

Govt must tame raging inflation

Good governance a must to get us out of this crisis

We're worried by the continuing inflationary trend which seems poised to hit a boiling point, with data released by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) saying that inflation hit a 10-year high in August. Overall, inflation surged to 9.52 percent in August, then dropping to a still-high 9.10 percent in September. Ordinary people, however, don't need BBS figures to know how badly prices have been spiralling out of control in recent months. Their daily suffering stands as living proof of that.

Inflation, which has been ongoing since the outbreak of the pandemic in Bangladesh, has been out of control for the past several months due to higher food prices amid global supply chain disruptions and trade uncertainties arising from the Russia-Ukraine war. Data shows that food inflation soared to 9.94 percent in August – the highest since April 2012 – and decreased slightly to 9.08 percent in September. Non-food inflation, on the other hand, was 8.85 percent in August, but jumped to 9.13 percent in September, indicating that the inflationary momentum is yet to dissipate. Another major concern is that inflation in rural areas has been worse than in urban areas – 9.70 percent in August, as opposed to 9.18 percent in urban areas during the same month. Food inflation in rural areas was similarly higher, since markets there tend to be more volatile than those in urban areas.

This calls for greater government assistance for lower- and fixed-income groups. But equally importantly, it indicates that the assistance needs to be better targeted, with food assistance for people living in rural areas becoming more urgent. Additionally, while external shocks are definitely big factors that are driving inflation, the recent fuel price hike in the country has, as anticipated, only made things worse. Therefore, we once again urge the government to consider lowering fuel prices at the earliest possible time, since it has had a cascading effect on prices of all other commodities. The government also urgently needs to curb corruption and wastage in the energy sector, which have gone totally out of control, leading to the return of frequent load-shedding that is only increasing production costs and commodity prices for end consumers.

Because there is no single policy intervention that can solve the current crisis, the government needs to try and tackle it on multiple fronts. Firstly, the government needs to scale up its subsidised food assistance programme for the poor. It needs to reduce corruption and mismanagement across all sectors, which seems to have become synonymous with governance these days. And finally, it needs to actively monitor the supply of essential commodities, such as different food items, and make sure that it is proactive in addressing any artificial supply shortage. In that regard, regular market monitoring by relevant government agencies is vital to root out any collusive practices by powerful trade syndicates.

Save aquatic life from extinction

Continued waste disposal and encroachment of rivers must stop

Dumping of toxic waste into rivers has become something of a norm in Bangladesh where there is no accountability for those who do it. But are the authorities aware of the long-term effects of their lax monitoring which is allowing this indiscriminate pollution of rivers? A research team from Chattogram University, in collaboration with a local environmental organisation, has recently revealed that as many as 81 species of plants on the banks of Karnaphuli River are in danger of going extinct over the next few decades. Another 61 species of plants, as per their study, are at risk of becoming endangered if no action is taken to prevent pollution. Moreover, researchers have found that the movement of dolphins in the river is also being disrupted.

If these revelations are not disturbing enough, know that 35 out of 140 species of fish are no longer present in the river because of its continued pollution, as per a report by the Department of Environment (DoE) in Chattogram. This is the state of just one river in one region. Imagine the state of other rivers going through the same ordeal.

Perhaps the most well-known victims of industrial pollution and encroachment are Dhaka's rivers. The level of mismanagement that these waterbodies have been put through boggles the mind. In many places, demarcation pillars, installed along the banks to signal their boundaries, have been turned into relics due to unabated encroachment. In many areas, fish and other aquatic animals have been driven away by the contamination from disposal of untreated waste. Across the country, a number of rivers and canals have disappeared thanks to pollution and encroachment. There is no shortage of examples to illustrate the woeful state of our rivers. How can they – and we, being dependent on them – survive if industries, individuals and even government agencies are allowed to suffocate them like this?

Unfortunately, all this is going on despite the authorities having enough information to stop the encroachers and polluters. In 2018-19, the National River Conservation Commission made a list of 57,390 encroachers in all 64 districts – of them, only 32 percent were reportedly evicted so far. In Chattogram, the district administration has a list of 2,112 grabbers along a 40km stretch of the Karnaphuli river. But the relevant authorities have repeatedly failed to comply with court directives to remove illegal structures. Meanwhile, these encroachers – among them politically linked individuals and industrial units – continue to pollute the river and kill its ecosystem.

We urge the higher authorities to crack down on those slowly killing our rivers. For too long, responsible government agencies have either done too little or conveniently shifted their responsibility onto others, which cannot be tolerated any longer. It is high time the authorities, including local administrations and agencies responsible for river protection, undertook serious efforts to stop pollution and encroachment of rivers. We must save them for our own sake.

Robbed wages, stolen livelihoods

Ensuring migrant workers' access to justice in destination countries



ON THE SHORES OF (IN)JUSTICE

Dr CR Abrar
is an academic and
human rights expert.

