

Oil, sugar price hike yet another shock to the economy

The government must implement economic policies that deal with the ongoing crisis

Earlier this month, the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) released data that gave us the impression that the country's galloping inflation rate might have cooled ever slightly, with food inflation dropping down to 8.5 percent in October from 9.08 percent a month earlier. While this means that the average inflation of 8.75 percent so far in this fiscal year is still a long way off the target of 5.6 percent, it raised faint hopes of a dampener in the ever-spiralling cost-of-living crisis that Bangladesh currently finds itself in.

However, these hopes have been dashed once again with another round of increase in food prices – this time in the case of soybean oil and sugar, the prices of which have gone up by around seven percent and 14 percent, respectively. For context, a litre of bottled soybean oil will now cost Tk 190 instead of Tk 178. And the reasons behind this increase, as cited by processors and refiners of this foodstuff, are part of the factors that have been creating a perfect storm in our economic situation: the devaluation of the taka against the US dollar, leading to high costs of imports, and a shortage of gas for operations.

Given that high inflation has already reduced our purchasing capacity, this price hike can only spell more trouble, especially for poor and low-income families. Over the past weeks, we have seen many heart-rending images of people turning up before sunrise and standing in open market sales (OMS) lines for hours to buy subsidised rice and wheat flour. Now, the food ministry has decided to also increase the prices of OMS wheat flour by Tk 6 (33 percent), thus reducing access to these essentials further.

The repercussions of rising prices on marginalised households – in terms of nutrition, debt, reduced spending on healthcare and education, and an overall degradation in the standards of living – will undoubtedly be severe. It is clear that people are struggling, and there is a dire need for government intervention to bring marginalised populations under social safety net programmes, at least for the short term. However, expanding OMS services and making them more accessible can only be the first step. In the long run, we must prioritise food security and maximise domestic food production. At the same time, the relevant authorities must also keep an eye out to ensure that unscrupulous agents do not take advantage of the situation and artificially raise prices in order to turn over a profit.

But first and foremost, the authorities must demonstrate their commitment to guiding the country out of this economic crisis. Although there are definitely external factors that have contributed to it, experts have for long warned against domestic economic policies that benefit the super-rich at the expense of the general population. Whether it is the interest rate cap that benefits big borrowers, the capital flight affecting our foreign currency reserves, or the big loan defaulters who manage to evade any accountability – it is clear that corruption and abuse of power are weakening our economy from within.

The government has the tools at hand to deal with this crisis. The question now is: do they have the political will?

Historic courthouse must be preserved

Chattogram site needs to be protected and put to proper use by authorities

It is saddening to see Darul Adalat, known as Chattogram's first colonial court, dilapidated due to lack of conservation efforts. The courthouse stands on a hilltop adjacent to the Government Haji Muhammad Mohsin College, a reputable educational institution in Chattogram. The building – whose exact date of founding remains disputed – is unique in its architectural traits that incorporate both Mughal and Western styles. It is magnificent not only because of its historical significance, but also because of its architectural beauty, and thus warrants proper care and preservation.

The lack of protection and preservation of Bangladesh's archaeologically significant structures has come to the fore repeatedly over the years. Historically valuable buildings have been demolished in Old Dhaka with support from powerful locals, disregarding the laws protecting them. Recently, another attempt was taken to destroy the natural beauty of the Central Railway Building (CRB) area in Chattogram, which was later averted due to massive public pressure. It is difficult to mount that kind of movement every time there is an attempt on the existence of a historically significant site. The government, therefore, must be proactive in protecting these heritage sites and not let any forces destroy them.

However, in the case of Darul Adalat, it is not exactly about the exceeding interest in it, but in the lack thereof. No government agency seems to be willing to take up the task of protecting and preserving this site of cultural heritage. Officials of the Department of Archaeology in Chattogram last visited it in 2013 and wrote to the director general of the agency to protect the building, declaring it a heritage site, but no progress has been made on that front. Another report was submitted to the head office to protect the building in 2019, according to a report published in this daily, but nothing came out of it either. The regional director of the Department of Archaeology in Chattogram said that a recommendation to protect the building has been sent from the department to the cultural affairs ministry. It is yet to be seen what outcome, if any, comes out of it. The building's location, space, and historical nature suggest that, if repaired and preserved correctly, it can come to great use of the city. Unlike other divisional headquarters, Chattogram does not have a divisional museum. The building can serve the purpose of housing that museum. It does not make sense to keep such a building unpreserved, and unused. We call upon the authorities to ensure collaboration within departments and ministries to protect Darul Adalat and put it to use for public good.

