

A hike in fuel prices now will be too much to bear

Authorities must explore alternative options

IT'S worrying to learn that the government is considering the possibility of a hike in fuel prices to address the "losses being suffered" by Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC) after the prices of crude oil and diesel have gone up in the global market. As the economic fallout of the Ukraine invasion by Russia continues to be felt around the world, two cabinet ministers, including the finance minister and the state minister for power, energy and mineral resources, recently hinted at a fuel price hike. We need to take this seriously and brace for the evolving situation.

The possible move comes about seven months after the government increased the diesel price by Tk 15 a litre in November last year. Earlier, in January 2013, the petrol price was raised by Tk 7 to Tk 96 a litre, and the octane price by Tk 5 to Tk 99 a litre. However, the prices of both fuels were slashed by Tk 10 a litre in April 2016. One may recall that when the government raised the diesel price in November, transport owners and workers organised a three-day nationwide strike leaving people stranded on the roads and highways. It would be difficult to predict how the transport groups might react if the price is increased so soon, that too in the midst of a volatile market situation.

In the latest instance, while the finance minister stopped short of announcing a hike, he did make it a point to mention that when the cost goes up excessively, the government has to adjust by increasing the price at the consumer level. This implies that the fuel price is about to go up soon, which will be unreasonable because the BPC has reportedly made profits of about Tk 50,000 crore since 2015. This being the case, there can be no justification for increasing fuel prices in the name of addressing the BPC's loss, or for shifting the burden of said loss onto the shoulders of the ordinary people.

As things stand, ordinary people are already finding it extremely difficult to make ends meet with the kitchen markets behaving erratically and the high prices of almost all daily essentials showing no signs of easing. A further escalation of fuel prices – along with the already-high prices of utilities like electricity, water and gas – are bound to have a ripple effect on the prices of food and non-food items. This will be too much to bear for fixed-income groups, especially those in the lower-income bracket. We urge the government to explore alternatives to raising fuel prices and overcharging an already over-taxed people. They deserve a breathing space in this crazy time.

Police must help female victims of cybercrimes

They must be proactive and respond quickly to complaints

IT is quite concerning that women and children are increasingly becoming victims of cybercrimes despite there being multiple platforms and dedicated law enforcement units to protect them. What is even more worrying is that women victims are not getting the help they need from police after lodging complaints. Several victims have told *The Daily Star* that they lodged complaints to the Police Cyber Support for Women (PCSW) under the Police Headquarters, but to no avail.

According to an estimate, from November 16, 2020 to November 16, 2021, at least 12,641 complaints were filed with the police unit dedicated to combating cybercrimes. However, a survey conducted by CyberLine, a voluntary organisation, has found that complaints filed by around 83.98 percent of female victims were left unaddressed. This just shows the level of inaction or inefficiency of the members of the police unit in charge of curbing these crimes.

As women and children are exploited, blackmailed or bullied in the cyberspace, they feel left alone when police – which are duty-bound to help them – do not do so, and when their families blame them for the situations they find themselves in. Such attitudes from society and family make it harder for women to share their issues or file complaints for a solution. Moreover, as law enforcers fail to take action against the offenders, the latter get emboldened to continue with their horrendous activities.

The level of cybercrimes in the recent past has increased so much that it seems anyone using social media platforms can, in fact, fall victim to such crimes. According to CyberLine, 79 percent of social media users are being affected. The question is, what can or should be done to make cyberspace safe for the users?

While raising awareness among internet and mobile phone users – particularly women and children – is of course a vital step to address the issue, breaking the culture of victim-blaming is also equally important. However, the biggest responsibility to check these crimes falls on our law enforcers. From the current state of events, we can assume that they do not have the necessary training or even a proper monitoring mechanism to deal with the evolving nature of cybercrimes. Unless they develop an advanced system to check these crimes as well as expedite their response time to cater to the needs of the victims, we cannot hope to see a change in the situation anytime soon. We urge the authorities to take proper steps with the urgency that this situation deserves.

New assault on the freedom of the press and expression

TV owners call for banning newspapers' video content



THE THIRD VIEW
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HOW unfortunate. There is a new assault on the freedom of the press. This time, sadly, it comes from another section of the mass media itself – the television. It has been an age-old practice – almost like an article of faith – that the media stands together. Its organisations support each other against those who try to restrict, throttle, and ban independent journalism. We now see some television channel owners trying to debilitate another part of the media – the newspapers. The Association of Television Channel Owners (ATCO) has appealed to the information ministry that the broadcasting of video programmes and multimedia content by newspapers be banned.

