

Inflation pushing people to the brink

Government needs to wake up and take effective action

THE unabated rise in prices that we have witnessed for months now has really started to take its toll on low- and middle-income groups. Two separate reports published by this newspaper on April 11 reveal the story of ordinary people, who have either been compelled to stop eating meat and fish altogether (if not more food items), stop sending money to their village homes to their parents (who are being forced to live off of loans), cut down on expenditure for their children, and worry about how they can afford basic medical treatment should they fall sick. Amid such suffering, the lack of urgency in action and legitimate concern and sympathy shown by the government towards people is shameful.

For months the media has reported on how terribly the people have been suffering. Reportedly, prices of rice, flour, pulses, oil, fish, meat, vegetables, soap and milk rose by 12 percent in February. Prices of other essentials including edible oil, sugar, red lentils, eggs and onions have risen by 10 to 40 percent in the last one year. If the government, in any way, had an effective market monitoring system, how could this have happened? Experts have been discussing possible solutions to the unbearable rise in prices, which they have said can be mitigated despite unfavourable external factors—if the government adopts proper policies and implements them correctly. And yet, government officials mostly seem to have shut their eyes and stuffed their ears. What else explains their lack of earnestness in taking meaningful action to check inflation and help the suffering people? Is it contempt?

The size of our market dictates that it cannot be controlled by enacting laws alone. It has to be backed up by enforcement. When people are suffering to the extent that they have been, enforcing price controls should have been the government's number one priority. But in its absence, trade syndicates have been having a field day again, hiking prices of essentials during Ramadan.

We urgently call on the government to wake up from its slumber and take note of the reality unfolding before its eyes. Given the situation, having a few sporadic Open Market Sales is not enough. It is not sufficient to cover many of the poor and almost the entirety of the middle class who also need help at this stage.

As around 70 percent of the population, who don't have any financial resilience, are not covered by the government's safety net programmes, it urgently needs to expand its social safety net programmes, and ensure that during this great crisis, these programmes are kept corruption free. For this, it should involve all stakeholders from society. Additionally, it needs to provide services such as electricity, water and gas at affordable prices through better governance and transparency in these sectors.

Why is the birth registration process so chaotic?

Take action against those harassing applicants, make process people-friendly

WE remain cautiously optimistic about the LGRD minister's assurance that the birth registration process would be made simpler and harassment-free. Md Tazul Islam recently told the media that action will be taken against those harassing the applicants who are trying to make or correct their birth registration certificates. We can only hope that he delivers on his promises.

Since the government made online birth registration mandatory for all citizens from January last year—to avail 18 citizen services, including enrolment in educational institutions, registration for secondary school certificate exams, applying for a passport, and driving license—people have been subjected to unbearable sufferings. They have had to deal with numerous difficulties while filling out the forms online as well as face harassment at the relevant government offices where they have to go in person to submit the forms or correct the errors.

According to our reports, applicants who submit the application following due process and without seeking any assistance from the brokers do not get their certificates on time. Thus, in order to avoid further harassment, people are paying the brokers' Tk 500 to Tk 1,000 to get the certificates.

Strangely, the government also asked those who previously had a 16-digit birth certificate to apply for new ones as the government is now issuing all the citizens a 17-digit birth certificate. The result is, unbelievable pressure was put on the Office of the Registrar General, Birth and Death Registration (ORGBDR). As of February 10, 2022, the number of pending applications was 17,86,0094. Every day, they are receiving 100,000 new applications, which means there is always a huge backlog. Taking advantage of the situation, brokers are exploiting the applicants and making some easy money.

What this all means is that the digitisation of the application process is not truly efficient and the government has actually forced the citizens to go through this without properly preparing the service delivery system. Experts believe that this huge backlog in delivering certificates and other problems, such as correcting the information errors, could be easily solved by using better and more efficient technology. Could the government not have easily updated the 16-digit certificates to 17-digit ones, instead of wasting so much time and energy to manually update things?

We urge the government to make the digital birth registration process easier, faster and harassment-free. We appreciate the LGRD minister's assurance to stop harassment of the applicants, but it means little without concrete actions by the relevant authorities to stop rampant corruption. The entire process needs to be re-evaluated so that it is people-friendly, as digitised procedures are supposed to be.

Can traffic get any worse than this? Yes, it can.



