

## Why are prices of essentials still out of control?

*The government has to do more to stabilise prices*

IT is extremely disheartening that, amid the increased economic struggles of people due to the pandemic, the prices of essential commodities have continued to remain high in Bangladesh's kitchen markets. One would have expected the government to address this issue more urgently. In fact, given that prices of certain commodities have historically gone up during this time of year, the government should have pre-empted this by taking appropriate measures before prices shot up to such heights. What is more disappointing is that, in the case of certain commodities, the price hike seems to be completely unjustified—the result of traders trying to exploit consumers to make exorbitant profits.

Take the price of onions, for instance. Traders have been trying to blame its rising price on disruptive weather in India. What is interesting, however, is that right after the five percent import duty on onions was withdrawn on Thursday, its price came down from around Tk 80-85 per kg to Tk 60-65, even though it takes at least four to five days to bring onion through the land port from India—which means traders lowered its price even before they could possibly import more of it. This is a clear example of how traders are exploiting the increased prices of certain commodities in the international market to raise prices of all commodities in the local market.

The government has time and again acknowledged the existence of syndicates trying to take advantage of any crisis and raise commodity prices. But what has it done to root out such syndicates? As far as we can tell, its actions have been wholly inadequate, and it is the consumers who always suffer as a result of such failures. Moreover, when it comes to certain commodities such as onion and sugar, the government consulted with traders to fix an appropriate rate for them to sell these commodities, which the traders are not adhering to. So, on what basis were the prices set, if they are not enough for traders to sell the items at and make profit? All these questions have to be answered by the relevant authorities.

At the end of the day, it is the responsibility of the government to ensure that commodity prices remain stable and affordable for people. For this, the government has plenty of resources and personnel. If prices are in danger of rising due to supply issues in the international market, the government should have taken counter measures to address them. Unfortunately, it has once again failed to do that. Now it must urgently provide direct support to people who are struggling to even meet their daily nutritional needs. Additionally, it should investigate why state officials once again failed to control prices of essential commodities during this time of crisis for the people.

## Development should be inclusive

*Seven villages in Tangail suffering from lack of a concrete bridge*

AMID all the development that Bangladesh has been witnessing of late, it may be hard to believe that there are still villages where people are deprived of basic facilities, such as education and healthcare, or bridges over the rivers flowing through those villages. Over the years, this daily has published a number of stories of such neglected villages, where development seems like an unknown word. One such report, published on Monday, revealed the predicament of the people of seven villages at Mokna union in Nagarpur upazila, Tangail. For decades, with no concrete bridge over one of the branches of the Dhaleswari River connecting these villages, the villagers have been suffering on a daily basis.

At present, there is a fragile bamboo bridge over the river that the villagers themselves built three years ago. Every day, commuters including school and college students use the bridge to go to their destinations. Since it is built on the road that connects the Upazila Headquarters with the seven villages, people heading to the headquarters for various purposes have no other option but to cross the bridge. In the absence of a concrete bridge, they often have to cross the river by small boats. It is particularly difficult for the locals to take emergency patients to the upazila health complex, while farmers also face difficulties to carry their produce to the nearby markets.

The villagers reportedly raised the issue to the local administration several times, and were given the assurance that a permanent bridge would be constructed there. Unfortunately, that promise has yet to materialise.

We urge the authorities concerned to look into the matter and direct the responsible departments to take necessary measures to build a concrete bridge in Mokna union as early as possible. Once built, this small bridge would not only make the lives of the villagers easy by improving communication, but will also create scopes for better trade and business, enhancing the villagers' economic condition. As we have already said, there are many such neglected villages, especially in regions where poverty is traditionally high with fewer economic opportunities. Any development work undertaken there may not make big headlines, but this is where development is most needed. We hope the government will pay equal attention to their development by building the necessary infrastructure, so that these people are included in our overall development drive.

# We must do better to protect children with disabilities



LAILA KHONDKAR

regarding sexual violence faced by children, but pursuing justice becomes even more challenging in case of girls with disabilities—especially if they have intellectual, speech, hearing, and psychosocial disabilities.

