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Govt should urgently formulate the EC law

Prioritise it to save our democracy from declining further

ON Wednesday, Shushashoner Jonno Nagorik (Shujon) placed its final draft of the proposed law titled “Chief Election Commissioner and Election Commissioner’s Appointment Act, 2021.” We call on the government to consider their submission with utmost seriousness. Despite the constitution providing for the formulation of a law to establish the Election Commission, no government has taken such an initiative in the last 50 years. That successive governments have ignored such a serious constitutional mandate, which concerns the people’s right to democratically elect their own representatives, is alarming for our democracy.

Against the backdrop of widespread mistrust in the Election Commission and an alarming apathy among voters, and with the tenure of the incumbent election commissioners ending in February, now would be the perfect time for the formulation of such a law—which could have previously saved us from a host of election-related controversies. However, with the complete collapse of voter participation in elections—as recently witnessed during the Sylhet-3 by-polls held on September 4, which had only a 34 percent voter turnout, and the Dhaka-10 by-polls on March 21 last year, which saw an embarrassingly low turnout of only around five percent—it is clear that our democracy has never been in more danger and in greater need of such a law. The practice of candidates getting “elected” unopposed—for example, when 43 chairman candidates were elected uncontested once 160 union parishads went into elections in September—is indicative of the true state of democracy in Bangladesh, or lack thereof. When neither voters nor opposing candidates feel the need to participate in an election, it is a strong sign that our electoral system has failed.

There is only one way to revive our electoral system: to create an environment where free, fair and credible elections can be held, and which are acceptable to the public. Formulating a law that can spell out in detail how election commissioners are to be appointed, through conditions that are satisfactory to the public, different political parties in the country and all other stakeholders, is an essential first step in that process, and there is no other substitute for that. The excuse that there is not enough time to formulate a law is not something that we can accept. There is still plenty of time to frame the law, and experts and eminent citizens have already made that clear, as well as their willingness to help the government in that process.

If the ruling party truly believes in its own claim that its popularity has never been higher, then it should not be afraid to work overtime to create a conducive environment to hold free, fair and credible elections. The conditions necessary for such elections should be made clear through law. Most other South Asian countries have been successful in formulating such laws—then why can’t we? It is clear that it isn’t because of a lack of time or any other factor. The only thing that we see missing is the political will. And mustering that up is where the true challenge lies.

Reduce diesel price for the farmers

The hike in price will have a domino effect on agricultural production

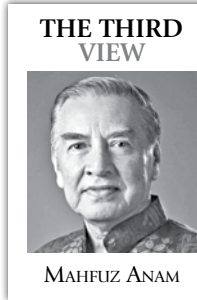
ACCORDING to a report by this daily on November 11, due to the recent hike in diesel price—which has gone up from Tk 65 to Tk 80 per litre—the production cost in the agriculture sector has already increased by at least 30 percent in the northern region of Bangladesh. Reportedly, this hike will not only impact the ongoing harvest of Aman, the production of winter vegetables and Boro paddy will also be affected, since farmers mostly depend on diesel-run machines to cultivate, irrigate, and harvest the crops.

Over the years, the number of the low-lift pumps, shallow tube-wells and semi-deep tube-wells—used to irrigate the cropland—have increased significantly in the country, and all of these are run by diesel. According to an estimate by the Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE), 48.5 percent of the region’s 691,437 hectares of land, which need irrigation, currently rely on diesel-run pumps. Moreover, the use of combined harvesters, reapers, planters, power tillers, tractors and threshers, which run on diesel, have also increased significantly in the region.

This price hike will have an impact on the transportation and fertiliser costs. According to the farmers, the transport service providers have already increased their fares by Tk 200 for transporting paddy of every bigha of land, while the pump owners have increased the irrigation cost by Tk 30 for every hour of irrigation. If things go on like this, the production cost of Boro crop, which makes up more than half of the country’s total rice production, will increase by about 15 percent—and many farmers have already decided not to cultivate Boro this season if the price of diesel does not come down.

