

Protect farmers to ensure food security

The burden of rising fuel prices on farmers will affect the entire country

IN early June, when presenting the budget to parliament, the finance minister emphasised the importance of boosting food production and ensuring food security. Although the final budget was criticised for not introducing proper measures to increase production, it was evident from his speech that the government acknowledges the importance that agricultural production holds for this country. Why then, we must ask, is it showing apathy towards farmers, without whose labour it is impossible to ensure food security?

In recent months, our farmers have suffered from the consequences of floods, followed up by extreme heat and limited rainfall, which wreaked havoc on their livelihoods through crop losses and low yields. Yet, even before they recovered from the shock of natural disasters, they were hit with a 37.5 percent rise in urea fertiliser prices. And now, they are at risk of being knocked out by the 42.5 percent rise in diesel prices.

It is estimated that the diesel price rise will force farmers to spend an additional Tk 4,000 in irrigation per hectare of Boro production. This is a crop that makes up 53 percent of our total rice production. Around 75 percent of all irrigation equipment is diesel-run. Data from Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC) suggests that paddy farming burnt over 15 percent of the 46 lakh tonnes of diesel used in FY 2020-21. Does the government have any plans to ease this burden that has been foisted upon already-suffering farmers, especially small-scale ones who account for 84 percent of all farmers and live in highly vulnerable conditions? While there are provisions of a Tk 500 crore stimulus package for the agricultural sector, we are yet to find how this amount will be utilised.

There are fears that if farmers are not able to pass on this rise in costs of production and get fair prices, many will give up on farming altogether. This is a huge threat to achieving food security. The alternative scenario – where higher costs are passed on to consumers – is equally grim. Ever since the pandemic, we have seen the prices of essentials continue to increase. Already, high costs of transportation are pushing up prices of vegetables and other foods brought into the cities from across the country. What we are witnessing now is nothing short of a cost of living crisis, and it will only get worse.

In December, a UN report found that 5.2 crore people in Bangladesh are food insecure, a number which went up by 2.4 percent between 2018 and 2020. Why should so many people be facing hunger in a country experiencing “rapid development”? The government must place greater emphasis on protecting the livelihoods of farmers, who are carrying on their shoulders the crucial responsibility of feeding the nation.

Time to free up occupied streets and pavements

Why are DNCC councillors sitting on the mayoral instruction?

AMID news of the two mayors of Dhaka being granted the state minister status and despite the city literally bursting at the seams, with over a crore people squeezed into its two corporations, it’s unfortunate that the city’s priorities aren’t getting enough attention. Or, even if they are, they aren’t getting the kind of response needed. One of the priorities is to have spacious roads and well-maintained pavements. Presently, many streets and pavements remain in a bad shape. They’re either going through some kind of repairs, or being put to personal/commercial use, or have parts of them grabbed illegally by building owners, thus obstructing the flow of traffic and pedestrians.

And while all this is going on, local ward councillors are turning a blind eye, firstly, to the suffering of pavement users, for example, and secondly, to the violation of related rules and regulations which they’re supposed to enforce. Often, we see parts of streets and pavements being occupied to make steel products or keep raw materials, plastic containers and iron scraps, or simply to park vehicles. Not only does this harm the integrity of concrete roads, those also become narrower and pavements unusable as a result. There is also the problem of canals and drains being clogged.

Despite occasional drives to evict or free up occupied public spaces, the city corporations have largely failed to make any impact in this regard or take action against illegal users. Just how indifferent concerned offices are can be understood from the fact that not one councillor from the 54 wards in Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC) has been able to prepare a list of road grabbers as directed by the mayor over six months ago. According to a report, the mayor gave them a verbal instruction to this effect on January 27. Some councillors defended themselves by saying there was no follow-up written notice. Some spoke of “confusion” over the contents of the instruction. Others, somewhat justifiably, spoke of the difficulty and even futility of listing given the political clout enjoyed by grabbers, making it harder to take meaningful action.

But one thing is obvious: the collective failure of councillors to respond to the mayor’s instruction, and the lack of accountability for said failures. It also shows how political considerations often triumph over the interests of ordinary pedestrians and commuters. We urge the DNCC high-ups to take a firm stance in this regard. They must bring councillors into line and urgently free up grabbed or blocked streets and pavements.

DEBACLE OF NATIONAL HOUSEHOLD DATABASE

Once again, the public must pay for the government’s failure



THE OVERTON WINDOW

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FOR the nearly eight years now that I’ve been working in the newspaper industry, I don’t think I’ve seen a whole month go by without coming across some report relating to corruption in one government aid delivery scheme or another. Keeping in mind that even reporting on such topics may now land you in jail – thanks to the draconian Digital Security Act (DSA) – or worse, get you disappeared, and that not all incidents are reported in the media, it’s perhaps safe to say that corruption in government aid delivery programmes is extremely rampant in Bangladesh.

