

PRICES OF ESSENTIALS

Govt doing its best to arrest hike

Two ministers claim

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Two ministers yesterday said the government has been doing its best to control the high prices of essentials, which is the result of global market instability.

Following a meeting of the National Economic Council's Executive Committee, Planning Minister MA Mannan said the market situation will gradually improve due to the government interventions and Value Added Tax (VAT) cuts.

"Any disruption in the world has an impact on our country. The government is trying its best to handle this. Around 800 [mobile shops] of Trading Corporation of Bangladesh are moving across the country, providing essentials to one crore families at lower prices," he said.

Echoing him, state minister for planning Prof Shamsul Alam also said the problem was global.

"We have no room to be depressed. This inflation is not for domestic reasons. Our... vegetable production decreases in the month of Chaitra, but plenty of vegetables are available in the market this season," he added.

The government is tackling the inflation well, he said.

"Many people talk about the long queues behind the TCB trucks, but if TCB products are available at lower prices, people would run after the trucks.

"I have doubts about some newspapers. A leading Bangla daily and an English daily published a photo of someone lying on the road. But she wears a nice sari."

"I want to say that an effort is being continued politically, especially those who are rival political forces or their supporters are out to... take [political] benefits," he said.



Laden with logs, an illegal three-wheeler, locally known as "Nasiman", plying a road in Khulna city's Daulatpur area. Operation of such illegal slow-moving vehicles often leads to accidents. The photo was taken recently.

PHOTO: HABIBUR RAHMAN

US ANNOUNCEMENT ON ROHINGYA GENOCIDE

Dhaka sees hope of repatriation

Myanmar's junta rejects declaration of Washington DC

UNB, Dhaka

Bangladesh has welcomed the US announcement acknowledging Rohingya genocide, noting that it might expedite efforts on accountability and repatriation fronts.

"Though late, it's a good news. We welcome it," Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen told reporters at his office yesterday while responding to a question.

He said if genocide takes place anywhere it should be acknowledged and the perpetrators should not go unpunished.

"That's why we say never again. We don't want to see any genocide. Unfortunately, genocide is taking place."

Terming the US a good friend of Bangladesh, Momen hoped that it will put more pressure on Myanmar so that they take back Rohingyas to their homeland in Rakhine state.

"If the repatriation efforts are expedited through this US announcement, we will be very happy," he said, adding that they are focusing on two goals -- welfare of Rohingyas through repatriation and preventing repetition of genocide.

The minister said the victims of genocide must get justice. He hoped the genocide case against Myanmar filed by The Gambia at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) will gain momentum.

On Monday, Matthew Smith, chief executive officer at Fortify Rights, termed US Secretary of State Antony Blinken's announcement "historic" for the Rohingya and all people of Myanmar and also for wider efforts to prevent and remedy genocide.

"To prevent genocide, governments must at least acknowledge it when it happens, which is precisely what the US government did today [Monday].

"United Nations member states should publicly acknowledge the Rohingya genocide in Myanmar and ensure that the UN Security Council refers the situation to the International Criminal Court," said Fortify Rights.

The US announced that the Myanmar military is responsible for committing genocide against the Rohingya people.

However, Myanmar's junta yesterday said it "categorically rejects" the US declaration that the military committed genocide against the mostly Muslim Rohingya minority, reports AFP.

"Myanmar has never engaged in any genocidal actions and does not have any

genocidal intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, racial or religious group or any other group," the junta's foreign affairs ministry said in a statement.

Zaw Win, human rights specialist at Fortify Rights, said: "It is a signalling and remarkable milestone for Rohingya victims and survivors that the US has

formally determined that the violence committed against Rohingya by the Myanmar military amounts to genocide and crimes against humanity.

"It has been a long-term expectation for the Rohingya community. Declaring that what happened to the Rohingya is in fact genocide should spur international accountability efforts and make it more difficult for the Myanmar military to continue its atrocity crimes."

The UN Security Council members should immediately put forward a resolution to refer the situation in Myanmar to the ICC, said Fortify Rights.

"Secretary Blinken's announcement is historic for the Rohingya and all people of Myanmar and also for wider efforts to prevent and remedy genocide," said Matthew Smith.



Deadly yet taken lightly

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percent and coal burning for the rest.

Black carbon, which does not last long in the atmosphere, is a key component of fine particles, or particulate matter 2.5 (PM2.5) -- tiny particles or droplets in the air that are two and a half microns or less in width.

Prof Salam said if the PM 2.5 is higher in the air, the amount of black carbon will be higher and the air

will be unhealthier. "In Bangladesh, we found that 25-40 percent of PM 2.5 is black carbon."