Spending All for Nothing

Education abroad does not always come with golden opportunities



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

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SHAMSAD MORTUZA

"In the midst of every crisis lies great opportunity" – this adage, credited to Albert Einstein, is shared by the Chinese who have the two-part word "wei-wei" to suggest danger and opportunity in any moment of crisis. However, the silver lining implied here says little about the cloud of opportunity-seekers who benefit from others' misery.

In a post-pandemic world, we have seen a boost in the number of many self-serving ventures. The growth in student mobility is one such area, where many countries are using students from the Global South as cash cows. While watching the award-winning Canadian investigative programme *The Fifth Estate*, the exploitative side of a crisis became apparent. Many career colleges in Canada quadrupled their international admission intake during the pandemic lockdown. The online classes did not require them to have the physical infrastructure to accommodate students on campus. A career college in Toronto, with a physical accommodation of 400 students, admitted over 2,000. After nine months of online classes, when these admitted students went to attend their classes, they heard that the college had declared an "extraordinary term break."

This particular college has 99 percent of students from India, whose admission was processed by an agent in India. The college is an extended branch of a community college where no domestic students are enrolled. The tuition fees here are five times higher than the local fees, yet students from South Asia through there hoping for a better life.

The agents back home sell the hope of the Canadian dream, promising backdoor immigration through these educational institutions.

One of the students interviewed for the programme hailed from the Indian province of Punjab, whose father is a rural farmer. He sold two of his tractors to raise 28,000 dollars for his daughter's admission. This covered only the first year's tuition for her planned four-year degree. The girl is now working 50 hours a week to pay for the remaining tuition fees and meet her living expenses. One can understand well how this will affect her academic performance.

The TV report tells us how nine students are living in the basement of an apartment building, where some



Thousands of international students were left to uncertainty when three colleges in Canada were shut down earlier this year.

PHOTO: THE GLOBE AND MAIL

students pay for one bed per shift. The education they receive at the college has not been audited by any quality assurance cell. Yet, Canada remains the third preferred destination for international students.

The Fifth Estate cited one official record that shows that between 2012-13, there has been a 15 percent decline in domestic student enrolment in Canada, but a 342 percent growth in international student enrolment. Some of these colleges are so savvy in getting international students to make up for the local students that they lower the admission criteria and waive English language requirements. The gold rush for the Canadian dream has created a cottage industry involving study-abroad agents, English language testing centres, travel agents, the housing market, support services, ranking hype, and permanent-residency lure.

One Indian student estimated that it would take 75 years for his father to pay off his tuition fees at his current income status. Parents are willing to sacrifice their present happiness for their children's future. This is what these overseas universities cash in on. In most cases, the international standard

commit suicide, failing to cope with the pressure.

My interest in the topic was piqued by a recent report that says our local banks have stopped opening student files for outgoing students to protect their foreign currency reserves. The newspaper that ran the story mentions that in the 2021-2022 academic year, USD 321 million (over Tk 3,000 crore) was sent abroad through official banking channels for tuition fees and maintenance. The actual cost of living abroad is much higher than that, so an intellectual guess is that much more than the quoted figure has travelled abroad. There is a steady growth in the amount of money that is being sent abroad for educational purposes: USD 234.1 million in 2020-2021 and USD 218 million in 2019-20.

Sadly, not everyone who is sending their children abroad has the means to sustain educational costs in developed countries. The lack of quality education at home, peer pressure, hope for a better life, and the persuasion of local agents convince parents to undertake a venture beyond their capabilities. In the process, they either sell off their properties,

with images of Western life through different media outlets. For a few dollars more, the West has created a new myth of the gold rush. Ironically, some of these governments have decreased state sponsorship of education – Australia, for instance. The crisis in funding allowed educational institutions to look for new opportunities in growing economies like India, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bangladesh.

