

Take the MPs’ concerns for price hike seriously

Such animated discussions benefit both govt and the public

WE agree with the concerns expressed by 10 opposition members of parliament (MPs) about the sustained high prices of essentials and the role of the commerce ministry in this regard. The lawmakers—from opposition Jatiya Party, BNP and Gono Forum—reminded us how the ministry, in recent months, has failed to bring any semblance of order to the kitchen market. They highlighted its inability to dismantle the syndicates or prevent them from manipulating prices, how Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has been used to raise prices (even of products produced locally or imported before the war), and how the rise in transport fares and utility service charges have joined hands with the prices of essentials to increase public suffering.

These concerns came amid fresh hikes in prices of essentials during Ramadan. Over the last couple of days, according to a report by this daily, prices of green chilli, cucumber, brinjal and fruits went up by Tk 20-50 per kg, while those of fish and meat shot up by Tk 50-100 a kg. The recent drop in prices of edible oil, onion and sugar could not bring any respite to the ordinary people as other essentials became pricier. The futility of official action to bring down the prices, despite pledges from the authorities and repeated urgings from the consumers, is thus deeply troubling.

On April 5, as these concerns were raised by the opposition lawmakers—quite passionately, one might add—the parliament was again a people’s chamber igniting animated discussions, a scene slightly reminiscent of a time when the House was vibrant with a strong opposition that wouldn’t shy away from critical policy and governance issues. There is a beauty to the spectacle of public representatives speaking on behalf of their people, and taking government authorities to task for their failures. A government benefits from the insights of such an opposition. We hope the authorities, particularly the commerce ministry, will take these price hike concerns with due seriousness and initiate appropriate measures to address them.

It must be said at the same time that the main reason for the ongoing crisis is the machinations of the syndicates, with their sphere of influence alleged to run deep into the commerce ministry. The syndicates exploit the lack of a strong oversight mechanism as well as the vulnerability of a market notoriously susceptible to rumours and supply concerns. The government must come down hard on these crooked traders, dealers and importers, otherwise prices will continue to be high or fluctuate, and people will continue to suffer.

Has Wasa water ever been safe to drink directly?

We urge Dhaka Wasa to accept responsibility for its many shortcomings

WHEN the long-serving managing director of Dhaka Water Supply and Sewerage Authority (Wasa) assures us that the foul-smelling tap water at home is harmless, are we to take his words at face value? Can we really drink the Wasa water without any fear, no matter how murky it may look or how foul it may smell? His claims are in sharp contrast to our own investigations, which have revealed a disturbing correlation between Wasa water and cholera outbreak in 10 areas of the capital.

He attempted to comfort the media saying that the tap water in his residence at Naya Paltan might smell of excessive chlorine, but that it was still drinkable. Yet, he urged all Dhaka residents to boil Wasa water before drinking it. If he is so confident that Wasa water is drinkable, why should he suggest boiling it? Besides, why should city residents have to burn gas worth Tk 332.37 crore to purify Wasa water anyway, when it’s Wasa’s mandate to provide safe drinking water?

Wasa water looks dirty even with the naked eye—and numerous laboratory tests have confirmed the presence of germs and bacteria, including the ones that cause diarrhoea and cholera, in Wasa water. It baffles the mind to hear the Dhaka Wasa MD say with such confidence that no germs were found in the water in the city’s 10 areas, from where most diarrhoea patients have visited various hospitals including the International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh (icddr,b).

Though the Wasa MD continues to deny the presence of harmful germs such as E. coli in the water collected from the pipelines and water tanks of houses, experts brush off his claim, terming it “baseless.” Our reporters, after visiting many affected areas, found breaches in Dhaka Wasa’s supply system to be the main reason behind the cholera outbreak. In many areas, residents are receiving water which is greenish brown or yellowish and smelly, which suggests cross-contamination with sewage lines.

It is unacceptable that instead of acknowledging the severity of the problems and taking immediate steps to rectify them, the authorities are yet again in denial. This does not bode well for us, as we must continue to risk our health by drinking the contaminated water. We remember all too well a similar incident in 2019 when the Dhaka Wasa MD claimed that its water was safe for drinking, only to reject a glass of lemonade made with it by a concerned citizen! We hope it doesn’t need another offering of greenish-brown water for the MD to finally admit Wasa’s many shortcomings.

