

Why are rice prices soaring?

Reportedly, there is no shortage of it in the country

IT is concerning that prices of both fine and coarse rice have gone up in the capital's wholesale and retail markets in the last few days, despite there being no shortage of food grains in the country. According to a report published by *The Daily Star* on May 21, the price of fine rice increased by Tk 2.5 per kg in the retail market, while coarse rice price also increased. This is only aggravating the sufferings of the people who are already struggling to meet their household expenses due to the rising prices of daily essentials.

Over the last five months, prices of almost all the daily essentials such as edible oils, lentils, eggs, flour, powdered milk, etc., have increased in the market.

While prices of imported items have increased due to supply chain disruptions caused by the Russia-Ukraine war, prices of many locally produced items, such as mustard oil, have also increased for no apparent reason.

While flash floods in Sylhet and Sunamganj could be a legitimate reason for the price hike, traders have alleged that some local companies are buying paddy in bulk and creating an imbalance in the market, thereby triggering the price hike. If that is indeed the case, the government must take strict action against these companies that are hoarding paddies at the prospect of making more profit, manipulating an already volatile market.

Illegal hoarding has always been an issue for us. We had seen earlier how traders and even local politicians hoarded large amounts of edible oil in order to sell them later at higher prices. And we might be experiencing something similar in the case of rice, if the government cannot stop this buying competition among the big companies. The Directorate of National Consumer Rights Protection (DNCRP), an agency of the commerce ministry, must remain vigilant and regularly conduct drives against illegal hoarders. Since traders have claimed that there is no shortage of the staple in the market right now, it is the government's duty to keep the rice market stable.

As it seems, the global market may remain volatile for quite some time because of the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war. Therefore, the government must ensure that our food grain stock remains stable for a significant amount of time in the future. And rather than depending on the next Boro harvest—which is supposed to be a good one—the government should also look for markets to import rice and wheat from. Ensuring food security for the people is now the most difficult challenge facing the government. And it should not let the people down.

Death by pollution

The government must take urgent action to save lives

WHEN over 2.15 lakh people die in a year from pollution related ailments, one has to take the aspect of environment degradation and the resulting impact on human health extremely seriously. A new global study by the highly regarded medical journal, *The Lancet*, revealed that pollution of different elements of nature resulted in the premature deaths of over 2.15 lakh people in Bangladesh in 2019 alone. The breakdown of the figure shows that nearly 1.75 lakh people died due to air pollution, while over 30,000 deaths occurred because of water pollution—Bangladesh also ranked sixth among countries seeing premature deaths because of pollution. By any standard, these are scary numbers.

We are concerned at the deteriorating condition of air quality in the country, especially in the major cities, which is largely contributing to health impediments including deaths from respiratory tract infection. We are aware that stories of our unrestrained air pollution often hit the headlines in global newspapers, but unfortunately, many of the visible sources of air pollution continue to do damage before the very eye of the administration.

The Lancet study further tells us that pollution in the water bodies has reached a horrific level, contributing to different types of ailments and deaths as well. Many other local studies also identified contaminated water as the main contributor to life-threatening illnesses of the intestines such as diarrhoea, cholera and typhoid. We may mention the cases of the recent bout of diarrhoea and cholera in the metropolis which experts relate to polluted drinking water. In fact, the colour and smell of water in every reservoir reek of high concentration of micro-pollutants.

The environmentalists of the country also told us about the hazards of lead pollution on human health originating from the industries and small factories across the country, which is directly linked to heart disease, cancer, skin disease, respiratory problems and various other illnesses. Experts say that environment pollution has deteriorated to such a level that even unborn babies are paying the price. Therefore, the pertinent question: How to address the pervasive pollution menace? They believe considering the intensity of the problem, we seem to be inadequately prepared and concerned.

The government needs to urgently implement the laws of the land strictly in order to save our air, water, soil, fish, animals and human lives. It is a travesty that things have gotten to this point; but it would be an even bigger crime to let them continue like this.

