

Punish market manipulators

Those who artificially raised prices did the country a great disservice

Our suspicion that some unscrupulous traders have been taking advantage to unjustifiably raise prices using the excuse of a global price hike, and despite prices of certain commodities going down internationally, has been confirmed by the findings of one of our intelligence agencies. The investigation, which studied the price movement of commodities in local and international markets over a 12-month period from August last year, found that the price increases in the local market were disproportionate to their rise abroad. In fact, in many cases, when global prices dropped, the opposite ended up happening in our domestic market.

Take, for example, the price of pulses which, despite dropping 14 percent in the global market, rose by 29.39 percent domestically. And also onions, the price of which increased by nine percent despite it becoming 28 percent cheaper in the global market. Sugar price saw a similar trend, declining by 11 percent globally, but increasing by 15 percent at home.

Though we have seen such price manipulations before, and perhaps all too regularly, what is even more unconscionable this time is that it took place at a time of a national crisis, and also when the majority of people had barely managed to recover from the damaging effects of a pandemic. The double whammy of legitimate economic difficulties due to a war abroad coupled with price manipulation at home has nearly broken the back of the middle class, while lower income groups have had to significantly cut back on their food intake.

While this was happening, what was the government doing? How is it that while high government officials kept lecturing the public to accept austerity, mega companies were colluding to manipulate the market right under their noses? How have government officials become so oblivious to reality, and to the sufferings of the people in general?

While it is critical to get the answers to these questions, we are somewhat encouraged by the fact that the Bangladesh Competition Commission has filed cases against 36 individuals and companies such as Pran Foods, Square, ACI, Akij, City, Meghna, Bashundhara and S Alam Group, accusing them of creating an artificial crisis in the market. However, given the fact that the government has previously gone out of its way to protect the interests of some of these larger companies – or at least their owners – at the cost of public interest, we are yet to be convinced that justice will indeed prevail.

But that is what desperately needs to happen right now. If the government ensures that price manipulators – particularly the more influential ones – are punished, and exemplarily so, for the crime of piling more misery onto the people and the national economy at a time of great crisis, then there will be some hope of price manipulation finally getting somewhat checked in the country. The ball is now in the government's court.

No end to power-sector malfeasance

Titas must answer for its recruitment process corruption

We continue to be baffled by the myriad forms that corruption takes on in our public services sector. A recent report by *Prothom Alo* narrates how security guards have been “hired” by Titas Gas Transmission and Distribution Company Limited, over the last five years at least, but under the identities of deceased, former, or retired employees. These fake employees have paid bribes of Tk 90,000 to even Tk 3 lakh in order to get a job at the monopolistic gas distribution company, only to be told that they would have to work under the names of previous employees. The culprits of such a process are employees within Titas Gas and those of Panther Security Services Ltd, the contractor company which is supposed to supply Titas with security personnel.

However, as Panther Security alleges, they are only allowed to “hire” people recommended by Titas employees and that it would be impossible for them to appoint a security guard to Titas without its approval. But no matter what, the responsibility to keep a check on such irregularities lies with Titas Gas itself – and it has failed miserably on this account.

Such a revelation of the corruption taking place in Titas is hardly surprising, given that other companies under the energy sector have been equally diligent in practising irregularities for years, without facing any accountability. Just last week, we expressed our disappointment at the Comptroller and Auditor General's (CAG) findings that the state coffer has been robbed of about Tk 4,697 crore because of irregularities in 11 companies under Petrobangla between FY 2014-15 and FY 2016-17, and in two companies of the Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC) in FY 2013-14.

The security recruitment corruption at Titas, too, has been going on for years. Even though the company secretary Lutful Haider himself pioneered the formation of a probe committee, after the matter started to come to the fore, no satisfactory actions have been taken based on the probe report as of yet. And despite being in charge of Titas Gas' security department for the longest time, Haider claims that he had no knowledge of these irregularities for years. But this is no excuse. Rather, it shows the extent to which Titas Gas authorities lack a sense of duty to identify and check corruption within the company.