According to a 2021 World Bank report titled “Bangladesh Social Protection Public Expenditure Review,” 49-66 percent of Bangladesh’s social safety net allowance and food support beneficiaries are not poor. Young but poor children are getting only 1.6 percent of the total social protection benefits from the government exchequer, even though they represent one in eight poor in the country. And around 36 percent of the country’s total social protection spending serves only 0.45 percent of its population – through the pensions for government officials.

Had these government programmes effectively reached the poor, poverty level in Bangladesh would go down from 36 percent to 12 percent, the report said. It is for this reason that experts have been calling on the government to establish a national database of some form, which could help identify who the real poor are.

In July 2013, the government undertook the initiative to set up the National Household Database (NHD) project which, according to the government’s own officials, would give the socioeconomic indicators of each household and help the government select the eligible beneficiaries of social safety net programmes. The initial project deadline was set for December 2017 and the project was estimated to cost Tk 328 crore. However, after numerous deadline extensions, the project is finally expected to finish later this year, with its cost rising by



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a whopping 112.75 percent to Tk 727 crore.

Since the lack of accurate and organised data has remained a major challenge for the government in delivering aid to the poor, the NHD could have been a most valuable tool for the government during the pandemic. For example, in July 2020, a staggering two-thirds of the five million poor families who were badly hit by the pandemic-induced shutdown were reportedly yet to receive Tk 2,500 each in cash support from a government fund of Tk 1,250 crore, because of a flawed beneficiaries’ list.

To prevent similar blunders, Finance Minister AHM Mustafa Kamal said in his letter to the World Bank on March 2, 2022 that the government was committed to using the long overdue NHD to disburse this year’s social safety net allocation of Tk 113,576 crore. He had echoed similar sentiments in January 2018 when while admitting that misuse occur at the time of spending money set aside for safety net programmes, he said: “The national database will stop the misuse.”

Unfortunately for the finance minister – and even more so for the poor – that dream will remain unfulfilled.

According to a recent report by the Implementation Monitoring and

are paying for – instead of it being stolen by the corrupt – the project undertaken by the government has proven to be worthless.

But it gets worse. The reason for the failure, according to the IMED report, is that there were too many inconsistencies in the data collected from 35 million families from 64 districts. “Even though several consultants were appointed,” the fact that “there are inconsistencies in the database” shows that “the consultants did not perform their tasks properly.” In 2016, as many as 545 data entry operators were recruited, but they were not given any defined tasks or responsibilities. The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) also did not assign an experienced officer, which hindered its implementation. The project had many IT consultants and senior programmers of BBS working on it, but they did not do any noticeable work.

Although the terms of reference for editing the collected data capturing and correction were well-articulated, the contracted firm did not edit the data adequately. And these issues were not raised in the meetings of the project implementation committee (PIC) and project steering committee (PSC).

Since the project’s implementation began in July 2013, there should have been at least 35 PIC meetings. However,

money, as well as how inefficiently that is being utilised. This apathy on part of government officials – not just the top-level politicians, but all along the governance hierarchy – is also evident in the fact that other government projects across the spectrum have a tendency to get delayed, cost more, and sometimes similarly fall completely by the wayside.

But ultimately, this attitude has come down from the top. During the pandemic, numerous non-government organisations had come up with different facts and figures indicating that poverty had risen alarmingly. Top government officials dismissed such findings, without presenting any counter evidence. Not only that, their own individual ministries sat idly by and didn’t even bother to collect their own data.

That same lethargic and uncaring attitude is what has led to this project becoming a complete disaster. And while the poor and the taxpayer’s will have to pay for the failure, those really responsible for it will most likely just continue on with their lives, without even having to answer for it. And the corrupt will continue to benefit as a result. All these must be obvious to government officials. Which begs the question: whose interest are they truly looking to serve with their actions?

A world in trouble, not just Bangladesh



CHINTITO SINCE 1995

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ALONG with many of you, I, too, am perturbed by the apparent panic (and muted enthusiasm) in some quarters, laced with immaturity and political aura, as the government, in late July, put into effect a countrywide load-shedding schedule. The move was cautionary “to conserve fuel amid soaring energy prices in the global market,” due to which Bangladesh has been experiencing a daily shortfall of 1,000-1,500MW of electricity.

