

## A welcome move

### OMS rice sale at subsidised prices will bring some relief to the poor

WE welcome the government move to sell rice at reduced prices under its Open Market Sale (OMS) and Food Friendly Programme (FFP) schemes across the country. As part of the move, which kicked off on September 1, 7.65 lakh tonnes of subsidised rice will be sold to more than 1.5 crore people over the next three months. Of them, one crore will get rice at Tk 30 a kg under OMS, and 50 lakh special cardholders at Tk 15 a kg under FFP.

Till August 30, the government reportedly had stocks of 17.5 lakh tonnes of rice and 1.4 lakh tonnes of wheat. That will change after the cabinet approved the import of five lakh tonnes of wheat from Russia and 3.3 lakh tonnes of rice from Vietnam and India at a total cost of Tk 3,590 crore. Another two lakh tonnes of rice will be added from Myanmar. Besides, the sale of oil, sugar, onion and lentil at the OMS centres will continue as usual. The injection of low-cost rice will give a much-needed if temporary breathing space to the poor, who have been struggling with soaring prices over the last few months. The government should now ensure regular supply of staples as well as unhindered access to them.

However, the sale of subsidised rice – at nearly half the price at the retail markets – brings out the contrast for the vast majority of fixed-income families who do not, or cannot, visit OMS centres. What will happen to them? According to the Trading Corporation of Bangladesh (TCB), fine rice was sold at Tk 75 per kg on Wednesday, semi-coarse rice at Tk 60 a kg and coarse rice at Tk 56 a kg. A week ago, the prices were about Tk 2-5 higher. This is a positive trend, and the government will hope that replenishing of stocks under G2G arrangements and reducing of rice import duty – from 25 percent to 15.25 percent – will soon stabilise prices. It has recently decided to fix prices of rice, among nine commodities, within 15 days. However, it is hard to predict how stable and consumer-friendly that will be, given the impunity enjoyed by dishonest traders.

Even if we think government-fixed prices will have the desired effect without leading to a supply crunch, rice represents only a part of the suffering of low- and fixed-income groups, as they face a cost-of-living crisis with sky-high prices of nearly all essentials. We repeatedly come across accounts of people describing their ordeal of being forced to forgo essential food items and services. They need relief not just in the prices of rice, but all other essentials as well.

So while we appreciate the recent initiatives of the authorities, we urge them to critically examine and address the reasons behind the volatility of the market. Enough justifications have already been given. We need results now.

## No sign of ‘zero tolerance’ for corruption

### Authorities must address the grim findings of TIB survey

THE government is often seen to boast of its zero tolerance to corruption. But as the latest Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) survey on corruption in service sectors shows, an extremely high level of tolerance is being shown to corruption by state officials. Out of the 15,454 homes surveyed by the TIB, about 71 percent said they had to endure corruption while trying to get public services last year. Corruption means bribery, extortion, embezzlement, deception, negligence of duty, nepotism, etc – for which, according to the TIB, they had to pay an estimated Tk 10,830 crore in bribes, which is 5.9 percent of the revised budget of FY 2020-2021. These practices were found rampant in 22 service sectors that are considered to be “riddled with petty corruption.”

In other words, the TIB report put a number on the suffering of citizens who have to cross a lot of invisible hurdles before they can get a service from public officials, whose salaries are paid from their taxes. At least 70.5 percent of households reported having to deal with graft when getting passport-related services, while 68.3 percent had to face the same when getting the services of BRTA. Ironically, 74.4 percent of respondents had to face corruption when seeking the services of law enforcement agencies. If such lawlessness is demonstrated by those tasked with enforcing the law of the land, it proves how embedded corruption has become in our system. And the authorities are clearly in no rush to hold these corrupt officials to account, either.

From the look of things, there seems to be a lot of institutional tolerance for corruption, as there is a lot of barriers to preventing it or punishing corrupt officers. For example, section 41(I) of the Public Service Act 2018 requires law enforcers to get prior approval from the government or relevant agencies to detain government officials in criminal cases. The High Court recently declared this provision illegal, but the verdict has been stayed by the Supreme Court till October 23, meaning that the legal barrier to prosecuting state officials for crimes, including corruption, will continue to be in a place for some more time.

