

Out of reach, out of control

Govt must take stern action to control edible oil prices

IT'S alarming that amid skyrocketing prices of daily essentials, yet another problem—a crisis of edible oil, particularly soybean oil—has now emerged, with retailers and wholesalers allegedly stocking it up to create an artificial crisis, and refiners slowing down delivery. According to a report by this daily, many consumers are returning empty-handed from local stores and kitchen markets. In the absence of effective monitoring, both retail and wholesale stores are exploiting the situation by either citing a lack of oil supply or selling them at exorbitant prices. As a result, not only are government-fixed prices being ignored, but low-income customers are being disproportionately affected as well.

The timing of this couldn't be worse, as consumers are being drowned under unusually high prices for almost all essential commodities. It was only the other day that we commented on the morbid scenes of people, many from the so-called middle-income backgrounds, running after state-run TCB trucks or jostling for position in front of them to buy commodities at lower prices. The edible oil crisis, we're told, has reached a point that the poor, frustrated by high prices, are going for loose (unbottled) oil in small quantities, but that too is becoming scarce. On Saturday, loose soybean oil was barely available in Dhaka's kitchen markets, while the price of a five-litre bottle was as high as Tk 830, although the government-fixed rate is Tk 795.

Bangladesh has to depend on the international market to meet 90 percent of its edible oil demand, making the role of importers and refiners hugely important. Insiders say the present crisis is the result of a stocking tendency within the supply chain after the refiners demanded that the commerce ministry increase the price of edible oil to Tk 180 per litre from March 1—up by Tk 12 from the government-fixed price. Some have cited high import costs and duties as well as supply concerns in the middle of the Russia-Ukraine war. The government didn't entertain their demand for hikes, according to the commerce minister, and as a result an unscrupulous group is manipulating the market.

The government plans to ban the sales of loose soybean oil after May 31, and palm oil after December 31 this year. This is a good move and should have been done earlier, as loose edible oil can not only be a tool of manipulation, but is often heavily adulterated, causing various health complications. But it is nowhere near enough. The government must initiate stronger interventions to check irregularities and make oil available within the reach of ordinary customers. It must ensure fair price adjustment in light of international prices, and punish errant traders and importers who try to exploit the situation as well as its lax oversight of kitchen markets.

From garbage to fashion!

An amazing way to beat plastic pollution

IT is pretty amazing that Bangladesh is on its way to becoming a major source of recycled yarn and fabrics made from plastic bottles. Reportedly, some Bangladeshi companies have already set up plants investing hundreds of crores of taka to make flakes from waste plastic bottles, which will be used to make yarn and fabrics. Recycled yarns are used to make some high value-added garment items such as jerseys, jackets, quilts, padding and outerwear. It is a growing global trend now to make yarn from recycled plastic bottles, as Western consumers are becoming increasingly conscious about saving the environment from plastic pollution. As the demand for such garment products is increasing worldwide, Bangladesh can take this opportunity to become a major producer of yarn and fabric made from plastic.

Reportedly, international retailers and brands are asking suppliers to add 25-30 percent of the raw material made from plastic to the finished garment items. Bangladeshi companies mostly import these recycled yarns from China. But the price of the yarn has increased a lot in the international market, which has led some Bangladeshi companies to plan for producing their own plastic flakes and yarns.

It is good to know that already seven local mills have set up plants to produce flakes from waste plastic bottles. While some of them have already started their production, they are struggling to get the required raw material for production. The problem is that plastic waste and bottles are usually collected in an informal way. If this process could be formalised and incentivised, the collection would definitely increase. Also, the seabed of the Bay of Bengal could be explored to extract plastic bottles currently polluting its waters.

Being the 10th most plastic-polluting country in the world (according to the Earth Day Network, 2018), it should be our priority to invest more in setting up recycling facilities. The National Action Plan for Sustainable Plastic Management has set a target of recycling 50 percent of plastic by 2025. In order to fulfil that target, more companies should come forward to make plastic flakes to be used to make garment products. Besides, recycled plastic can be used to produce many day-to-day household products. While reducing our consumption of plastic is very important, it is equally vital to reuse and recycle them. And we believe that more Bangladeshi companies will come forward to set up recycling plants to beat plastic pollution in the country.

HISTORIC MARCH 7

Setting a nation on the march



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND
Dr Shamsad Mortuza is the pro-vice-chancellor of the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB).

