

The consumers are right

Titas proposal to raise gas prices unacceptable, illogical

WE completely agree with the views expressed by consumers at a recent public hearing organised by the Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission (BERC) to discuss the proposed gas price hike by Titas Gas Transmission and Distribution Company Ltd. Titas recently proposed to increase gas tariffs by 117 percent. At the hearing, consumers from various sectors—domestic, industries, power, etc.—termed the proposal not only “unacceptable,” but also “illogical.” They asked the Titas authorities about the rationale behind such a proposal, and pointed out the company’s failure to provide proper services to its subscribers. Reportedly, Titas not only failed to snap illegal gas connections, but also could not prevent gas theft and ensure uninterrupted supply to its consumers in all these years.

Meanwhile, the Technical Evaluation Committee of BERC recommended raising the gas tariffs by 20 percent on average, which was also criticised by the Consumers Association of Bangladesh (CAB). They said this increase was not logical given the poor service the consumers get.

Gas shortage has become acute in many areas across Bangladesh over the last few months, and many gas-fuelled industries have been struggling to continue their operations due to severe supply interruptions. To solve this, the government decided to import more LNG at higher prices. Experts, however, have long advised the government not to go for more LNG imports, but to explore gas reserves inside the country to solve the shortage in supply, to avoid further burdening the consumers.

In addition, a large part of the problem can be solved by removing inefficiency and irregularities in the distribution companies. Reportedly, Titas—which distributes gas in Dhaka and Mymensingh divisions—has 2.9 million legal connections and nearly the same number of illegal connections. Titas employees are reportedly involved in conferring these illegal connections. Although Titas authorities claim that they regularly snap illegal connections, that hardly makes a dent in their number. They claim they can’t take care of all illegal connections due to manpower shortage. If that’s the case, why don’t they recruit more people to do the job?

Additionally, CAB has rightly pointed out that the government, which owns 75 percent of the shares in Titas, could be reinvesting the profit instead of taking it.

The consumers at the public hearing raised some very important issues—questions that need to be addressed. Titas needs to answer them before proposing unreasonable price hikes.

Russia’s threat of using nuclear weapons alarming

Negotiations must go on to end the ominous possibility

THE world is on tenterhooks since Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Russia would use nuclear weapons if its very existence came under threat. Now, the word “if” could mean anything, and it would depend on the Russians how they perceive the necessity of using such weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Peskov must have imparted the thoughts of President Vladimir Putin when he said, “We have a concept of domestic security, and it is public. You can read all the reasons for nuclear arms to be used. So if it is an existential threat for our country, then it can be used in accordance with our concept.”

Such expressions as “existential threat” and “our concept” only after a month when Putin ordered Russia’s nuclear forces to be put on high alert may invoke a high-stake war in Europe unless otherwise averted. We also note with great concern that Russia’s defence ministry confirmed that its nuclear missile forces and northern and Pacific fleets have already been placed on enhanced combat duty.

We condemn Russia’s subtle threat of using nuclear weapons, and share the concern of United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, “The prospect of nuclear conflict, once unthinkable, is now back within the realm of possibility.” We have observed that Russia’s war in Ukraine has already left a terrifying trail of destruction and deaths. And while the body count is increasing every day, there is no sign of respite for the besieged citizens.

It is distressing to note that while the world community is clamouring for non-proliferation of all kinds of nuclear weapons for the sake of creating a safer world, a threat from Russia of using one in a war with a neighbour has sounded the alarm bell across the world. We are aware of the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons signed in 2017, which could happen after a prolonged campaign by the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons—ICAN. We know that an overwhelming majority of the world’s nations, including Bangladesh, adopted the landmark global agreement to ban nuclear weapons, known officially as the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. It entered into force on January 22, 2021.

Therefore, we call upon all members involved in the conflict—Russia, Ukraine and the West—to tone down the aggressive rhetoric coming from all sides. A month into the war, it is imperative that the parties to the conflict need to sit down and try to reach a political settlement to end it without any further delay, taking into consideration the security and concerns of all sides.

