

Time for superficial solutions to price hikes is over

At the current rate, some people may soon be unable to afford food

ALREADY high staple prices, the price of rice has increased for a second time in just four days in the market. How are people to survive the immense inflationary pressure coming at them from all sides? While businessmen have blamed the usual suspects – the increase in paddy price, transport cost and import taxes – for the hike in rice prices, the food minister has blamed it on the actions of crooked businessmen. According to him, the hike is disproportionate with the rise in transport costs.

The question is, what actions has the ministry taken to address this? Given that the majority of people, particularly those in the lower- and middle-income groups, are facing the worst economic pressure in Bangladesh's recent history, shouldn't the government be actively looking to prevent any shady manoeuvrings of "dishonest" businessmen during this time of great national crisis?

Lower-income groups, as well as people living on fixed incomes, have already had to abandon the intake of meat, fish, etc. due to their prices being astronomically high. Recently, the price of egg – perhaps the last affordable source of protein for the poor – has risen so much that the country risks facing a malnutrition crisis soon. And that will undoubtedly set us back massively, across numerous fronts. With the price of rice now rising rapidly, what are people to eat? Can we expect them to just forgo it, too?

The prime minister has recently acknowledged the pain that the general people are going through. But why is it that we don't see such concerns, genuine as they may be, translated into greater efforts to alleviate their suffering? Given the current reality, why is it that the authorities are refusing to increase the minimum wage for workers in RMG and tea plantation sectors, for example, who are easily among the most poorly paid? How are these people and others living on fixed incomes going to afford prices of food and other essentials?

Even though we are pleased to know that the government is going to launch a food friendly programme (FFP), where it will sell rice at a cheaper rate for 50 lakh poor families, as well as expand its Open Market Sales (OMS) to the upazila level, these are but temporary band aid measures. Not all people can access these programmes either. What will happen to the rest? And how is the government going to ensure that these programmes are not going to be infested with corruption, like most of its programmes are? The government needs to think these matters through, instead of providing superficial solutions.

We can't let our demographic dividend pass us by

Govt must address rising unemployment as a matter of priority

ALTHOUGH Bangladesh has a huge workforce that, if utilised properly, could give the economy a massive boost, it is not happening in reality because of a number of factors, the most important of them being rising unemployment. Currently, 65.6 percent of the population is of working age (between 15 and 64). Experts tell us that when there is a steady flow of people in the workforce, productivity increases, which in turn brings desired economic growth. But recent data point to a bleak scenario in which Bangladesh is wasting its "once-in-a-lifetime window" of demographic dividend because of its inability to create new jobs.

Just how bad the situation is can be understood from a 2016 survey by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, in which the unemployment rate among the educated was shown to be 47 percent. There has been little progress since, as evidenced by a 2021 survey by the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies that concluded that about 66 percent of the graduates from colleges affiliated with National University remain unemployed. Unemployment among university graduates is about 10 percent. Every year, about 20 lakh people are added to the labour force but jobs are not being created in that proportion. Equally worryingly, about a third of the youth population (45.9 million) are not engaged in employment, education or training.

Bangladesh could do wonders on the economic front if it could just exploit the advantage of having such a huge active population. And this is where we are missing out on the benefits of the demographic dividend. The window of our demographic dividend is said to have opened during the mid-noughties, thanks to low fertility and mortality rates and the workforce having fewer dependents, and it is expected to be shut by 2045. If we continue to squander our human capital advantage, this dividend may well turn into a disaster.

The government must act fast to turn the situation around. It must focus on creating jobs and advancing job-oriented education, and engage more of the youth population in employment, education and training. More investment is needed in vocational and technical education, as well as expansion of the service sectors, to help create jobs. The government has recently, and rather belatedly, formulated the National Employment Policy 2022 that aims to create about 30 million new jobs by 2030 and take unemployment to the "lowest level" by 2041. It also identified a number of challenges. Removing those challenges should be its highest priority now.

A woman is dead. Why are we gossiping about her personal life?



