

## A black day in the history of fuel prices

Record price hikes mark an anti-people policy shift

WE'RE alarmed by the government's decision to increase fuel prices by up to 51.7 percent, the highest such increase in the country's history. At a time when people are already undergoing tremendous hardship because of sky-high food prices and galloping inflation, this will make life much more difficult for them. As per the new price chart that came into effect on August 6, each litre of octane now costs Tk 135 – an increase of 51.7 percent or Tk 46 from Tk 89. Each litre of petrol costs Tk 130 – an increase of 51.1 percent or Tk 44 from Tk 86. Meanwhile, the prices of diesel and kerosene reached Tk 114 per litre from Tk 80.

Officially, the reason cited for this extraordinary move is “price adjustment”, which the government was “forced to do” since fuel prices in the international market were a lot higher than that in Bangladesh. Unofficially, though, it has been suggested that this will help fulfil a key condition of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) from which Bangladesh is seeking a USD 4.5 billion loan or “bailout”, as some experts called it, amid the economic crisis. The IMF loan is apparently contingent upon, among other conditions, the withdrawal of subsidies from the energy sector.

Whatever the reason, however, from the point of view of ordinary citizens, the government has struck an unbearable blow even though, mere hours before the announcement, the state minister for power and energy had hinted at a “reasonable” and “bearable” level of price increase. In recent times, the government has expressed increasing reluctance to bear subsidies in different sectors. In November 2021, it hiked diesel and kerosene prices from Tk 65 to Tk 80 per litre – which, however, led to a 27 percent increase in bus fares, and a 35 percent increase in launch fares. On June 5, wholesale gas prices were increased by nearly 23 percent. Last week, prices of urea fertiliser were hiked by 37.5 percent. Prices of water, electricity and gas are likely to rise further soon.

Usually, when the government talks about the burden of subsidies, somehow it is always shifted onto ordinary consumers, as if it is their fault, even though the pressure can be offset by saving money wasted in corruption, mismanagement and “system loss”. The latest price hikes also make little sense because international fuel prices are currently on the decrease, a trend that experts say will continue. Why, then, would the government take this anti-people move? It will no doubt cause further inflation, shooting up already-high transport fares, prices of essentials, and production costs. People will have to further tighten their belts. And the pain that all this will cause is indescribable.

We urge the government to reconsider its decision and follow the suggestions of experts to undertake pro-people deficit adjustment reforms.

## Why should consumers pay for Wasa's bad policy?

Poorly executed, foreign-funded projects are a burden for our economy

WE'RE concerned to learn about the amount of debt taken by Dhaka and Chattogram Wasa over the last one decade to fund projects meant to improve their overall service. According to a report by *Prothom Alo*, while Dhaka Wasa has taken up seven such projects taking Tk 21,000 crore as foreign loan, Chattogram Wasa has undertaken four projects with foreign loan amounting to Tk 6,288 crore. Although some of the projects have been completed by now, their effect has been mostly limited thanks to mismanagement and poor planning. Experts fear that even the projects that are now underway are also unlikely to bear much fruit.

Meanwhile, both the Wasa administrations are repeatedly raising water tariffs despite their generally poor services. Dhaka Wasa, for example, has increased its water tariff a total of 15 times since 2009.

The question is, why are they burdening consumers with increased water tariffs, and also putting pressure on our economy by taking up these big projects, if they cannot deliver expected results? Take Dhaka Wasa's Padma-Jashaldia Water Treatment Plant (phase-I) project, which was completed three years ago. The Tk 3,670 crore undertaking was meant to ensure better water supply to some parts of the capital. But one-third of the plant's production capacity reportedly remains unused, due to a lack of pipelines. Now, Dhaka Wasa wants to take up another project to solve this problem!

The condition of other ongoing projects is also not much different, as many have had their deadlines extended several times while their costs also escalated over the last few years. One of them is the Dhaka Environmentally Sustainable Water Supply project, launched in October 2013, which is still incomplete. Since all these projects have been implemented or are under development with foreign debt, the Wasa authorities are required to pay off loans in big installments. Reportedly, in the FY 2021-22, Dhaka Wasa's annual loan installment amount was Tk 400 crore, and it will increase further in the coming years. The question is, can they burden the consumers with increased water tariffs to pay off loans? Definitely not.

