

## Onion prices skyrocketing

Nexus between hoarders and traders must be broken

IT is unfortunate that capitalising on India's export ban on onion, the traders in the country have exponentially increased the prices of this daily essential item. Now, one kilogram of locally produced onion is being sold at Tk 120 at the kitchen markets across the capital, whereas at the beginning of September, the same amount of onion was selling at Tk 35 to Tk 45 in the local market. Reportedly, India has imposed a ban on onion export as a number of its onion-exporting states faced severe flooding this year which affected their production. Although we currently have no shortage of stocks of onions in the country, the traders and hoarders are only taking advantage of India's ban. They have hiked the prices even though their stockpiles were bought at much cheaper rates. Under the circumstances, it is the low-income people who are suffering the most.

Bangladesh does not produce enough onion to meet its domestic demand. Around 11 lakh tonnes of onions are imported every year to meet the demand of about 24 lakh tonnes. Since Bangladesh imports bulk of its requirement from India, the ban would, no doubt, have an impact on our market. However, we should not face any crisis of onions in the market at the moment since we currently have a stock of three lakh tonnes of onions, according to the commerce secretary.

The government should strictly monitor the market and ensure that no artificial crisis is created by the hoarders. The government can also take legal action against the traders for increasing the price under the Control of Essential Commodities Act. According to the Act, 17 essential items, including onions, must be sold at government fixed rates.

It is good to know that the TCB has taken initiatives to sell onions at a cheaper price at 35 points of the capital. This would surely give some respite to the low-income people. Also, the government's initiative to import onions from Egypt, China and Singapore to maintain adequate supply in the market is praiseworthy. However, as a long-term solution, the government should seriously consider increasing onion production in the country.

## Increasing number of heart patients in the country

Improve cardiac facilities nationwide

IT is alarming that the incidences of cardiac diseases in Bangladesh are increasing sharply. And patients are being wrongly diagnosed when it comes to cardiac ailments. Cardiovascular diseases have become a cause of increasing concern, topping the list of non-communicable diseases. Indeed, when we look at the World Health Organisation (WHO) data, patients suffering from heart ailments accounted for 17 percent of total deaths in 2014 whereas nearly three decades ago, all non-communicable diseases together (including heart diseases) accounted for only eight percent of total mortality. The situation is particularly bad outside Dhaka.

Against this backdrop, we find that there are only 36 cardiac care units in both public and private facilities, according to the latest data from Cardiac Surgeons Society of Bangladesh (CSSB). Of these, 26 hospitals are equipped to conduct cardiovascular surgeries. And of those, 20 are located in Dhaka. The ones outside Dhaka paint a completely different picture. For instance, the Zia Heart Foundation in Dinajpur has not been functional since 2016 due to shortage of surgeons. CSSB data tells us that there are only 150 cardiac surgeons in the country, of whom 32 work in Dhaka.

In a country of nearly 170 million people, it is shocking to learn that we have so few cardiac surgeons and a mere six hospitals outside of Dhaka and there too, not all are operational. It is little wonder that people flock to Dhaka for treatment, but often it proves to be too little, too late! The ministry of health needs to take cognisance of these alarming data and go back to the drawing board when preparing next year's budget. It is not merely a question of having the requisite number of hospitals in other districts but also having these facilities properly manned by doctors, nurses and other relevant medical staff so that the heart patients may receive prompt, adequate and proper treatment.

## DHAKA-CHATTOGRAM HIGHWAY

# Why no feasibility study?



NO FRILLS

SYED MANSUR HASHIM

WHEN policy planners undertake a major connectivity project like the Dhaka-Chattoogram highway expansion, which serves as a lifeline for our exports, one would expect that they would do what reasonably well-informed policymakers in other countries do, i.e. conduct a feasibility study on what sort of traffic will be plying on the highway, not just at the time of its completion and inauguration, but five or 10 years down the line. That is why governments all over the world conduct feasibility studies before committing millions of dollars and years in construction time, so that the finished product lasts and serves the public interest.

Unfortunately, in our country, feasibility studies are seldom conducted and we end up in a royal mess. The recently completed Dhaka-Chattoogram highway that was expanded from two-lanes to four-lanes at a cost of Tk 3,439 crore and inaugurated in 2017, was supposed to have a lifeline of 10 years without any major need for repair. However, two years down the line, the highway is already in trouble and the government has been forced to foot a repair bill costing Tk 793 crore under the head "repair and maintenance". That bill that has just been coughed up from the national exchequer is 23 percent of the original cost of the project!

