6 | The Paily Star

The Paily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR LATE S. M. ALI

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Evaluate the return from subsidies

What is the government's

long-term plan?

THE government's subsidy expenditure has increased by a mammoth 29.36 percent this fiscal year to Tk 46,385 crore, with allocation for exporters going up by a staggering 70.63 percent year-on-year to Tk 6,825 crore. While we understand that certain core sectors like the export sector need subsidies in order to be competitive—particularly those that are trying to break into the global market and can help diversify our lopsided export basket the economic rationale for providing such subsidies must be justified. And for that there must be proper evaluation to check whether government subsidies are being used to optimise the benefits.

Proper assessment needs to be carried out to find out what exactly it is that we are getting in return. And the government should make it clear whether it has already done the necessary evaluation and, if not, when and how exactly it plans to do so. It is also important for the government to reveal for how long it plans to continue with its subsidy programme, whether subsidies would be provided non-stop or episodically, and what its long-term vision is.

In this context, we welcome the government's decision to provide subsidies to the expatriate workers but hold the opinion that in order to encourage migrant workers to use the official channel to send in remittance, the government should consider increasing the existing subsidy level from two percent to at least five percent to encourage migrants to desist from resorting to hundi.

However, we are disappointed that the agricultural sector has been ignored in this regard. This sector needs government support as much as, if not more than, the other sectors. The government should do a lot more for the farmers who have suffered substantially during the last boro season and had incurred huge losses. We hope this would be taken into consideration and the farmers would be adequately subsidised.

Shocking picture of juvenile crimes

Over 300 teenagers involved in 99 murders!

T is shocking and worrisome to learn from a Prothom Alo report that over 300 children have been involved in almost 100 murders in the capital in the last 16 years. According to the report, the victims were also teenagers, most of whom were aged between 12 and 17. While during the last one and a half years, as many as 13 children were murdered by other children in the capital, only in the last 10 days, two teenagers were killed. By analysing at least 30 of the murders, the daily has revealed some major reasons why these murders took place which include senior-junior clash, establishing supremacy in an area, drug trade and abuse, relationship-related conflicts, among other reasons.

As more and more children are getting involved in crimes such as murder, rape and drug abuse, and mugging, we need to address the root causes of such criminal behaviour among teenagers. We need to examine why children from middle-income and rich backgrounds—who have access to education and are supposed to be brought up in better environments—are getting involved in such crimes. Sociologists suggest that families should focus on teaching their children moral values and ethics which can resist various kinds of social malaise such as violent crimes and drug abuse. But that alone will not prevent children in our society from getting involved in crimes. We need to understand that juvenile crimes are not isolated incidents and that various criminal gangs in the city use teenagers to commit bigger crimes. So, in order to prevent children from indulging in criminal behaviour, we need to stop the bigger criminals first. Most of all, the general culture of impunity that these criminals enjoy must be broken to put an end to all kinds of crimes that are happening in our society at present.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Save the children from sexual abuse

It was shocking to know that a seven-year-old girl in Wari was brutally murdered in a vacant flat after being raped. It is sickening that not even children are safe from the preying eyes of such perverted men. These incidents have a profound impact on children, among others.

It's obvious that women and children are not safe anywhere, not even in their own homes. The fact that some people find the audacity to exploit children's vulnerability tells a lot about the direction in which we as a society are heading. Sometimes the families of victims stay quiet, worried about their reputation in society.

We need to address why this kind of crimes is taking place despite various measures by the responsible departments. I think, at this stage, only strict punishment for the perpetrators, proper implementation of the law and greater parental vigilance can save our children from sexual abuse. Md Zillur Rahaman, by email

A recipe for a public health disaster



NAHELA NOWSHIN

OING by numerous recent news reports, we have good reason to be worried about the state of food safety in the country. One would think it's a miracle that a full-blown public health crisis hasn't broken out yet, especially since even staple foods are clearly not safe. Lead and pesticides have been found in milk, and poultry feed has been found to be laced with antibiotics,

among a host of contaminated food products being sold in the market. What is so concerning is that the problem seems to have ballooned to biblical proportions and it is hard to even wrap one's head around the entire debacle.