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TEACHER who married college student found dead. Body of teacher who married college student found, husband detained. Teacher who married college student victim of "murder," not "suicide."

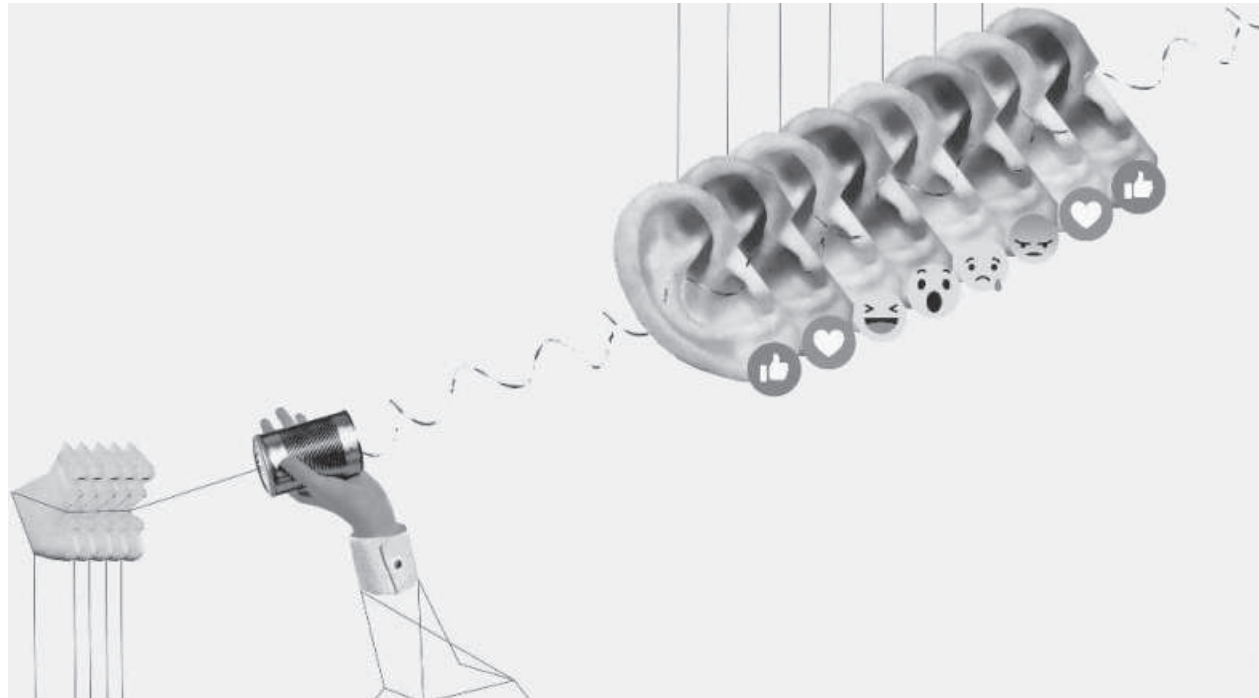
If you come across these headlines while scrolling on social media, alongside photos of a couple sitting close together and smiling into the camera, what would your first impression be? Would you be expecting to read about a "crime of passion?" Would you, perhaps against your better judgement, think, "A woman who married her student! What else did she expect?" Would you look at their obvious age gap and feel a wave of judgement for a woman who seemed to have "preyed" on a young, vulnerable man that she was responsible for teaching?

Perhaps you wouldn't think any of these things at all. But I can almost guarantee that these headlines would give you one impression: A teacher seduced and married one of her students in a complete abuse of her position of responsibility, and something horrible happened as a result.

And in this way, we in the media would be responsible for spreading disinformation – *not* misinformation, which is the publication of incorrect or misleading information, whereas disinformation is a deliberate deception. Because as we all came to know soon enough and which media outlets who investigated the story found out very early into their reporting, the woman and the man in question – both above the age of 18 and thereby able to give consent to any relationship they enter into – met on Facebook and never had a teacher-student relationship prior to that.

