

High Court’s directives time-befitting

Prevention of food adulteration should be govt's first priority

WE welcome the High Court’s directive to immediately remove from the market 52 food items that have been found to be substandard by Bangladesh Standards and Testing Institution (BSTI). The substandard food items include daily essentials such as salt, turmeric and chilli powder, among other things. In some items, heavy metals such as lead were found higher than the permissible limits. So the HC’s concerns and directives regarding food adulteration are very timely. Having said so, we think it needs to be made clear as to what the BSTI meant by terming some of the products substandard but not “harmful” to human beings. It needs to clarify what constitutes a substandard food and what are the parameters. When a daily essential such as salt, produced by the two big companies that hold approximately 20 percent of the market share, is found to be substandard, it should ring the alarm bell. Such products should not have been in the market in the first place.

As the HC has urged the government “to declare a war on food adulteration the way it was done in case of narcotics,” we cannot but recall the way the anti-narcotic drive was carried out, where only the small-time drug peddlers were targeted, while the kingpins escaped the net. We think there should be strict institutional monitoring of the drives to make sure that these are carried out in an efficient and transparent manner and only those in breach of the rules and regulations are held to account.

Building training academy in char land

Expensive in terms of money and ecology

THE Rajshahi prison authorities have sought allotment of some 100 acres of char land in the Padma River in the city’s Sreerampur area to build a prison training academy. The reason being given is that no other suitable land has been found to build the complex. Locals are against the idea for the reason that these lands remain submerged during the rainy season and the forest in the area has trees that are over a hundred years old. If the ministry of land leased the area for the proposed construction, it would require land filling and the decimation of some 5,000 trees.

While there is a need for the police administration to build the necessary infrastructure to train police personnel, developing this particular spot for an academy complex would threaten the forest cover and disturb the ecological balance that the forest provides. On top of that, the land in question is flood-prone and would require significant expenditure in land filling and dredging to protect it from future inundation. It is understood that the prison authorities have already marked some 800 trees for felling to make way for the construction of the complex, and people of the locality fear that it will mean irrecoverable damage to the forest with its ancient trees.

A visit to the area has found that the authorities have set up several signboards on the flood control embankment of the area, declaring the proposed site of the academy. Precious forest areas need to be conserved, not decimated. Forest land should not be leased to any party, even if it is for public construction, because it sets the precedence for private entities to follow suit. We hope that an alternative site would be found for the academy that does not disturb the environment or the ecological balance of the area.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Minimising income inequality

There is no denying that Bangladesh has achieved remarkable economic progress. It has begun its graduation process from the Least Developed Country (LDC) group and is set to become a middle-income economy by 2021. The main heroes of this tremendous feat are the expatriate workers, workers of the RMG sector, farmers and thriving entrepreneurs. Despite this success, there is a persistent rise in income inequality and unequal distribution of wealth among different groups of income earners. According to the Gini coefficient, an indicator of the disparity of wealth and income, our scores are 0.74 and 0.48 respectively, which is quite worrisome.

Excessive corruption, lack of job opportunities and development projects in the rural areas are some of the contributors to this rampant inequality. So a graduation from the LDC group would be meaningless if the benefits of growth do not trickle down to the people of the middle and bottom tiers of the economic pyramid.

The government should spend more on social welfare projects and education in order to reduce inequality. Strong and inclusive growth should be promoted through the redistribution of wealth and income, fruitful investments and proper implementation of fiscal and monetary policies. Finally, all forms of corruption in the administration should be eliminated.

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Rise of the executive and the decline of civil liberties



THE OVERTON WINDOW
ERESH OMAR JAMAL

society at large. The other is the decline of civil liberties—some of which, such as the right to privacy and free speech, people are now “willingly” compromising on, or no longer view as inalienable even.

