

Food ministry must do better to control prices

High prices of rice making life harder for the poor

THE food ministry has clearly a lot to answer for, its failure to control prices of food, especially rice, being prominent among them. To be fair, it is neither the only ministry struggling to contain soaring prices, nor is it to blame for the ongoing economic crisis caused by a combination of bad policies, governance failures, and market influences from beyond, which created the domino effect. But it does have the vital responsibility of making sure food is available at affordable prices, by doing whatever necessary, something it has miserably failed to do.

It has neither enough manpower nor, apparently, enough willpower to launch effective drives against illegal hoarding of rice and paddy across the country, and go after the syndicates of traders responsible for the current situation. As a result, we witnessed how the prices of rice increased twice in just four days last week. On Friday, our correspondents in several districts found that the lowest price of any variety of rice was Tk 52. Over the last one week, the prices of both coarse and fine rice varieties rose by Tk 5 to Tk 10 per kg in retail markets. A kilogram of coarse rice like Swarna is being sold at Tk 52 to Tk 54. The situation is almost similar for the fine rice varieties, with Miniket selling at Tk 70 and Nazirshail at Tk 90-95 per kg.

As the government scrambles to stop big rice millers and wholesalers from stockpiling rice/paddy or randomly increasing prices, the usual blame game has, once again, been afoot. No one is willing to take responsibility. There is no reliable mechanism to establish culpability either. This only delays or derails action. And it's really unfortunate because you would expect that the government, having many businessmen-turned-MPs in the policy circle, would by now be able to see through the machinations of traders and make effective interventions. But after every instance of price manipulation, they seem to start from the scratch, taking baby steps when they should be taking giant steps.

As a result, despite ongoing efforts, dishonest businessmen continue to find a way to destabilise the market. This is particularly worrying ahead of the Aman harvest season of November-December, with the low yield of Boro, low rice imports despite last month's reduction in import duty, and increased prices of urea fertiliser all coming into play. We urge the authorities to take firm steps to bring down the prices of rice and punish corrupt traders. They must see the problem as a consequence of both governance and policy failures, including factors like consecutive hikes in prices of fuel, fertilisers and utilities, and fashion their response accordingly. Only then can they alleviate the suffering of ordinary consumers.

We must take better care of elderly citizens

They need proper healthcare, other facilities to live with dignity

THE world is experiencing an increase in the number of elderly people, and Bangladesh is no exception. According to the country's Population and Housing Census 2022, over 1.53 crore people now are over 60 years of age – or around 9.28 percent of the total population. In the 2011 census, this group constituted 7.48 percent of the population. Needless to say, the rise in their number is good news, as it means that our average life expectancy has increased. But we must not also underestimate the challenges that the country faces in providing this huge population with the care they need to live healthy and with dignity.

Currently, Bangladesh lacks a specialised healthcare system to support its growing number of elderly citizens. Since this group is not generally engaged in any income-generating activities, it is often difficult for them to get the healthcare they need. Many mid- and low-income families struggle to bear the high medical expenses of their elderly relatives in the absence of any proper healthcare policy by the state. Unfortunately, there are not many facilities in the country where the elderly can stay and get some sort of treatment. Currently, the country has only six old-age homes, under the social welfare ministry, and some shelter homes run by charities. While the government gives an allowance to senior citizens under its social protection schemes, the amount is very little compared to their needs, nor is it easily accessible to everyone.

Unless these issues are addressed with priority, our growing elderly population may face a grim future. According to the United Nations Population Fund, 3.6 crore people in Bangladesh will be aged 60 and above by 2050. This means that if we do not undertake proper policies and initiatives to care for our elderly right now, it will be more difficult for us to face the challenges in the future.

The government needs to immediately take some major policy decisions to cater to the needs of this population; it must also include the issue into its development strategy. While it must prioritise building supporting facilities for the senior citizens at the upazila level and in all major cities, special attention needs to be given to develop a healthcare policy under which they can get treatment for free, or at least on a priority basis. Equally importantly, we need to integrate our elderly population into various processes at social, community and administrative levels, in advisory roles preferably, so that they can contribute meaningfully to our society even after retiring from an active life.