We hope that the state minister for power, energy and mineral resources will follow through with his promise that “stern action would be taken against those who are responsible” in this situation. But we also believe that it is high time for the government itself to stop being willfully unaware or in denial regarding the various irregularities and immense corruption taking place across its arms, and especially in organisations which are supposed to provide the public with quality services. Oblivion, or the pretence of it, is no longer an option.

The sorry state of our rivers



Dr S Nazrul Islam is the founder of Bangladesh Environment Network (BEN) and the initiator of Bangladesh Poribesh Andolon (BAPA). He is the author of Water Development in Bangladesh: Past Present & Future.

S NAZRUL ISLAM

The World River Day, which was observed on Sunday, is nowhere more relevant than in Bangladesh, which is known as a *nodimatrik desh* – a country borne by rivers. Most of Bangladesh lies on the Bengal Delta, which was created by the sediment deposited by rivers flowing down from the Himalayan and the Arakan mountain ranges. There used to be more than a thousand rivers crisscrossing through Bangladesh. Many of those rivers are now lost, mostly due to human interventions. However, according to the Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB), the country still has about 230 rivers with perennial flows and between 310 and 405 rivers have flows only during the summer.

Rivers have major roles in the ecology and economy of Bangladesh, one of which is serving as a means of transportation. Traditionally, waterways used to be the main method of transportation; all major cities of Bangladesh developed along riverbanks and, more prominently, at river crossings. Transportation using rivers is usually cheaper

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and less polluting. Unfortunately, transportation via rivers has declined over time. In contrast to the information provided by the BWDB above, the Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) claims that the country has 700 rivers with waterways totalling 13,000km in length. Of this, 5,968km is classified for navigation, of which 3,865km is classified for navigation during the dry season. It also classifies the waterways into four groups – namely trunk routes, link routes, secondary routes, and seasonal routes. The wide divergence between BWDB and BIWTA regarding the total number of rivers reflects the paucity of accurate information. This is indeed lamentable in view of the crucial importance of



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FILE PHOTO: MOSTAFA SHABUJ

rivers for Bangladesh.

Be that as it may, it is clear that the length of navigable parts of the rivers has shrunk over time. The process started with the construction of railways by the British rulers in the 19th century. It affected the rivers and waterways in two ways. First, railways provided a faster way of travel and transportation of goods, hence reducing the importance of waterways. Second, the railways represented the first wave of interventions in the floodplains in Bangladesh, obstructing the free flow of water on them. These obstructions started the process of separation of the floodplains from river channels, triggering the gradual decay of both the river channels and the floodplains.

The importance of waterways declined further when the country embarked on the construction of roads and highways, particularly after independence. Besides the main arteries, a huge network of rural roads has been constructed in recent decades as well. According to news reports, more than 11,000km of roads have been constructed in Sylhet and Sunamganj districts alone. Of course, road connections are necessary for villages. However, in most cases, these roads have been built in an indiscriminate and unplanned manner, with no regard for optimisation and minimisation

off floodplains from river channels by constructing embankments. As a result, rivers become disconnected, waterways shrink, and both floodplains and river channels suffer. Railways and unplanned roads and highways also serve as embankments, aggravating the negative effects of the Cordon approach.

Fourth, a major reason for the decay of rivers and waterways since the 1970s is the interventions in the shared rivers carried out by the upstream countries, particularly India. The most prominent examples are the Farakka and Gajoldoba barrages, which divert the dry season flows of the Ganges and Teesta rivers, respectively. As a result, most of the rivers in southwest and northwest Bangladesh are dying. India's dams and barrages are causing harmful morphological changes in Bangladesh's rivers. With little water in winter, the river beds dry up and get compacted. As a result, when India opens all the floodgates in summer, the rivers cannot do enough bed-scouring to accommodate the water and instead expand sideways through bank erosion. The rivers are therefore becoming shallower and wider.

Ironically, while damaging the health of Bangladesh's rivers through its interventions, India at the same time is eager to have river transportation through Bangladesh to its seven

adjacent portions of the riverbeds. It is necessary for India to realise that, for sustainable river transportation through Bangladesh, it is necessary to restore the health of its rivers. Thus, it is in India's own interest to remove all dams and barrages on the upstream reaches of the shared rivers and their tributaries.

