

PM's visit to India

Energy cooperation, connectivity and trade likely to be central focus of talks

AGAINST the backdrop of global instability pushing up prices of fuel and commodities, and growing economic pressures at home, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's upcoming visit to India at the invitation of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi is of special significance. In recent years, diplomatic ties between the two countries have only grown stronger, especially after the resolution of major disputes over land and maritime boundaries. This time around, energy, trade, connectivity, water-sharing and security are likely to be central topics of discussion.

Given that rising energy prices in the country is having a knock-on effect on the cost of living and creating a great deal of economic insecurity, we hope the possibilities of energy cooperation will be of central importance on this four day visit. Since India has been buying crude oil from Russia at discounted prices, can there be any possibilities of the two countries exploring an agreement on the import of fuel oil from India to ease the current energy crisis in Bangladesh?

There are a number of crucial topics of discussion in terms of trade and connectivity that will come up during the PM's trip as well, such as ensuring an unhampered supply of foodstuff like wheat, onion, pulses and spices to Bangladesh, withdrawing the anti-dumping duty imposed on exports of jute products from Bangladesh to India since 2017, and speeding up rail, road and waterway connectivity projects. Agreements on these issues will ultimately benefit both countries, since India-Bangladesh bilateral trade was worth over USD 14 billion last year, and Bangladesh is an important part of India's Look East Policy. In this regard, any potential deal must be firmly rooted in reciprocity. Given that Bangladesh's share of export to India is worth close to USD 2 billion, any deal that improves connectivity and lowers the cost of trade needs to be fully reciprocal for us to be able to reap its benefits.

It is also promising that, after a gap of 12 years, the Joint Rivers Commission meeting held on August 25 has led to progress on water-sharing issues, and the text of the MoU on Interim Water Sharing of Kushiyara river has been finalised. While we look forward to this, and other water-sharing agreements, being signed during this trip, we cannot help but note that no such progress has been made in terms of discussions on Teesta. However, despite certain issues that are yet to be dealt with, we are hopeful that the PM will have a fruitful visit and will continue to build on the close and friendly relations between the two countries, to the benefit of both.

Govt support for Aman production

Provide farmers with diesel and fertilisers at subsidised rates

WE are concerned to learn that the production of Aman paddy – the second biggest crop after Boro in the country – may be hampered this year due to delayed planting of seedlings. Reportedly, farmers planted 2.30 lakh less seedlings this season compared to the same three-month period last year. The main reasons for the delay are the unusual temperatures and rainfall patterns of this year, as well as increased fuel costs for irrigation.

Aman is a rain-fed crop that requires sufficient rain before the seedlings can be planted. But in the past three months, the average rainfall has been unusually low, with as little as 243mm of rain in August – the lowest since 1989. Coupled with the hike in fuel prices pushing up costs of irrigation, as well as the fear of flooding that made farmers wait for the right time to plant, the end result has been that farmers have fallen behind the planting target.

According to the Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE), farmers have planted seedlings on 48.90 lakh hectares this year, against the target of planting on 56.20 lakh hectares of land. This is far behind the cultivation target achieved in the previous year. Although farmers now have a second option to plant a late variety of Aman, this reportedly has a lower yield in comparison to the main variety. Since Boro and Aus productions were also hampered this year due to severe flooding, an insufficient harvest of Aman will raise serious concerns about grain shortage in the coming days. At a time when the people are already struggling to cope with the increasing costs of living, food grain shortages could have terrible impacts on food security, especially in the most marginalised populations.

Since the late variety of Aman can be planted till mid-September, the government must immediately ensure there is no scarcity of seedlings for farmers. The DAE should encourage more farmers, especially in flood-affected areas, to plant the late variety. The government must also ensure that farmers have access to uninterrupted power supply for irrigation. Equally importantly, it needs to provide them with diesel and fertiliser at subsidised prices to relieve their burden of increased production costs. We can only expect a better harvest of Aman if all the necessary support is provided to our farmers. And in the long run, the authorities need to come up with proper strategies and policies to support farmers and ensure stable crop production cycles that are rooted in the understanding that what we are now witnessing are not erratic weather patterns, but the very real impacts of climate change.

Tea workers' strike ends. What's next?



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PHILIP GAIN

DURING an unprecedented strike between August 9 and 27, the tea workers in northeastern Bangladesh demanded a cash pay of Tk 300 per day. The tea garden owners agreed to raise the wage to Tk 145 per day, which enraged the workers. In defiance of the owners' decision, government officials and agencies (DCs, Department of Labour and police) and their own leaders, the tea workers continued their strike till August 27.