Our own resources can help us get over the energy crisis



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THE present energy and power crises that Bangladesh faces did not befall us all of a sudden. It has been predicted for quite some time as energy experts in the country noticed a gradual fall in local gas production levels. Gas being the main energy source in the country, a decline in gas production led the government to import liquefied natural gas (LNG) in a bid to offset the supply shortfall. But that actually backfired because of the high price of LNG getting even higher, thanks to the Russia-Ukraine war that broke out in late February. Policymakers in Bangladesh have now come to realise that a major mistake was made by not carrying out large-scale gas exploration in

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the country over the last 20 years, which could have replenished the consumed gas as the years went by. But the realisation came too late, and not before the country once again embraced episodes of load-shedding soon after the well-publicised "electricity for all" declaration.

But why is there not enough exploration to meet the gas shortfall? Bangladesh's success ratio is 3.5:1, meaning we get one commercial gas discovery if we drill three and a half wells on an average. This success ratio is well above the world average. The last three wells drilled in Bangladesh led to one successful discovery (Zakiganj),



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meaning that the success ratio remains valid till date. On the contrary, the exploration rate in Bangladesh is too low. In the last 22 years, Bangladesh has drilled 28 exploration wells, meaning 1.2 exploration wells were drilled per year on average. This is too low a rate of exploration by any standard for a proven hydrocarbon basin. Bangladesh has an area of over 147,000 sq km and has drilled 98 exploratory gas wells so far. In comparison, the state of Tripura in India (adjacent to Bangladesh), which has an area of 10,000 sq km, has drilled 160 exploratory wells.

Gas exploration and reserves issues are often discussed and argued upon in a funny manner in Bangladesh. In 1998, the US-based Occidental Petroleum Corporation discovered a large gas field named Bibiyana in Sylhet. The company came up with a proposal for the government to export the gas produced in Bibiyana to India, apparently for a quick profit recovery. A group of people with vested interests launched a campaign to facilitate gas export. As part of the campaign, they floated a theory that Bangladesh was floating on gas. But ultimately the whole issue was put to rest by a pointed statement from the then Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, in a meeting with the visiting US President Bill Clinton, that Bangladesh would not export gas without keeping 50 years of reserve for its own use. This was a bold move which eventually buried the gas export syndrome for good in

may not be sustainably procured from a volatile international market – at least at present, as well as in the near future because of the sky-high prices. The Russia-Ukraine war has made the situation worse mainly because of the Russian gas embargo by European countries who are entering the LNG market. So the demand for LNG in the international market will increase – as will the price.

What is the size of "yet to find" (i.e. undiscovered) gas resources in Bangladesh? International and national geoscience communities are both in agreement that the Bengal delta (Bangladesh), like the other delta basins in the world, is inherently gas-rich. There have been several assessments by international geoscience agencies as to how much undiscovered gas still remains under the ground. One of these is the United States Geological Survey (USGS)-Petrobangla joint assessment, which was released in 2001. It concluded that the undiscovered gas resource in Bangladesh is 32.5 trillion cubic feet (Tcf) in 50 percent probability. This study did not include the potential gas reserves in the deep sea area.

Lately, certain senior members of the energy sector in the government have been suggesting that the USGS did not apply proper methodology and inflated the numbers while assessing the undiscovered gas probability of Bangladesh. But they did not mention any specific fault or weakness of

the methodology discussed in the report. They tried to relate the USGS with those groups who initiated the "floating on gas" theory apparently to facilitate gas export. But the fact we all know is that it was the profit-driven Occidental oil company who was behind the campaign.

The USGS is a non-profit scientific organisation whose methodology of research is accepted all over the world. The USGS applies this methodology to periodically assess undiscovered gas in the US as well as in other countries. It defines the total petroleum system (TPS) of an assessed area using the geological and geophysical data. In Bangladesh's assessment, the database was provided by Petrobangla and the work was done by a joint team of the USGS and Petrobangla.

In 2001, the Norwegian Petroleum Directorate (NPD), jointly with the Hydrocarbon Unit (HCU) of Bangladesh's energy ministry, made another assessment and concluded that the undiscovered gas in Bangladesh amounted to 42 Tcf in 50 percent probability. NDP is a state-run oil and gas company in Norway. A third assessment, done as late as in 2018 by a European agency named Ramboll, suggested that the undiscovered gas resource of Bangladesh was as much as 34 Tcf, a significant volume that could almost double Bangladesh's current gas production level if all geological areas were explored and developed properly.