Unfortunately, the Bangladesh authorities fail to see the win-win solution that the Open approach offers. Instead, they tenaciously cling to the Cordon approach, most likely because of the large budgets involved with embankment and other construction projects that this approach generates. Bangladesh is also failing to negotiate river issues with India from a position of strength. Instead of using the UN convention on using international watercourses and the advantages it has regarding transit, transshipment, port use, etc to establish its rightful claims on the shared rivers, Bangladesh is giving up these rights. Instead of preventing India from construction of upstream river-intervening structures without its consent, Bangladesh is now seeking permission from India for the go-ahead for a minor river use project within its own territory, as the recent Kushiara Agreement illustrates. So, the question is: When will the authorities stand up for the rivers of Bangladesh?

Devastating climate impacts await coastal Bangladesh



POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

Dr Saleemul Huq is director of the International Centre for Climate Change and Development (ICCCAD) at Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB).

SALEEMUL HUQ

The World Bank recently published a thorough analysis of various adverse impacts of human-induced climate change that will hit the coastal districts of Bangladesh over the coming decades, increasing the frequency and severity of coastal flood events. The estimated losses amount to USD 570 million every year going forward if measures are not taken to minimise those impacts.

Let me unpack what is involved in this dire scenario, and what can be done to minimise the adverse impacts being predicted if no action is taken.

The first physical impact is due to sea-level rise, causing enhanced salinisation of the surface water in low-lying coastal districts. This is already happening, and millions of people have already adapted to this situation, capturing rainwater on their rooftops to have fresh drinking water during the lean period. At the same time, farmers are growing saline-tolerant varieties of rice that have been developed by our scientists.

This slow-onset emergency is going to cause significant losses and damages in the years to come,

even with successful adaptation technologies and measures. Hence, while we need to develop adaptation technologies to help people minimise the adverse impacts of climate change, we also need to think of ways to help them plan for a time when adaptation will not be available anymore, and people will have to move away as a second-order adaptation measure.

We need to enable people to be able to make their decision to move of their own volition and timing, rather than be forced to move due to floods or cyclones.

The second major impact that the World Bank analysis has identified is the occurrence of severe flooding and cyclonic events, which will be more frequent in the coming years and cause devastation with each event. While Bangladesh has been relatively successful in building embankments in large parts of the low-lying coastal zone, and we have also built thousands of cyclone shelters and improved our early warning systems, these measures will not be sufficient to tackle the even bigger events that will come with

climate change.

Hence, we need to immediately enhance the height of the existing embankments while also increasing investment in operations and maintenance, which are woefully neglected at present. This will of course require large funds. The recently completed National Adaptation Plan (NAP) has identified projects

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needing several hundred billions of dollars that need to come from both the Bangladesh government and the global community.

The good news is that the developed countries have agreed to double their fundings on climate change adaptation for the developing countries, but the challenge for Bangladesh will be in improving its ability to access these global funds more effectively than it has done in the past.

However, more money, while undoubtedly important, is not the only

thing we need. We need to improve our own governance system to minimise corruption and unnecessary expenditures on overrunning project times and budgets, which is quite rampant and completely unacceptable. This will require a combined top-down and bottom-up approach to monitor and improve the performance of all the concerned departments and agencies of the government.

Another important investment which does not necessarily require large sums of additional funds is to improve our entire educational system to ensure that our next generations have the kinds of knowledge and skills that will be needed in the 21st century – not the old and completely outdated rote learning they are getting now. This change in how we teach our children needs to be done with great urgency and does not require more money but a change of attitude in our leaders and teachers.

By investing in the young people living in the coastal districts of our country, we can turn them into climate champions who will not only be able to tackle the climate impacts, but actually share that knowledge with other countries facing similar problems.

In conclusion, we need to take the World Bank report on the potential losses and damages from climate change as a warning as to what will happen if we don't make plans to minimise those potential impacts and launch our actions immediately.