

India’s ban on wheat export is disconcerting

But there is a silver lining too

IT is distressing news that our single biggest exporter of wheat, India, has put a curb on export of the food grain. Bangladesh happens to be the single biggest importer of Indian wheat. Wheat is the second most consumed grain item in Bangladesh, and after the edible oil crunch, which was partly man-made, it is alarming that we must now brace for a spike in wheat price as well. In fact, no sooner had India announced the shocking news on May 14 that prices in the wholesale market in Chattogram shot up by as much as 25 percent.

Economists had predicted that the Russian aggression on Ukraine—a conflict that has the potential to be long-drawn—would have severe consequences on the world economy. But apart from the war, which involves Russia—the largest wheat exporter in the world, and which is facing international sanctions—on the one side, and Ukraine—which produces a staggering six percent of food calories traded around the globe—on the other, a concatenation of events has combined to adversely affect the wheat market. There was poor harvest in China, the largest wheat producer in the world, and severe drought in India. All this, as the world was already facing severe supply chain pressure caused by the pandemic and rise in fuel and food prices.

However, there is a ray of hope, held out in the assurance of the Indian commerce secretary that India’s neighbours as well as the needy countries would receive special dispensation. Given that we import more than 80 percent of our requirement of wheat from India, we believe that the Bangladesh government should take it up with its Indian counterpart to initiate deals at government level for wheat import. It should also request India to ensure shipment of the amount of wheat for which letter of credit has reportedly been issued already.

There is a silver lining, too, because the next harvest of wheat in Bangladesh is due soon and the product will be in the market by the end of May. But the most important job for the administration in the interregnum is to prevent panic-buying. And even more importantly, it must launch an anti-hoarding drive straight away to prevent the repetition of what we experienced with edible oil. The government may even consider legislating laws that would make hoarding of fast-moving food items a grievous penal offence, meriting the highest degree of punishment.

Introducing school buses is the need of the hour

It will not only reduce traffic jams, but will also ensure children’s safety

IT is good to know from Dhaka North Mayor Atiqul Islam that they are planning to introduce buses for different schools, especially the English-medium ones, to reduce traffic congestion in the city. While we appreciate the mayor for suggesting this big step, we would also like to add that the government should introduce school buses in both English and Bangla medium schools. Designated school buses will not only reduce traffic jams in the city, but it will also ensure safety of the schoolchildren on the road.

Dhaka’s traffic congestion has become literally unbearable over the last one decade, due mainly to an increasing number of personal cars and various infrastructure development projects going on across the main thoroughfares of the city. While we are hopeful that these development projects, such as the metro rail, will end soon, can we hope to see a reduced number of private cars on our streets in near future? No, not until our public transport system becomes safe and convenient for the commuters.

According to a study by Brac Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD), traffic congestion in Dhaka eats up around five million working hours every day and costs the country USD 11.4 billion every year. If we want to reverse the situation, we need to make some vital changes in our public transport system. Since private cars are a major reason for the crippling traffic jam on an average work day, we need to come up with good plans to reduce their number on the road.

The affluent citizens of the city generally send their children to school by car. And, often, one car carries only one child. This creates a mad rush of privately-owned cars during school hours, bringing the main roads of the city to a standstill. Some of the residential areas in Dhaka have become difficult to live in due to day-long traffic congestions, caused by the unlimited number of cars parked on the roads. If all the schools in the city have their own buses for carrying students, the situation will significantly improve. Fewer cars on the streets will also mean better air quality.

But how the government will make the schools agree to their plan is the question here. The DNCC mayor has said that the government will reduce taxes for those who will introduce school bus service. While this may encourage some schools to take this major step, more incentives are needed for this initiative to be an all-out success.

We hope the government will seriously consider this issue and come up with a well-thought-out plan with participation from all the stakeholders involved.

Are some people always trying to ‘oust’ the government?

