

Consumers paying for misdeeds of Wasa

Say speakers at CAB discussion

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The consumers are paying for the extravagance, mismanagement and corruption of Dhaka Water Supply and Sewerage Authority, said speakers at a virtual discussion.

The Consumers Association Bangladesh (CAB) yesterday organised the discussion on the proposed hike in water, gas and electricity prices.

They questioned Dhaka Wasa Managing Director Taqsem A Khan's Tk 6.15 lakh salary and the Tk 40 crore stimulus package that Wasa officials received last year.

Voktakantho Editor Kazi Abdul Hannan, also the keynote speaker at the event, said, "Taqsem A Khan has received a 421 percent salary raise [making it around Tk 6.15 lakh from Tk 1.20 lakh] since 2009 and his organisation increased water tariff 14 times during his tenure."

Wasa authorities proposed the price hike mentioning their loss, but their revenue is now Tk 7,000 crore whereas it was Tk 700 crore earlier, he said.

Hannan said Wasa wants to increase the price by 20 percent but the reality is different.

CAB President Ghulam Rahman asked, "Do the staffers and officials, who make extra profit by putting the burden of excessive price on consumers, deserve a bonus?"

"My request to the political leaders is to be accountable to the people everywhere, and provide relief to people ensuring

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Land grabbers, including brick kiln owners, have encroached upon a long stretch of the Hori river in Khulna's Dumuria upazila, reducing the once 300-metre wide river into a canal. River-grabbing is one of the causes behind the perennial waterlogging in Bhabadaha region of Jashore. The photo was taken in Sholgotia of Dumuria yesterday.

PHOTO: HABIBUR RAHMAN

UNFIT VEHICLES 5 lakh still on the road

TUHIN SHUBHRA ADHIKARY

More than five lakh registered vehicles are now on the road without fitness clearance mainly due to poor monitoring by the authorities amid the pandemic.

Many unregistered vehicles are running without undergoing any fitness test.

Also, unlicensed drivers are at the wheel of at least 10 lakh registered vehicles, indicates latest data of the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA).

All these are making the country's thoroughfares riskier as statistics show that the number of road crashes increased sharply in recent years.

At least 5,088 people were killed in 5,472 road accidents last year, said police.

The number of deaths and road crashes were 3,918 and 4,198 respectively in 2020, meaning the figures rose by 29.86 percent and 30.34 percent last year.

The police's figures, collected based on the First Information Report (FIR) and General Dairy (GD), are much lower than those of the road safety organisations'.

More than 50 lakh vehicles, including 35 lakh motorbikes, were registered with BRTA till last year.

According to existing rules, motorcycles don't need fitness clearance.

Also, new cars, SUVs and minibuses are not required to have it in the first five years. After that period, they have to have their fitness cleared once every two years.

As these three types of vehicles had to take fitness clearances annually before January 2020, the number of vehicles eligible for fitness test should have been lower now and the number of unfit vehicles should have been smaller.

However, BRTA data shows 5.08 lakh registered vehicles, which are eligible for fitness test, did not renew their documents till last month. The figure had never been so large previously, sources said.

The number of unfit vehicles was 4.79 lakh in July 2019, according to a BRTA report submitted to the High Court as per its directive.

The state-run BRTA's 2020-21 annual report said 6.75 lakh vehicles received fitness certificates in the last fiscal year. The number was 7.5 lakh in 2019-20 and 7.06 lakh in 2018-19.

An official of the government agency said around 2 lakh out of the 5.08 lakh vehicles are three-wheelers, which are used outside Dhaka. Besides, many of them are not operated.

BRTA offices across the country remained shut for a long time during the Covid-induced lockdown in the last two years, which contributed to the rise in the number of unfit vehicles, the official told The Daily Star, wishing anonymity.

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WATER TARIFF HIKE Wasa grabbing money?