In the absence of the feasibility study, the project did not fare well in construction—it was completed six years after the original project deadline, by which time the traffic volume on this vital link had also increased significantly. From what has been printed in this

paper on September 30, we find a series of things not done and which resulted in things falling apart six months after inauguration. The fact that authorities caved in to transport companies and made the rule to increase the maximum weight limit of goods-carrying vehicles only precipitated the highway's descent into disrepair and the spiralling repair bill that would come barely 18 months down the line.

With poor forecast about increased traffic and overloading, the agreement between authorities and transport

Then there is the question of quality of workmanship. The physical work on the project was not streamlined and was not done in one go. The Roads and Highways Department (RHD) reportedly was years behind schedule (implementation was supposed to start in 2006 and be completed in 2012) with work starting in 2010 for the stretch from Cumilla's Daudkandi to Chattoogram City Gate, and which saw a three-time revision in design. These revisions pushed up the cost from the original estimate of Tk 2,168 crore to Tk 3,439

is that the project has been mismanaged from inception. Agencies involved from the planning to constructing have to share the blame for a poorly managed project that had failed at various stages of project management. At the end of the day, this money is not grant money; it is the taxpayer's hard-earned money that is being thrown away because we refuse to get our act together in handling mega-sized projects.

By the time a major project such as the Dhaka-Chattoogram highway extension is fixed, we have thrown away much of



In our country, feasibility studies for infrastructure projects are seldom conducted and we end up in a royal mess. PHOTO: STAR

*By the time a major project such as the Dhaka-Chattoogram highway extension is fixed, we have thrown away much of the gains that would have been ours to reap had we done our job right in the first place. Years of delay defeat the whole purpose of the project, and with time extensions come cost escalations.*

companies resulted in flouting global standards by anywhere up to 50 percent more load per vehicle. Then of course, there is the question of authorities imposing fines on overloading and backtracking on that decision within 24 hours when transport owners and workers ran amok damaging weighing bridges in Manikganj and Chattoogram districts.

As stated before, the government caved in to unrealistic demands and increased the maximum weight limit of good-laden vehicles from November 2017. What that meant was that two-axle vehicles (six wheels) can carry maximum 22 tonnes, three-axle vehicles (10 wheels) maximum 30 tonnes and four-axle (14 wheels) maximum 44 tonnes. This is in contravention of the global standard of 15.5 and 22 tonnes, respectively, for the above-mentioned vehicles. The original design back in 2006 forecasted that there would be a six percent year-to-year growth in traffic. In reality, traffic had grown at an average of 10 percent per annum.

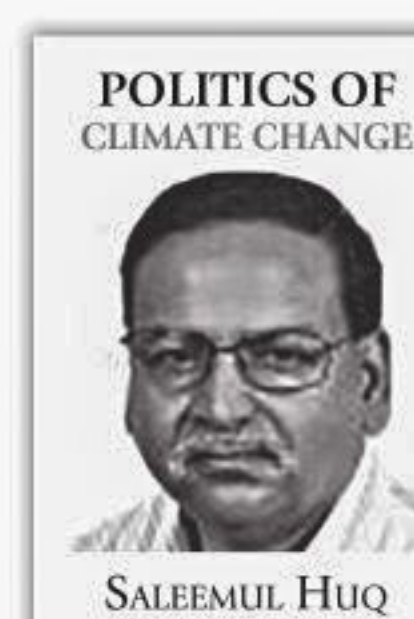
crore (an escalation of 58 percent). The beauty of this project amidst all the faults of not having done the proper pre-project works like studies and correct forecasting, is that we have a situation where some sections of the highway had been opened up to deal with traffic pressure before actual inauguration in 2017. So, it is safe to conclude that degradation of certain portions of the highway (those that were "unofficially" inaugurated as far back as 2013) suffered from wear-and-tear.

Fast forward to the present, we have conflicting responses from different government agencies and explanations as to why RHD flouted rules about the weight limit for lorries and other transports. A secretary of the RHD told this paper that the decision to increase the maximum weight limit was given due to a "special situation" that allowed for vehicles to use the highway carrying goods up to 40 tonnes and that this limit has now been brought down to 22 tonnes. The unfortunate truth, of course,

the gains that would have been ours to reap had we done our job right at inception. Years of delay defeat the whole purpose of the project, and with time extensions come cost escalations. That, unfortunately, is totally unacceptable given the fact that we have dozens of mega-sized projects in the pipeline using soft (and hard) loans from countries like India and China and multilateral lending institutions such as the Manila-based Asian Development Bank (ADB), the World Bank, Japanese JICA, Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). The failure to complete projects on time coupled with the failure to deliver quality workmanship is not lost upon the lending agencies/countries and we run the risk of finding out that some of them may not be willing to fund future projects in the country as we start losing credibility.