Child sexual violence, abuse, and exploitation happen in many ways, which can range from inappropriate

more vulnerable. So, it could be safely said that the number cited above reflects only the tip of the iceberg.

According to "Out from the Shadows: Sexual Violence against Children with Disabilities," a report jointly prepared by Save the Children and Handicap International, children with disabilities are at a greater risk of experiencing physical and sexual violence than children without disabilities. They may be hidden in communities due to stigma and discrimination, and excluded from schools and other educational opportunities. Adolescent girls and boys with disabilities (particularly those with intellectual disabilities) are usually excluded from activities that could increase their knowledge about violence, sex, and healthy relationships, as well as from peer networks that might protect them from violence.

and sensitivity to communicate with children with disabilities in an effective way, and cannot provide the required support.

In Bangladesh, children with different types of disabilities face different challenges. A survivor with speech and hearing impairment cannot give testimony to the court directly, as there are no lawyers or judges who know sign language. Courts require interpreters in such cases. But there are only around 10 of them in the country, and most of them are based in Dhaka. In case of survivors with psychosocial disability, the police are not willing to document such cases because the survivors cannot prove the incident. Those who have multi-sensory impairment are completely unable to give testimony.

Perpetrators should be brought to justice through speedy trials. Social and

If the burden of proof could be shifted to the accused perpetrator from the victim, it may be easier to get justice.

There should be investment in high-quality, free services that prevent and respond to sexual violence against children with disabilities. We must ensure that the children get the support they need. This includes medical care, support to cope and keep safe, someone to assist them to understand information or use sign language, advice to help them get a lawyer for free, and support to speak in court in a way that is safe for them.

There should be capacity building efforts for the police, judges and court staff, social workers, doctors, nurses, and other health staff so that they could provide adequate support to the children with disabilities with sensitivity. Infrastructures and services should be designed in a way that all children with disabilities could use them easily.

Children with disabilities should be consulted to ensure services are appropriate and accessible to them. They should have access to information on their rights, which will help them in identifying, preventing, and acting upon violence against them. The laws related to rape and disability rights must be disseminated to them in accessible formats (through braille, sign language, etc). Parental awareness should be developed so that they can prevent and detect the early signs of sexual violence faced by their children with disabilities. This will be helpful in taking measures to protect them quickly.

"It makes me so angry when I see the man who raped my 13-year-old daughter with disabilities proudly roaming around the neighbourhood, saying, 'What's so wrong with raping a retard? She's a reject anyway!'"—this remark by a frustrated father of a girl with intellectual and physical disabilities expresses the reality faced by the children with disabilities. Due to the additional vulnerabilities faced by them, we have more responsibilities to do all we can to protect them from sexual violence. The government, civil society, service providers, media, parents, and community members should play their roles properly to ensure that children with disabilities are protected from sexual violence. Let's make them a priority and always consider their best interest.

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**We should guarantee equal access to education and other opportunities that decrease the isolation of children with disabilities.** PHOTO: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

touching to rape. Children are abused in all settings: homes, schools, playgrounds, workplaces, etc. This is a serious violation of children's rights and has a long-term negative impact on their lives. Most of the cases of child sexual abuse remain unreported, and the likelihood of the abuse being unreported is higher in the case of children with disabilities. There is chronic inaccessibility and structural discrimination that children with disabilities face within the legal system in Bangladesh. Therefore, survivors and their families usually refrain from speaking out about the violence against them. This makes children with disabilities even

As a result of the isolation, children with disabilities are perceived as an easy target for violence. In many cases, parents of children with disabilities are unaware of the risks facing them, and cannot take actions to protect their children. Perpetrators could be a relative or anyone on whom the child is dependent, which makes it very difficult to address the issue.