NO STRINGS ATTACHED

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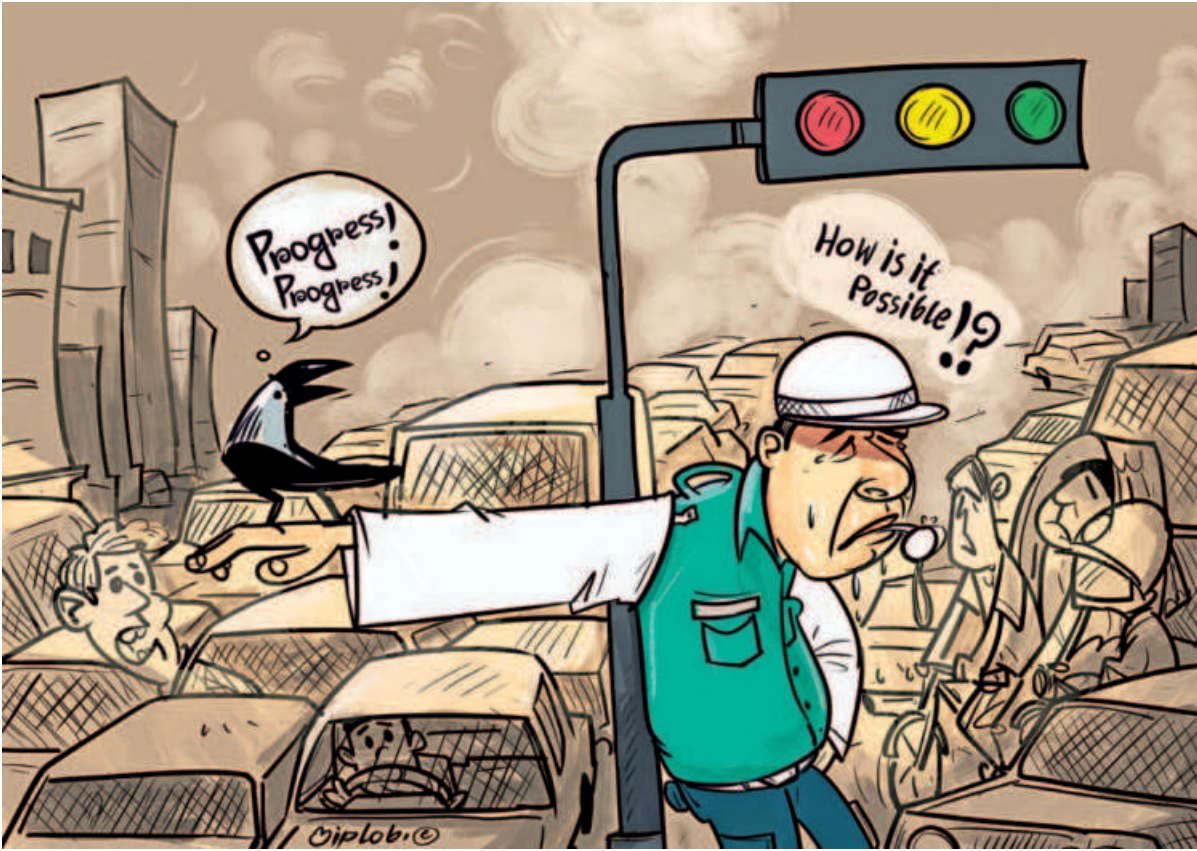
WHY is it that, no matter how many times we have experienced something unpleasant, we continue to do the exact same things we did before, expecting a different outcome? This illogical perspective that is described as insanity cannot be more manifested than in our traffic situation. Before Ramadan, it was bad enough. Travelling from A to B took a minimum of one hour no matter what the location, whether it was from Kachukhet to Gulshan or Gulshan 1 to Gulshan 2. Now, with the holy month in progress, public office goers are out by 3 pm, people are already shopping for Eid, and schools have reopened, making an already untenable situation worse.

Dhaka is at a total standstill, most of the time. We hear of school students arriving an hour late for class or commuters from Uttara spending two and a half hours on the road to reach Karwan Bazar, making their total number of travel hours (up and down) around five hours—every day, except maybe Friday. One cannot but reiterate the refrain: How are we to function if we spend so much time just on the road? On top of that, it's hot and dusty thanks to perpetual construction, the air is thick with choking smog—why must something as basic as travelling within the city be such a miserable experience? What happens when there is a medical emergency, how will an ambulance reach the hospital on time before someone's breath runs out?

With most of our energy sapped from being trapped in traffic, we are washed out by the time we reach our workplace, irritable and demotivated, especially because we are already thinking of the gruelling ride back home.

They say that once the metro rail is complete, all problems will be solved. Yes, they could be, to an extent, if most people decide to use the train, especially private car owners. The question is: Will they? And what do we do in the meantime? There are over three lakh private cars plying our roads currently, taking up 60-65 percent of their capacity. How can we get a large number of these vehicles off the roads?

Reducing the number of private cars and motorcycles would be an obvious solution. What about taking off CNG-run private vehicles from the main roads of Dhaka? This is no doubt a controversial suggestion as it will hurt the middle class



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fuel-run SUVs, would be huge. As for school-goers, if there were enough safe, reliable school buses, the unnecessary jams near schools could also be avoided.