CR ABRAR

"We go overseas to earn, but our money is being stolen. We need to do something about this."

– **Bijaya Sreshtha, Nepali returnee migrant worker and activist**

"We need a break from the cycle of exploitation (of wage theft) and the silence associated with it."

– **Kortornilo Farny, Thai migrant activist**

"Wage is the property of workers; we need to create a system for them to reclaim their unpaid dues."

– **Sister Lizzy, Indian activist**

These statements were made at a conference on access to justice for migrant workers held in Kuala Lumpur on October 2-4. The event was convened by Migrant Forum in Asia to take stock of the Wage Theft campaign. Launched in June 2020 by a large coalition of civil society organisations and trade unions in the Asian region, the Wage Theft campaign aims "to establish an 'Urgent Justice Mechanism' in addressing the plight of millions of migrant workers whose wages have been unjustly withheld by their employers."

Wage theft is the total or partial non-payment of a worker's remuneration, earned through the provision of labour services, as stipulated in a written or non-written employment contract. It also includes payment below the minimum wage, non-payment of overtime, non-payment of contractually owed benefits, non-negotiated reduction of salaries, and retention of dues upon one's contract termination.

However, the phenomenon of wage theft is not restricted to these indicators only. Deduction from wages under the pretext of insurance, medical examination, transport costs, skills training and the like is quite common as well. In many instances, workers are promised higher wages but are made to sign a second set of documents upon arrival in the destination countries, often in languages that migrants do not understand. This subjects them to be contractually paid less than what was promised to them. Unauthorised deduction of wages in the guise of imposing penalty to the workers is also common. In many instances, the quality of food and the standard of accommodation are not commensurate with the amount that is deducted from their wages. All these amount to wage theft.

One of the major forms of wage exploitation takes place when domestic workers are made to work for long hours (without being paid overtime) and also made to work for the relatives or friends of the employers. Instances are replete when workers are brought under the visit visa and denied wages even though they are made to work during that



Covid-19 has exposed the acute vulnerability of Asian migrant workers in destination countries.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

period. There have been cases when employers or agents paid less than the due wages when they transferred the payment directly to the relatives of the workers in their origin countries.

The long drawn stagnancy in basic salary is a major factor for migrants receiving meagre end-service benefits as the package in most cases is tied to the basic salary received. Cases are also rampant in which employers illegally deduct the amount they pay to recruitment agencies to procure workers, from their wages. Often, the amount might be equivalent to three to four months' wages of a worker.

The increasing engagement of mega-employment companies that supply migrant workers to third-party employers, often big companies, and government agencies in the destination countries has become a major source of wage exploitation. Huge segments of workers' wages (allegedly up to 50 percent in cases) are usurped by these mega-companies that essentially work as labour contractors, while companies that benefit from the services of these workers refuse to take any responsibility for that.

The false promise of remitting unpaid wages made by the employers after a worker leaves the country of employment is yet another form of wage theft. When Covid-19 was at peak, millions of migrant workers were robbed off their unpaid wages and entitlements. The countries of destination have thus far not taken any initiative to make their employers pay due wages to the deprived workers – neither has it been an issue of concern for the countries of origin.

Instances are not uncommon where employers hold the travel and identity documents of the workers and force

them to continue to work even after the end of the contract period. These workers have little option but to comply as they are threatened that their arrear wages and end-service benefits will not be cleared if they do not comply. Under such circumstances, with their status becoming irregular, they become virtually bonded to their employers. Likewise, workers are often subjected

to forced return before the expiration of their contracts. This enables their employers not to pay their end-service benefits and return travel costs. Migrant workers are not spared of being robbed of their wages and due entitlements even after their death. The claims of "natural causes" of deaths are often far from the truth. The use of the term "natural cause" frees the employers from paying compensations for workplace accidents and other responsibilities, and there is little scope for the deceased migrants' families to lodge claims and complaints. The prohibitive legal costs associated with lodging such complaints or claims act as a huge deterrence. Imposing taxes on the compensations is yet another form of wage theft for workers and their families.

What migrant workers experienced during the peak of Covid-19 across the globe has shed light on this largely ignored plight of the vulnerable workforce. In their fixation to harness remittances, the origin countries did not show much interest in their migrant workforce's lack of access to justice in the destination countries. Surely, they would be interested in the issue if someone could work out the potential increase in the volume of remittances – given the workers were not deprived of their due wages. As Prof Binod Khadria of Jawaharlal Nehru University argued, the damage done due to wage theft is not limited to the migrant workers, but the nation as a whole. "Wage theft is an assault on the concerned country's GDP," he observed.

Lauding the launch of the Wage Theft campaign, the World Bank economist and remittance expert Dilip Ratha stated that if portable pensions and social security benefits

can be worked out between states, the international community should talk about access to portable justice. Further reinforcing the argument, Ragunath Kesavan of the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia observed that if national courts can adapt to changed circumstances and make room for virtual hearing for commercial cases, employment

matters could be taken up by them.