Children with disabilities usually find it hard to move away from risky situations or call for help. Often they don't know if a crime has happened to them, or can't tell other people what happened. In most cases, police, legal, and medical professionals do not have the capacity

structural discrimination that prevents children from accessing services should be addressed. We should guarantee equal access to education and other opportunities that decrease the isolation of children with disabilities. There is a need for a change in public attitude regarding children with disabilities, which will contribute to creating an environment where they feel included. It is important to prohibit all forms of discrimination that may hinder access to justice as well as medical, legal, psychological, and social services. For example, legal provisions that automatically prohibit children with certain disabilities from being recognised as competent witnesses must be changed.

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# Regional efforts needed to end Afghanistan's woes

*The IS-K must be stopped in its tracks*



A CLOSER LOOK

TASNEEM TAYEB

THE Islamic State-Khorasan Province (IS-K) is emerging as a major threat to peace in Afghanistan, proving the Taliban's previous judgement of their capabilities wrong. Ever since the IS-K

was established in 2015—when they were at the height of power in Syria and Iraq—the offshoot of the international terror network has carried out constant attacks across Afghanistan. One would remember the horrific shooting at a maternity ward in Kabul in 2020, when fighters suspected to be members of IS-K shot at expecting mothers, nurses, and doctors. Twenty-four people, including mothers and newborn children, were killed.

Over time, the IS-K has carried out many daring attacks on the previous Afghan government and politicians, local and international security forces (including the US and NATO personnel), international humanitarian agencies and their personnel, minority groups, and the Taliban, among others.

More recently, the IS-K has claimed two suicide bombings at Shia mosques on two Fridays in a row. The first of these two suicide attacks, targeting Friday prayers, was orchestrated at Said Abad Mosque in Kunduz province in northeast Afghanistan, on October 8. More than 50 worshippers were killed in the suicide attack, and hundreds were injured. It was the third attack on a religious institution that week. The mosque attack, along with the recent transgressions of the IS-K, raised concerns among the Afghans, the ruling Taliban, and the United Nations; UN Secretary-General António Guterres said it was part of a "disturbing pattern of violence."

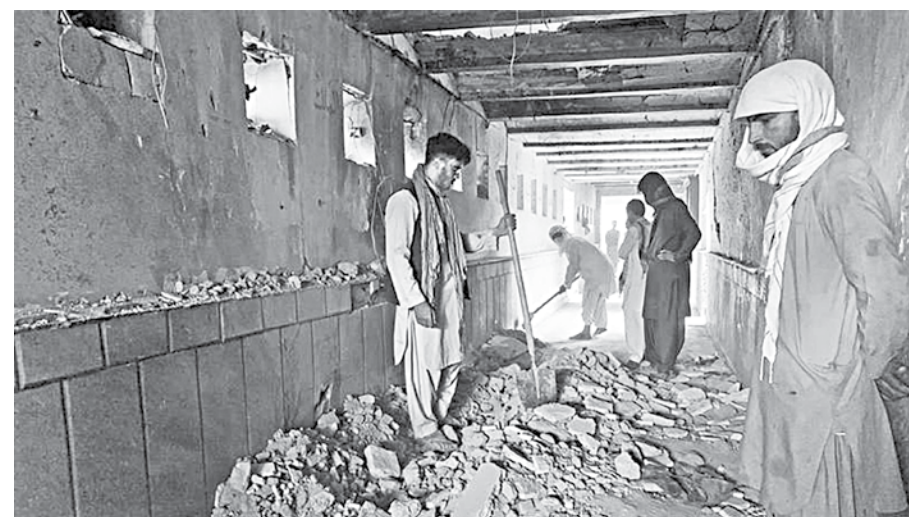
The latest suicide attack, on October 15, only added to the apprehensions of the people. This attack was carried out at a packed mosque in the Taliban stronghold of Kandahar. At least 65 worshippers were killed, while hundreds were injured. The UN secretary-general called the attack "despicable."

An attack at the heart of the Taliban's power centre—the southern city of Kandahar—sends them a very alarming signal: they are perhaps no longer capable

of safeguarding their own stronghold. While the world is still coming to terms with the fact that the US had to make a botched exit from Afghanistan after nearly 20 years of occupation—thanks to its own premature Afghanistan strategy and mismanagement of resources—and that an extremist group is now ruling the country again, the emergence of IS-K bodes ominous portents for the world community.