We are losing our young generation to the West. We are losing the expected benefits of demographic dividends. To stem the rot, we need to improve our education sector. We need to discourage students from going abroad in undergraduate programmes where no bursaries are available, and the chances of getting derailed without any parental supervision are higher. They can go for postgraduate and research programmes with a certain level of maturity and convictions. We can nurture their dreams. But at the same time, we need to protect their dreams from the traders of false hopes. We need to bring the local agents of foreign universities who dupe students under scrutiny.

Why are our resources wasted on lavish building projects?



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ANUPAM DEBASHIS ROY

Megaprojects are an inescapable lure for the government. They provide politicians and government officials with great opportunities to pocket public funds, while they get to show massive visible development – i.e. roads, bridges, and buildings – to the people. However, even those high-cost buildings seem to be a waste when they are left unused for years after their construction is complete.

That is exactly what has happened with government housing built for officials in Mirpur. According to a report by *Prothom Alo*, most of the five multi-storey buildings built in Mirpur-6 Kather Karkhana neighbourhood in Dhaka have been left unused for the past two years. Officers are not interested in living there as it is far away from their workplaces. The situation is much worse in the Shialbari area in the same section, where all six buildings of the project are left unused. This has not just happened in the capital – 15 multi-storey buildings in Noakhali and Narayanganj are not being used like this. In total, more than 1,800 of 2,385 flats are currently left unused.

This is an unacceptable waste of public money. A large sum was spent on these projects without conducting

a proper assessment of the demand for flats in the areas that they were built in, according to sources cited by *Prothom Alo*. The Directorate of Government Accommodation was never even consulted in this regard. It seems as though these buildings were built just for the sake of increasing the number of projects under a department, without any regard to the amount of public money that was spent on them. Bureaucrats in Bangladesh already enjoy too many benefits, from government-sanctioned housing to cars, and even to staff for their care in some cases. Making even more accommodation spots for them, especially in areas where they do not even want to move to, is simply an inexcusable waste of our already limited resources.

This is not an isolated situation either. In another case, the government constructed a 13-storey building at the cost of a whopping Tk 229 crore near the Election Commission office in the capital's Agargaon area three years ago, intending to accommodate the science and technology ministry there. However, the building is currently vacant as the ministry is unwilling to relocate its office from the Secretariat

Building to Agargaon. This has happened because of the clustering of all government work at the secretariat and the lack of decentralisation of government services. To utilise such a massive project, the government should force decentralisation and make the relevant ministry move out of the secretariat.

But it has not been able to do so

Who decides that these structures are needed when clearly they are not, seeing as these buildings sit empty for years on end? Are our healthcare, education, and other sectors already so developed that we cannot use the money squandered on building projects to improve these ailing sectors?

Instead, it is trying to rent out the building separately to different government agencies – without any success yet as the agencies that rented the office spaces are yet to move into the complex.

In a separate case in Narayanganj, the chief judicial magistrate court building, which was built at a cost of Tk 32 crore on the Shayesta Khan road, has been left unused for the last three years.

Examples like these are, sadly, aplenty. Several other examples can be drawn to highlight the wastage of taxpayers' money in building infrastructure that contributes to nothing. So the questions that need to be asked are: why do we need to build these structures? Who decides that they are needed when clearly they are not, seeing as these buildings sit empty for years on end? Are our healthcare, education, and other sectors already so developed that we cannot use the money squandered on building projects to improve these ailing sectors? What does it say about our national priorities?

Our government's priorities should be simple: ensuring the maximisation of public welfare. Wasting money on lavish government buildings is the last thing that they should do. We should be very frugal about spending money on building projects, and our prime minister's calls for austerity are a great step forward. However, if the spending spree on these projects carries on, there will be no public benefit out of the stated measures.

Our nation is ailing from many maladies. Countering those should be our priority right now. We need to make sure that our people get the proper education, healthcare, assistance, training and social safety – the basics – that they so direly need and deserve. The public money wasted on useless building projects can be better utilised to meet those needs. The government must be careful about its projects so that they do not waste any money, especially in these times of economic hardships.