In early June, *The Washington Post* reported that load-shedding prospects loomed over the US during summer. The US power grid is under stress like never before, with regulators warning that the kind of rolling outages that are now usual in California and Texas could be far more widespread. South Africa is another country to face rolling blackouts. Europe’s energy crisis is taking an ugly turn, no thanks to Russia’s gas monopoly. Such a fluid situation threatens to intensify the stress and anxiety of shaky economies.

No “country” is an island, with due apology to John Donne. Almost any major incident causes a ripple effect across the globe – a few ripples lasting longer and spreading further than the others. Expert (read: political) opinions are also rife, as typified by BNP Standing Committee Member Mirza Abbas’s declaration that “this load-shedding may lead to the fall of the [Awami League] government.” Blaming the

government for plundering electricity and load-shedding, he said whether there was electricity production or not, owners of quick rental power plants would get paid.

Now is not the time to bask in romanticism, because this is a global catastrophe, exacerbated by the war in Ukraine, a lasting deadly virus, growing shortage of food and an energy crisis, compounded by natural forces triggered by decades of human neglect and naivety.

Seemingly sleeping politicians seem to be wide awake to any remote opening of unseating a sitting government – whatever be the human cost. While governments are gasping to maintain the status quo, the opposition camps are considering this debacle an opportunity to topple and take over, forgetting that their personal destiny is tied to a government’s rise and fall.

Imagine there is a change of guards by the twirl of a magic wand. Will gas ooze from the crevices of dried earth? Or shall coal sprout from a hitherto unknown volcano? Will the war in Ukraine come to an abrupt halt? Will global warming stop wreaking havoc in both hot and cold climates? Shall national entities across the borders learn from past misconduct and mistakes?

The Covid-19 contagion is now in its third year. Economic growth has been impeded. Physical and mental health has been severely affected. Nations,

communities and many people have become poorer. Not complaining really, but a handful of companies have become wealthier by pouncing on the dire situation and gifted opportunity. All is fair in love, war and business.

The worldwide loss of lives is nearly 6.5 million, the number of positive cases estimated to be 600 million, recovery figures being 30 million less. Bangladesh has counted almost 30,000 dead and two million infected.

Covid has affected the production of all foodstuff and goods as well as hampering shipping and transportation, curtailing supply and increasing prices. Empty shelves in some of the biggest retail outlets made disheartening TV grabs. Costs of living soared. The unforeseen occurrences have jolted governments in all nations – poor and rich.

Examples are grim from all over the world. The US central bank had to raise the interest rate by 0.75 percent for the second time in a row to curb the soaring inflation. It is no better in the UK, where “very high prices” could increase household bills to 3,850 pounds in the coming winter due to electricity supply shortages. Households are already paying 1,971 pounds per year for energy bills after the price cap was increased in April.

To conserve water, hoses/pipes were banned in Hampshire and the Isle of Wight after England recorded its driest July in a century. The temporary ban was necessary because a drought threatened to damage the habitats of two neighbouring rivers. The extreme measure became necessary due to extreme heat and reduced rainfall, alongside demand. Wasa can claim it does not walk alone.

Forest fires have been a hallmark of climate change. Las Vegas in New Mexico (US) declared an emergency, with less than 50 days of clean water supply left. Currently relying on

reservoirs, the shortage was caused by Calf Canyon-Hermits Peak Fire, the largest wildfire in New Mexico ever, due to which debris and ash contaminated the Gallinas River, the city’s solo source of water.

Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez has called on workers in the public and private sectors to stop wearing ties, as an “urgent” energy-saving measure in the heat, as countries strive to become less dependent on Russian gas in the wake of the war in Ukraine. The prime minister said the move would ensure that people stay cooler and therefore lower energy costs, because air conditioners will be used less. In 2011, Japan introduced its “Super Cool Biz” campaign, which encouraged office workers to wear cooler clothes in summer. And during sweltering temperatures in the UK recently, politicians were told to ditch their suit jackets while in the House of Commons. We, too, were advised to save energy.

There is scarcity of food worldwide. It is not only in Bangladesh that customers are having to count more notes for the same size chicken. A spokesperson for the fast-food giant KFC said, “Recent supply chain challenges have meant (that) some of our restaurants are facing a few shortages of poultry. It comes after KFC chiefs had to issue a similar supply warning in August last year.”

Let’s try to understand the current crisis in the global context. Despite our economic troubles, in several indicators Bangladesh is faring better than many other countries. That is credit to the entire nation. Let’s stand by a government that boldly gave out mobile numbers for the needy to collect food when Covid was at its peak.

Allow me to conclude on a positive note. Bangladesh’s July export earning target was over USD 3.47 billion, but the actual gross amount was more than USD 3.98 billion. Cheers!