Although the Taliban has been

While IS-K fighters are now challenging the Taliban and trying to dent their image through these atrocious attacks, they are unlikely to stop at this. The IS-K—as per the ideology of the IS—is likely to target establishing a caliphate in the region through destabilising regional peace and order. Since many of these fighters are from Pakistan and Uzbekistan, they are also likely to have a good understanding of these countries, which they can use to their advantage as and when required.



**Local Afghans inspect the inside of a mosque following a suicide attack in the city of Kandahar, southwest Afghanistan, on October 15, 2021.** PHOTO: AP

dismissive about the capacity and strength of the IS-K in the past, they are now realising the mistake of undermining the IS offshoot. After the Kunduz attack, a Taliban spokesman tweeted, "This afternoon, an explosion took place in a mosque of our Shiite compatriots... a number of our compatriots were martyred and wounded." He suggested that the Taliban were investigating the bombing. There were also talks of strengthening security at the religious institutions in the Shia dominated areas. Despite that, the Kandahar attack took place—under the very nose of the Taliban.

The Nangarhar and Kunar-based IS-K, being an offshoot of the Islamic State, follow their belief systems. The IS-K fighters include hard-line jihadists from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, and also include some former members of the Taliban, who harbour a more extremist worldview.

Jason M Blazakis, professor at Middlebury Institute of International Studies, in an article on Defenseone.com, suggested that while the Taliban was focused on local victory, "ISIS still wants the world." He further added, "ISIS-K also believes that al-Qaeda and the Taliban are too locally focused and disinterested in establishing a global caliphate... al-Qaeda was always opposed to creating a global caliphate too quickly, citing the need to govern successfully by tending to the masses. ISIS instead bet on its ability to metastasise globally and for a time eclipsed the already-diminished al-Qaeda within jihadist circles."

However, to what extent the Taliban and al-Qaeda will be able to keep IS-K at bay remains to be seen. Crushing the IS-K would be a difficult task for any actor—local or foreign. Nangarhar and Kunar are mountainous and semi-mountainous terrains and provide ample opportunities

for cover. And with the constrained resources, the Taliban is stuck between a rock and a hard place with regard to eliminating the threat of IS-K.

Another challenge that the Taliban face is internal strife between the various factions within the organisation. There are radical, extremist elements within them, many of whom are not happy with the more moderate attitude of the Taliban—those who believe in the old dogmas and feel that the Taliban are not hard-line enough. To these factions, IS-K might look like just the right association.

The IS-K's possible affiliation with the powerful Haqqani network, with whom the Taliban are also strongly connected, also makes it difficult for them to go after the IS-K. A BBC report quoted Asia Pacific Foundation's Dr Sajjan Gohel as saying that "several major attacks between 2019 and 2021 involved collaboration between IS-K, the Taliban's Haqqani network and other terror groups based in Pakistan."

The Haqqani network is currently in charge of internal security in Afghanistan. Its influence with the Taliban and their prominent roles in the government have made regional and global players uneasy about the ability of the Taliban to deliver on its promise of security.

The IS-K—known for its notorious ambitions, radical ideologies, and unpredictable actions—had even unnerved the US security forces with the atrocious Kabul airport attack, which pushed the US forces to further hasten their evacuation. The IS-K is not a force to be trifled with. These jihadists are blood-thirsty and would do anything to achieve their goals. This terrorist outfit of Islamic State should be stopped in its tracks now, before they muster more support and resources to emerge as a stronger malicious force than it already is.

The IS-K is not just Afghanistan's problem; it is the problem for the region. The regional players now need to take a good, hard look at the situation in Afghanistan, and take concerted and comprehensive measures to stop the IS-K from spreading its wings further. A distraught and vulnerable neighbour being forced to harbour terrorist elements is not a desirable geopolitical scenario for anyone.

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