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This inflationary crisis demands an all-out govt effort

PM's directives should be followed through to the letter

WE are glad to see the government finally waking up to the terrible nightmare that has become an everyday reality for ordinary people. For nearly a year now, prices of almost all goods – especially the essentials – have been rising unabatedly. This rise has become particularly acute since the beginning of the Russia-Ukraine war, pushing people from the middle-class downwards onto the brink of privation. Considering all that has happened, we are pleased to note that the prime minister herself has now directed government officials to make an all-out effort to keep prices of essential commodities stable through measures like lifting all tariffs and taxes on their imports, and taking stern action against market manipulation.

According to data from the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), the inflation rate shot up to an eighteen-months-high of 6.29 percent in April this year which, according to some economists, is actually lower than the real inflation figure. And this has been happening at a time when multitudes of people were already struggling from job and income losses due to Covid and other related factors. During this entire time, even though the government took a few decent measures – such as deploying TCB trucks to sell goods at lower prices – to try and provide some relief to the poor, they have been woefully inadequate to address the sufferings of the mass numbers of people. And despite the advice of experts and the desperate pleas of the general people to do more, the government has repeatedly displayed a lack of urgency and concern for these difficulties which have only been piling up. Therefore, it is about time the government got serious about keeping prices of essentials down.

There are a host of measures that the government is reportedly considering at present. For example, the commerce ministry will facilitate imports by the private sector and monitor supply and prices in the market to limit any artificial price spiral. Private food importers will also get various kinds of support so they can easily import food grains and other essential commodities. These are steps that, if implemented properly, should ease some of the inflationary pressure. But ultimately, what the government has to do is conduct regular drives against syndicates, irrespective of their political affiliation, as instructed by the prime minister.

Unfortunately, we have heard similar instructions fall by the wayside too often in the past. As a result, politically connected and powerful traders have continued to exploit one disaster after another to artificially keep prices up, exasperating the existing inflationary crisis. The only way this can be solved is for the government to not only make good economic policy, but to follow through with them on the managerial level. And a most important part of that is to break the back of these powerful syndicates.

Why use public money to fund hajj for ruling party allies?

Such sacred pilgrimage must not be underlined by nepotism

WE are baffled by the allotment of the government's hajj funds this year. We understand that the government carries the expense of a certain number of hajj pilgrims every year – and the number of pilgrims receiving this advantage is 254 this year (out of a total of 57,585 Bangladeshis allowed to enter Saudi Arabia in 2022 to perform hajj). The issue, as a report by this daily has pointed out, is the relatively large number of Awami League leaders, activists, and allies whose hajj will be funded by the government, using taxpayers' money. Tk 11.33 crore will reportedly be spent on sponsoring the pilgrimages, at a time when the economy is under severe stress and the government itself has advised practising austerity, including restricting foreign trips for its officials.

Out of the 254 people selected for the publicly-funded hajj this year, more than 50 percent are reportedly ruling party leaders, their relatives, and those belonging to like-minded political parties. Now, the question is, what are the criteria for selecting the beneficiaries of this fund?

We understand that the hajj, one of the five sacred pillars of Islam, is obligatory at least once in a lifetime to every adult Muslim if s/he is physically, psychologically and financially able to perform the rituals. However, Islam allows for any solvent Muslim to finance another Muslim who does not have the financial ability to perform the pilgrimage.

Given the guidelines in the scriptures, we want to know the government's justification for choosing to spend taxpayers' money to fund pilgrimages of such a high number of ruling party members and allies. Are we to believe that these people are financially insolvent? Of all those in the country who cannot afford hajj, are the 254 chosen really the most deserving candidates?

We want to remind the government that the money it is spending is not its own, but belongs to the people of this country. It owes it to the people to provide a transparent account of why and on whom their money is being spent, and why they are not eligible to receive the benefits themselves. If the government must subsidise such pilgrimages, we urge it to come up with eligibility criteria and a transparent selection process. Such a sacred ritual as hajj should not be mired in controversies and corruption.