Under these circumstances, in order to save our farmers from incurring losses and to protect them from the burden of additional production cost, the government should reconsider its decision and reduce the price of diesel. It should also consider giving subsidies on fuel prices and other agricultural services to farmers, so that they can not only bear the production cost, but also earn enough to live a decent life.

Why is public convenience an alien concept for our decision-makers?



STARTING from unannounced road blocks forcing commuters into hours of traffic congestion, to making important arterial roads off limits for visiting foreign guests, to cutting off gas and power for maintenance work without prior information, to unreasonable diversion of traffic for megaprojects, to frequent government price hikes of essentials—all are done without an iota of consideration for public convenience, leave alone rights. Much of the frustrations of ordinary people could be handled better only if public rights and the government’s obligation to citizens were at all on the radar of our bureaucrats and planners. It is true that governments often need to take unpopular decisions. Among them, raising prices of essentials is the most troubling both for the government and the citizens. For the former, it leads to an immediate decrease in popularity and general unrest, and for the latter, an increased economic burden, making life more difficult to bear.

124.41 per litre, while our diesel will now cost Tk 80? Price differential of Tk 44.41 per litre (more than 50 percent) will remain, which is sufficiently a big margin for smuggling to continue. So, this argument does not hold water.

The second reason was straightforward: the rise in international prices. In the July-September period, the average price of oil shot up by 71 percent to USD 73 per barrel. Then in October, it hit USD 83.7. So, we must raise our prices—was the government’s logic. The Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC) was losing Tk 20 crore a day. This bleeding had to stop, and raising the price by 23 percent would be the minimum that they could live with.

The energy ministry’s logic is that domestic prices will have to reflect international prices, and since diesel and kerosene prices have gone up, so must the prices at the consumer end. We would have found this argument acceptable if domestic prices were actually adjusted with the fluctuating international oil prices, meaning our prices not only go up, but also reverses when the international prices dip. But it seldom does—and when it does, there is only a marginal adjustment.

Immediately after the Covid-19 pandemic struck the world and the global economy slumped, oil prices came down

will earn a near equivalent amount from VAT and duties on fuel, which it can use to pay the BPC, thereby obviating the need for energy price hike. But the energy ministry chose to “extract” the money from the consumers, who are mostly lower middle-class, if not downright poor, and risking gravely damaging our economic recovery.

Which brings us to the question of timing. Why now? Just when we are recovering from Covid, just when our exporters are beginning to put their feet on the ground, when our domestic manufacturers are steadily putting their houses in order, when our labourers are beginning to find jobs, entrepreneurs are starting to see light at the end of the tunnel, just when our farmers—who kept us well-fed during the height of the pandemic—are finding a way out of their depressed situation, to suddenly impose a price hike that will hurt us the most appears more like a sabotage of our recovery than a policy to ensure our growth.

Nobody benefits from this, except the BPC and its parent ministry. It appears that people’s—if I may dare say, the government’s—interest has been set aside to serve that of a corporation.

The price hike hit at the very root of the transport sector—which acts as the pivot in



A countrywide strike by transport owners and workers over the fuel price hike by the government last week caused huge suffering to the commuters. The photo was taken on November 5, 2021, on the Gabtoli bridge in Dhaka. PHOTO: STAR

A good example of that is the government’s decision to raise fuel prices on November 3. On that day, the government raised the prices of diesel and kerosene by 23 percent, from Tk 65 to Tk 80—two items that directly impact the economy and the lives of the most disadvantaged segment of society. The total consumption of diesel is four million tonnes, 70 percent of which is used by the transport sector and 20 percent by the farmers. Kerosene’s total demand is 100,000 tonnes, mainly used for cooking, lighting and aviation fuel.

Two reasons were given for the rise: One, too great a price difference between India and ourselves will lead to fuel smuggling. How will this be stopped with diesel price being Rs 101.56 as of November 1, which is equivalent to Tk

to USD 27 per barrel. From 2015 to 2021, the BPC made a profit of Tk 43,138 crore. Where did this “profit” come from? From the public, who were forced to pay a much higher price for diesel and kerosene than they should have had to, as the international prices were quite low. By what right did the energy ministry extract additional payment from ordinary citizens? It is, in our view, equivalent to a form of extortion by the government under a false pretence.