They began to cool down when Environment Minister Md Shahab Uddin, who is an MP from Moulvibazar-1 constituency, visited a blockade on the Moulvibazar-Barlekha regional highway on August 24 and assured the protesting tea workers that their wage issue would be settled

What we should not forget is that these workers and their communities have remained tied to the tea gardens for five generations. They don't own the land that they till and live on. The houses they live in are not theirs, either. There are issues other than wages they can raise, leading to a bigger movement.

soon. Responding to the workers' firm position that they would not go back to work until their demand for Tk 300 in daily wage was met, the minister said, "The prime minister will talk to you on [the] wage issue and make a decision. The matter will be solved in three days."

Three days later, on August 27, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina sat with the tea garden owners' apex body, Bangladesh Tea Association (BTA), and fixed the daily cash wage at Tk 170. The tea workers wanted the PM to interfere and promised to accept what she would decide for them.

Although what they had demanded originally was more than what they got, never before in history have these tea workers seen an increase of Tk 50 at one go. In an agreement between the BTA and Bangladesh Cha Sramik



Tea garden workers show three fingers in tune to their demand for Tk 300 in cash wage.

PHOTO: PHILIP GAIN

Union (BCSU), the lone trade union and combined bargaining agent of tea workers, the increase was Tk 18 for 2019 and 2020 – the maximum till then.

The workers have gone back to work now with hopes that their expectation for just wages would be met in the future. All parties, including the workers' union and the owners' association, now have breathing space and time to build faith in each other.

However, there are other burning issues to be discussed at length and understood so that the workers do not have to resort to such strikes again. The PM had to interfere when the Minimum Wage Board and the negotiation between BTA and BCSU failed completely. She has understandably acted upon a special power given to the government by Section 140(A) of the Labour Act to bring an end to the strike.

However, the calculation of wages, including the plucking bonus, overtime payment for work in the field and factories, and fringe benefits, should be done taking the labour law into consideration. The sub-section 45 of Section 2 of the Labour Act does not allow inclusion of most of the facilities/items that the owners monetise in their calculations of what they give to the workers in addition to the cash wage. In a press conference on August 30, BTA leaders claimed that, after the increase in wages, what they would now give to a tea worker would be nearly Tk 540 per day! But such calculations are absurd.

of Assam has also published the cash component of wages paid in kind and the rate of compensatory benefits per day, which stand at Rs 104. Thus, the composite wages for workers per day in Brahmaputra Valley are Rs 336 and Rs 314. I mention the situation of wages in Assam because of the similarity between Assam and Bangladesh.

BTA's calculation of what a worker gets comes as a big surprise to workers and their union. According to the BTA, 90 percent of the workers work in the field planting tea, taking care of the plantations, and plucking tea leaves. While those working in the field will now get Tk 170 in daily cash pay, those working in the factory (10 percent of the workers) will get little more. Then, the owners have added 17 other components which are paid in cash and kind. BTA has not consulted the workers' union at all in this calculation of wages. Many of the components have been included in violation of the labour law. Those that merit as cash components paid in kind are also overestimates.

"I reject the owners' calculation of wages," says Rambhajan Kairi, executive advisor of BCSU and a member of the Minimum Wage Board to represent tea workers. Kairi suggests that the owners should sit with BCSU to jointly calculate the cash component of the wages paid in kind. "What the owners have done so far is just arbitrary," he asserts. "In Assam, the plucking bonus and overtime are not added to wages."

Advocate AKM Nasim, country

programme director of Solidarity Centre, which works for workers' rights, has argued in support of Rambhajan Kairi. "Tea garden owners presented a misleading calculation of cash wages and the in-kind services they provided to tea workers when the daily cash wage was Tk 120. The employers' calculation confuses us when they include plucking bonuses, festival bonuses, medical and annual leave benefits and provident fund's administrative expenses, among others, within the definition of wages," Nasim said. "The Labour Act does not allow the owners to add these as 'basic wage.'"

Now that the tea workers have gone back to work, they will start getting a daily cash wage of Tk 170, which was previously Tk 120. This means the new wage structure would have gone into effect from January 2021. So, from then to date (end of August 2022) there are 20 months for which a worker who has worked all work days during this period will get an arrear of around Tk 30,000 at a simplified calculation (Tk 50x30x20). A post-factum agreement (effective from January 2021 to December 2022) will now be signed between BTA and BCSU, as it happened in the past to facilitate the payment of arrears in instalments.

One concern is if 40,000 casual tea workers will get the arrears or not. According to media reports quoting the secretary of BTA, only the registered workers will get the arrears. The casual workers have been getting the same cash wages for the last two agreement periods (four years) as the registered workers. They do not get equal fringe benefits, however. "Had the agreement been signed in time, the casual workers would get the increased wages," argues Rambhajan Kairi. "Therefore, the practice of paying arrears to the casual workers should start from now on."

What we have witnessed in August begins a new era of protest in the tea gardens. The tea workers have demonstrated the strength of their united voice. They have gone back to work with their key demand only partially fulfilled. Yet, it is seen as a victory of the tea workers' quiet revolt.