FERRY DISASTERS

Let’s not sugarcoat institutional murders



OF MAGIC & MADNESS

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IT’S like a scene from a Stephen King movie: a small passenger vessel being “devoured” by a cargo ship about 20 times its size. But perhaps even the master of horror couldn’t have produced a moment so short, yet so fateful. Video clips capturing this tragic encounter on the Shitalakkhya River show how panicked passengers of the Munshiganj-bound vessel ML Afsar Uddin screamed as the much larger MV Rupshi 9 cargo ship crept up on the former and, without warning, ploughed into it. The ship continued to push forward until some passengers jumped into the river. Seconds later, the smaller vessel sank, with many passengers still on it, while the ship went along like nothing had happened.

You normally use words like “plough” when describing some highway crashes. “The truck ploughed into a van,” you say, or “The train crashed into a stranded car.” The “killer truck” epithet owes its origin mostly to this type of impact. It’s a standard trope for crime thrillers as well. One may also recall the 2016 terrorist attack in France, in which the world was shocked by the audacity of a cargo truck being driven into crowds celebrating the Bastille Day, killing 86 people.

So it takes some imagination to think of a similar occurrence on the waterway, where you least expect it. Yet, here we are.

Reports published after the March 20 ferry disaster, which recorded at least 10 deaths so far, describe emotional scenes of people searching for their missing relatives or mourning the dead. Some of the headings aptly captured their mood: “I need no compensation, just find my husband’s body,” said Momela Begum about her husband who returned from Kuwait only a month ago. “My child, I can’t bear losing you,” cried Jayaram Rajbangshi, holding the lifeless body of his three-year-old daughter. “Are we doomed to die like this? Die again and again?” said Minu Begum, who lost her nephew’s wife and daughter before losing her daughter-in-law and granddaughter in another launch tragedy on the Shitalakkhya last year. “Will there be no punishment for the murderers?” asked another grieving relative.

These expressions of pain and sorrow remind us that there’s no tragedy like the loss of a loved one, especially in such pointless deaths.

When the relatives talk about murderers, they don’t just mean the crew



▲ When will the cycle of waterway accidents break?

ILLUSTRATION: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

The officials or vessel owners are rarely held to account for their actions or lack thereof. We see low-level operators rounded up after each incident, which makes for good optics.

for what it is? After all, when institutional failures, incompetence and negligence are encouraged rather than punished, such catastrophes—either in the form of collision, or fire or capsizе caused by internal malfunctions—become a natural outcome, making the official-owner complex complicit. And if a person is held responsible for a deliberate act of murder, why can’t we hold an institution and related stakeholders responsible for the same?

Unfortunately, the officials or owners of vessels are rarely held to account for their actions or lack thereof. We see low-level operators rounded up after each incident, which makes for good optics but cannot prevent the recurrence of such tragedies. The same can be said about land transport owners. Or, the regulators and top officials in both sectors.

Their culpability becomes clear when you consider how water vessels, for example, are caught in a tragic loop of circumstances that makes accidents, small or big, almost predestined. First, you have a system that allows faulty vessels and ill-trained crew members to operate. (Part of the reason why ML Afsar Uddin capsized so quickly was its being a “sunken-deck” vessel, known for having fewer safety measures and no watertight deck which could help it remain afloat for a longer time.) Then,

regulatory oversight, lack of trained crew members, rise in river traffic (including unregistered vessels), shortage of manpower for safety checks, overcrowding, and an overall culture of impunity for the waterway tragedies, which have been on the rise in recent years. According to Buet’s Accident Research Institute (ARI), 110 people were killed in waterway tragedies in 2019, while 264 people were killed in 2020. Last year, some 199 people lost their lives.

The frequency of these incidents should be a wake-up call for those in charge of the Department of Shipping and the Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA). They must first acknowledge their failures to prevent such incidents and then help institute a system of accountability that actually works, regardless of how well-connected one is. They can no longer hide behind excuses or blame games, especially with the monsoon/storm season coming.

There is no dearth of research on why waterway tragedies keep happening in Bangladesh, nor on what should be done to prevent them and modernise the river management system. All this is more or less known already. What we really need now is a push to change how the system works, and ensure accountability for everyone involved in it.

After two years of Covid, what’s next?