That means civil liberties, in our times, have become somewhat malleable. But what should it actually mean? According to American attorney and journalist Glenn Greenwald, civil liberties refer to “the list of limitations that we have imposed on the government, in terms of the power that they exercise and what it is that they can do to us.” These “limitations are not ambiguous, conditional or circumstantial,” but exist in “all circumstances” and can legitimately “be claimed by all groups and all people”, as they “are really ‘absolute’ in their nature”. Limitations that are dictated by the constitution—another somewhat forgotten or overlooked concept of our time.

As Thomas Paine wrote in his book *Rights of Man*, “A constitution is not a thing in name only, but in fact. It has not an ideal, but a real existence.” American attorney Patrick Henry, similarly wrote, “A government is only the creature of a constitution. The constitution is not an instrument for the government to restrain the people, it is an instrument for the people to restrain the government.” And as such, according to Paine, the constitution “contains the principles on which the government shall be established”—in its entirety and as separate branches—including “the power which the executive part of the government shall have.”

As the idea of the constitution slowly got relegated to the realm of being only a piece of paper, the executive part of governments around the world has been able to cross those limits, step-by-step. And here we can find similarities between Bangladesh and the US even.

To take one example, during his

presidency, president Obama “not only asserted” the power to target US citizens for execution without any charges or due process, but also “exercised it in practice” to justify the killing of Anwar al-Awlaki in 2011 and his 16-year-old American-born son Abdulrahman citing the controversial law known as the Authorisation to Use Military Force, according to *The Guardian* (“US cited controversial law in decision to kill American citizen by drone,” June 23, 2014). Which is what all Bangladeshis understand and term more simply as extrajudicial killings—perhaps because its occurrence is so common here.



But what led to this concentration of power at the hands of the executive branch that allowed it to so blatantly cross constitutional limits and violate the rights of individuals?

Firstly, it has been achieved under the framework of endless conflicts, where nations portray themselves to be constantly under some kind of threat, or at war, without clearly identifying with whom and where. If we look at history, we see that it has always been the case during wartime that political leaders have been able to exert powers without limitations. As the famous Roman

statesman Cicero said, “When men take up arms, the law falls mute.”

In Bangladesh, that threat has sometimes been defined as “anti-liberation” forces—without describing what that actually means. Even though Bangladesh has been an independent nation for nearly 50 years, politicians continue to make the claim that someone, somewhere, wants to return it to a state of subservience to another country.

The second reason that has led to limitless government power is the perception among people that the violation of rights is only affecting

originally applied, once such abuses have been institutionalised—at which point it becomes increasingly difficult to object to them.

We have seen this in the US through the use of the Patriot Act. It was first used to violate the rights of Muslims after 9/11, but has now been expanded to include everyone else—for example, the targeting of the entire US population through mass surveillance.

The third reason, which is closely associated with the second, is the role that partisan allegiance plays in how people react to rights violations. In 2008, the CIA prepared a top-secret report—only known about after it was leaked to WikiLeaks who published it—in the middle of the US presidential election which was quite extraordinary. It stated that there was a rising anti-war sentiment in the west, which the CIA feared would quickly get out of hand unless it was immediately contained.

The report explicitly concluded that the best weapon to arrest this trend would be if the US elected Barack Obama as president. The reason being that once he (a black male) became the face of US wars, instead of George Bush (a white male), people who were inclined to oppose them under Bush would begin to view them more favourably.

And what happened eventually? The US openly waged seven wars under Obama—more than it did under Bush—with the US and global anti-war movements largely remaining silent.

The lesson that should be drawn from this is that constitutional rights and civil liberties cannot be safeguarded in the long run simply by going to the ballot-box once every few years, and electing a political leader who we like or believe we can trust—but by citizens banding together across “group identities” to demand that no matter who wields power, the government respects its constitutional limits.

This is not a new lesson but a very old one. One we have had to relearn time and again.

And although it may seem too idealistic to some, history teaches us, as it is doing now, that it is the most practical, and perhaps only viable, alternative that we have ever come up with to one or another form of despotism.