What ATCO is demanding will greatly harm the newspaper industry and is likely to jeopardise the latter's future, for there is no way newspapers can survive without their digital presence.

The world has changed, and the media sphere much more so. Today, newspaper readers demand updated news the very instant that it happens. They want explainers, backgrounders and also on-the-spot coverage. They not only want to read their favourite reporters or columnists, they also want to listen to them, see them, and interact with them – which is only possible through the internet and in multimedia format.

Every newspaper worth its name has 24/7 online and multimedia coverage of events. *The New York Times* offers special audio-visual coverage of the Ukraine war along with CNN, Al Jazeera, BBC and hundreds of other TV channels. American newspapers covered the US' recent shooting deaths in print and video formats, alongside TV channels. Take the recent fire at the container terminal in Sitakunda upazila of Chattogram. We all covered it in multiple formats – the TV channels had their written reports uploaded online as we, the newspapers, provided both written and video coverage of the event. Nowhere in the world has any broadcaster complained about newspapers offering video coverage.

Take any important newspaper in Europe, Japan, Asia or Southeast Asia – the picture is the same. *The Times of India*, *Hindustan Times*, *The Hindu*, *The Telegraph* of India, *Dawn* of Pakistan, *The Bangkok Post* of Thailand, *The Jakarta Post* of Indonesia, *The Star* of Malaysia – and I can go on and on – each of these renowned newspapers has a highly efficient and vibrant audio-visual digital presence. So, why this demand by ATCO? Will it not force Bangladesh to fall behind the rest of Asia and the world in terms of print media?

Is it ATCO's view that they are losing viewership due to newspapers running videos? No. They are losing their viewers



ILLUSTRATION:
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ATCO's demand must be opposed because it is against Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's aim of building a "Digital Bangladesh." It must be opposed because it is anti-progress, anti-future, and against the interests of Bangladesh's print media.

to Indian channels, especially the Bangla ones. Our TV channels have known this for years and have done very little to fight the competition.

When ATCO demanded "clean feed," we supported their cause because it concerned their business and we realised that our TV channels needed to earn profit. But now they are striking against newspapers' "contents" which makes it an issue of press

minister is carrying out the business of government through video conferencing. She is presiding over some of the most crucial decisions of the state virtually. This is what intelligent leadership and progressive societies do to keep abreast of change and innovation. ATCO's position is totally contrary to this truth.

Futurists predict that the technological changes – especially artificial intelligence,

freedom and freedom of expression. It hits out at the constitutional rights of the press and the people.

ATCO says that newspaper videos are against the paper's declaration – the initial permission to bring out a newspaper. These "declarations" pre-date the digital age and hence need to be changed to serve the future interest of Bangladesh – along with many other laws that were drafted ages ago. As a progressive country, we must change the laws to suit the digital era.

ATCO's position on what is allowable under the online registration policy is based on a flawed interpretation. As we understand it, acquiring separate registration for online versions allows newspapers to have news and multimedia contents. A serious reading of the policy clearly shows that newspapers, with special registration for their online versions, are allowed to produce video content.

There is also the urgent need for diversification. Every industry is diversifying and bringing out new products (for us, it is multimedia content) both to keep their present consumers (for us, readers) and to attract new ones.

Even social sectors are diversifying. Much of today's education is imparted through online classes and videos. Was this foreseen when we admitted our children to schools, colleges, universities, etc? As parents, did we know or agree to the fact that our children will be taking lessons virtually and not in a face-to-face classroom setting? We have all adapted to new methods and technologies due to changing times and made use of the opportunities that these are providing. Did our higher judiciary ever know that they would be holding virtual courts, or that doctors would be prescribing treatment and medicines without physically examining patients? Even our prime

biotechnology, quantum physics, super-computers, space exploration, etc – will completely dwarf the innovations we have seen so far. We can't even imagine what the future will be like. So, are we going to face the ever-evolving future world of incomprehensible changes, possibilities and opportunities with outdated mindsets and laws, and concepts and ideas that were conceived in a totally different era?