Both Dhaka and Chattogram Wasa have taken up such projects despite them not being realistic or sustainable from an economic point of view. They should be held accountable for their inefficiency and failures. The two institutions must stop increasing water tariffs to make up for their own mismanagement, and find a way to repay loans based on discussions with all the stakeholders.

# How to avert the next level crossing disaster



OF MAGIC & MADNESS

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THE problem with unprotected level crossings is quite old, just as the bickering over their management between the railway authorities and other concerned agencies. Yet, after every tragedy, the bickering parties return to the chopping board with an eagerness that one would wish were directed to saving life rather than saving face. No official apology issued for any dereliction of duty. No inter-agency collaboration to avoid its recurrence. No reforms in how the level crossings are operated. It's like the only outcome they care about after a tragedy is a sense of coming out of it not looking like the guilty party.

True to this tradition, the railway bosses, after the latest level-crossing collusion that killed eleven people in Mirsharai, Chattogram, again opted for the safety of old, hackneyed arguments. The incident shocked the nation because of the unfortunate loss of so many young lives. Most of them were SSC/HSC students as well as teachers of a local coaching centre. Besides, six others were also critically injured. Reportedly, they were on their way back from a picnic when a Chattogram-bound train rammed into the microbus carrying them, with no lineman to warn them or pull up the barrier.

Soon after, however, the railway minister sought to clarify whose head he thought should be put in the metaphorical guillotine for the tragedy. “A train goes on its own tracks. It never crosses into tracks of others. It never hits anyone [on its own],” he said, spelling out the ABC of train operations. He then added: “It is others that hit the train, others who prefer to build roads over railroad tracks. It is their responsibility to give security to the people and property [passing through them].” Road security, in his view, is not the concern of the railway authorities, but of the Road Transport and Highways Division.

Around the same time, the director general of Bangladesh Railway (BR) said: “The responsibility [for the level crossing accident] is not ours.” But then, rather conveniently, he shifted the blame onto the victims themselves. “Anyone crossing a track should be careful before stepping in. The responsibility for any accident is theirs.” One wonders what is more



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PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN

tragic – a deadly accident, or the insinuation that victims had brought this upon themselves. The insensitivity of the comment only illustrates the indifference with which citizens are generally treated by most public institutions.

To be frank, the railway authorities do have a point when they speak of other agencies building roads cutting through the rail tracks. In that, level crossings represent a unique administrative challenge, as they bring together two distinct modes of transport – trains vs road and off-road vehicles – and two different sets of supervisors, with the other being road builders including the Local Government Engineering Department (LGED), upazila/pourashava administrations, etc. A crossing marks not only their point of meeting, but also their point of divergence.

The friction starts with the very act of building crossings – both authorised and unauthorised – which are often left unmanned. Currently, there are 1,412 authorised and 1,149 unauthorised crossings in the country, most of them

unmanned. In short, about 84 percent of all crossings are unprotected. Reportedly, at least nine government bodies were involved in building the unauthorised level crossings, with the LGED having constructed the highest 516.

The danger of unprotected level crossings can be understood from the fact that, so far this year, a total

crossings. Lack of interoperability among the agencies involved is an issue that only a central wing can address. It should supervise all decisions related to level crossings. For example, at an inter-ministerial meeting in January 2021, a number of decisions were taken to ensure the safety of level crossings, including constructing speed breakers where there are none, reducing the

of 35 people were killed in collisions. At least 173 people were killed in the six years till 2021, and 739 people in the 13 years till 2021, according to an estimate by the Accident Research Institute (ARI) of Buet.

If you ask the BR, they will give you a number of reasons why managing level crossings is a responsibility of those building the roads, which they often do without constructing speed breakers on either side of crossings, or ensuring that they are safe to use for road travellers. There is also an acute shortage of staff to operate the barriers round the clock. But just because the BR is ticking some of the boxes right doesn't make it wholly right, or innocent, or absolve it of its own responsibility. Poor supervision or crisis of gatemen, for example, is something that it stands perennially guilty of. But level crossings being a shared administrative challenge, their responsibility shouldn't have to fall solely on the railway too.