Cumilla polls, a litmus test for EC, and the shadow of drugs



OF MAGIC & MADNESS

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FOR a party that is so image-conscious and so demanding of “clean image” from its candidates, the Awami League surely knows how to make a muck of things and draw unflattering attention. According to a report by *The Daily Star*, the ruling party nominated Arfanul Haque Rifat as its mayoral candidate for the June 15 election to Cumilla City Corporation. It did so despite him being named in a government list as the number one patron of drug lords and smugglers in the district. Why on earth, you wonder.

Reportedly, Rifat was backed by the long-serving member of parliament (MP) from Cumilla-6 constituency who, following the confirmation of nomination, publicly urged local leaders and activists to stand by his side. For the Awami League, Cumilla city is a rare chink in its armour. It suffered defeats in both the mayoral polls held since the corporation was established in 2011. The third time's a charm, it will hope, and Rifat's resume is full of reassuring news bites. He's got the whole Awami League spectrum covered in his career: Before serving as the general secretary of the party's city unit, he was a senior vice-president of the district unit of Jubo League. Prior to that, he was involved with the Chhatra League. But to be selected as a nominee, he'd need to survive pre-selection scrutiny. Was there any, you wonder again.

This, we don't know. What we do know—and perhaps what makes all the difference—is that he was chosen from 14 nomination-seekers by the holder of the most powerful office in the country, which marked him as a patron of criminals not long ago. The whys and hows of the decision are hard to fathom. Is it possible that Rifat was wrongly implicated? Could it be an intelligence slip-up? Or did they simply forget this had ever happened?

The list, a copy of which has been obtained by *The Daily Star*, was prepared by the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) with the assistance of a government intelligence agency, as part of a countrywide drive to identify drug traders and smugglers, their patrons, and corrupt law enforcement officials involved with them. It was shortly before the “war on drugs” was launched. The PMO, in 2018, even sent the home ministry a letter along with the list of Chattogram Division,



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The third Cumilla City Corporation election is scheduled for June 15, 2022, the first election to be overseen by the new Election Commission.

PHOTO: SHAHIDUL HASAN ROMAN/ WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

case—not just because of the unlikelihood of it happening so long after that distant era in our history, but also because of the involvement of responsible government offices in the listing process.

So much for the drive for clean image and credible elections.

Not that there is any illusion left for the citizens, especially after a decade and a half in which all credibility of our electoral process has been washed down the drain. Today, elections have become more of a depressing slideshow than a democratic tool for power transition.

Rifat's alleged background is a throwback to the not-so-short and not-so-distant history of drug lords, land grabbers and human traffickers brought into the fold of ruling circles. Let's not forget the power-hungry businessmen whose bottomless money pit has funded many a campaign. But the first group—because of their open, shameless display of the close ties between politics and crimes—certainly takes the cake.

Just over the past decade or so, we've had a number of MPs falling into that category. We've had Mohammad Shahid Islam alias Kazi Papul, elected from Lakshmipur-2 constituency, who was sentenced to seven years in a Kuwaiti prison for human trafficking and money laundering. We've had Abdur Rahman Bodi, elected from Cox's Bazar-4

sentenced to 10 years in a graft case. Their exploits and machinations are well-documented, their effects palpable throughout our political firmament.

The risk of having a mayor with alleged criminal links in Cumilla is that the district shares a 106km boundary with India, from where illegal drugs are smuggled into Bangladesh, according to law enforcement agencies. It's a huge red flag if the allegations against Rifat are true, although nothing definitive can be said since those allegations were perhaps never investigated. But doesn't the Awami League owe it to the voters, and its own legacy of fighting against drugs, to get to the bottom of the matter and make decisions accordingly? Unfortunately, that there should have been a need to ask something so basic shows how little we've come to expect of our political parties, and the electoral system in general.

