

## Implementing HC directives is now the challenge

### High Court's landmark verdict to stop river grabbing and pollution

We commend the High Court for declaring river grabbing and pollution criminal offences in a landmark judgment. As the full text of the HC verdict was released on July 1, we have come to know of the 17-point directive the HC has given in an attempt to save our rivers, most of which are now in a deplorable condition because of continuous grabbing by local influential people and pollution by indifferent and non-compliant industries. What is more, such acts of complete disregard for our rivers take place under the nose of the local administration, and sometimes in connivance with the administration itself.

The High Court's directives are all very well-thought-out and, if implemented, can actually go a long way in saving our rivers. But for that, those who are entrusted with implementing the directives should be compliant. As the court has directed that no river grabbers or polluters can participate in any elections, the EC must ensure that. Likewise, the Bangladesh Bank must make sure that no banks give loans to these people. The government must also play its part by making a list of the river grabbers and publicising their names in the media and ensuring that these people get the punishment they deserve for destroying our lifelines that these rivers are. The National River Conservation Commission (NRCC), being the legal guardian of all rivers, must act like the "parents" of these rivers. But for the NRCC to play its part, it must be empowered and the river commission law must be amended incorporating stringent provisions for the offenders.

After the HC directives, we hope that there will be no foot-dragging by the relevant agencies in carrying out their responsibilities. And we also hope that no political influence can stop the authorities from taking action against the offenders.

## The latest national budget

### A mixed bag of goods

THE new budget, under the stewardship of a new finance minister, has been passed in parliament and it has both good and not-so-good sides. If we look at the strengths, a lot of emphasis has been placed on internal resource mobilisation. Although our past experience tells us that actual revenue collection has consistently fallen short against projected revenue collection. There is much consternation amongst business groups regarding the new VAT law and there is fear that it will bring further burden on businesses that the consumer will ultimately have to bear. Without addressing the inefficiencies of tax administration, there is pessimism that nothing substantial will happen in this area.

Expatriate workers will be given incentives to encourage them to send their earnings through formal channels which, if it works, will boost foreign reserves. The budget has focused on increased public investment by local and state enterprises. Yet, without curbing widespread graft, how much of that money will be well spent is in doubt. Details on how fresh employment for 30 million people will be achieved remain unclear. The budget also fails to give us any light on how to address the issue of non-performing loans (NPLs) that have risen to astronomical figures in the banking sector. We get no insight as to how the government intends to address this vital issue.

The current budget brings bad news for fixed-income groups who depend on savings tools as the rate of source tax on such instruments is set to double from five percent to 10 percent. The government has allowed for the white washing of black money once again but we ask the merit of this decision since it will discourage people to pay taxes, especially at a time when the government is placing huge emphasis on income tax collection. The price of gas has been hiked at various levels raising the fear of increase in transportation costs and putting greater pressure at household levels. In the final analysis of things, something needs to be done in the rate of utilisation of the ADP as it has become customary to spend the bulk of it in the closing months of the fiscal year, which does not benefit the people in any way and opens up the possibility of graft at various levels.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Risks of using unlabelled beauty, healthcare products

Beauty and healthcare products are necessities for females of all ages and their popularity is soaring increasingly. Young women are particularly conscious about their skin care routine for which they prefer buying authentic imported products.

However, recent incidents show that popular outlets of cosmetics, both online and physical—those which claim to deliver imported products—are selling products without labels. This is creating confusion among the consumers about the authenticity of the products. It is impossible to find out if these are imported legally or have been brought from Chawkbazar. Using these products can lead to various kinds of skin diseases including skin cancer.

Recently, the Directorate of National Consumer Rights Protection (DNCRP) fined several cosmetic shops at Bashundhara City Shopping Complex and shut down some of them temporarily. This step is appreciable; however, creating awareness among women about the risks of using unlabelled products has become crucial. They need to be more cautious about the health repercussions of using these products.

Faria Chowdhury, East West University



NAZNIN TITHI

I assume there is hardly anyone amongst us who has never felt cheated after buying a product or taking a service in exchange for money. On many occasions, I have felt that I was overcharged for the food items I bought from the local bazaar because I never found the price list hung anywhere. I was often overcharged for a bottle of water or the carbonated drinks at restaurants. Many times, I felt that the money I paid for a particular service was completely unreasonable given how unsatisfactory the service was.