Highlighting the severe limitations of the current system, William Gois of Migrant Forum in Asia said in most jurisdictions, migrants lose their residency as soon as their jobs are terminated. How can one pursue their case when they are not allowed to stay, and in the rare cases that they are, they do not have the permission to work? Likewise, while lodging complaints may be free of charge in some jurisdictions, preparing documents for cases requires a lawyer's service, which is expensive. The reticence of employers to be present at the court or honour its decisions and the inability of the court to execute its decisions are the gaping holes in the existing system, Gois noted.

Pablo Ceriani of the UN Committee on Migrant Workers called for building firewalls to ensure that workers are protected under the labour law independent of their immigration status. Ryszard Cholewinski of the International Labour Organization (ILO) underscored the need for setting up fast-track alternative dispute resolution mechanisms for small claims, and protection for complainants and whistleblowers against retaliation.

Covid-19 has exposed the acute vulnerability of Asian migrant workers, particularly their lack of access to justice in destination countries. The power imbalance between the employers and the workers, and the absence of an enabling environment of freedom of association and the right to organise, reinforced by indifference of the authorities of both the countries of origin and destination, have created a situation of systemic injustice. It is time the states took meaningful measures to protect the goose that lays the golden eggs.

Who benefits from the raids at healthcare facilities?



Dr Rakib Al Hasan
is a physician, author, activist,
and youth leader. His Twitter
handle is @rakibalhasan_bd

RAKIB AL HASAN

Every year, we see raids taking place at hospitals, clinics, diagnostic centres, and other healthcare facilities across Bangladesh. This year, too, the government ran a countrywide campaign against illegal healthcare facilities, shutting down more than 1,600 such institutions. No one can say how many unregistered hospitals, clinics, diagnostic centres and blood banks exist in the country. According to some estimates, the number of illegal hospitals is two or three times that of the legal ones.

Healthcare providers cannot operate in secret, so how is it that so many unauthorised institutions have been able to run their activities? The more important question is: why are more and more people going to private institutions for healthcare?

Over the years, budget allocations for the health sector as a proportion of the GDP have steadily declined in Bangladesh, which is now below one percent. Bangladesh is ranked the

lowest in South Asia in terms of per capita government expenditure on healthcare. According to a report by the World Health Organization (WHO), 49 percent of the country's population do not receive quality healthcare services. In 2020, the health sector was running with less than 10 doctors, nurses, and midwives for every 10,000 people. And the skills of the majority of doctors, nurses, and midwives in the country do not meet the standards set by WHO.

Most of the hospitals that have been declared illegal by the government were occupied by doctors who are registered with Bangladesh Medical and Dental Council (BMDC). Assistants at operation theatres (OTs) perform minor to major surgeries. There are not enough nurses; in many places, cleaners work as nurses. Smoke from the kitchen enters OTs at times, and used equipment is reused to treat patients. Hospitals have been found to accommodate patients far beyond their capacity. Quality of lab work is substandard, and not all

facilities are available to run tests. In many places, the environment is not good for patients at all.

The raids that have shut down numerous unregistered hospitals, clinics, and diagnostic centres frequently seem to be for show now – one day they are closed, and the next day they are up and running again. The health administration has consistently failed to stop the massive level of corruption and irregularities that go on in these healthcare facilities, as an overwhelming majority of owners of illegal hospitals are politically influential.

Illegal and unlicensed hospitals are mainly broker-dependent. In other words, agents of these hospitals roam around in the government hospitals, which are overburdened and have limited resources, and lure patients and their families – especially those who come from rural areas to seek medical treatment – to these private practices. In these hospitals, patients are often subjected to maltreatment, and the expenses are also very high. Many patients and their families lose everything to pay for their medical bills. These brokers roam around openly and are known. Yet, no action is taken against them.

Owners of illegal clinics and diagnostic centres are also quite well-connected – both financially and politically. Therefore, oftentimes, if a

patient dies due to improper treatment in any of these clinics, not much is said and done about it. That is why the raids to identify and fine illegal practices do not bring any significant change in the country's healthcare system. Unless the core problems are addressed, they never will.

Healthcare has turned into a lucrative business for many people in the country, who do not deviate from their mission to make profits even in the most extreme situations. We have all seen how some people made hundreds of thousands of taka just by selling masks and testing kits in the early days of Covid-19 pandemic, when there was a severe crisis. Measly budgetary allocations for the health sector have not helped the situation either. Lack of priority on the government's part to make healthcare accessible to everyone is leaving a major segment of our population vulnerable to these profiteers. The only way to save our health sector from them and make quality healthcare accessible and affordable for the general mass is to bring the entire healthcare system of the country under the public sector. Regulations have to be in place and implemented in order to bring semblance of accountability to the healthcare sector. Conducting some raids against private hospitals, clinics, and diagnostic centres from time to time will not make much difference.