

## Ensure blunder-free distribution of Family Cards

We don’t need another botched govt relief programme for the poor

We welcome the government’s decision to sell a number of essential goods at subsidised prices to 8.8 million selected low-income families, and the fact that the beneficiaries will be given “Family Cards,” which will make them eligible for their purchase. We hope this will negate the purchase of these goods by unscrupulous groups with the intention of reselling them at higher prices in the open market—as has reportedly happened before—and thus denying low-income families, who actually need it, of the benefit. Prices of daily essentials have been rising unabatedly for months now. As reported in the media, prices of certain essential goods have reached record highs. These price hikes are making life extremely difficult for low- and middle-income groups, who have already been hit hard due to the economic downturn brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic.

While we fully support the government’s decision to distribute Family Cards, which will allow people to buy commodities at low prices from the Trading Corporation of Bangladesh (TCB), we can’t help but feel somewhat apprehensive, given the track record of previous such programmes. On numerous past occasions, we have seen government relief programmes getting mired in corruption. Although the distribution of Family Cards is intended to check some of the graft, it can only work if the selection and distribution processes themselves are kept free from corruption, which is a tall order. It will require strict government supervision to avoid political favouritism and ensure transparency in the process of preparing the beneficiary list. In line with that, experts have time and again warned against handing such programmes to political leaders, as that has often led to the poor being deprived of their benefits. Thus, the local administration should create their own database of individuals who should be eligible to receive the cards.

Moreover, during previous relief distributions, we have often witnessed long lines and chaos due to mismanagement and other issues. This time around, the government should take measures beforehand to avoid such problems.

If the government can properly make these arrangements, they would definitely help the people that are suffering. At the same time, it needs to try harder to bring the prices of essential goods under control, as that is the only real feasible long-term solution to this crisis.

## The sad saga of a river named Sutki

Authorities must intervene to reclaim its lost identity

It is unfortunate that, in Bangladesh, greedy humans can take possession of public properties through forging documents or resorting to other dubious means without much repercussions. Such is the case of a small river called Sutki in Habiganj district, which is being claimed by a local family as their personal property. The genealogy of ownership of the river and subsequent court battles of nearly 50 years have been chronicled elaborately in this daily. The report has brought to light the clever machinations of some influential people, who continue to claim ownership of the Sutki River with fabricated documents for generations.

It was clearly evident from the papers in the local land office that the water body was recorded as a river, which means it was a government property. The local administration also confirmed that the land was not private property. Even when shown these documents, those claiming the ownership refuse to acknowledge that Sutki is a river; instead, they call it a “water reservoir,” which their ancestors apparently dug centuries ago for irrigation.

It is distressing to learn that one family continues to deprive thousands of people of the locality from accessing the resources of the river. The big question that arises is: How could a single family have claimed ownership of a public property for decades? Who aided and abetted them in the process?

It is surprising, indeed, that the ownership of the river has changed hands a number of times through court battles, and it still remains unsettled because of various legal bottlenecks. We have the uneasy feeling that the root of the problem lies at the local land office, where century-old records are kept for future use. According to the Bangladesh Poribesh Andolon’s Habiganj unit, the government is yet to win the legal battle due to the negligence of government prosecutors who failed to produce the relevant documents before the court.

The whole story smacks of corruption at a very high level, which is making it difficult to reach a solution. We hope the ministry concerned would now intervene to give back Sutki its legal identity. It is unacceptable that a river should be held hostage to a family’s greed and corruption.

# Our migrants are suffering. What can we do to help?

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INTERNATIONAL migration plays a significantly large role in our economy. One in 10 Bangladeshi workers is currently migrant, and at least a quarter of the country’s population indirectly depends on migrants’ income. The sector is also responsible for absorbing a lion’s share of new entrants into the workforce: 1.6 million youths enter the labour market each year; meanwhile, the annual number of outbound migrants has been upwards of 500,000 since 2016.