A skewed world order



STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

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SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN

THE international system changes with the passage of time—strategic, political and economic compulsions act as the causative factors. Sometimes the change is gradual, while the shift sometimes is tectonic. The inflection points are the prominent events brought about by conflagrations, disasters, natural and man-made calamities. We are apparently standing at an inflection point, brought about firstly by the Covid calamity that portends to change the existing world order and influence economics, international trade and indeed international diplomacy. Experts believe that “contemporary history will forever be divided between what happened BC (before coronavirus) and AC (after coronavirus).” Secondly, the blatant and illegal invasion of a free and sovereign country by a big power, transgressing all international norms, is likely to influence the future order of things internationally. It is not for the first time, though, that such transgression has occurred, but the invasion of Ukraine is seeing a form of human barbarity—perpetrated by a powerful country on a relatively weaker country—not seen in the recent past.

The current world order is actually a skewed system dictated by the strong, ordered by the colonial and neocolonial powers unable to shed the hubris of the past. Such arrangements betray the hypocrisy and double standards of those that dictate the world order. And Putin and Russia won’t be left behind.

Sometimes the old order gives way to the new in a process driven by ideas flowering from the minds of intellectuals. After the end of the Cold War, a new paradigm had to be invented for international intervention, and one came handy in the form of the Huntingtonian doctrine, The Clash of Civilisations, which advanced the thesis that not countries, but cultures (read: religion) will confront each other in future. And so it was when the US and its coalition of the willing—which started with 31 countries and ended up with 48 (comprised of all Western countries except for four, and all but three of them were non-Muslim countries)—launched its illegal attack on Iraq in gross violation of international laws governed by the United Nations Charter.

The international political order or law that sought to govern international relations and the behaviour of nations was the UN Charter, including sovereign equality of states and prohibition of the use of force in international relations. It



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development. And perhaps the most important adjunct of the rules-based international order—the human rights regime—is governed by the Declaration of Human Rights, which, according to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, promises to all the economic, social, political, cultural and civic rights that underpin a life free from want and fear.

The UN is hamstrung by the veto power of the Big Five. Most of them are the victors of World War II, and as the saying goes, to the victor goes the booty. The veto power is one such booty. More often than not, it has been used for petty national interests by them, rather than for the greater universal good. It has been used to sanctify illegal wars like the invasion and illegal occupation of Iraq. The most recent exercise of this power was Russia’s veto on the UN resolution that would have called on Moscow to immediately halt its attack on Ukraine and withdraw its troops beyond the international borders.

A similar “casteist” treaty that divides the world into nuclear haves and have-nots is the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Its objectives are to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons technology, to promote cooperation in the peaceful uses of nuclear energy, and to further the goal of achieving nuclear disarmament and general and complete disarmament. An unofficial appendage of the NPT is the Nuclear Club, an informal arrangement of the band of five declared nuclear powers. Not that a few undeclared merit entry into it, but are not acknowledged by the anointed five. The NPT successes have been mixed, most of all in respect with the general disarmament, which has played into the hands of the

non-proliferation security fallacy. NPT’s “success” has been well articulated in an article in The Print, published in March 2020 commemorating 50 years of the treaty. It says that the NPT “spent the first half of the 50 years living a lie, and the second half witnessing its own dangerous demise. It is hazardous to continue to believe it will be effective in preventing

nuclear war, and the sooner the world moves on to other ways to secure itself, the better.”

Today, the world is at a crossroads. To quote US-based think tank the Council on Foreign Relations, “the benefits of the US-led order and, in particular, the many international agreements that the US has championed to open up the world to the free flow of goods, services, ideas, and people no longer look so promising—not least to the many Americans whose livelihoods have suffered as a consequence.”

The post-Cold War order imposed by the US also faces challenges. The liberal order is decaying where multilateral approach to solving problems has been replaced by narrow nationalism. The unequal benefits of globalisation have accentuated the north-south divide. Today, the centres of economic and military powers are shifting. The lone superpower is having its status challenged, with its main contender enlarging its footprint not only beyond its region, but much beyond into other continents. But be that as it may, experts opine that although the world is likely to see more competition, the logic of major power cooperation remains overwhelming, thus reducing the chance of conflagration between major powers.

What the last 75 years have demonstrated is that no order can be dictated, much less imposed, on others. When that happens, that order is bound to be challenged and violated, as we are seeing today. A rules-based world order must be a collaborative arrangement, and no country, big or small, should be allowed to abuse it by flaunting its military or economic clout.

Pain and anger in Sri Lanka



THE OVERTON WINDOW

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SRI LANKA is known as the country of smiling people because of their friendliness. But recently, the island nation has been experiencing an explosion of pain and anger. An unprecedented economic crisis has been sweeping across Sri Lanka, and although signs of it started to emerge in 2019, not many foresaw back then how badly and quickly things would deteriorate.