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FOR all of us around the world, the last two years have been rough because of the Covid-19 pandemic. As of March 24, 2022 afternoon, more than 476 million people have been infected by various strands of Sars-CoV-2. Globally, more than 6.1 million have died so far. The greatest toll—nearly 80 percent of all cases—has been among those 65 years or older in terms of cases, hospitalisation and deaths. Many of us have lost close family members. The trauma of the losses is still with us.

In recent weeks, when we have been experiencing a steady decline in Covid cases in many countries, with people coming out of the long “Covidian” hibernation, there still have been worrisome developments, such as the rising number of Covid cases in parts of the Asia-Pacific (Singapore, China, South Korea and New Zealand) and Europe (Britain, Germany and Italy), with the new surges largely driven by vaccine scepticisms. The latest Covid surge, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), is “the tip of the iceberg.” So, even after two years of fighting with the pandemic, we are evidently not out of the woods yet.

The bottom line is, Covid is not going away, according to many experts. The vaccines and other treatments can keep future increases manageable. However, the biggest problem that remains is the millions of unvaccinated people—many of them by choice while others without access to vaccines—in much of Europe, Africa

Can we foresee a post-Covid future anytime soon? Expert opinions suggest that Covid is here to stay. Just like recent surges in several countries, the disease will likely continue in some form and keep on disrupting our daily life.

and the rest of the world. The two years of Covid have taught us some lessons not only about the coronavirus itself, but also about healthcare systems globally—how people and society have perceived this terrible disease and their responses, the sociopsychological tolls, the politics and backlashes against Covid restrictions, the astonishing vaccine nationalism, and, finally, how the pandemic wrecked and transformed the world economy.

An immediate lesson out of the pandemic showed how ill-prepared our global health institution, WHO, was. There was a major disconnect between what the world expected of WHO and its capacities and power to deliver—particularly its inadequate budget, which, strangely, is only one-fifth of the budget of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The fragility of public healthcare systems across the world became apparent, too, reaching their limits with shortages in every respect—from hospital beds and nurses/caregivers, to oxygen supply, medical tools and modern technologies—due to historic neglect. The situation was further compounded by pre-existing vulnerable and disadvantaged population groups, influenced strongly by the lack of access to health insurance and other social and economic factors, both in developed and developing countries.

The pandemic further exposed vulnerabilities in our society and accelerated the already existing inequalities in many countries, without any adequate social protection measures. As a result, the poverty-stricken and ethnic/indigenous groups, no matter where they live, have suffered the most. In many countries, the pandemic and the measures to fight it—for instance, periodic and/or prolonged lockdowns—led to mistrust in government, with the rise of anti-science populism, particularly in North America and Europe, despite the triumph of scientific and political

leadership that so quickly developed and produced billions of vaccine doses. However, at the same time, we witnessed vaccine nationalism in many countries, with utter failure of the global leadership to distribute and ramp up enough supplies through the ambitious COVAX programme to the least developed and developing countries.

The pandemic forced us to be bunkered in our homes until now. As a result, the concept of the workplace changed—perhaps forever. Millions lost jobs during the pandemic; others were forced to work from home due to lockdowns and travel restrictions. Many with inadequate or limited home office facilities endured stressful and long hours of work at home, without any scope to relax and recover from Covid anxieties; others with good home office support (and without any parental responsibility) found benefits in working remotely. However, the shift to remote work completely changed the way we work and interact every day through endless and often poorly timed virtual meetings via Zoom, Microsoft Teams and WhatsApp, online lectures/seminars, and training, often harming our relationships with family members, friends and colleagues. This remote work style may ultimately lead to a “hybrid” model for work in the future.

Can we foresee a post-Covid future anytime soon? Expert opinions suggest that Covid is here to stay. Just like recent surges in several countries, the disease will likely continue in some form and keep on disrupting our daily life. Some scientists predict that Covid will become endemic—perhaps more in the form of a respiratory disease that would be regularly treated like influenza. In other words, we must be ready to live with it in the future. Until then, it would be wise to continue putting on masks and testing periodically as part of everyday life. We can only hope the dangers and disruption of Covid will ease soon.