AHSAN HABIB

Md Belal Hossain, a pensioner from Old Dhaka, was livid when he picked up the morning paper on Wednesday: he learnt that Wasa was pushing to hike the water tariff by up to 40 percent.

"Is this a joke that I will have to pay more for the smelly, yellow water that flows out of my tap?" a furious Hossain told The Daily Star yesterday.

Rarely does he get clear water, and even then, the water is not fit to put in the mouth: there is a foul smell.

"This is just not acceptable. On what basis is Wasa raising the price?" he said, while demanding better service quality.

Like Hossain, hundreds of thousands of city dwellers are indignantly questioning the rationale behind the tariff hike -- which would be Wasa's third in three years and 16th in 13 years -- despite failing to fulfil the pledge of providing safe drinking water to



the vast majority of the capital's two crore residents.

And when one combs through the annual reports, Wasa's bid to hike the tariff -- by 38.8 percent to Tk 21 per unit (1,000 litres) for residential use and by 31 percent to Tk 55 per unit -- seems like money-grabbing.

For instance, in fiscal 2020-21, the Dhaka Water Supply and Sewerage Authority

(Wasa) logged in a profit of Tk 49.6 crore, up 7 percent year-on-year, according to its audited financial report.

In fiscal 2016-17, it was Tk 22.6 crore, meaning the state-owned organisation's profit has more than doubled in five years.

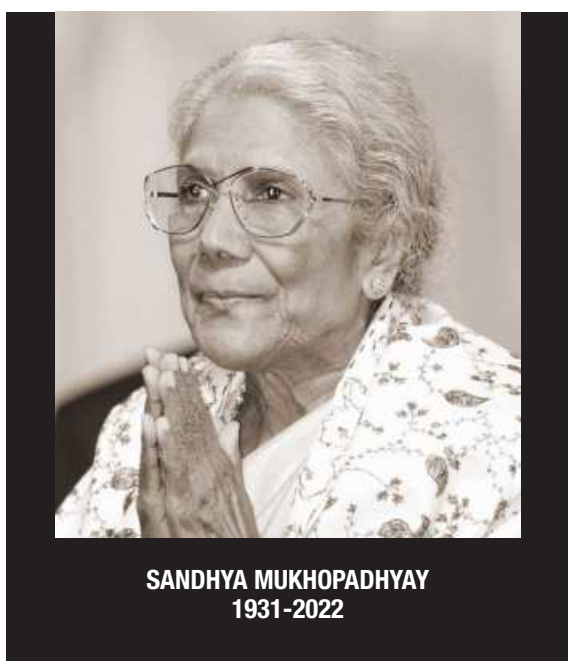
"I don't see any logic behind the price hike of water as it is making profits over the last several years and has huge retained earnings," said Khondaker Golam Moazzem, research director of the Centre for Policy Dialogue.

Retained earnings are the portion of a company's cumulative profit that is held or retained and saved for future use, particularly for investment purposes. At the end of fiscal 2020-21, Dhaka Wasa's retained earnings stood at a staggering Tk 892 crore.

"Wasa could very well have dipped into its retained earnings instead of going for a tariff hike when the inflation is already on the up," he said.

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The sun comes down on Sandhya



SANDHYA MUKHOPADHYAY
1931-2022

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

"Ei poth jodi na sesh hoi..." The voice in the Uttam Kumar-Suchitra Sen-starrer film "Saptapadi", which has kept Bengali music lovers spellbound for generations, has fallen forever silent.

Singing legend Sandhya Mukhopadhyay, the last of the Mohicans of Bengal's golden era of modern music, passed away at eastern Kolkata's Apollo Hospital yesterday evening after suffering a massive cardiac attack at the age of 90.

She is survived by daughter Soumi Sengupta and son-in-law.

Sandhya was admitted to hospital on the evening of January 27, a day after she fell in her bathroom. She was later diagnosed with Covid-19 infection.

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee said "Sandhya'di" had recovered from Covid-19 but there was a sudden deterioration in her condition.

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