As for the TIB report, it has been found that citizens were less likely to face demands for bribes when seeking digitalised public services. While it is recommended that all public sectors utilise digitalisation wherever possible to make things easier and faster for citizens, this is no answer to corruption. Corrupt officials have shown considerable ingenuity in finding new methods of continuing their practice. Therefore, the Anti-Corruption Commission must be allowed to play a leading role in finding and prosecuting them. We urge the higher authorities to match their zero-tolerance commitment with stern action to combat corruption and establish accountability in all service sectors.

# Next Election: A Replay of Old Politics?



## STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

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SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN

THE heavy odds that the main opposition party is facing in its attempt to carve out a political space, and exercise its democratic rights, is apparent from the way its political programmes are being foiled by the ruling party cadres. It is difficult to believe that these are being done without the knowledge or consent of Awami League high-ups. What we see happening on the streets is making a mockery of our democracy – despite the prime minister saying that the opposition should be allowed to take to the streets without harassment. It casts doubts on the next parliamentary election.

But one who is familiar with our politics and remembers the Awami League's strategy to foil BNP's political programmes would notice a continuity in its plan vis-a-vis the BNP. Recall the times in 2017, during the Awami League's third tenure in power, how BNP's call for a rally in Dhaka in November was foiled by the ruling party.

The police administration stopped traffic on the highways leading to Dhaka from various districts. Public transports went off the road, being owned and controlled by a syndicate composed of ruling party leaders or their allies. Travellers had to endure indescribable hardships, being stranded on the highway. All these to ensure that BNP supporters could not reach Dhaka on the day of the rally. Newspapers had carried vivid reports of how an agency that is meant to serve the people, irrespective of party affiliations, was made an instrument for suppressing democracy and violating constitutional rights of the citizens.

All manner of excuses were offered by the police, the prime one being the need to search all incoming traffic for the sake of security. Dhaka residents felt the brunt, too, since public vehicles were far and few between that day. The blame for the situation was put, predictably, on the transport workers, but the most hilarious of the comments was made by the transport minister, who, when asked by journalists on November 12, 2017 about the BNP's allegations that the police were acting at the behest of the government, very cynically said, “This must be investigated to see who is



The violent attacks on BNP rallies in all parts of the country are not only reminiscent of the past, but they also forebode an uncertain political future.

PHOTO: STAR

obstructing them. The BNP does tend to get in its own way.”

The ruling party has been acting in the same vein since 2010 when dealing with the BNP. And we have been continually commenting on the gradual shrinking of space for opposition politics. But it is not only opposition parties. Any demonstration, criticism, comments have been dealt with an iron fist. One has not forgotten the way people, demonstrating for road safety, were mauled by the police who were augmented by the ruling party men. This, surprisingly and unfortunately, has become a recurring phenomenon when it comes to tackling anti-government rallies.

So far, the year 2022 has been no different. What is outrageous and unacceptable is the police turning a blind eye and, in some cases, actively participating in perpetrating violence on the opposition party members. The violent attacks on BNP rallies in all parts of the country are not only reminiscent of the past, but they also forebode an uncertain political future – the likelihood of perpetuation of a regime strutted, again, by questionable

phenomenon – have received quick and firm riposte from the administration.

A senior police official in Barguna district was promptly posted out, an inquiry commission was instituted and a pacification meeting was held with central BCL to assuage their feelings for the “same side” action. Police baton-charged to disperse two warring factions of the Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) on August 15, who at one point vandalised a police vehicle too. Conversely, note the manner of police behaviour when it comes to BNP or its affiliated organisations. Do we need a better graphic illustration of a politicised police? How does one expect a level playing field when the election time comes closer and closer?

It is unfortunate how violence and confrontation have become indices of determining the political credentials of a party. “Control of the streets” has become the be all and end all of a political programme. And a new dangerous pattern has emerged where houses and businesses of BNP members are being targeted by Awami League cadres.

we tend to forget that the two have become synonymous.

We are glad that the Awami League is reminding us of the past arson attacks; they have not forgotten about it, and neither have we. But we would like to know the disposal of cases against those arrested for allegedly carrying out arson on buses in 2014. How many of those arrested were actually BNP and opposition members? What has become of the charges against them? Reportedly, not all of those arrested for involvement in the said attacks belong to the opposition parties.