This is why there should be a special administrative arm in charge of level

number of illegal level crossings and building overpasses or underpasses in future projects. But hardly any progress has been made in this regard. A central authority would be ideally placed to fast-track such activities and ensure inter-agency collaboration.

But even within a central command, the railway should play a prominent role. Unfortunately, despite huge investments being made in the railways, the authorities are struggling to offer decent services thanks to sheer corruption and irregularities within the BR. Mismanagement in procurement, recruitment and railway scheduling remains a critical challenge. But it is the security aspect of their duties where they are failing most spectacularly, with the number of railway-related accidents excluding level-crossing collisions still pretty high. The railway authorities must lead the drive for reforms and be a part of the solution rather than the problem, otherwise level crossing disasters will continue to occur.

## ARRESTING GAMERS

# An alarming threat to individual liberty

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THE recent arrest of over 100 youths in Chuadanga has shined a light on a problematic tendency of our police force. The arrestees were detained for participating in a PUBG (online game) tournament. The High Court Division of the Supreme Court of Bangladesh (HC) directed the Bangladesh Telecommunications Regulatory Commission (BTRC) to shut down some online games that it considered destructive and harmful to the youth. More specifically, on August 16, 2021, the HC gave an interim order to ban all links/ internet gateways to PUBG. The HC's order was directed towards the BTRC, not the general people of Bangladesh. If media reports are to be believed, the BTRC tried to comply with that order. The above is stated to give a background for the upcoming discussion. This article does not discuss the legality of the police's action. It certainly does not intend to discuss the merit of the ongoing litigation. Instead, this piece deals with the paternal role taken by our police force, and its moral and political legitimacy. Essentially, Bangladesh's increasing practice of

state paternalism is very alarming.

State paternalism is the practice of the state using its coercive power to make an individual do something or abstain from doing something, against their will, with the claim that the state is looking after their greater interest (such as the claims of parents in general). In a liberal state, this paternalism is acceptable, only to a minimal extent (if at all), as it greatly undermines individual liberty. It is important to note that state paternalism differs from the harm principle, which holds that limiting liberty is only justified when it is done to prevent harm to other people. In this context, “liberty” means an individual's right to act in any way they want. For instance, the state forcing its youth to get their hair cut in a certain way so that they look “gentler” would be a paternalist action, since the state is claiming to know more about the well-being of the youth than the youth themselves. The state creating a law prohibiting the violation of people's bodily integrity would be more in line with the no-harm principle.

In a liberal state, it is expected that the state will not tell us how to live a good life. It is not the state's responsibility (or something within its power) to decide what one's definition of a “good life” ought to be. Rather, the state must create a social environment

of good governance where one can freely pursue their vision of a good life. In exercising paternalism, the state arbitrarily sets a standard of a good life. In a modern complex state, people's standards of morality greatly differ, and it would be illiberal to prefer one standard of morality over others. Also, as Lon L. Fuller rightly argued, morality of duty (the minimum morality that

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we expect from our fellow citizens) can be enforced through legal coercion, but not morality of aspiration (morality of excellence/perfection). For instance, you may enforce the duty of not stealing through legal coercion, but not that of aspiring to be a good person.

Now, if we look at recent events, the police's justification for arresting

online gamers, reportedly, was that these games are destroying the morality of the youth. Here, the police, as an institution performing an affair of the state, is using coercive power to enforce its version of morality over the youth. In doing so, they are deciding what would be a “good life” for the youth and what sort of life they should aspire to achieve. Not only are the police acting on their own policy, but the foundation of such policy is based on a subjective moral standard. We observed similar situations when the police force of multiple districts forced their local youth to get haircuts.

A liberal state must respect individual agency to the extent that it does not harm others. To live in society, we voluntarily sacrifice some of our liberties as part of our social contract with the state and with our fellow citizens, as long as we consider them justified. As long as one's actions are not harming others and not violating any particular laws, one must be allowed to form their own opinions and live their life according to their own wishes. As Jeremy Waldron rightly noted, our dignity demands that our decision-making ability must be taken seriously, and we must be recognised to have the ability to regulate our actions in accordance with our own understanding of norms and reasons.