How good is the offshore gas prospect? To say the least, references may be made, for example, to one presentation at the SEAPEX Conference in Singapore in 2019 by a group of geoscientists from an oil company working in Bangladesh. The presentation, based on the 2D and 3D seismic surveys in Bangladesh offshore block SS II, pointed out that this block, located 60km northwest of the multi-TCF Shwe gas project (offshore discovery in Myanmar) occupies the same play (meaning gas accumulation pattern) fairway trend and has genetically similar play types and drillable structures.

It is clear from the discussion above that all the studies done jointly or singularly by international and national agencies on the undiscovered gas repositories are in agreement that Bangladesh still has a significant amount of undiscovered gas under the ground. The notion that the country has exhausted its gas resources has no scientific basis. Bangladesh still has high hopes of coming out of the present energy crisis by engaging in extensive exploration to find the yet to find gas resources. In this case, science should dictate the course of action rather than politics.

What happens in the US, does not stay in the US

Restricted abortion rights will impact the whole world, including Bangladesh



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WHEN the Democratic Party came into power in early 2021 after the last US elections, feminists and human rights activists all around the world followed the countdown till the very last minutes, anticipating what changes could occur next. Not surprisingly, very early on in his role as President, Biden rescinded the "Global Gag Rule" – a devastating anti-abortion policy that undermined the health and rights of women around the world. The rule had denied funding for foreign organisations and NGOs/INGOs providing abortion information or services. It also meant that development organisations using funding from USAID would no longer be able to carry out abortion-related work, even with funding from other donors, if they wanted to continue receiving funding from the US. The withdrawal of the Global Gag Rule was a light of hope for civil society organisations around the world.

In 2011 alone, the United States provided over USD 96 million to support the Covid response in Bangladesh. While the US has helped fund "public health" in Bangladesh for the last five decades, abortion rights has not fallen under this. And now the overturning of Roe v Wade has taken us backwards, not just in the US but around the world, and curtailed the progress that had been made on women's rights and abortion access globally.

You might think the overturning of Roe v Wade has not made much difference in the context of Bangladesh, but a deep dive into the matter tells us differently. At a recent round-table, Marcia Soumokil, the Indonesia country director at Ipas, an international NGO that works to increase access to safe abortions and contraception, said, "The overturning of Roe v Wade could overturn legislation across the world as well. When access to abortion is severely restricted in the US, it will send signals to the rest of the world governments,

in Indonesia and other countries, that abortion rights are not part of human rights."

"Conservative factions in society and government will interpret this change as a declaration that government does not oblige to protect abortion rights," she added. And so, in the current situation, not only will funding opportunities for abortion rights from the US become a diminishing possibility, stigma and barriers to safe abortion access will also be aggravated worldwide.

Under Bangladesh's penal code of 1860, induced abortion is illegal except to save a woman's life. Menstrual regulation (MR), however, has been part of Bangladesh's national family planning program since 1979. Despite the availability of MR services, many women resort to underground (and unsafe) abortions because of stigma and lack of availability of information/resources. According to the Center for Health and Population Research at ICDDR,B, the incidence of abortion was 35 times higher for unmarried women in Bangladesh than for married adolescents. Additionally, there is a huge data gap, especially with regard to younger women getting abortions, so how big a problem access to safe abortion is remains largely underrepresented.

In 2020, a high court ruling asked why the abortion related sections in the Penal Code of Bangladesh should not be declared void as it is

contradictory with the fundamental rights guaranteed in Bangladesh's Constitution. At present, if rape victims become pregnant, they are unable to abort the unwanted foetus, and since 2020, things have not moved in this regard.

Although we tend to focus on the positives, like our achievements in bringing down fertility rates and maternal mortality, the fact remains that due to a number of circumstances, women will get abortions. And unsafe routes to abortion results in several complex problems, including endangering the life of both the woman and the child, suicide, and negative impacts on mental health.

Needless to say, marginalised groups such as young women, rural women, women with disabilities and queer people are doubly and triply affected by such issues. To say that Roe v Wade does not affect us is simply untrue. Asking "if we have the option of MR, why do we need abortion rights?" may help us escape from reality for a while, but it will not help strengthen the fight for reproductive health and justice in the long run. We must fight head on – socially, legally and individually to get past the stigma and oppression that limit women's bodily autonomy, agency and rights, and we must hold decision-makers accountable. As feminists and activists, we should bring back the movement of "My body, my rights," and use data-driven advocacy to do so.