The Covid-19 pandemic has triggered severe disruptions in the migration sector. The onset of the pandemic in 2020 caused economic activities across the world to come to a halt. As a result, more than 400,000 Bangladeshi migrants were forced to return home in 2020, according to the International Organization of Migration (IOM) estimates. Given that migrants are often the sole breadwinners and that their households are dependent on remittances, this abrupt termination has disrupted their economic stability, with long-term ramifications for their families. Curiously, while the other key sector of our economy, the RMG industry, has received major limelight during the Covid-induced crises, the plight of returnee migrants has gotten scant attention in popular discourse and policy response.

Migrant households usually fare better economically than others, but a research commissioned by the UN found that, during the initial Covid lockdown, consumption and expenditure in migrant households across the country were comparatively lower than their non-migrant counterparts—a direct repercussion of the overreliance on remittances to meet household needs. Surveys conducted by Brac indicate that over half of the returnees remained unemployed and in urgent need of work even 14 months after the initial influx.

Besides the economic fallout, the pandemic had deep psychosocial impacts on the returnee migrants and their families, too.

Employment overseas, particularly for poor families, is often deemed a ticket to a prosperous future. Individuals invest a considerable amount of fortune to migrate abroad. However, the cost of migration in Bangladesh is steep, compared to countries like India, Nepal, and Pakistan, due to a host of governance failures along the recruitment chain. Migration, therefore, frequently entails liquidating generational assets like land or depleting lifetime family savings. Given that most overseas workers end up in unskilled jobs with relatively low wages, it takes a considerable number of years to



FILE PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQ

Our international migrants, who make a sizeable contribution to our economic growth, deserve more support and protection from the government.

recoup the large upfront investment.

We can only imagine the failure of such high-risk endeavours on the aspirations and hopes of individuals and the anxiety it likely ensues. This trouble was only compounded with the added layer of pandemic-induced complexity. In the initial panic of Covid, migrants were often regarded as “Covid-carriers,” ostracised by

should not be a challenge, since migrants register at the ports of entry during exit and arrival. The challenge here is one of data governance at airports and coordination across relevant ministries and departments.

Second, the pandemic is likely to have worsened the already challenging situation of labour rights violations

their communities and shunned by their friends and families.

This unprecedented influx of migrants and the consequent crisis resulted in some emergency measures by both NGOs and the government. The central thrust of such initiatives was to reintegrate migrants to the domestic economy. Most prominent of these initiatives is a Tk-700-crore investment scheme established by the government to provide collateral-free soft loans to the returnee migrants. Additionally, with funding from the World Bank, the government is providing Tk 13,500 each to 200,000 migrants. Brac has also been proactive in assisting returnees via cash transfers, skills training, and psychosocial counselling. While such measures are laudable and urgently required for emergency relief, a sustainable reintegration strategy is pivotal for the long-term rehabilitation of returnees.

It has been two years since hundreds of thousands of migrants returned home due to the pandemic. As the onslaught of return ebbs, perhaps it’s time to take stock not only to optimise the present response, but also to equip for the future in the event that such an influx reoccurs.

In discussions with experts, several themes repeatedly emerged.

First, given our resource constraints, it is not practical to provide continuous assistance to all returnees. Nonetheless, we can be more efficient with our existing resources. This includes improved targeting of beneficiaries, as well as providing assistance tailored to individual profiles. Establishment of a returnee database is critical to this end—which

that are ubiquitous to migrants in gulf countries—from unpaid wages to abrupt termination of contracts. A proper grievance mechanism to mediate labour disputes is long overdue. The government’s unilateral actions, e.g. strengthening the labour attaches, would go only so far in resolving this issue. The daunting challenge of labour rights would require a multilateral and transnational approach, not only between migrants’ home and host countries, but also between major global powers. This agenda needs to be linked with the broader global agenda on preventing modern-day slavery and human trafficking.