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

IT is common for modern day leaders to use teleprompters, in which words are projected onto transparent beam-splitter mirrors, making their speeches appear impromptu and spontaneous. Bangabandhu, too, had a teleprompter, but his was made not of characters in pixels, but of the real-life characters sitting in front of him. His people in the audience were the words and the world of his speech. They appeared in millions on March 7, 1971, on the grounds of what is now known as Suhrawardy Udyan, like the words on a page waiting with a collective aspiration for freedom and for the talismanic touch that would set words into action. Theirs was the energy and passion that got articulated through the voice of one leader. The historic speech of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on March 7, 1971 set a nation on the march.

In 18 minutes, Bangabandhu prepared his countrymen for the ultimate struggle that they would have to endure for their freedom. He chose each of his words carefully, knowing that one wrong word would present him as a secessionist before the world, giving the scheming Pakistani rulers the opportunity to ignore the faint hope of democratic process altogether. The landslide victory in the 1970 general election that gave Bangabandhu the endorsement of his people to form the government in Pakistan would mean nothing, and his opponents could present him as (what Bhutto called) a "rebel rouser," invoking immediate military action. He chose each of his words carefully, knowing that the one million people sitting in front of him had had enough of the oppression in the hands of West Pakistan rulers. Frustrated by the machination of the leaders of West Pakistan and angered by their colonialism, they were ready to erupt in action. Bangabandhu could read the words and the world before him as if he was the only one who could see the invisible teleprompter.

Before the rally, his associates told him of the mob sentiment that would not be pacified by anything short of the unilateral declaration of independence. The Awami League had won an absolute majority of 160 seats, while its opponent Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) had won only 81 seats in the first general elections since the independence of Pakistan in 1947. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was set to be the prime minister of Pakistan. The National Assembly, however, was not inaugurated as the military dictator Gen Yahya Khan and the PPP Chairman Zulfikar Ali Bhutto did not want a party from East Pakistan heading the federal government. Not to mention, the affluent aristocratic class of Pakistan had little to no respect for a man of the people as their leader. It was up to



▲ **Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman at the then Ramna Race Course Maidan on March 7, 1971.**

PHOTO: ARCHIVES

Such great speeches are rooted in history as they carry the memory of human experiences. They are not located at any given time, but to the entire humanity.

Bangabandhu to expose the hypocrisy of Pakistani rulers who had started acting like a colonial power to subjugate its own people. The stakes were really high at the height of the Cold War, when the world was divided into two camps. The strategic interest of the US and China in Pakistan and the strong tie between the Soviet Union and India made the unrest in East

he made showed his keenness to keep the democratic process alive. He mentioned four conditions for joining the National Assembly: i) The immediate lifting of martial law; ii) The immediate withdrawal of all military personnel to their barracks; iii) The immediate transfer of power to the elected representatives; and iv) A proper inquiry into the loss of life during the

Pakistan a global affair. The speech drew attention of the international media, who speculated that Sheikh Mujib would make a unilateral declaration of independence from Pakistan. Bangabandhu, however, was aware of the failures of such declarations in Rhodesia and Nigeria.

Thus, on March 7, 1971, Bangabandhu stood on the juncture of history. His plight was similar to Abraham Lincoln, Winston Churchill, Martin Luther King, Jr and Nelson Mandela, who are all known for delivering path-breaking speeches. Such great speeches are rooted in history as they carry the memory of human experiences. They are not located at any given time, but to the entire humanity. No wonder, Unesco recognised and recorded the speech as a world documentary heritage in 2017. In a video message congratulating the people of Bangladesh for their first ever inscription on the register of Unesco's Memory of the World, the then Unesco chief Irina Bokova explained why Bangabandhu's speech merited the honour. She referred to the first sentence of the speech, in which he stated the "heavy heart" with which he appeared before his people. Bokova observed that Bangabandhu was "conscious of the weight of his call. He stood before history with a deeply emotional summons for justice, emancipation, freedom and human dignity."

A close reading of the text shows the tonal rise and fall that Bangabandhu used as well as the mixture of formal and informal registers that he applied to coax, cajole, and convince his intended audience. He empowered his audience by saying that "you know it all. You understand it all." In doing so, he instantly created a bond of familiarity between him and the people. He appears like a healer with empathy as he carries out the diagnosis of the social illness that affects his people, before making a prognosis. The demands that