Cheaper polythene bags spell disaster for the environment



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FINANCE Minister AHM Mustafa Kamal gave the public quite the surprise when he proposed to withdraw the existing 5 percent supplementary duty on all types of polythene bags, plastic bags (including oven plastic bags) and wrapping materials made of polyethylene. To justify his move, he said the recommendation was made to reduce tax-burden at the local manufacturing stage and make the business environment friendlier. Needless to say, the proposal will appease the local manufacturers who have been seeking fiscal support and exemption from supplementary duty on all kinds of polythene bags made from polyethylene. The proposal, if endorsed in the Jatiya Sangsad during the passing of the budget at the end of this month, will help local manufacturers in more ways than one. It is expected to propel the growth of this industry, help cut the price of polythene bags in the country, and, worryingly, encourage the use of environmentally hazardous single-use polybags to a larger extent.

Does this not seem like a total shift in the government's stance against the use of polyethylene and plastic products? It was in the early 1980s when plastic products, especially polythene shopping bags, were introduced widely in the Bangladeshi market. The bags quickly gained popularity. They were light, cheap, and could be disposed of after being used only once. However, within a few years, the environmental impact of using these non-biodegradable shopping bags became all too evident. After the flood in 1998 – when the sewerage lines were found clogged with heaps of polythene bags leading to massive water-logging – the government became aware of the danger that polythene and plastic bags posed. In 2002, the government banned thin polythene and plastic bags, making Bangladesh the first country in the world to slap such a restriction. The ban, hailed as a major step towards reducing environmental pollution, worked for a few years.

But then the restrictions started to wane thanks to lax enforcement of the law and with hardly any environment-friendly alternative. Twenty years down the line, these polythene and plastic bags have become an integral part of our daily lives as they are used indiscriminately for household and industrial purposes. Be it in the supermarkets or kitchen

markets, streets shops or high-end malls, the presence of polythene is everywhere because of their durability, lightweight, and low price. What is more alarming is that most consumers just throw these bags away after using them once. These bags eventually find their way into the drains, sewage pipes, canals, rivers, and open areas, polluting earth and water. According to a World Bank study,

Polythene and plastic bags are harmful in many ways. First, these products degrade slowly and into tiny particles which then enter the food chain, posing a significant risk to humans, marine life, and ecosystems. And its decomposition takes several hundred years. Globally, managing plastic waste is increasingly becoming an environmental and economic challenge. Governments in all



A man on a boat collects plastic materials from dirty water in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

In 2020, the per capita plastic consumption in Dhaka stood at 22 kg, up from 9.2 kg in 2005.

Bangladesh's annual per capita plastic consumption in urban areas tripled in 15 years to nine kg in 2020. The problem, it found, is worse in Dhaka city, where plastic usage is significantly higher than the national average. In 2020, the per capita plastic consumption in Dhaka stood at 22 kg, up from 9.2 kg in 2005. About 646 tonnes of plastic waste was generated daily in Dhaka, which is 10 percent of all wastes generated in Bangladesh. Only 37.2 percent of the plastic waste in Dhaka was recycled, the study showed. According to a study by an environmental research group called Environment and Social Development Organisation (ESDO), over 78,000 tonnes of polybag waste generated during the pandemic period by illegal polybag manufacturers increased to half a million per day. Of the total, some 5,996 tonnes of waste were generated in Dhaka. According to Paribesh Bachao Andolan, an environmental watchdog, nearly 1,000 polythene factories operate across the country, but most of them are located in old Dhaka. A 2018 report published by Earth Day Network, a leading NGO that works on environmental issues, ranked Bangladesh 10th out of the top 20 plastic polluting countries in the world.

parts of the world have deployed policy and economic instruments, such as bans and product taxes, to disincentivise the production and consumption of "single-use" plastic products and packaging. Bangladesh also progressively took steps in curbing plastic pollution since the early 2000s with green activists and environmentalists vigorously protesting against their use. Government high-ups, ministers and policymakers, on different occasions, expressed their position against the use of polythene and plastic. The authorities sporadically conduct drives to stop the polythene menace for a few days, and then the issue is completely forgotten.

Given the reality on the ground, the finance minister's proposal for waiving the supplementary duty on all types of polythene bags would only worsen the situation. Therefore, how judicious is it to give tax cuts on the very products that were once banned? The world is waking up to the problem of plastic pollution with governments and other stakeholders starting to act. Then why should we provide incentives to a sector that is proven to pollute the environment? We cannot afford to let our businesses grow at the cost of our environment.