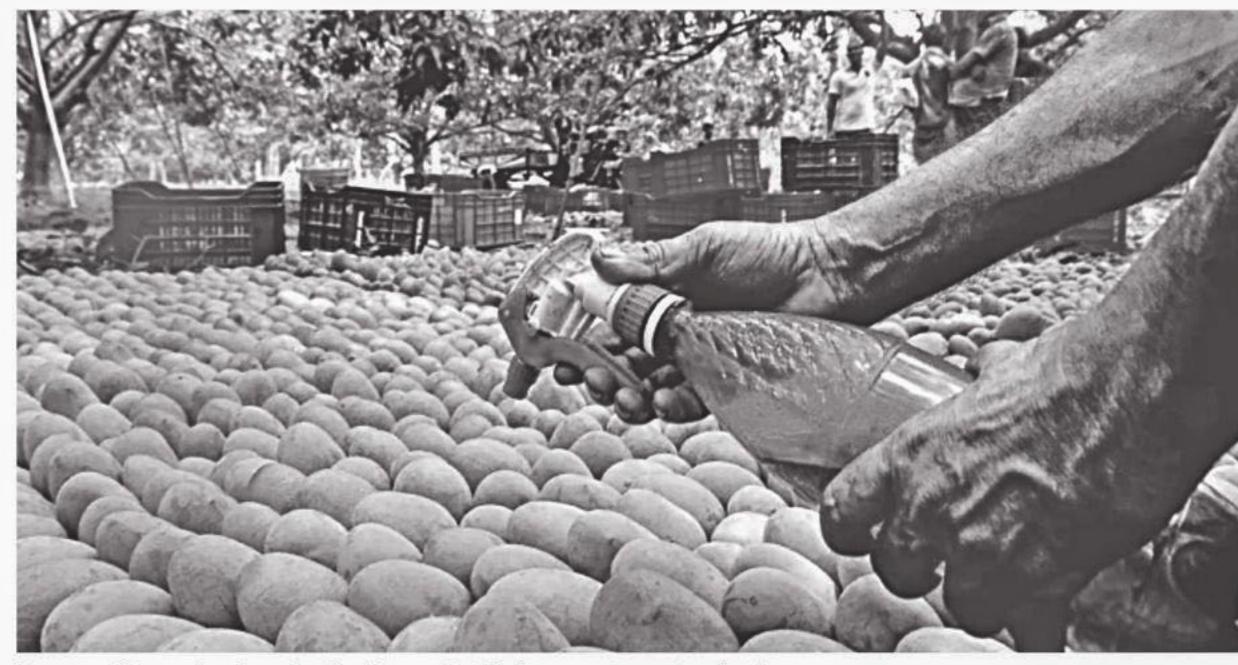
One thing, however, is clear: our right to safe food is among a long list of casualties in the absence of the rule of law. But here's the thing: unlike many other rights violations and malpractices that we regularly turn a blind eye to and simply wish away, food adulteration isn't something that we can easily ignore without risking our health and wellbeing. Nothing can be a greater danger to public health than the presence of adulterants, potentially at a mass scale, in the food we eat. And the fact of the matter is that we continue to be in the dark about the extent to which the food we are routinely consuming is contaminated.

Since the beginning of this year, hordes of news reports have emerged that once again reflect the sorry state of food safety in Bangladesh. Take poultry for example. A report in January claimed that the government banned the import and sale of meat and bone meal (MBM), a kind of poultry feed, which can cause anthrax, antibiotic resistance and cancer. MBM was banned in many countries including India, which banned it in 2001, and the EU in 1994. Apart from MBM, various types of antibiotics in almost 50 percent poultry feed samples of 14 brands collected from four districts were also found by a government study. This is beyond concerning because we derive a large part of our protein intake—36 percent, according to the fisheries and livestock ministry—from poultry. It goes without saying that the presence of MBM and antibiotics in poultry feed samples could spell disaster for public health in ways beyond our imagination.

The government must have figured out by now that mere bans on paper do not work. After all, the use of antibiotics in poultry feed is "banned" and even import of MBM containing harmful elements is illegal. But traders have been quite successful in importing both antibiotics and MBM in large quantities, intended for use in poultry feed, under the nose of the very same customs authorities that are now somehow expected to enforce the ban. There is, of course, no guarantee that will ever happen.