Last year, I went to one of the reputed private hospitals in the city to see a doctor for my knee pain. I paid Tk 1,200 as visiting fee. After listening to my problems, the doctor said I needed physiotherapy, so he directed me to the physiotherapy room. Having paid Tk 2,000 for physiotherapy and after around half an hour of wait, I was called inside by a young woman. As I entered the curtained area, the woman handed me a paper where a set of exercises were shown in pictures. She took hardly three minutes to show me the exercises. And that was it. Being extremely disappointed at their service, I wanted to complain to the authorities. I wrote a one-page complaint and put it in the complaint box, as directed by the receptionist. She (the receptionist) told me that the people in charge of looking into the complaints would call me the next day to listen to my grievances. I waited. But no one called.

Just a few days before last Eid, when I came across the news of someone filing a complaint with the Directorate of National Consumer Rights Protection (DNCRP) against a popular fashion brand in the country, for discrepancies in pricing labels of two similar products, I suddenly became aware of the fact that I have been totally clueless about protecting my rights as a consumer all these years. The complaint against the Uttara outlet was that it charged Tk 1,315 for a panjabi on May 31 which was sold at Tk 730 on May 25. As the DNCRP found the allegations to be true, it slapped a fine of Tk 4.5 lakh on the outlet. Later, the fashion brand also admitted that the price tags were wrongly placed.

The events that followed took the social media by storm. When within 24 hours of the DNCRP's drive at the said outlet, the magistrate who led the drive was transferred outside Dhaka (although later his transfer order was cancelled), people on Facebook started expressing their grievances against the fashion brand, which, according to many, has been charging exorbitantly high prices for their products. Some even urged the consumers to boycott the brand altogether. There were also people who expressed their

views in favour of the brand, with good intentions and logic, of course.

For me, the incident was an eye-opener. Although I had some idea about DNCRP and their activities, I had very little knowledge about the procedures through which a cheated consumer can lodge complaints against any shops or service providers. Sadly, I am not the only one. There are many among us who do not have any knowledge about laws on consumer rights.

According to a survey by a consumers' rights forum, 36.20 percent people in the country are not aware of the existence of a law to protect the rights of the consumers, while 47.55 percent people do not know that there exists a body (the Directorate of National Consumer Rights Protection) to protect their rights (Prothom Alo, August

deliver less [sic] quantity of goods than the weight offered to the consumers while delivering or selling any goods; to make or manufacture any fake goods or medicine; to sell or offer to sell goods or medicine the date of which has expired; or to do an act which may endanger life or security of the consumer and which is prohibited by any Act or rules."

Consumers can file complaints with the DNCRP under this Act if any of their rights mentioned above are violated. For example, if healthcare professionals, hospitals and clinics take exorbitant prices for their services, or the patients' rights are violated in any way, they can file complaints. Similarly, when the ride-sharing services hike their fares indiscriminately during holidays and rush hours, the affected passengers can also

have not been included in the law. The Act needs to have specific guidelines to deal with the issue of medical negligence and the negligent healthcare institutions. Also, the government needs to finalise the draft amendments to the Act to extend its vicinity for the greater protection of the consumers.

In the last few months, we have often come across news of food adulteration in the media. Essential food items such as milk and poultry have been found to be contaminated with numerous types of antibiotics, harmful bacteria and other elements. Very recently, date expired medicines were found in 93 percent pharmacies of the capital where the DNCRP has conducted drives.

Although there are different agencies and government bodies including



Consumers should play their part to protect their rights.

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

20, 2017). This explains to some extent why violation of consumers' rights is so prevalent here.

In order to protect the rights of the consumers and to prevent anti-consumer rights practices, the Consumers' Rights Protection Act, 2009 was formulated which came into force in 2010. Under this Act, some of the anti-consumer rights practices were identified as: "to sell or offer to sell any goods, medicine or service at a higher price than the fixed price; to sell or offer to sell adulterated goods or medicine knowingly; to sell or offer to sell any goods containing any ingredient which is extremely injurious to human health and the mixing of which with any food item is prohibited under any Act or rules; to deceive consumers by untrue or false advertisement for the purpose of selling any goods or services; not to sell or deliver properly any goods or services promised to sell or deliver in consideration of money; to sell or

file complaints. Recently, the Consumers Association of Bangladesh (CAB) has introduced a call centre for the consumers to file complaints. If a complaint is proved to be true after investigation, there is also the scope for the complainant to get awarded a fourth of the realised fine (penalty) slapped on businesses for violation.