The basic facts of the case are these: On Sunday, a woman was found dead in a house she shared with her husband in Balaripara of Natore. The man left the house in the middle of the night, came home in the early hours of the morning, and the police were called in. While their preliminary findings point towards a case of suicide, they are investigating the matter and the husband has been taken in for questioning.

If we in the media were performing our responsibility to inform our readers of the facts and only the facts, without passing judgement and reflecting our



VISUAL: KAZI TAHSEN AGAZ APURBO

own biases, then perhaps this would be the only information readers would know so far. In an ideal world, the police would also not have speculated to the media on whether the case was one of suicide or something else before proper investigations. And the media would now not be delving into the victim's personal life, playing detective and throwing in *masala*-filled details into the mix – talking about her husband's reported addiction, her past relationships, her child – to create a sensation around what is essentially a story of trauma, and potentially, of violence.

Some reports have tried to talk about the social shaming and ostracisation the woman faced for marrying a younger man. However, even the well-meaning reports ended up reproducing this shaming to a certain extent by ultimately focusing on the fact that she was an older woman who married a younger man – a teacher who married a student, even if he wasn't her student. If the sexes had been changed, and a man in his early 40s had married a woman in her 20s, would we have thought about it twice, even though the power dynamics are likely to be completely different in

under a lot of stress. And perhaps that is part of her story (although we need to have a whole different conversation on how harmful stereotypes about drug addiction, viewed only as a crime and not a public health issue, continue to get in the way of national conversations about recovery and support).

But is this really the media's story to tell? What exactly is our responsibility in this situation? To play the role of the police collecting evidence, and discuss what specific injuries there were on the woman, and how her body looked when it was discovered? Are we meant to be the lawyers, delving into her husband's addiction, attempting to find whether it automatically points towards a criminal nature, so we can find if he engineered the whole thing? Or are we simply playing the role of the local gossip, creating clickbait for readers with no regard for the fact that a woman's life has been ended and there are people out there who are mourning her?

This is not the first time media reports have been filled with unnecessary and sensationalist details that distract from the real issue which, more often than not, is violence. Only last month, a woman was murdered by her husband three months into their marriage.

count as femicide, but till now, we have failed to make that word a part of our vocabulary. Instead, our reporting standards came dangerously close to victim-blaming, or at least of opening up avenues to discuss whether the man's reaction was acceptable or not.

In all such cases, the basic fact is that a woman is dead. If she died by suicide, it becomes an opportunity to create conversations around mental health, trauma and social stigma. If she died as a result of intimate partner violence, it becomes an opportunity to talk about gender-based violence and the structures that perpetuate it, such as a desperately slow criminal justice system, inadequate responses from police or social stigma in reporting violence.

Sensationalising such stories do nothing to create meaningful conversations. And as long as we continue to make light of these cases and report on them as isolated incidents, rather than part of a system that is so often biased against women, we will only be perpetuating a culture that normalises trauma and violence.

Crossing the red lines to nuclear war



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NOW that the pomp and glory of US Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan is over, and China has held military exercises surrounding Taiwan, what has been achieved other than further worsening of US-China relations? The crumbling of the current world order is like an earthquake disaster. Initially everything looks fine, then cracks and tremors begin to appear, and events accelerate until the actual earthquake occurs with massive devastation.

The difference between earthquakes and war is that the latter is human-induced and should, in theory, be avoidable. The Thucydides Trap is less about whether Great Powers will fight and more about whether it is avoidable. History has rewarded heroes when they win wars, but has seldom praised statesmen who have avoided wars.

History will debate whether the Russia-Ukraine war was avoidable. So far, it is a non-nuclear war because Russia warned NATO not to provoke a nuclear situation. NATO, at least, understands that the Cold War, fought between 1946 and 1991, did avoid a nuclear war. Both sides understood that nuclear war was MAD (mutually assured destruction). There were lots of proxy wars, such as the Korean war, where the Soviets pushed China to do the fighting, or Afghanistan, where the US financed Islamist forces to wear down the Soviet forces. The Cuban missile crisis was

defused when the Russians agreed to remove missiles from Cuba, provided the Americans removed missiles from Turkey. Both sides decided to back down from each other's "red lines," the crossing of which would escalate beyond either side's control.

