more and more children to fall prey to predators in society and now that there are these Acts in place, it is the duty of lawmakers to make them an effective one.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Rohingyas need protection

On January 7, *The Daily Star* published an op-ed titled "Rohingyas need protection, not relocation to Bhashan Char". This is an excellent article that touches on the core issues related to the problem, including how to resettle the Rohingya refugees. Like all refugees, the Rohingyas depend on the goodwill of the host country to survive.

Bangladesh has so far been very welcoming to the Rohingyas who were driven off their land by Myanmar's army and Buddhist mobs. As such, it will be dangerous to repatriate them now without redressing the situation that drove them away in the first place.

Under the circumstances, Bangladesh should continue providing essential services for the refugees in the camps until new homes can be found in a third country. Mohammad Zaman is absolutely right when he says: "Rohingyas need protection, not relocation."

Mahmood Elahi, Canada

A better police force

The prime minister has recently emphasised on the accountability of the police, while the president advised the force to be friendly to common people. These suggestions were very timely.

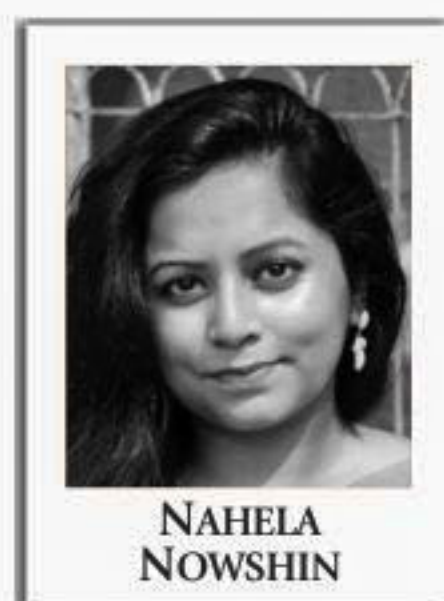
As the Police Week is being observed, we honour brave police officers whose contribution to the society should be remembered. At the same time, we are also concerned about officers getting involved in illicit activities.

We hope the Police Week will lighten up the force's inner conscience and encourage it to be dutiful, professional and respectable.

Iqbal Ali Khan, By email

Paying a high price

Of all the reasons behind the rising cost of living in Dhaka, corruption has always been a root cause



NAHELA NOWSHIN

LIVING costs in Dhaka have soared so high that it's not just low-income groups struggling to make ends meet—the middle class is feeling the squeeze too. According to an analysis by the Consumers Association of Bangladesh (CAB), the cost of living in the capital hit a four-year high in 2017 due to rising prices of essentials and utilities. Onions had the highest price hike last year, followed by other vegetables, household gas, rice, liquid milk and beef. The change in the living costs in 2017 went up by an alarming 8.44 percentage points from 2016. Besides, house rent soared by 8.14 percent and electricity by 6.44 percent in 2017 from that a year ago.

We are talking about the rise in prices of *all basic amenities*—not luxuries that we can do without. If this trend continues, "affordable" living in Dhaka, for the majority at least, will become a fantasy.

While the cost of living for millions of Dhaka residents keeps going higher with little to no change in their income, the situation is not as bleak for many. The lucky few are government staff who, with the full implementation of the eighth national pay scale, saw their salaries go up drastically. And it is because of this that total expenditure in the first quarter of FY2016-17 was 15.5 percent higher than a year earlier. It is also because of this that there was a huge jump in non-development spending—up 19.35 percent to Tk 35,325 crore in the first quarter of FY2016-17 whereas only a year earlier non-development spending was 0.32 percent less than the year before that. The salary scale for non-government school, college and *madrassa* teachers also came into effect in 2017. Last year, it was also reported that the government had doubled pay for local government representatives in city corporations, municipalities, and councils for districts, upazilas and unions.

The reason I am citing these is simply because if you look at the numbers, the massive chunk of total expenditure being spent on government staff and representatives' and others' salaries simply cannot be ignored.

The debate about whether the salary increase of government staff under the eighth national pay scale is justified merits a separate article—and a lot has already been written about it in leading newspapers. But just to recap, economists have largely been in favour of the move to raise the pay of government officials because unlike in many countries, public service in Bangladesh has been less-than-rewarding in terms of pay and so, the boost in salary was seen as a way to attract meritorious candidates and tackle inefficiency in public institutions.

However, at the end of the day, this money is coming straight out of taxpayers' pockets. And whereas economic theory dictates that better wages boost efficiency, reality is far less simple. It has been observed that in developing countries like Bangladesh, good wages are not nearly

enough to eradicate corruption—wealth status of a person matters little when we are talking about bribery. Now we have a situation where (i) taxpayers are paying more towards public servants' salaries, and (ii) corruption in public institutions still exists. So can we really say that we are better off? And how does this affect living costs?

The interlink between government pay raise and inflation is a whole other debate in itself—many sceptics believe pay hikes and inflation don't exactly have a causal relationship. But generally speaking, inflation is almost always one of the results of increased expenditure on government salaries.

The theory is simple. As purchasing power of a certain section of the population increases because their wages are now higher, there is more money in the market,

in two phases—first in March 2017 and then in June 2017. But thankfully, the High Court declared illegal the second phase hike on household consumers since increasing gas prices twice in the same year in a single announcement violated the Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission Act. Mind you, the two-phase hike of 2017 came just two years after gas prices were already hiked in 2015.