The bottom line is that policymakers must wake up from their slumber and come up with real solutions instead of keeping their eyes closed as their flag-flying cars whiz by while the rest of the population sweats it out in the chokehold of traffic. They must repair the footpaths (so people are not maimed by open manholes, potholes and broken debris from construction) and free them from hawkers who have to pay a fee to the local mafia for a piece of pavement. Many people have already resorted to walking instead of being stuck in hours of traffic, but the broken and encroached upon pavements make it hazardous and difficult to travel on foot. Public transport vehicles must be dramatically increased—we only have 37,593 registered buses for a city of over two crore. Our city fathers, moreover, must give up their indulgence of rickety murir tin buses, owned by powerful quarters, that emit black fumes and stop

burden of people moving around in the city. The Covid experience has given us a logical solution: A hybrid model—with some days working from home and the rest in the workplace. Government offices that deal with processing documents digitally could adopt this model and make sure all applications can be processed online without disruption. Other offices where most or all of the work is done on digital platforms, too, could benefit from this—especially during Ramadan.

These are not difficult measures to implement and it is surprising that most of what has been mentioned constitutes the bare minimum that ordinary citizens can expect from their capital city. Dhaka's population is now around 22,478,000 and is estimated to reach 31.2 million by 2035. One can only shudder to think how Dhaka will cope with another nine million or more city dwellers, most of whom will be moving around the city at any given time. Will those responsible for this city finally take notice of our misery and allow Dhaka's arteries to flow freely again?

Renewable energy, not imported LNG



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ON March 21, 2022, Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina declared 100 percent electricity coverage of the country. As one of the fast-growing economies in the world, Bangladesh needs a reliable energy grid, so this is a milestone moment.

As Bangladesh scales up its energy supply, its leaders face a choice: do they double down on imported fossil fuels, or invest in renewable energy instead?

Last year, it made a major leap forward when it scrapped plans for 10 new coal-fired power plants.

But there are some expectations that at least some of the cancelled coal-fired projects would be replaced with LNG-fired power. There is a distinct possibility that the new Integrated Energy and Power Master Plan (IEPMP)—currently being developed by Japan—will lock in further commitment to LNG-fired power. This would be unsurprising, given that Japan is keen to sell its LNG power technology overseas.

A closer look at fossil fuel markets shows that this approach has major economic risks, and would be a backwards step for a country in need of an affordable and reliable energy system.

Relying on LNG imports means locking into an unstable market and the price spikes that go with it. Even before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Asian LNG prices reached their highest level ever late last year. Japan is well aware

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how such LNG price spikes impact power prices—2021 saw Japan's worst power crisis since the Fukushima disaster, prompted by high LNG prices.

Now, Russia's invasion of Ukraine means that the fossil fuel market will become even more volatile. Countries who normally source gas from Russia are looking elsewhere, putting supply under pressure. Already, that's driven up LNG prices to new record highs.

That global dash for gas triggers sky-high costs for people, business, and government in Bangladesh. The government has already paid through the nose in subsidies and other losses to soften the blow of huge price rises in 2021. As a result, Bangladesh Power Development Board (PDB) proposed raising the cost of electricity by 66 percent—a rise that's likely to be passed on, at least in part, to consumers and businesses, too.

Locking into more LNG reliance would mean that Bangladesh is even more exposed to the risks of volatile fossil fuel imports. It's no foundation for growth.

Instead, the government's efforts should be redirected to the two things needed to safeguard the sustainability of the power system: grid investments to make better use of existing capacity and scaling up renewable energy.

Given the power system's already very low overall utilisation rate of just 42 percent, the new IEPMP must focus on grid investment to improve reliability and limit the country's future dependence on expensive, imported fossil fuels.

Overcapacity problems means the PDB is forced to pay high capacity payments to plants, causing worsening operating losses for the government. Investing in the transmission system would get power to the parts of Bangladesh that need it the most and help end the stream of financial losses from the PDB. Fixing this

should be a priority in the IEPMP—not importing expensive LNG.

Renewables are a secure energy source, and that's why the world's most powerful countries are now accelerating their investment in renewables amid current geopolitical instability. Take Germany, which has just announced its accelerating its journey towards 100 percent renewable energy after the war in Ukraine exposed the cost and insecurity of relying on gas. Every day Bangladesh doesn't invest in renewables is another day spent paying through the nose for fossil fuels—while ignoring the almost limitless energy sources on its doorstep.

Energy that Bangladesh can control also means more reliable power for its citizens. A USAID report highlighted that only 11 percent of grid-connected houses receive more than 16 hours of energy supply a day. Secure renewable energy solves this by getting reliable power flowing to the businesses and homes that need it at a fixed cost, unaffected by global fossil fuel price volatility.

Bangladesh's Sustainable and Renewable Energy Development Authority (SREDA) has recently proposed that a new clean energy target of 25 percent (including renewable and nuclear) by 2030 be incorporated into the new IEPMP. This target would amount to 10,000MW of power, including 5,000MW of wind power.

Other countries are shifting fast from their reliance on fossil fuels. They're planning for the energy markets of the future—not those of the last century. The recent fossil fuel volatility will only accelerate that transition.

If its new IEPMP wants to prepare Bangladesh for a prosperous, energy-secure future, it will invest in grid upgrades and clean, affordable, and sovereign power. That means renewables, not LNG imports.