Most of the country's institutions and sectors have already been done irreparable damage due to the immoral actions of a handful of people driven by the sole motive of profit. The food sector is no different. The routine use of harmful substances such as MBM and antibiotics in poultry feed, for example, is due to their cheapness and because they help ensure "low mortality and good growth of chickens", which basically translates to lower production costs for traders. And who's going to stop them? The poultry industry is, after all, very lucrative and is a source of livelihood for millions. According to a United States Department of Agriculture report, one million entrepreneurs and eight million people are involved in Bangladesh's poultry sector and commercially produce 10.22 billion eggs and 1.46 million tonnes of poultry meat annually.

If the poultry industry is a microcosm of the state of



It seems like no food product in the market is immune to contamination.

food safety in the country, the picture couldn't get any scarier. It seems like no food product in the market is immune to contamination. A Dhaka University study found detergent (yes, you read that right) and antibiotics for humans in packaged milk in kitchen markets and grocery shops. Some of the most trusted brands-which regularly bombard us with advertisements that bank on their top "quality"—are also guilty of playing havoc with food safety. The same DU study found nine other food items manufactured by some of the top brands miserably failing the Bangladesh Standards and Testing Institution (BSTI) standards. These products include everyday essentials such as ghee, turmeric powder, dry chilli powder, and palm oil.

All this makes you wonder: what have the regulatory bodies been doing all this time? What is to explain the utter failure of the BSTI, Bangladesh Food Safety Authority (BFSA), and relevant ministries (food, agriculture, livestock and fisheries, industries) in putting a halt to food adulteration all these years—a problem which has now mushroomed beyond control?

The shortage of skilled manpower and equipment is a major problem. BFSA Chairman Mohammad Mahfuzul Hoque, in an interview published in this daily last year, said: "Some of them [laboratories for food tests] have equipment but not skilled manpower, while some have manpower but not good equipment." The lack of accredited laboratories is also one of a long list of issues in the process of identifying adulterated food products and taking action against manufacturers; this essentially means that tests done by unaccredited laboratories are dismissed out of hand by businesses. Clearly, many of these institutions that we depend on for oversight of the food industry are far from well-equipped or well-staffed. For proper food safety management, what's required is a large pool of highly skilled manpower which Bangladesh has consistently been facing a shortage of in many important sectors, including RMG. Shortage of manpower also means that it is extremely hard, if not impossible, to maintain constant monitoring which is essential in a country like Bangladesh, where many companies, after receiving the BSTI certificate, carry out operations violating every word in the rulebook. BSTI certificates, therefore, do not necessarily mean that the product(s) the company is manufacturing is safe.

Lack of capacity aside, some recent, very curious

developments should make us sit back and think deeply. In May, a High Court order asked the BSTI, BFSA, and the Directorate of National Consumer Rights Protection (DNCRP) to recall 52 adulterated food products from the market (as revealed by a BSTI report). Even a HC order, however, couldn't prompt all of them into action. In the same month, the HC summoned the BFSA chairman for failing to recall the 52 products. (It is to be noted though that the "court, however, expressed satisfaction with the compliance report submitted by DNCRP which said it had conducted drives at markets almost all over the country and confiscated substandard and adulterated food items," and BSTI cancelled licences of seven food companies that featured on the list of the 52 products.) What is so disappointing is that this is not the first time the authorities have been unable to recall bad products. But here's the real shocker: the BSTI, a month after it released the report outlining the substandard products, magically found most of the 52 products to pass the standards in a retest.

This fiasco only goes to show that we need, more than ever, independent researchers to step up and carry out tests on food samples in the market and disseminate the results in a transparent manner. Because right now, as the above incidents show, there is a dearth of reliability and confidence in tests being carried out by government bodies whose results are only creating confusion and

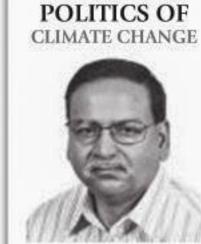
For years now, countless surveys and studies have been exposing the levels of contamination in the food we eat. And for years, we have seen little to no progress in reining in businesses and traders who have been making a mockery of food safety and people's health and wellbeing. In the midst of this miserable state of affairs is the lack of consumer rights and awareness, which means that there is very little likelihood of the consumers protesting the harmful products flooding the market.