The American economist who had the most influence on shaping the understanding of nuclear options was Thomas C. Schelling (1921-2016). His Nobel laureate lecture, titled "An Astonishing Sixty Years: The Legacy of Hiroshima," reminds us how lucky and rational we were so far in avoiding nuclear escalation. Schelling's great attribute was to apply intellectual rigour and common sense to very uncomfortable questions. He thought through the unthinkable. A leading game theorist, he understood that all human decisions are interdependent, contingent upon someone else's behaviour, the most common being "tit for tat."

But common sense at the individual level does not always work at the global level. Married couples who want a divorce can appeal to a court for independent judgement. Great Powers cannot appeal to any higher court, not even the United Nations, because they have the veto over any ruling. Thus, the only global rule is that Great Powers must reach understandings with each other and not cross each other's red lines, beyond which they will clash.

In a unipolar world where the hegemon power can enforce order, there is what economists call "equilibrium." But as Schelling warned, equilibrium is only a result of balance, but when the unipolar order fragments into a multipolar order or disorder, you can get "far-from-equilibria" results. Biden's "Build Back Better" framework seeks to get back to a semblance of unipolar position, but having crossed Russia's red line over Ukraine, war has broken out. It is contained so far because it is a proxy war where only the Ukrainians are dying, while NATO provides the arms. But if emotions get too high, attacking nuclear plants can also escalate to a nuclear conflagration, which cannot be contained.

Pelosi's trip, to some extent, has already crossed China's red line, which is about One China policy including Taiwan, not "One China, One Taiwan." China has just published its White Paper on Taiwan, which spells out China's red line on Taiwan.

What we face today is a situation that, until recently, few dreamt would be possible – that the US and its allies may be crossing two red lines and engage in a two-front war at the same time. It is no longer a fantasy to imagine that a third front could break out in the Middle East with Israeli-Palestinian tension.

Schelling's warning was that "nuclear weapons, once introduced into combat, could not, or probably would not, be contained, confined or limited." In other words, if non-nuclear options cannot arrive at mutually accepted conclusions or decisions, nuclear options would be used. If warring parties are not willing to negotiate, then escalation would rise inevitably to a nuclear option.

The only solution to this is to shift radically away from brinkmanship and avoid playing the current game of chicken – namely, who blinks first. When

the leading military power is no longer assured of winning on all fronts, (and that is still a big "if"), it is the insecurity that creates conditions for chaos. Once the US moves away from "constructive ambiguity" to the certainty of action, such as legal commitment to go to war on Taiwan, then it becomes hostage to Taiwan acting recklessly or even accidentally to provoke war, in which recent US war games show that the losses for everyone are horrendous.

The rational game does not have stable equilibria (as solutions) when emotions run higher and higher because both sides, civilians and the military, cannot predict how the other would behave and therefore pre-empt losses by engaging in first strikes. The UN secretary-general was correct in warning the nuclear powers to commit to "no-first-use" policy. No peace process is possible without all nuclear powers sitting down to discuss how to de-escalate the present situation.

As Schelling understood, the only way out of this nuclear conundrum is for Big Powers to rebuild trust and agree to disagree, including appreciating how not to cross each other's red lines. Interdependent decision-making requires self-restraint by the major players. But the way the current media is fanning emotions, no leader can afford to look weak to their domestic audience. Hence, "tit for tat" means escalation until eventually red lines will be crossed – not by intention, but by abstention.

Perilous times need statesmen who are not absent from the big decisions of our times. Democracy assumes that great leaders will emerge with great wisdom to fulfil the will of the people. But if the will of the people is misled into mutual Armageddon, then instead of the dialogue of the deaf, we may have the swan song of the dead.

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