The silver lining to every crisis is that it gives an opportunity to learn and radically rethink conventional approaches. Until now, the focus of overseas employment in Bangladesh has been a relentless search for new labour markets and higher remittances. Perhaps now the time is ripe to seriously contemplate repatriation and reintegration as a strategic pillar for the migration sector. This applies not only to those involuntarily deported due to Covid, but also to those who have completed the natural cycle of migration and returned home. We have been sending workers overseas for over two decades now. Our nation is no longer a new entrant to the international labour market. As the migration sector in Bangladesh ages, a structural and comprehensive national reintegration plan becomes all the more pressing. Until now, our predominant focus has been on only half the story—sending migrants away. But it’s high time we focused on the other half—making migrants feel at home when they’re back.

## If war wins, climate action loses

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THE Ukraine war is a tragedy of tragedies, catastrophic for the Ukrainian people, a disaster for the global economy and a real setback for global peace and stability. The emotional fog of war is such that most commentary is about who wins, who loses and who is right or wrong. The inconvenient truth is that perhaps we will all lose, with little upside unless we start de-escalating everything.

The war has swept aside concerns about the pandemic, with intense focus on how to defeat the enemy. The speed and ferocity of the war caught almost everyone by surprise, so we have few clear-headed assessments of comprehensive short- and long-term implications on the global economy, finance, trade and development. Those who care about climate warming, as I do, would like to ponder what the war means for the fragile agreement on climate action decided in the Glasgow COP26 last November.

With the return of great power conflict in 2014 and the eruption of the Ukraine war this year, the world’s attention will be diverted from climate change towards preparing for war.

Make no mistake, there is a direct connection between military spending and carbon emissions. The US accounted for 24 percent of total NATO military spending in 2021, or an estimated USD 811 billion. The Brown University

In short, increased defence expenditure will accelerate energy and non-renewable material consumption, absorb the best talents in war efforts, increase carbon emissions, thus diverting scarce resources away from climate action.

Watson School of International & Public Affairs estimates that the US Department of Defense is “the world’s largest institutional user of petroleum and correspondingly, the single largest institutional producer of greenhouse gases (GHG) in the world. In 2017, for example, the Pentagon’s total greenhouse gas emissions (installations and operations) were greater than the greenhouse gas emissions of entire industrialised countries, such as Sweden, Denmark and Portugal.”

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How urgent is the climate disaster? The UN Secretary General called 2021 the “make it or break it year” for global climate action. He quoted scientists to say the world must cut global emissions by 45 percent by 2030, compared with 2010 levels, to avoid the most catastrophic impacts of climate change.

Instead, for 2022 alone, the UN has estimated that it will need USD 1.7 billion to support and provide essential supplies and services for people in Ukraine, including an anticipated four million Ukrainian refugees.

We have been witnessing bushfires in California and Australia, flash floods in India and Indonesia, volcanic eruptions and earthquakes that are unprecedented in scale and intensity.

On top of all this, Russia accounted for 10 percent of world oil supply gas output and 26 percent of world wheat production. The price of oil has risen to just under USD 139 per barrel, and wheat, grain and palm oil prices are at record

highs. Countries that were hoping to cut fuel subsidies will now have to cushion energy shocks, whilst coping with higher defence expenditure and increasing social spending to alleviate rising poverty already worsened by the pandemic. All these in the midst of surging inflation and slowing global trade, disrupted by supply chain choke points and war.

In 2021, the World Scientists’ Warnings into Action, Local to Global, signaled a global Climate Emergency in energy, atmospheric pollutants, nature, food, population and economy. Unfortunately, war has torpedoed collaborative efforts because political stability is being disrupted.

We need to be realistic that the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are very high-level goals requiring detailed design, implementation and action on hundreds of thousands of Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) projects and programmes at local levels. Most emerging markets lack the talent, funding and capacity to implement these effectively. It is easy to call for a “Global Marshall Plan” for civilisation. But with war, it is likely that Europe will prioritise a Marshall plan for restoration of the Ukrainian economy first. Who will fund the Climate Action by developing countries in Africa and developing Asia and Latin America?

Like all crises, war has divided the world into those who are rich and protected, and those who are poor, vulnerable and insecure. This is no longer a zero-sum game, but a vicious downward spiral of conflict, failing governance and climate-driven natural disasters.

Before the war gets too hot, we need cool heads and warm hearts to reflect why we need de-escalation for peace and the existential survival of all humanity.