If we accept BPC’s claim that it is losing Tk 20 crore a day, then the yearly loss roughly comes to Tk 7,300 crore—far less money than what PK Halder robbed from our banks. This could have easily been offset from BPC’s accumulated profit from the last six years. Even today, in the midst of our pandemic recovery, the government

maintaining market stability—forcing the owners of these vehicles to raise fares. But they also took advantage of the situation to demand a hike in fares far higher than was necessary. Though the government said it was 28 percent, the market reality was 50 percent. For the transport owners, it was a golden opportunity to hold the public hostage and force the government’s hand, under the threat of strike, to concede to their proposals. The bus and truck owners claimed that the last fare hike was in 2015, which for launch owners was in 2013. Hence, all their pending demands had to be fulfilled now.

Finally comes the issue of the method in which the government implemented the fuel price rise.

There is a practice of holding a hearing in which stakeholders’ voices are given

Building back better with refugees for a greener Bangladesh



including cyclones, flooding and rising sea levels.

Despite these odds, Bangladesh is recognised as a success story due to its climate action policy, which includes strong community-wide training, education campaigns, anticipatory and preparatory action, and significant infrastructure investments. As the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26) enters its final week, we have an opportunity to reflect on and recognise some leading climate change and environmental initiatives taken by Bangladesh.

The presence of close to one million Rohingya refugees from Myanmar in 34 congested camps in Cox’s Bazar district—the largest concentration of refugees globally—also poses additional climate related challenges. In the first six months following the arrival of more than 700,000 Rohingya refugees in 2017, the Bangladesh government generously allowed them to find refuge in an area spanning over 6,000sq-m of natural forest reserve. The rapid influx and a lack of preparation led to trees being cut down to set up shelters, and the timbers used as firewood for cooking and covering the refugees’ most

basic needs. In turn, this led to increased risks of landslides and flooding in the camps, not only posing grave risks to the lives of the refugees, but also adding to one of Bangladesh’s, and the region’s, main environmental challenges—deforestation.

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian actors, together with the Bangladesh government, are working to “build back better” by enhancing the resilience of the refugees and the local communities both to climate-related risks, including cyclones and monsoons, and environmental risks such as land degradation, soil erosion, and deforestation.

More than 3,000 Bangladeshis and Rohingya refugees have received training on how to manage tree nurseries, plant and care for seedlings, and protect young trees. Through the “regreening” project supported by the UNHCR, they have replanted over 600 hectares and added grasses at streams to help treat wastewater and reduce pollution levels.

The volunteers’ tasks also include replanting trees ripped out by landslides, protecting wildlife, and raising awareness in their communities about the need to protect the forests in the lush corner of southern Bangladesh. Trained volunteers also carry out disaster risk reduction activities, including slope stabilisation to mitigate exposure to landslides and land degradation during monsoon.

The success of reforestation has also depended on the introduction of clean cooking alternatives, such as liquefied petroleum gas (LPG), to the local and refugee communities. This has prevented people from requiring 700 tonnes of

firewood every day to meet essential needs. Since September 2018, the UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) have provided over 70 million kilograms of LPG to both Bangladeshis and Rohingyas living in the Cox’s Bazar district.

The introduction of LPG has also yielded social cohesion dividends between refugee and local communities, reducing tensions related to the deforestation on host community land, and has had additional benefits for the communities themselves, reducing cooking times and allowing women to focus on other tasks, including gardening and supporting their children’s education. Notably, incidences of gender-based violence have also reduced as women no longer have to walk long distances alone, sometimes in the dark, to collect firewood for cooking. Use of LPG also freed up shelters and homes from smoke and toxic gases, which are harmful to health.