conflict. He also warned his opponents of the consequences if his demands were not met. More importantly, he announced a civil disobedience movement in the province, calling for "every house to turn into a fortress." He ended his speech famously proclaiming, "The struggle this time, is a struggle for our liberty. The struggle this time, is a struggle for our independence." The Pakistan secret service, covering the event, reported to the headquarters, "The clever Sheikh Mujib got away with declaring independence, we kept looking." Many have raised questions as to why Bangabandhu did not declare a unilateral declaration of independence on March 7. Major Siddiq Salik, posted in charge of Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) in Dhaka in 1971, offered three reasons: i) Yahya requested Sheikh Mujib not to carry on with the dialogue over the National Assembly; ii) the then US ambassador to Pakistan visited him a day before, underscoring that he would not get any of their support; and iii) The threat from a certain Pakistani GOC that he would muster up all his military might to "kill the traitors and raze Dhaka to the ground." Bangabandhu did not yield to the pressure. He concentrated on his own convictions to decide on his course of actions. People close to Bangabandhu have all confirmed how uncharacteristically quiet he was before the delivery of the speech. He was calm and reflective. His wife comforted him saying, "You say what you believe in." When driving to the venue, he told his driver to avoid the usual route to the Race Course field from his Dhanmondi residence. The driver asked him, "Do you know what you will be saying today?" Bangabandhu answered, "I will say whatever Allah makes me say." And he went on to say, "I shall free the people of the land, InshaAllah." The rest is history.

Due diligence laws must be a shared burden



Mostafiz Uddin is the managing director of Denim Expert Limited. He is also the founder and CEO of Bangladesh Denim Expo and Bangladesh Apparel Exchange (BAE).

MOSTAFIZ UDDIN

WE recently saw the announcement of new supply chain "due diligence" laws by the European Union (EU), which are aimed at making multinational businesses accountable for social and environmental transgressions in supply chains. The idea of such laws has been on the cards for some considerable time, and they have huge implications for RMG supply chains.

For many years, fashion retailers have been accused of outsourcing poor environmental and social practices to Asia. It is claimed that they are turning a blind eye to supply chain issues, whether it is poor treatment of workers, forced labour or damage to the environment. The reason such issues are so pertinent to the RMG industry is that it is the one industry which, perhaps more than any other, has been outsourced from the West to Asia.

What do these laws mean and how will they affect garment suppliers? The official draft suggests that to comply with the EU's proposed corporate due diligence laws, companies would need to meet a number of criteria. These include integrating due diligence into their sustainability policies; identifying actual or potential adverse human rights and

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environmental impacts; preventing or mitigating potential impacts; bringing to an end or minimising the actual impacts; establishing and maintaining a complaint procedure; monitoring the effectiveness of the due diligence policy and measures; and publicly communicating on due diligence.

How much of a difference will such laws make, and how will they impact garment suppliers? Well, fashion retailers already carry out a significant level of due diligence on their suppliers. There has been a huge increase in environmental and social auditing in recent years. Fashion retailers use these audits as a kind of insurance tool to maintain standards throughout the supply chains. However, there is no legal requirement to carry out such audits, and there is very little stopping a retailer from working with whomever supplier it wishes. The big worry for fashion retailers is illegal subcontracting, which still goes on in some supply chains and means that retailers end up with supply chain blind spots.

The broad point is that the current model as far as due diligence is concerned is a voluntary one. Fashion brands and retailers follow it to a large extent because the reputational risk of not doing so is simply too great.

But with the proposed EU laws coming into effect, supply chain due diligence will turn mandatory from voluntary. In many ways, I support this as it will go some way towards levelling the playing field for our customers, and potential suppliers. In order to avoid falling foul of the due diligence laws, retailers may choose to work mainly with the "best in class"

suppliers to mitigate their outsourcing risks. This, in turn, would reward the suppliers who have invested heavily in social and environmental governance issues. In theory, social and environmental standards could be raised right across the board.

My concern, however, is that the burden of following due diligence will fall almost entirely on the suppliers. I worry that it could mean more audits, more box-ticking, and increased costs for RMG factories. As suppliers, we already face a huge burden where audits are concerned, and these are costly, time-consuming and, in many cases, repetitive. Experience tells us that retailers will pass costs and responsibilities down the supply chains wherever possible. We have already seen this with voluntary agreements, and there is no reason to think any differently if due diligence regulations become legally binding.

In light of all this, if the due diligence laws are introduced in the European Union, I think it would be an opportune time for both suppliers and customers to sit down and decide how we are all going to follow the new guidelines. It is in all our interests to sing from the same hymn sheet on this issue.

In summary, then, yes, let's have new laws around due diligence, and let's shift away from these issues being handled through a voluntary approach. But let's also use this opportunity for fashion suppliers to enter an open dialogue, where we all discuss exactly what the new laws will mean, and which party will be responsible for ensuring that no one falls foul of the new regulations.

I talk of cooperation and partnership a lot and on this issue, it is more important than ever. We need to work together on this.