Speaking to an official of the DNCRP recently, about my experience at the hospital, I learned that I could actually lodge a complaint under this Act for not getting a satisfactory service from the hospital, but it should have been done within 30 days of the incident. What I needed was give them, in writing, detailed information about what happened to me.

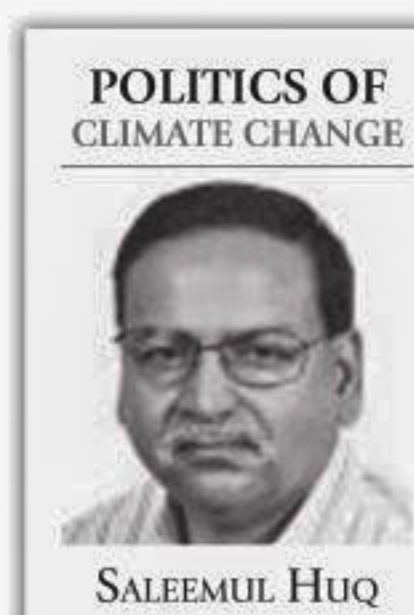
So the Act, in fact, is very effective despite having some drawbacks: for example, under this Act, a cheated consumer cannot directly lodge any criminal suit against anyone. Also, many of the areas where violations are rampant

DNCRP, Consumers Association of Bangladesh (CAB), Bangladesh Standard Testing Institute (BSTI) to deal with these issues, the consumers themselves should also be aware of their rights and do whatever they can at the individual level, because individual efforts to fight against anti-consumer rights practices can go a long way to prevent such corrupt practices.

At the time of writing this article, I came to know from a news report that DNCRP has taken action against a resort in Gazipur, after a consumer had filed complaints against them a few months ago for poor service, bad behaviour and for making false advertisement of their services. This incident will surely send a signal to other corrupt businesses who are regularly violating consumers' rights without having to face any action.

Naznin Tithi is a member of the editorial team at The Daily Star.

## Climate change diplomacy is now the challenge



SALEEMUL HUQ

LAST May, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was invited to the annual leaders' high-level meeting in Munich, Germany, to speak on the growing concern about the global security threats due to climate change.

On July 10, Bangladesh will be hosting President Heine of the Marshall Islands who heads the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF)—which is a group of nearly 50 of the most climate vulnerable developing countries—which Bangladesh was a founding member and head of for a few years.

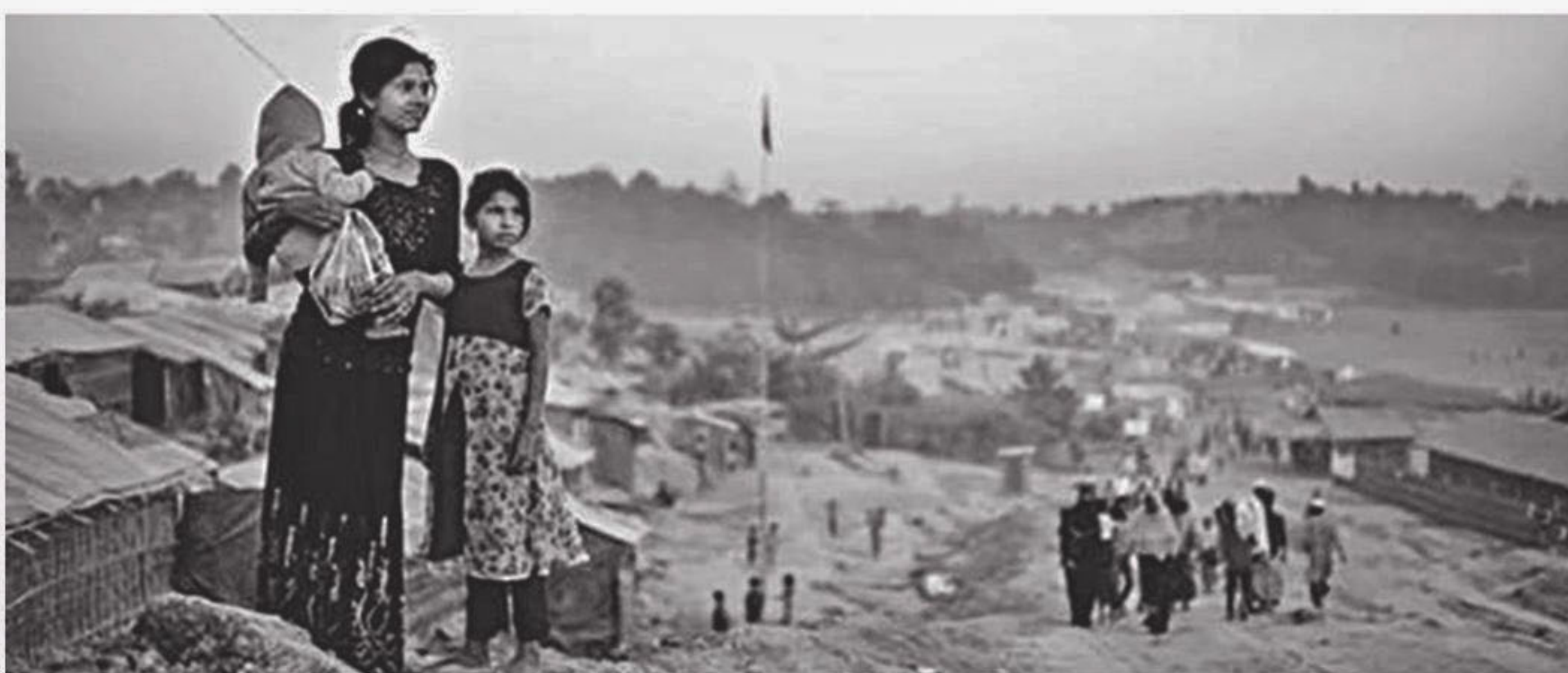
At the same time, we are expecting Kristalina Georgieva, the Chief Executive Officer of the World Bank along with Ban Ki-moon, the former Secretary General of the United Nations who are two of the three co-chairs of the Global Commission on Adaptation (GCA).