Our PM’s remarks should engage our thoughts



STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

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SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN

EARLIER this month, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina made a remark that assumes significance given the rueful undertone that her statement conveyed. This was a follow-up of her statement last month. She is reported to have said, “Some people are always trying to regroup and oust the government.” That despite all the developments that have taken place in the last decade under her watch. She also alluded to the effort of some political parties to seek help from foreigners, “hoping that someone abroad will hold their hands and put them on the throne.” She had reportedly said in end April that a group of political parties had joined hands with the BNP-Jamaat alliance to try to oust her government. And she wondered what the fault of the Awami League government was, and why they wanted to oust it. Here is my tuppenny worth of opinion.

Let’s pose a counterquestion: Why, indeed, would anyone try to “oust” a political party that is well ensconced in power, and has so much to show on the economic front? In this regard, we would like to believe that the parties that the prime minister named and the people she mentioned in her remarks are well established and recognised political parties and people with long political credentials. Hence, the term “oust” that denotes a more sinister intention than a legal political process of replacing a party in power through elections does not apply here. “Unseat,” perhaps, may be more appropriate here. We are totally opposed to supra-political means of changing government and would like to believe that all legal political parties—which all opposition parties are—also subscribe to this principled view. Anything contrary must be curbed ruthlessly. The last such intervention was that by Gen Moin in the political process in 2008. The Awami League continues to enjoy the fruits of that intervention. Some of the above-mentioned changes were welcomed with the comment of the Awami League leader that “we are not unhappy,” and in 2008, the party assured that all the ordinances of the caretaker government would be



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Sheikh Hasina, prime minister of Bangladesh and chief of the Awami League.

FILE PHOTO: BSS

validated if the party was elected to office, nay “power.” And indeed, most of those were.

The economic story is astounding, but who will answer for the thousands of crores of taka that has been siphoned off from the country? Despite the not-so-sound condition of the banking sector, more and more private banks were allowed to open—an example of

crony capitalism. And most of those who deliberately violated banking rules are yet to be brought to justice.

The less said about shrinking political space to the opposition, the better. Thus, when the ruling party taunts the main opposition party for the lack of its presence on the streets or losing political relevance, they know one of the main reasons why. Even a gathering of politicians within the walls of a house is considered clandestine and, in some cases, forced to break up.

The politicisation of the administration, particularly the police, has set a very bad precedence. For example, did the Rab chief not exceed his remit when he warned against protesting the scrapping of Article 370 in India in Bangladesh (New Age, August 10, 2019)? Some of the recent comments of senior police officials sound like those of party cadres. The regression of law and order is exposed by the way law enforcers have acted on a selective basis in many instances.

As for “hoping that someone abroad

will hold their hands and put them on the throne,” running to the foreigners has been the cheap stock-in-trade of all our political parties. But the only direct involvement in our elections that one can recall was when Indian Foreign Secretary Sujatha Singh personally tried to prevail on Ershad to join the 2014 parliamentary polls when all the other opposition parties had boycotted it (*Dhaka Tribune*, July 1, 2014). Without an opposition, the election would have been far more questionable than it was.

Then there is the issue of the rule of law, which has severely eroded the ruling party’s image. There is nothing wrong with the law, but everything with the order. When law is applied selectively, it becomes the rule of men. When a convicted person belonging to the ruling party can go abroad for treatment without any impediment, while another has to wait for government benediction, it betrays the attitude of the administration towards the rule of law, and does nothing to enhance the government’s image. There are examples where law has been applied depending on who the alleged accused was.

Last, but not the least, let’s restate that it is the constant effort of the opposition in any country to unseat the party in power through elections by exposing the failures of the incumbent and offering better alternatives to the public. And anti-government utterances and criticisms are absolutely the established norm in a free political system. This cannot be painted as anti-state activities, which has been done during the tenure of the current regime. Criticism of anyone remotely associated with the high-ups of the party in power has invited the wrath of the administration, as was the case with writer Mushtaq and cartoonist Kishore. The former died in custody in February 2021, and Kishore’s case lingers. The Digital Security Act, and the proposed Data Protection Act—which is seen as being legislated with next year’s parliamentary elections in mind—have curbed and will curb the freedom of expression even more. The worst sufferer has been the media, whose self-censorship has reached to a weird level, and criticism of political personalities has come to be regarded as *lese-majesty*.