Tanvir Ahmed, civil engineering professor at Buet, said black carbon is not routinely monitored in Bangladesh, therefore its concentrations from direct measurements are not available.

But it can be assumed that if PM 2.5 rises, black carbon too goes up proportionately, he added.

Black carbon has a number of disastrous consequences on the environment and climate, as well as affecting the temperature within a city, having knock-on effects on the quality of people's lives, according to IQAir, a Swiss air quality technology company.

"And with large accumulations of this taking place due to its heavy release from factories, brick kilns and automobiles, it

would be found in high amounts permeating both the atmosphere and roads across Bangladesh," it said in its 2021 World Air Quality Report.

The report puts Bangladesh on top among the most polluted countries in terms of air quality while Dhaka on the position of second most polluted capital in the world following New Delhi.

Researchers say the poorer the quality of air

is, the more black carbon exists in the environment.

Prof Salam said though black carbon is a major air pollutant, the government has done little to tackle its emission despite embarking on a national action plan.

If it is controlled, the temperature of the country could be reduced by at least one degree Celsius, he also said, recommending immediate measures.

With the support of

Climate and Clean Air Coalition, the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change conducted baseline assessments of short-lived climate pollutants, including black carbon, in Bangladesh in 2013.

Following this, the national action plan was adopted in 2018, aiming to reduce black carbon emission by 40 percent by 2030.

But officials at

the Department of Environment (DoE) say they have no mechanism to monitor black carbon -- they only can monitor particulate matters PM10 and PM 2.5.

"We had identified the sources and formulated an action plan but due to fund crunch we could not implement it," said Mirza Shawkat Ali, director (Climate change & International Convention) of DoE.

He, however, said they were trying to implement some of the provisions of the action plan like reducing the traditional brick kilns.

Following a High Court order last year, a detailed guideline was prepared on containing air pollution.

"The Department of Environment alone cannot improve the air quality but it requires a comprehensive and coordinated efforts," he added.

Tk 5,132 crore projects as per MPs' demand

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Development Association (IDA) will finance about Tk 2,544 crore in the four-year-long "Local Government Covid-19 Response and Recovery (LGCCR)" project.

Briefing reporters after the meeting, Planning Minister MA Mannan said lawmakers have been demanding the renovation of religious establishments and construction of bridges in their respective areas.

"Hundreds of applications were filed... The Ecnecc has taken those into consideration," he said, adding that one bridge will be built in his area in Sunamganj.

"A representative has to comply with the locals' demands. The list of the bridges [to be built] is prepared based on the needs of the local constituents."

About the religious houses, Mannan said, "There are sentiments linked to this issue. That's why it has been taken into consideration."

The project to renovate religious structures is the second phase of the GSIDP project taken up in 2017, following the lawmakers' demand.

The first phase is still going on, with 96 percent of the work completed. The tenure of this phase ends in June 2022.

The second phase will commence in July and end in June 2025. Only religious buildings in villages will only be renovated under this phase.

The project will play an important role in strengthening social bonding," said the planning commission in its observation.

Meanwhile, bridges with an accumulated length of 17,687 meters would be built under the bridge-construction project. Besides, 38,800m-long approach roads would be constructed.

There will also be river administration work under the project with a deadline set for December 2026.

according to the project document.

The project will improve the rural communications system, ease transportation of agriculture and non-agricultural goods and generate employments.

The Local Government Engineering Department will implement both projects.

On January 10, 2017, the Ecnecc approved "Construction of Important Bridges on Rural Roads" at the cost of Tk 3,926.76 crore.

Meanwhile, Tofail Ahmed, local government expert, asked, "Why does the government need to spend money on religious institutions? Devotees are there to look after those. From a religious point of view, spending money for political purpose is not good either... Water management is more essential than bridge and road construction. The government needs to fix its priorities first."

LGCCR PROJECT

Mannan said the LGCCR project will be implemented in some 10 city corporations and 329 municipalities, with a deadline set for December 2025.

The project aims to strengthen urban local government institutions to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic and improve preparedness for future shocks, benefitting around 40 million urban residents, according to the WB.

It will support labour intensive public works to restore the livelihoods of the poor and vulnerable people, mostly working in the informal sector, who were most affected by restrictions and lockdowns.

Eligible urban local bodies will install community hand-washing stations and toilets; and improve sanitisation in municipality-owned or operated markets, burial grounds, and public offices. It will create 1.5 million days of temporary work as well as employment for

10,000 women under the public work scheme.