RTI in the age of authoritarianism

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SHAMSUL BARI and RUHI NAZ

AS authoritarianism creeps in across the world, the ideals of participatory democracy and representative governance have taken a back seat once again in many countries. Since the end of World War II more than seven decades ago, the scope for people's participation in the affairs of the state has waxed and waned, in countries old and new – and now it seems to be receding again.

The incredible devastation and human suffering caused by the war sparked the quick generation of international principles, norms and standards, in which people were put at the centre of all visions for a new world. International legal instruments sprang up, in which the rights and welfare of the people were the main focus. Soon these were relayed into national laws.

An important outcome of this development was the rejection of the traditional concept of governance by political elites in favour of the concept of people's sovereignty over all affairs of the state. The idea of "active citizenship" in matters of governance began to evolve. Though derailed frequently during the Cold War period, it got back on track firmly after the demise of the Soviet Union and the emergence of new democracies.

It was during this period that the concept of active citizenship took a big leap forward. New democracies joined their older counterparts to adopt freedom of information (FOI) act or right to information (RTI) act. These laws sought to end the culture of secrecy in government work and to empower citizens with a legal right to seek relevant information from public authorities to monitor their work. They were seen as "auxiliary precautions" against

government proclivity to keep citizens in the dark about their activities.

But adopting a law and putting it to actual practice are two different things. So as the number of countries with FOI/RTI laws grew, scholars and activists were drawn to measuring the effectiveness of these measures. Their findings reveal a rather discomfiting picture of many governments adopting the law as "window dressing" to improve their international image or paying the law a mere lip service because of domestic or international pressures. Hence, governments do little to implement the law proactively. Meanwhile citizens are generally uninformed about their responsibilities to make effective use of the law.

An important finding of the scholars indicates that the success of RTI law depends largely on society's view of citizenship and the government's commitment to that view. The most prevalent understanding of citizenship in many democracies limits the role of citizens to obey the laws, passively participate in periodic elections and let elected representatives deal with the matters of governance. People feel far removed from the workings of the government. In such cases, the task of preparing citizens to assume a more participatory role in the matters of governance, fostering closer interaction with government bodies, requires an active movement. And it is for the citizens to do that. FOI/RTI laws provide them with the tools. Movements like this have sprung in many countries, including in our neighbour country India.

To begin with, users of the law must understand that governments have a legitimate need to keep a variety of information hidden from the general public. FOI/RTI laws have clearly identified the areas which call for safeguards, including those related to sovereignty, public security or individual privacy. The problem arises when public officials use the exemptions mindlessly, as a matter of habit, or to cover their own mistakes or

wrongdoings. Unless this is checked, the law is doomed.

This is where the concept of active citizenship comes in. Citizens should learn what types of information will help them discover if government offices are doing their jobs properly. Secondly, while it is easier to use the law for personal reasons – to ask for information relating to the release of pension payments – the real value is in establishing government accountability, i.e. to ask for information relating to public expenditures. Such use requires better understanding of the scope and extent of the exemption clauses. Unless that happens, officials will continue to use exemptions to deny disclosure.

To deal with such abuse, citizens normally depend upon the arbitration role of an independent and impartial information commission. But where that is not the case, the watchdog role of citizen groups becomes important. In Bangladesh, a large number of RTI applications are rejected regularly on the basis of exemption clauses. It is time our civil society turned its attention to the problem and helped establish a mechanism, whereby such arbitrary decisions are put under scrutiny and dealt with legally.

Our judiciary has helped in the past. But the practice of seeking the opinion of the High Court is still very limited. Since decisions of the Information Commission are final, the only way of ensuring proper application of the law is to seek the court's guidance. There is a clear need to develop proper jurisprudence in this area, as has been the case in many older democracies.

Time has come for our social and political elites to match their passion for fair elections in the country with a similar zeal to promote proper application of the RTI Act as an instrument to establish transparency and accountability in governance. This is one law which, when properly used, can yield beneficial results even in difficult political times.

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