It is a travesty that our right to safe food, a basic right, is being trampled upon despite the consumers picking up the tab for higher food prices year after year with no guarantee of improved quality. As food producers remain determined about safety practices not cutting into their profit margins and as weak regulatory bodies remain helpless and powerless in the face of malpractices in the sector, we, the consumers, will eventually end up paying the steepest price when all this comes to a head.

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

GCA MEETING

Vulnerable countries merit greater attention



SALEEMUL HUQ

HIS year marks a clear break with the past in terms of the climate change problem now becoming a "climate change crisis" with the adverse impacts of human-induced climate change

getting visible across the world. The most recent manifestation of it was the unprecedented heatwave in Europe, which was several degrees higher than normal. This also means that all countries have to

to take forward after the summit in 2019 and 2020.

The GCA is co-chaired by Ban Kimoon, former secretary-general of the UN, Kristalina Georgieva, chief executive of the World Bank, and Bill Gates of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. There are also a number of other Commissioners including Dr Musa, CEO of BRAC

International, as well as many others. The Commissioners will meet in Dhaka to discuss the preparation of the Flagship Report and plan the action tracks to take forward after the report is launched. They will also meet with the representatives of civil society and focus on the Action Track to Support Local Level Adaptation,

vulnerable countries to one of the most "resilient" countries by 2030.

The second point is to expect the global community to further lend their support to the efforts of vulnerable communities around the world, who have been active in enhancing their own adaptive capacity but with little support so far. This was well-demonstrated at the 13th annual International Conference on Community Based Adaptation (CBA13) held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, last April. The vulnerable communities had a clear demand that future adaptation plans, programmes and projects must be designed with them, not

just for them. With regard to the funding support Bangladesh is playing a major role in both trying to prepare to tackle climate change impacts at home as well as share our knowledge with other countries and to raise our voice in global forums such as the upcoming Climate Action Summit in New York in September, which Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has been invited to attend by the UN secretary-general.



Climate change is occurring at a faster rate than previously thought.

put in place adaptation measures at both national and local levels to prepare for what is about to come in future.

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to attend by the UN secretary-general. This week, Bangladesh is hosting a meeting of the Global Commission on Adaptation (GCA) that was set up last year to prepare a Flagship Report on Adaptation for the Climate Summit and then promote a number of action tracks which is the track that is of the greatest importance for Bangladesh and other Least Developed Countries (LDCs).

Having been personally associated with this action track with the GCA, I am rooting for their success in taking it forward both in the report and after the report is launched. I am sharing below some of the aspects that we are keen to see in both the report and its follow-up.

The first point is for the world to recognise that the government of Bangladesh under Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina as well as the civil society, academia, private sector and the media have been working as part of a whole-ofsociety approach to making Bangladesh transition from being one of the most

for adaptation, it is still much less than for mitigation and needs to be enhanced considerably. However, even the insignificant amounts that have so far been allocated to support adaptation in vulnerable countries have failed miserably to reach the most vulnerable of them, who should have been the priority.

Hence, the major demand regarding funding adaptation is not only for much more funding, in many tens of billions of dollars a year, but also for better channels and procedures to be put in place to deliver it (as those who were supposed to do so have failed).

Finally, the demand for knowledge sharing on adaptation is not necessarily for higher-resolution climate change

models (although they are certainly useful) but rather facilitating South-South sharing of experiential-knowledge generated by planners, implementers and practitioners in the developing countries with each other. Unfortunately, the global support tends to be only available to fly in and fly out international "experts" for short workshops, but not to support South-South peer-to-peer learning, which is the need of the hour.

So, while we certainly wish the GCA well in challenging the prevailing paradigms and increasing funding, we also expect it provide it in a manner that is truly supportive of the bottom-up efforts of the vulnerable communities themselves, and not just the usual topdown methodology that we have seen so far (which has failed to deliver).

We would, therefore, like to invite the three co-chairs and as many Commissioners as possible to come back to Bangladesh in January 2020 to participate in the 6th annual Gobeshona conference on climate change. This annual conference has been held for the last five years and the next year's event will become a global event where we will be inviting participants from around the world to come and learn from Bangladesh. It would, thus, be an ideal platform for the GCA to launch their Local Level Adaptation Action Track in Dhaka in January 2020.

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