Have the people really swallowed the ruling party’s mantra of Development before Democracy? That is what the Awami League should ask itself.

Let’s capitalise on the booming RMG business



RMG NOTES

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MOSTAFIZ UDDIN

TWO years ago, garment order books were empty as Covid broke out and shut down the main global markets for Bangladesh. Two years on, those order books are full. Our ready-made garment (RMG) industry has come full circle, following what we will surely look back upon one day as one of the most extraordinary periods in our history.

Nobody knows how the next few months or years will pan out. There are talks of global inflation leading to higher interest rates, which will be required to put the brakes on rising prices. Higher interest rates often slow down the economy. Others think inflationary pressures might ease off on their own once the global supply chains begin to move properly and the bottlenecks clear up in major logistics hubs, such as China.

The picture of uncertainty prevails, but we must be grateful that, amid these volatile times, business is good. But what now? I think we have an opportunity that we should not allow to go to waste. Bangladesh must strike while the iron is hot and capitalise on healthy order books by making investments and changes that will serve us well in years to come.

Somebody asked me just recently about how I think the next 12-18 months would go. That is anyone’s guess. That said, our business has been fairly robust since late last year, and I don’t see why this would change anytime soon. The reason I say this with a fair degree of confidence is China, the world’s largest textile market, which has adopted a “zero Covid” strategy, closing down



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Bangladesh has been presented with a great opportunity to grab a larger share of the global market for its RMG exports. Making use of that will require timely investments in both manpower and technology.

FILE PHOTO: AFP

whole cities due to a small number of infections.

These issues have major implications for Bangladesh. Our own government has taken a light-touch approach to the pandemic, balancing the need for public health safety with the necessity of having a healthy economy. China continues down its path of zero Covid, which shows no sign of being discontinued.

The upshot of all this is that China is becoming a serious sourcing risk for all retailers, including those in fashion. When people ask how I see the near-future unfolding, it is difficult not to see a further decoupling between China and fashion brands and retailers, and more business for its closest rivals, such as Bangladesh.

So it is high time now for our garment suppliers to take steps and turn this short-term opportunity into a long-term business strategy. The sun won’t shine forever on our industry, and there are steps we can take to capitalise on the healthy revenue streams we are experiencing right now. We must not waste this opportunity.

Investment in key, business-critical areas is a must-do for our industry in the

next 12-18 months.

The first of these areas is technological upgrading in our factories. Productivity rates remain low in our industry compared to that of our rivals. Better operational management, better layout, more modern machinery—all these can enable us to improve productivity and bottom lines. They can also ensure that we continue to meet customer requirements and be more flexible to changes in orders.

Another factor is training manpower. Good people make a successful business. Attracting decent talent is a huge challenge at any time, particularly when order books are full to the brim. Now is the time to invest in people and their training, and to forge stronger links with our colleges and universities.

The third point is, of course, sustainability. One thing I have witnessed this past year is that our customers are doubling down on their demand for sustainability now more than ever. We are seeing big fashion retailers rationalising their supply bases, getting rid of suppliers that cannot meet their criteria for sustainable production. Some of our factories risk being left behind in the new landscape if they don’t invest in, for instance, energy and water-saving technologies.

The final area I believe we need to focus on is promotion and marketing. I see so much interest in Bangladeshi products right now, there is such a huge groundswell of goodwill towards our industry. Fashion brands saw during the pandemic that we can be relied upon as a trusted sourcing partner, and I now believe we are reaping the rewards of that.

Let’s not waste this goodwill, and let’s all focus on the same key factors: quality, consistency and sustainability. Some people believe a shift of production from China to Bangladesh might be temporary. It’s up to us to make sure this is a permanent shift, and for that, we need to invest.