The ruling party, thus, also owes it to the new Election Commission to be fair and reasonable in all decisions related to the Cumilla city polls. It is, after all, the first big election to be organised by the new commission (which started work only about three months ago), and hence a litmus test for the integrity of the whole electoral process it is about to oversee in the run-up to the general elections scheduled to be held next year.

More chores for women further tilts the gender gap

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MY husband says not to look for work too far from home since I have to do the household work as well and asks me to wait.” Mita (not her real name) went on to express her frustration by saying, “If this pandemic hadn't arisen, I would have surplus money to spend on my kids, I would've had a job.” Mita is a 32-year-old former garments factory worker whom we interviewed as part of a project to understand the gendered experience of Covid-19 in Bangladesh. Mita left her job during the pandemic, and when she did start looking for jobs again, she had much fewer options because of her husband's specific instructions.

A harsh fact of the pandemic is that it did not affect all groups of society equally. Women lost out on growth and employment opportunities because they are having to shoulder the heavier share of the domestic burden.

With the closure of public and private educational institutes, offices and transportation at different times during the pandemic, the labour market was disrupted for all. However, the pandemic induced an economic downturn which imposed a double burden for women.

In Bangladesh, nearly 31 percent of the informal workforce has female employees. People who worked in informal sectors lost their jobs without any prior notice and were the most impacted. Multiple studies from around the globe indicated women's careers were adversely affected even if they were able to retain their jobs and there was a trend of women decreasing their work hours

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during the pandemic.

We hoped, seeing how stressful household responsibilities are first hand, being exposed to the full extent of it—men would begin to do their fair share. But they continued letting the women of the house pick up their slack. As a result, household responsibilities increased more for women compared to pre-lockdown. To explore this, we interviewed 28 female respondents and 12 male respondents in Bangladesh asking about specific effects of Covid-19 on their household responsibilities and whether there was a gendered dimension to these impacts. We found three recurring themes.

The first, families in patriarchal societies have unequal distribution of labour, with the majority of the women having double the work pressure within the household compared to men. For example, Yamin Begum, a 41-year-old housemaid, mentioned increased household workload during Covid by saying: “Yes, during the lockdown the work pressure increased. I had to boil water several times a day. I had to keep things clean a lot—with soap and water and made sure everyone washed their hands. I had to make food for everyone as well.”

This was not an anomaly as 21 out of 28 of our female respondents stated that the pandemic and the initial lockdown have led to a multitude of challenges for them, including increased household work due to the extra precautions they had to take because of Covid. Even though more family members were staying at home, 16 of our female respondents mentioned that they had no additional help during this time. The other 12 female respondents got additional help from the other family members who are female.

The second theme was the perception of men about household work being less strenuous than their work and the

overriding belief that the household chores are an integral part of women's everyday life and should not be considered as a burden. Men typically think household work should be done by women, as they have always seen women spending most of their time taking care of household responsibilities. A 32-year-old tea stall owner from Kallyanpur said: “There is less pressure in housework. My work needs more energy.”

The third theme was women themselves preferred for their husbands and sons to not get involved in household chores. Some of our female respondents opined that they are not used to their husband's assistance inside the kitchen or in the regular household chores.

“Have you ever seen men working in the kitchen? Never! Even though now I have a little pressure due to the lockdown, these jobs (cooking, washing, cleaning, and taking care of the house) are my responsibilities. I cannot ask my husband to do this. My mother, my mother-in-law never did this, how can I?” laughed 46-years-old Nasrin, who lives in Agargaon slum in Dhaka city.

Our findings confirmed the notion that women tend to take on more household duties than the men, and that for many women, the lockdown brought on an increased burden of responsibilities. Surprisingly, many women had to put up with this increased workload without any kind of support and that led to their low-income recovery.

Despite our shared sense of gender progress in Bangladesh, lots need to be done to bring gender equality within the household domain. These findings are direct indicators that must sway the policymakers to take into consideration the unfair distribution of domestic labour and the unpaid care labour when drafting policy responses for Covid and future pandemics.