As part of a community-wide training initiative, over 200,000 individuals in the Bangladeshis and refugee communities in Cox’s Bazar received information or training on how to respond in case of an elephant encounter, as the forest is home to the famous and endangered Asian elephant. With additional support, 100 Elephant Response Teams have been formed and equipped. They help ensure community safety by preventing human-elephant encounters, reducing the number of human deaths from 14 in 2017, to zero since the programme started in 2018. The success of this collaboration can also be witnessed by the recent birth of 10 baby elephants, marking huge strides in protecting the critically endangered species.

a play. Whether they are ever taken into consideration, we have very little evidence of. But the ritual is held and, if nothing else, the media covers it so that the people come to know, at least, what are the issues at stake.

This time around, even this ritual was not held, bypassing the Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission (BERC) which usually hosts these hearings. Why? So far we have had no answer. As a result, the declaration of the price hike took everybody—save those who were responsible for formulating it—by total surprise. The first people to react were the transport owners, whose vehicles stayed off the road and demanded new passenger tariffs to be fixed before they resumed their services. After three days’ strike and the resultant public sufferings, the government increased bus fares by 28 percent and launch fares by 43 percent. The BPC’s interest as well as the bus, truck and launch owners’ interest were served.

Guess whose interest has not been served? You are right, the interest of the people—the daily commuters. They have no union, no lobby group, no rich benefactor. Our public representatives are supposed to represent them. But the reality is that most of them have their own respective economic axes to grind. Where is the time to think of the public? Our parliament has much better and more important things to do. People thought they had votes that they could cast every five years and bring their wishes to the fore. Since that does not count—literally and figuratively—anymore, they have no option but to accept whatever is made to come their way.

Let’s do some common-sense reasoning. The bureaucrats of the energy ministry and that of the BPC knew full well what the impact of raising fuel prices would be on the economy, and how ordinary people would suffer. They also knew very well that transport owners of all types would make all sorts of exaggerated demands and, through a sudden strike, force the government to accept their demands. Knowing all this, shouldn’t they have had some sort of a dialogue with the relevant stakeholders first? The fare hike could have easily been calculated based on the 23 percent hike of diesel and kerosene prices, agreed upon, signed and sealed and then made public, saying that from such and such date, fuel prices will be raised by the government and all those sectors affected by it will be allowed a rise of fares as detailed. This would have saved the public so much trouble and hardship.

Instead, a chaos followed in which commuters suffered immeasurably. The decision to raise fuel prices was taken on November 3. It came to the press on November 4. No high-level meeting was held till the following Sunday—due to Friday and Saturday being weekend holidays—after three days of harassment, physical suffering and precious loss of time for the poor and the ordinary. When meetings did take place, they only formalised the owners’ demands, as if the fuel price rise was actually an excuse for the government to sanction price rises for the bus and launch owners.

It is our view that such things happen because of a fundamental disrespect for anybody who is not a part of either the officialdom or the ruling party of the day.

..... Mahfuz Anam is the editor and publisher of The Daily Star.

To anticipate and prepare for recurring seasonal weather events such as cyclones, over 2,000 Rohingya and Bangladeshi volunteers have been trained by the UNHCR partners to hoist warning flags, make loudspeaker announcements, evacuate households in flood-prone areas, and be first responders to damage in the camps in the initial hours following landfall. Their training has built extraordinary community resilience and saved lives. These are just some examples of the UNHCR’s commitment to empowering refugees and their host communities to prepare for, and adapt to, the impacts of climate change in Bangladesh. There are hundreds more.

Capacity sharing and strengthening initiatives among the government, local population, refugees, and humanitarians play a key role in empowering individuals to build resilience and disseminate knowledge within their communities to create a better future for all.

COP26 has reignited the urgency of climate action across the globe. At the UNHCR, we commit to providing support to affected countries and displaced communities who have the least amount of resources to prepare and adapt. We also encourage the meaningful participation and leadership of the displaced people in the planning and implementation of climate action policies. In Bangladesh, we reiterate our commitment to continue to “build back better” in Cox’s Bazar, and support Bangladesh to continue their climate action work and sharing of innovative climate action practices at a global level.

..... Johannes van der Klauuw is the UNHCR representative in Bangladesh.