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## The challenge from Greta Thunberg on tackling climate change



POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

SALEEMUL HUQ

LAST week in New York, the United Nations Secretary General (UNSG) António Guterres held a Global Action Summit where he invited world leaders from selected countries only to come with "plans not speeches" to raise the level of ambition to tackle climate change. Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was amongst those invited but US President Trump was not (although he did turn up at the UN building that day to hold a separate meeting on religious freedom).

There were also many other related events held in the UN and around New York City. One of these events was the launching of the Year of Action of the Global Commission on Adaptation (GCA) where the Bangladesh prime minister also spoke. This was hosted by the prime minister of the Netherlands who will host an adaptation summit in the Netherlands in October 2020 at the end of the year of action.

Another series of events were held in the Central Park Zoo in New York on nature-based solutions which is an emerging area of developing economies while protecting the environment at the same time.

However, despite all these events and the important talks delivered by the great and the good, the most electrifying intervention was a short four-minute passionate speech by the 16-year-old Swedish teenager, Greta Thunberg, whose words, "How Dare You!", to the leaders, rang out with absolute clarity about the complete inadequacy of the efforts that the leaders were touting.

She has been able to completely turn around the terms of the debate concerning

tackling climate change, from just a problem which we can tackle by taking incremental actions (and congratulate ourselves for doing so), to an emergency (she likens it to a house on fire!) which requires immediate and urgent action and which the leaders are all failing to deliver.

She is absolutely correct, as the world's scientific community have been saying for many years, that the actions being promised, even by the most progressive

four million marching on September 20, and over six million marching on September 27. Greta Thunberg led the first march in New York on the first Friday (where I was able to join with many colleagues from Bangladesh) and then she led the second march in Montreal where more than a million people marched in Canada. It was by far the biggest global march ever held.

In my view, this constitutes a significant

becoming clear.

The first is the identification of the role of the fossil fuel companies who knew about the adverse impacts of their pollution, but instead of taking action to deal with the problem, did their best to prevent actions and continued to profit from their pollution. They were even able to influence governments to prevent them from taking action.

This nefarious act is now being recognised and many people, led by the Extinction Rebellion, are attacking the companies through peaceful protests around the world. Lawsuits are also being initiated against some of the companies in different countries.

These companies now need to be held responsible for the loss and damage that was caused by them and this will be an issue in the upcoming COP25 negotiations under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in Santiago, Chile in December.

The final aspect of the shift that I predict we will start to see much more of, is that individuals around the world will stop relying on their leaders (although continuing to urge leaders to act) only and will start to take action to tackle the problem themselves.

The country and people of Bangladesh represent a good example of this whole-of-society approach of tackling climate change, from the prime minister and government to NGOs, academia and private sector and media all taking the necessary actions by themselves, as well as collective actions to ensure that Bangladesh transitions from being the most vulnerable country to becoming the most resilient one.

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Secretary-General of the United Nations Antonio Guterres shakes hands with Swedish environmental activist Greta Thunberg. PHOTO: REUTERS

leaders, are completely inadequate compared to the scale of the climate crisis.

The other game-changing actions that took place on the two Fridays at the beginning and end of the Climate Action Week were the massive marches by school children around the world, with around

shift in the global dynamic on tackling climate change from relying on leaders (who have largely failed us) to the people, and indeed to the children of the world who will now be taking the lead.

It is still unclear how this shift in dynamic will unfold but a few channels are

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Trouble in the RMG sector?

It is a very common phenomenon for the number of orders to decline during June-August in the RMG sector. But in the last two years, that decline has been more significant. Normally, garment factories remain without too much work for one or two months during this time. After that, things normalise and companies go back to running at great speed.

This year the situation has deteriorated alarmingly. Many factories are not running for eight hours. Garments have been manufactured earlier than buyers' schedule because of a lack of upcoming orders.

So in the near future, factories have a lot to worry about. The US and the UK are important markets for Bangladesh. But orders from there are not coming as they used to before.

If the number of orders continues to go down, it could badly impact our economy. The government should be wary of this emerging problem.

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