The Sri Lankan government is running low on foreign currency. Over the last two years or so, it has exhausted over 70 percent of its foreign reserves and now is only left with USD 2 billion, while it has a whopping USD 7 billion in debt due in 2022. As a result, the country has been unable to pay for essential imports such as fuel, food items and other critical products.

Things have gotten so bad that, on April 5, 2022, Sri Lanka’s top medical body declared a public health emergency due to a scarcity of medicines and equipment in the country. That means the state healthcare facilities, which a majority of Sri Lankans depend on, will now only prioritise emergency and urgent care services. People are being forced to withstand rolling blackouts for up to 13 hours a day due to fuel shortage. Retail inflation is estimated to have crossed 17.5 percent, and that’s not even the worst of it. According to reports, food inflation has risen over 25 percent, leading to a steep rise in food prices.

On the surface, it is obvious that the island nation has experienced a series of bad luck. In 2019, its economy took a big hit because of the Easter bombings. The Covid-19 pandemic followed next year, devastating its lucrative tourism industry and its foreign workers’ remittances.

Sri Lanka also undertook a number of megaprojects, many of which were not viable and were expected to give returns at much later dates. A number of these projects were financed through borrowing—from other countries or international organisations—which put added repayment pressure on the country.

Finally, as the shroud of the pandemic started to be lifted off of the global economy, the Russia-Ukraine war and its resulting destabilisation of global trade, currencies and commodity prices have dealt a knockout blow to Sri Lanka’s already feeble economy.

Most, if not all, of these occurrences can be considered as “black swan” events—unpredictable events that are beyond what is normally expected of a situation and have potentially severe consequences. And this does give some legitimacy to the idea that the crisis in Sri Lanka is the culmination of a number of unfortunate and unforeseeable incidents, thereby excusing its policymakers from some of the blame. Why, then, is there so much anger in Sri Lanka?

On March 31, 2022, more than 1,500 people protested outside President Gotabaya Rajapaksa’s private residence. Among the slogans they shouted was one asking him to quit. Others included “Prosperity for rulers while hardship for people,” and “Country is for all and not for one family.” Later, a section of the crowd attempted to break through the barricade before the president’s private residence, leading to the police cracking down on them.

Incidents of violence became more frequent as the government imposed a 36-hour curfew on April 2, deployed troops backed with sweeping new powers under a state of emergency to quell protests against the president and his relatives, and forced a social media blackout. But even as hundreds of people continued to get arrested for peacefully demonstrating, that did not stop thousands more from taking to the streets, ignoring the curfew.

This anger is partly driven by just how bad things have gotten for ordinary people, while partly driven by years of frustration. Through this demonstration of anger, the Sri Lankan people are expressing their refusal to be taken for fools. Because, despite the external factors that have affected Sri Lanka’s economy, its policymakers are not completely blameless, and people recognise that.

For years, Sri Lankan policymakers have refused to prioritise diversifying the country’s export basket through proper policies and support. Its overdependence on only two major export items—similar to Bangladesh—is what cost Sri Lanka so dearly. As exports slumped, Sri Lanka’s forex reserves nosedived, which made it increasingly difficult for it to import essential items; consequently, its currency suffered through massive instability and prices continued getting pushed out of control.

Sri Lanka also undertook a number of megaprojects, many of which were not viable and were expected to give returns at much later dates. A number of these projects were financed through borrowing—from other countries or international organisations—which put added repayment pressure on the country. Additionally, corruption and nepotism became widespread in Sri Lankan politics. As family-based politics came to dominate the overall national politics, people’s resentment towards the political class grew. The political class became increasingly distant from the ordinary people, which made it more difficult for them to recognise the clear warnings that were sent out by both the experts and the people. As a result, some of the major policies that the government adopted, such as slashing taxes and pursuing fully organic farming, were not feasible—they were taken to quickly appease the masses, not to address the root problems.

As tragic as what’s been happening in Sri Lanka is, there is a great lesson in it for Bangladesh. Many of the problems that have brought the Sri Lankan economy to its knees are also present in our country. And for the policymakers and people who might be thinking, “What’s the worst that could happen if we continue to leave ourselves vulnerable to external shocks and forces?”—the present economic suffering and civil strife in Sri Lanka should serve as a clear reminder that it’s best not to try our luck and find the answer to that through first-hand experience.