In September this year, the current Secretary General of the UN, Antonio Guterres, called for a Climate Change Summit where the invitees are only the leaders who he feels are being proactive in tackling climate change. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina of Bangladesh is one of those leaders invited to the adaptation and resilience track of the summit. He has asked leaders to come with "plans not speeches" and also to bring "offers" as well as "asks".

It is therefore clear that Bangladesh has already embarked on climate change diplomacy under the leadership of the prime minister herself.

Here are some suggestions on how Bangladesh can take this issue further in future.

First, the prime minister can take a message from the people of Bangladesh



Rohingya refugees at the Thankhali refugee camp in Bangladesh.

PHOTO: ED JONES/AFP

that the country wants to change the narrative of it being regarded as one of the world's most vulnerable countries to climate change, to becoming one of the most resilient ones. Also associated with this message is that, it is a whole-of-society approach where, under the leadership of the government, it is attempting to involve civil society, academics, youth, the private sector and media in a collective enterprise to become more resilient.

The second message that should be upheld is how Bangladesh has been investing in enhancing its own resilience for over a decade with its own budget and has learned a great deal about local level adaptation in particular and how to integrate climate change planning into national, sectoral and local level plans—something that would be required of all countries sooner rather than later. Bangladesh will be happy to share its own experiential knowledge in tackling climate change both South-South as well as South-

North. In this respect, we should invite representatives from other countries to join the annual Gobeshona conference every January, where current research on tackling climate change in Bangladesh is shared with each other.

My third and final suggestion is to include climate change diplomacy in the regular training of every new batch of foreign service officers of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Foreign Service Academy has done such a course on a pilot basis last year which went quite well. It should become a regular feature as every Bangladeshi diplomat should be climate change literate from now on.

It is also worth considering the appointment of a climate change envoy as many countries have done. Such a person should be a senior (or recently retired) diplomat with experience in the UN body (e.g. in New York or Geneva).

Finally, let me suggest a link between the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh and

climate change which gives rise to another issue. The fact that even though they were not climate refugees, they are now living in an extreme climatically vulnerable location and conditions. Their vulnerability to climate change adds a new dimension to their humanitarian needs and adds to the responsibility of the global community to do more to ensure their return to Myanmar as well as look after them while they remain in Bangladesh.

As the world's biggest existential crisis, climate change is a global problem in which Bangladesh by virtue of being one of the most vulnerable countries, is also at the forefront of learning how to tackle its problems. While we have not solved the problems, we are learning fast and we should use this to project Bangladesh as a leader in tackling global climate change.

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