What we should not forget is that these workers and their communities have remained tied to the tea gardens for five generations. They don't own the land that they till and live on. The houses they live in are not theirs, either. There are issues other than wages they can raise, leading to a bigger movement. For now, we would expect that negotiations and an agreement between the BCSU and BTA are not stalled like in the past, after the current two-year agreement period ends in December 2022. A timely agreement and reasonable increase in wages will bring lasting peace in the tea gardens.

Climate justice for the urban poor

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SUDIPTO MUKERJEE and ROBERT CHATTERTON-DICKSON

THE northeast of Bangladesh has been battling its worst flooding in over a century. Rising waters washed away homes, livelihoods, farmlands, roads, and critical infrastructure, leaving around 7.2 million people in the Sylhet region severely impacted. Despite evacuation and relief efforts, many remained cut off for protracted periods from rescue and relief.

Women and girls were particularly vulnerable, and food insecurity and risks of waterborne diseases still remain high. These floods occurred at a time when the southeast, the Chittagong Hill Tracts, and many areas of the Barind tract were suffering from the effects of droughts.

These events are a grim reminder that climate change is an existential threat across Bangladesh. Its far-reaching consequences are increasing the frequency, intensity, and duration of disasters, putting at risk years of hard-earned economic, social, and human development progress made by the country.

Rural-to-urban migration for greater economic and social security is becoming inevitable, and climate stresses and shocks will only increase this trend, especially from climate "hotspots" across vulnerable areas in Bangladesh. Currently, Dhaka alone receives about 400,000 migrants annually, significantly contributing to the city's increasing population of

slum dwellers – a population group which, despite having migrated under distress, continues to face climate vulnerabilities such as flooding and landslides while having limited access to basic services such as health, education, and nutrition.

The switch from farm to daily wage labour work is challenging and comes with limited protection for rights and weak social protection. Moreover, urban centres are also at high risk from sea-level rise, storm surge impacts, waterlogging, and flooding.

How can Bangladesh address the interrelated challenges around climate change, migration, and urbanisation, and turn it into an opportunity for inclusive development?

We can see the possibilities already in 19 cities across Bangladesh. They are part of a programme that aims to develop urban resilience against natural hazards which would otherwise perpetuate urban poverty. The Livelihoods Improvement of the Urban Poor Communities (LIUPCP) is a product of the largest global partnership between UNDP and the Governments of the United Kingdom and Bangladesh. It recognises that, despite adaptation in rural areas, climate change will lead to large-scale displacements. Hence, it is committed to ensuring the building of resilience in cities to enable them to absorb the unavoidable migration in dignified ways.

LIUPCP exemplifies a holistic model that "fills the gap" to improve the overall wellbeing and climate resilience of the most vulnerable people in urban environments.

The significant investments in data and analytics by the programme is helping make multidimensional poverty much more visible, and in turn, ensuring better planning and programming for the urban poor by the government and wider development partners. The programme is a unique example of locally-led adaptation, led by municipalities and city corporations.

Crucially, LIUPCP is helping transform the role of women by changing their status from beneficiaries to agents of change. It is carrying out local level leadership-building in their communities, positively changing gender norms and dynamics. Women from the settlements are leading in urban climate adaptation by investing in their community infrastructure. For example, they are organising themselves to demand, design, and implement small to medium scale infrastructure including underground drainage networks, raised walking platforms, evacuation bridges, access roads, flood-proofed walls, and water and sanitation facilities. Nationwide, women have thus far had a say in developing more than 8,233 sanitation facilities and 12,970 other infrastructure facilities, with close to a million women and men reaping the benefits.

Urbanisation is inevitable in Bangladesh, but without it being absorptive, adaptive, and inclusive, there is a heightened risk of prolonged

challenges, including insecurities and social conflict.

There is significant scope to expand our work around sustainable development from our learnings, and we must recognise the need for people to be equipped with portable skills suited to relevant urban livelihoods before they are displaced, potentially through the appropriate skilling of vulnerable youth at climate hotspots. Similar initiatives for developing skills in line with alternative (off-farm) opportunities resilient to climate change will also be helpful in rural Bangladesh, when considering those without the liberty to migrate as an adaptive measure. Vocational and technical education is critical to help prevent negative coping strategies such as crime, commercial sex trade, forced migration for modern slavery, and the expansion of slums.

As Bangladesh fights the increasing effects of climate change, including in its cities, early investments will help safeguard the wellbeing and human security of climate-affected urban residents. LIUPCP's achievements of building urban resilience can serve as a model for replication to reduce inequalities. Further attention should be given to the complexities around internal climate migration in line with the Bangladesh government's Perspective Plan for 2041 that recognises this challenge. As committed long term partners of Bangladesh, the UK government and UNDP will continue their support to ensure no one is left behind on the country's journey toward achieving Agenda 2030.