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PROJECT SYNDICATE

How social protection can empower women

PHAKAMA NTSHONGWANA, NICOLA ANSELL, and KEETIE ROELÉN

TO live in dignity, free from want, is a fundamental human right. Social protection is key to upholding that right, ensuring that people can escape poverty and insecurity. That is why social protection is at the centre of strategies for ending global poverty by 2030, the first of 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. But, if those strategies are to work, they must go further—especially with regard to women.

In recent years, many countries—particularly in Africa, Asia, and Latin America and the Caribbean—have made great strides toward improving social protection. But most policies and initiatives are inadequate, and nearly four billion people still lack any social protection at all. Because women are the leading providers of unpaid labour, they are the most likely to suffer from this failure.

The issue of social protection was at the top of the agenda at the UN’s 63rd Commission for the Status of Women, held last month. NGOs, activists, policymakers, and academics called for increased support for women in the labour market, including initiatives to encourage employment and the provision of social support, such as childcare services. Pointing to successful countries like Iceland and Norway, participants agreed that only on a level playing field, with no gender pay gap, can the full potential of girls and women be realised.

The first step toward designing effective strategies is to gain a more nuanced understanding of the struggles many women endure as they attempt to juggle vast responsibilities. Beyond the “invisible” work of household maintenance and caregiving, women in low-income households often are expected to contribute financially. Women constitute the majority of frontline workers in public-service sectors, for example.

The pressure on single mothers is particularly intense. Being a single parent is challenging in any context. But it is all the more difficult for a poor woman with limited education or training and little or no access to social protection or support. Add to that the pejorative discourse about single motherhood and “dependency culture,” and the situation can be overwhelming.

Yet that is the reality women face in many countries. In South Africa, for example, working-age adults receive no social assistance unless they are disabled. While there is a means-tested benefit programme for children’s primary caregivers, the Child Support Grant, the funds dispensed are insufficient to meet children’s needs. In any case, those who accept social support are often looked down upon by their communities.

In Haiti, women seeking employment do receive some support, through initiatives by the local organisation Fonkoze. But little attention is paid to the specific challenges faced by women, who are also expected to continue to act as primary caregivers for their families.

With no social support, poor mothers are often left with an impossible choice: either leave their children without sufficient quality care or forego an income that they badly need. When social security provision for impoverished caregivers is linked to an obligation to seek



A woman sits in the middle of wreckage following a deadly earthquake in Haiti in 2010.

PHOTO: AFP

work, even that choice is taken away.

Addressing these challenges will require governments to expand and rethink social-protection programmes. For starters, it is important to recognise that women are not simply seeking “free money.” While young men may tend to feel greater shame about receiving “unearned” income, owing to cultural expectations that men must be providers, young women also tend to view themselves as providers, not simply nurturers.

Evidence from poverty-targeted cash-transfer programmes in rural Malawi and Lesotho reinforces this conclusion. While poor women appreciate much-needed cash, they are often uncomfortable with their status as recipients of state benefits, and are keen to make productive contributions to their families and communities. That is why it is vital to deliver to women genuine income-generating opportunities, rather than simply distributing small cash payments that keep them close to the poverty line.

Moreover, it is not every woman’s goal solely to act as a caregiver. Women have ambitions of their own. Those ambitions may focus on providing for their families, whether as a caregiver or a breadwinner, but that is not always the case. They need support that enables them to choose the contributions they want to make, and access to relevant, meaningful work.

Involving men and other caregivers is vital to build effective social protection systems that work for women, though this must be accompanied by good

and affordable health services, schools, and other facilities. Programmes focused on boosting social protection and expanding employment opportunities for women must adjust the language they use, in order to challenge assumptions about women as the main providers of unpaid labour. Finally, efforts should be made to strengthen community relationships, in order to cultivate the trust needed to revive the type of childcare that predominated before the ideal of self-contained households, with one male provider and one female caregiver, took hold.

Evidence from around the world demonstrates the urgent need for social-protection policies and initiatives that enable women not just to survive, but to thrive. This means giving women the support they need to participate in the labour force—including education and training—while taking into account the true extent of their responsibilities. Above all, it means empowering women to choose the balance between employment and caregiving that works best for them.

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