The High Court decision was by all means a victory for the people and for the Consumers Association of Bangladesh (CAB) which filed the writ petition challenging the legitimacy of the decision by the Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission to raise gas prices. This was a rare accomplishment by CAB whose influence and strength are far from adequate compared to their counterpart in other countries where consumer



Prices of food items and basic utilities such as gas and electricity soared last year.

PHOTO: STAR

leading to higher inflation. This of course greatly boosts traders' confidence who engage in corrupt (the magic word) practices, ultimately leading to skyrocketing prices of commodities and services.

This summary of the effects of a large portion of total expenditure being eaten away by government salaries is, of course, only part of the story. The spiralling prices of rice last year, as we saw, were attributed to a number of things—flash floods, shortage of rice in public granaries, failure to import rice on time, etc. There are a myriad of factors other than just apportioning a major pie of total expenditure to government pay raise.

All the hullabaloo surrounding gas prices last year is an example of how authorities won't even blink twice before dumping additional expenses on households, even if it means going against the law. The hike happened

rights groups wield significant power. The authority CAB can exercise is limited, which means that it cannot easily bring policy changes that would protect consumer rights.

Of all the things behind the rising cost of living in Dhaka, what remains uniquely inexcusable however is the consistent failure of the government to reduce corruption; it has seeped into every aspect of our lives—and we are quite literally paying the price for it. No sector, no industry, no stage of the supply chain seems to be immune to corruption. And as things now stand, it would be naive to be even slightly optimistic about the future of living affordability in Dhaka. For ordinary people, many of whom already live hand to mouth, the road ahead will be tougher.

Nahela Nowshin is a member of the editorial team at *The Daily Star*.

2018 may be the tipping point for tackling climate change

AS we move into the new year it is perhaps appropriate to reflect on the significant actions and developments that occurred in 2017 in the arena of climate change, both globally and nationally, and do some crystal-ball-gazing into the future.

In my view, there has been a significant number of positive developments and successes that the world has achieved in tackling the challenge of climate change during 2017.

I will start with the global level in terms of the implementation of the historic Paris Agreement on climate change and then the national level in Bangladesh.

The first development was the way that the rest of the world reacted to the withdrawal by President Donald Trump from the Paris Agreement. Such a move by the

Furthermore, France and Europe also agreed to make up the finance that the US was supposed to have provided to the USD 100 billion a year from 2020 onwards, promised by the developed countries to help developing countries tackle climate change through both mitigation as well as adaptation through the Green Climate Fund (GCF).

A second aspect related to the Trump withdrawal was how Americans stepped up to "remain" in the Agreement in defiance of their president. From the Governor of California to the Mayor of New York to the heads of companies like Walmart and Tesla, many actors in the US have vowed to fulfil the commitments made by President Obama in Paris in 2015.

The third, and perhaps even more significant, achievement was that renewable energy like solar and wind has become cheaper than fossil fuels and the development of battery technology to store energy enabled renewable energy to be delivered on a large scale, which was not the case before.

One manifestation of this development is the fact that

Another manifestation is the way that vehicles using batteries are set to replace petrol-driven vehicles in the road transport sector globally within a decade. As a result, every major vehicle manufacturer in the world is actively making battery-based vehicles.

The fourth development is a very significant one for vulnerable countries like Bangladesh, which is the scientifically unambiguous attribution of the fact that severe climate impacts, including the hurricanes in the Caribbean, the floods in South Asia, the wildfires in California, and the heatwave in Australia are indeed connected to human-induced climate change. Indeed, even the severe cold weather being felt by the people in North Eastern America this week is also attributable to anthropogenic interference in the global climate.

It is important to note that these severe weather events would have happened even without climate change, but their severity and intensity was enhanced because of anthropogenic climate change (and hence they became more destructive than they would have been without climate change).

Finally, at the national level in Bangladesh, we have also achieved several successes in 2017.

The first one is the high-level prioritisation by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, the government and the Planning Commission towards implementing the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) across the different ministries of the government. SDG Goal 13, which is on climate change, is effectively equivalent to implementing the Paris Agreement. Hence Bangladesh has put the highest political importance on implementing the Paris Agreement on climate change along with attaining the other SDGs by 2030.

The second achievement is the accreditation of two Bangladeshi institutions, namely the Palli Karma-Sahayak Foundation (PKSF) and Infrastructure Development Company Limited (IDCOL), which makes them eligible to access climate finance from the GCF. This is a significant achievement for which both the institutions as well as the Economic Relations Division (ERD) of the government deserve congratulations. Of course, the next challenge to actually get funds from the GCF still remains, but we can look forward to that taking place within 2018.

The final development is the fact that Bangladesh has decided to officially graduate from being a Least Developed Country (LDC) within the next few years and begun to plan ways to make our economy less aid-dependent and more self-reliant. This now opens the way for the private sector to make major shifts in investment away from less environment- and people-friendly areas and towards a cleaner and greener economy.

This last point is still to be reached but it is certainly within reach within a few years.

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A view of the Baie Nettle beach in Marigot ahead of the arrival of Hurricane Irma in September 2017.

PHOTO: AFP

president of the United States of America at any time in the past would have scuppered the agreement. However, in 2017, not only did no other country leave the Paris Agreement, but China stepped up to take on the mantle of leadership by reiterating its commitment towards implementing the agreement.

even Republican Governors of some States in the US have been investing in large-scale utility-level renewable energy supply while ignoring coal, despite Trump's incentives for using more coal. As a result, these market forces have already driven the US to be well on track to meet Obama's commitment under the Paris Agreement.