The project will also help local government institutions improve preparedness for climate impacts, disaster, and future disease outbreaks, said the WB.

Other projects approved include procurement of 200 broad gauge passenger carriages for Bangladesh Railway; supplying water through rainwater harvest in coastal districts; establishing an Air Force Training Institute at Zohurul Haque Base in Chattogram; improving governance and management research and training facilities; upgrading three regional highways and three district highways under Naogaon Road Department; establishing an external telecommunication network for Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant; and establishing a seed multiplication farm at south-eastern region of Bangladesh.

With an annual average PM2.5 concentration of 78.1 µg/m³, Dhaka ranked the second most polluted capital in the world, only surpassed by Delhi's 85.0 µg/m³. PM2.5 refers to particulate matter which measures up to 2.5 microns in size, and has a range of chemical makeup and

sources.

PM2.5 concentration was 66.8 µg/m³ in Pakistan and 58.1 µg/m³ in India.

"Central and South Asia had some of the world's worst air quality and were home to 46 of the world's 50 most polluted cities," the report said, analysing data of 6,475 cities in 117 countries, regions and territories collected in 2021.

Not a single country managed to meet the WHO's standard in 2021.

Air pollution in Bangladesh increased the risks for bouts of chest infections that can lead to susceptibility to respiratory conditions such as influenza and pneumonia, lung cancer and can wreak havoc on the human body, with all organs being susceptible to damage, particularly the liver and kidneys, the report said. Children who are exposed to high levels of pollution can end up with developmental problems.

WHAT CAN BE DONE

With years of collective work from both the government and citizens, dents may be put into the levels of pollution via the implementation of fines and punishments for those that exceed air pollution levels in any given area.

The study recommended phasing out the old vehicles and the use of diesel in automobiles and moving to cleaner fuel sources.

"As stated, a highly concentrated effort would need to take place over the coming years, if Bangladesh is to see its position as world's most polluted country changed for the better," read the report.

Air pollution is now considered to be the world's largest environmental health threat, accounting for seven million deaths around the world every year. It is estimated that in 2021, the deaths of 40,000 children under the age of five were directly linked to PM2.5 air pollution.

Biman puts Boeing 737s under watch

RASHIDUL HASAN

Biman Bangladesh Airlines has placed its fleet of Boeing 737 planes under surveillance after a jet crashed in China.

The national flag carrier yesterday said they are monitoring flight procedures, air worthiness and operations of the aircraft line.

On Monday, a China Eastern Airlines Boeing 737-800, travelling from Kunming to Guangzhou, with 132 people onboard, plunged to the ground and caught fire.

India's aviation regulator has also placed its fleet of Boeing 737 planes under "enhanced surveillance" after the deadly crash.

Dr Abu Saleh Mostafa Kamal, Biman's Managing Director and CEO, said, "Like other countries, we have also placed our fleet under surveillance... Flight safety is a serious issue and we are closely monitoring the situation."

Another bridge over the Payra

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Bangladesh Bridge Authority hired a South Korean-Bangladesh joint venture (JV) firm to build a major bridge over the Payra in Patuakhali.

Officials of the BBA and the firm signed a contract yesterday in this regard at capital's Setu Bhaban in presence of Road Transport and Bridges Minister Obaidul Quader.

The partners of the JV are Korean company Samwhan Corporation and Mir Akhter Hossain Ltd of Bangladesh.

The firm will prepare the design of the 1.7km bridge and is to build it in three years at the cost of around Tk 641 crores.

Project Director Tofazzel Hossain said they hope the contractors will start designing the bridge within the next two weeks.

Last year, the government inaugurated the Lebukhali over the Payra on the Barishal-Patuakhali highway.

Body of jute worker found in vehicle

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Natore

Police yesterday recovered the body a jute mills employee from a jeep bearing stickers of the Secretariat in Bonpara Bypass area of Natore's Baraigram upazila.

The dead was identified as Hazrat Ali, 36, employee of Taz Enterprise Jute Mills in Gazipur.

Abu Siddique, OC of Baraigram Police Station, said they recovered the body and arrested the driver of the vehicle after conducting a raid in the area at 9:30am based on a tip-off.

He added that the owner of the Taz Enterprise Jute Mill, Mizanur Rahman, was picked up for questioning.

During interrogation, Mizanur claimed that Hazrat had taken a loan of Tk 4 lakhs from him. Unable to pay it back, Hazrat allegedly entered Mizanur's room and died by suicide on Monday night. Mizanur then claimed he put the body in a car out of fear.

Liton Kumar Saha, superintendent of Natore police, said a police