It is clear that a policy of inculcating fear in the opposition is being applied. It is also apparent, from what has transpired in the last fortnight, that any attempt to exercise political rights, and to seek space, will be curbed by force. It appears that the order of things, leading up to the elections and up to election day, would be dictated by the ruling party, and the democratic institutions, including the Election Commission, would be able to do little except pretending to do something. A gloomy note, but that is the reality.

# Time for Bangladesh to scale up investment in climate diplomacy



## POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

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SALEEMUL HUQ

AS the world is currently in the era of loss and damage from human-induced climate change, the need for Bangladesh to invest in different aspects of the issue at the global level has also entered a new era which will need significant investment in enhancing our capacities for climate diplomacy in different platforms.

Let's start with the annual Conferences of Parties (COPs) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), where the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MOEFCC) has always taken the lead to represent the Government of Bangladesh. The official Bangladesh delegation is usually led by the environment minister for the high-level part of the COP and the secretary for the technical part of the event. As the individuals holding those positions change over time, they need support from individual negotiators who have long experience in the COP process, since it is quite complicated and difficult for newcomers to understand quickly.

Fortunately, Bangladesh has several experienced negotiators in

the Department of Environment (DoE) who don't get transferred out. However, it is time for the DoE to invest in building the capacity of the next-generation negotiators for the future climate conferences. At the same time, the government benefits from a group of non-government experts who have been following different agendas for many years and can provide expert advice to the official delegates. However, these experts are also growing old, and a new generation of experts is needed.

There are, nowadays, many different parallel activities during the COPs involving various coalitions of actors – some of which see government ministers and officials attending – as well as other networks for civil society, youth, private sector, scientists and many other such groups.

Over the last few years, Bangladesh has participated in many such meetings. However, one thing that is needed is for all the people going to the COPs, both from the government and non-government sectors, to find a way to share their respective activities to ensure that all Bangladeshis at a COP are speaking with a united voice.

One good way in which this has been done at the last two COPs was having the Bangladesh pavilion, which was used as a meeting venue to showcase activities by both government and non-governmental actors from Bangladesh. This has proven to be quite effective and should be repeated at every COP going forward.

The second main point that we now need to recognise is that climate change as a global issue is no longer confined to only once-a-year gathering; rather, it is an issue that is having impacts and actions every single day somewhere in the world. Thus, climate diplomacy must become integrated into the training of every batch of foreign service officers so that they are aware of climate change issues and can speak about them wherever they may be posted. In fact, as our diplomats get posted to different countries, they are increasingly being asked to talk about how Bangladesh is tackling climate change, given our reputation as a climate champion. This is indeed an asset for “Brand Bangladesh,” in which we should invest as much as possible.

A third group of actors who have a global role to play on the topic of climate change are our scientists and researchers. Bangladesh has already acquired a well-deserved reputation as a global leader on adaptation to climate change, but we cannot rest on our laurels – we need to continue to invest in further research as well as share our research outputs with the rest of the world. In particular, there is a tremendous potential for Bangladesh to promote its scientific expertise in adaptation to climate change with

other vulnerable developing countries.

Another domain for us to build our global diplomacy skills in is with respect to global climate finance, which is a growing opportunity that Bangladesh has not really been able to access at scale, as our finance sector lacks the skills to engage on this topic at the global level. This should be a high priority for investment in capacity-building of the public as well as private financial actors. This particular investment will have the greatest short-term returns for Bangladesh if we are able to access not just a few hundred million dollars a year, but billions if we learn to play the climate finance game well.

Finally, the best long-term investment is in our young girls and boys to make them our champions both for tackling climate change at home and by linking up with youth groups around the world – for example, through the Fridays for Future movement of school students. In particular, the global youth groups need to campaign on the issue to address losses and damages from human-induced climate change as the global leaders are failing to do so adequately.

To conclude, as the impacts of human-induced climate change become evident around the world every single day, and as this global problem will only get worse with time, Bangladesh has to invest in building its global climate diplomacy capacities while also tackling climate change at home. We have the potential to be a global leader in climate diplomacy if we make the right investments now.