The media's operations and business models stand transformed by the digital revolutions witnessed so far. Future innovations will impact it even further. This is true for all media, especially for print. Print media has to innovate and find newer ways to serve its readers, whose taste, preferences, values, and patterns of time utilisation have dramatically changed. They want to read newer things, different things, and in multiple formats. Many people, instead of reading books, prefer to listen to them. This has led to audiobooks being recorded. Many of our readers prefer to listen to news instead of reading it. So, we have podcasts along with printed news.

Newspapers of the future – some are already there – will have to become news platforms instead of just papers, and reach their readers in multiple ways – print, online, mobile phones, podcasts, and multimedia. This is the future which we must embrace if we are to survive.

We appeal to our minister, Hasan Mahmud, that as the minister for the whole sector he should not be swayed by TV only. He must think of the interests of radio, online media and, of course, the print media, in formulating his policies.

ATCO's demand must be opposed because it is against Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's aim of building a "Digital Bangladesh." It must be opposed because it is anti-progress, anti-future, and against the interests of Bangladesh's print media.

Bangladesh must protect its HRDs



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MARY LAWLOR

ALMOST a year ago, I wrote to the government of Bangladesh with other UN independent human rights experts raising our concerns over the treatment of investigative journalist Rozina Islam. We have yet to receive a reply.

Not responding to an official communication from UN Special Rapporteurs is a red flag, raising doubts about a government's commitment to human rights, and about its political will to protect human rights defenders (HRDs) like Rozina.

In May 2021, she went to the health ministry to meet the Health Secretary, but was locked in a room for five hours. Her phone was confiscated, she was accused of theft and of photographing documents relating to the government's purchasing of Covid-19 vaccines. The next day, she was sent to jail for a week.

This happened a few weeks after she published investigative reports on alleged corruption and mismanagement in the health sector, and irregularities in the purchasing of emergency medical supplies to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic.

My latest report on human rights defenders working against corruption was presented to the United Nations Human

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Rights Council in Geneva in March, and it detailed what happened to Rozina Islam. Despite her case being publicly raised at this international forum, the government still did not respond to the concerns first outlined in June 2021.

Rozina is apparently under constant surveillance, has to present herself in court several times a month for hearings that often don't take place, and is liable to have her passport confiscated again in July. I know from speaking with HRDs across the world that these are textbook strategies used to harass them and to bully them into silence.

It is not just anti-corruption HRDs who fear being targeted in Bangladesh. I've received reports that, in January 2022, Mariyam Akhtar Pakhi – whose work includes providing education to vulnerable children – was assaulted in her home. Reportedly, about 20 men armed with knives, hockey sticks and other weapons pushed their way into her home one evening, and beat her and her family. She and her elderly mother, two brothers and her infant daughter were severely injured in the attack. The men also looted the house and took away gold ornaments, Tk 50,000 in cash, and set the house on fire. Relatives say the attackers have threatened to kill the family if they return.

And we know that HRD and Rohingya community leader Mohib Ullah was shot dead last September after receiving multiple threats, which he had reported to the authorities. Governments have a responsibility to protect human rights defenders, however critical HRDs may be of the authorities. Mohib Ullah had been

documenting human rights violations against the Rohingya community both in Myanmar and in refugee camps in Bangladesh.

The government did respond when I questioned them about his death, and said that 12 people had been arrested in connection with his murder. I hope a proper investigation is carried out that meets international standards, and that steps are taken early to predict and prevent situations where HRDs could be at risk.

Meanwhile, more HRDs face attacks in Bangladesh. According to reports received by my office, since December 2021, Bangladeshi authorities have launched a campaign of threats, intimidation and harassment against HRDs. There are also reports that the families of human rights defenders are targeted when HRDs leave the country.

The authorities are preventing HRDs from receiving foreign funding, and using cybercrime laws to target them. It's a disheartening, worrying pattern. HRDs in Bangladesh should be able to carry out their work without fear of intimidation, harassment, jail or murder. It's the State's job to protect them.

Human rights defenders work peacefully to build just and fair societies, and the Bangladeshi authorities should publicly declare their support for this work, provide protection for Mariyam Akhtar Pakhi, drop the charges against Rozina Islam, bring to justice the murderers of Mohib Ullah, and stop attacking anyone who peacefully works to defend the rights of others.