

Farmers are the true heroes of this nation

But what have we done for them?

In a year fraught with endless challenges that threatened to cripple our economy and jeopardise our food security, the men and women working tirelessly in the fields, our farmers, have fed us through the seasons. Their strength and incredible resilience have weathered the most adverse conditions – natural calamities and high production costs – to ensure a steady supply of grains and vegetables to an ever-hungry market.

Putting our anxieties about a possible famine in the near future to rest, the farmers of the country have produced 1.63 tonnes of Aman rice in 2022, which is a record high, according to the Bangladesh Rice Research Institute (BRRI). Including Aman, farmers produced 3.97 crore tonnes of various grains of rice last year – much higher than our consumption requirement of 2.51 crore tonnes. It isn't just in rice production that the country's farmers have excelled. According to the Food and Agricultural Organisation, fruit production in Bangladesh has increased by 11 percent on average for 18 consecutive years.

It is clear that our farmers have done more than their share to keep food on our plates. But the critical question is: what have we done for our farmers?

Not only did they have to battle repeated floods and then extreme heat with scanty rain, they also had to confront a 37.5 percent rise in urea fertiliser prices, on top of a 50 percent rise in fuel prices. Despite the high costs of production last year, farmers are now being forced to sell their produce at lower rates, with unscrupulous syndicates fixing the prices in the local market, in the absence of effective monitoring or intervention from the government. What's worse is that if farmers sell their paddy directly to the government, at the current government rate, they are looking at Tk 120 per maund in losses.

Our farmers have been ignored by policymakers for too long, with brokers, traders and millers taking advantage of them at different stages of the production and distribution process. Currently, it collects around five percent of the total paddy production directly from the farmers, which is too low for them to influence the market price. It is high time the government purchased a larger quantity of paddy directly from the farmers at higher and fairer rates, and fast tracked the completion of the warehouse facilities to store the collected crops. It also needs to take effective steps to monitor and control the influence of middle men, who are systematically robbing our farmers of their dues.

In addition, the government needs to increase the availability of fertilisers, especially during boro season, and provide targeted cash support to small farmers to supplement the increasing irrigation costs due to higher diesel prices. Despite the roaring success of our farmers, there is no room for complacency as we head into another year of uncertainty and volatile food market, if we are to ensure the food security of the nation, particularly of those living in the margins.

Don't abandon crucial projects midway

Allocate funds for Moulvibazar flood management, ensure efficient implementation

It is quite frustrating to see how various development projects often fail to meet the deadline due to ill-planning, inefficiency, mismanagement, corruption as well as fund crisis. While the deadlines of some of these projects keep extending, increasing the overall project cost, some projects are just abandoned midway, also wasting a huge amount of public money. A report published in this daily revealed the ill-fate of one such important mega project undertaken to free three upazilas of Moulvibazar from flooding. The project worth Tk 996.30 crore was taken up by the Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB) in 2021 after the Executive Committee of the National Economic Council (Ecne) had approved it. Although it was scheduled to be completed by 2023, no visible work of the project has been completed so far due to shortage of funds. According to BWDB sources, only Tk 75 crore of the allocated Tk 996 crore has been handed over to them so far.

Reportedly, the project was divided in 76 packages and 53 contractors were selected who were supposed to complete the work. Already, 26 of the 72 work packages have been abandoned, while work on the remaining 46 packages is continuing at a slow pace. The residents of the upazilas think that if the project cannot be completed before the next monsoon, the entire area may face devastating floods this year again.

This project is supposed to control floods in Moulvibazar by dredging some very important rivers, such as the Monu river, and repairing and building some river protection dams. We have seen how last year's devastating floods in the Sylhet, Sunamganj and Moulvibazar region made millions of people homeless and affected their livelihoods. The communities are still living in financial hardship as they lost all their belongings to regular floods as well as the seasonal flash floods.

In order to prevent a similar situation this year, the authorities must make a well-coordinated plan to control the flooding in the region. Since the above-mentioned project is supposed to manage the floods in Moulvibazar, it should not be abandoned midway. The funds allocated for the project must be disbursed soon so that the contractors can continue their work. Since the deadline would have to be rescheduled, the BWDB and other relevant authorities must revise its plan to complete the project within the shortest possible time and with the stipulated budget.

We understand that the government is in a financial crunch and needs to practice austerity measures at all levels. It is all the more reason to only approve and undertake projects that are absolutely crucial for the communities, and most importantly, to ensure there is no wastage, corruption or delay during their implementation.

Finally, only dredging the rivers and building dams cannot stop the floods in the region. The BWDB must take advice from our river experts in this regard, change their traditional "cordon approach" to rivers and adopt a modern river management approach, if they really want to manage floods in the region.

THE 2022 ECONOMIC CRISIS IN SOUTH ASIA

What is in store for the new year?



BLACK, WHITE AND GREY

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ALI RIAZ

It is customary, almost ritualistic, to ask two questions at the beginning of a new year – how the past year went and what is in store for this year. Such ritual notwithstanding, the new year does provide an opportunity to introspect for nations as much as for individuals. Often, the past year lays the pathway for the future. As such, 2022 was no exception when it comes to South Asia. Although the region is always known to be volatile, the past year was more so than usual. Economic crisis and political upheavals have shaken several countries.

Looking back at 2022, experts on the South Asian political and economic landscape would highlight the ongoing economic crisis for understandable reasons. Economic crises landed three countries – Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka – at the doorstep of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 2022. The economic picture of these countries appears to be the

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same – dwindling foreign reserves, liquidity crisis in banks, growing trade imbalance, severe depreciation of local currencies, rising cost of fuels and daily necessities.

Bhutan, anticipating similar crises, acted preemptively and took measures that enabled it to avoid a full-blown crisis but didn't prevent people from facing unprecedented hardship. The hardship has not spared India either, although its economy appears to be facing the crisis better. Its political situation is a different story altogether. In all the countries of the region, the poor and lower-middle class are bearing the brunt as various austerity measures are being put in place by their respective governments.

The conventional wisdom about the crisis has explanations about its causes and consequences. In terms of the causes, the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian aggression



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in Ukraine are paramount. As for the consequences, it is argued that the economic crisis has engendered a political crisis, which led to the downfall of the Rajapaksa government in Sri Lanka and the Imran Khan government in Pakistan. Bangladesh's recent anti-government demonstrations are also viewed through the same prism.

There are some merits to this causal explanation. According to the IMF, the global economic slowdown is unavoidable; others are warning of a global recession. In 2021, the global economy grew at the rate of 6 percent, whereas the projected 2022 growth rate is 3.2 percent, and 2.7 percent in 2023. South Asian countries growth will be around 5.8 percent in 2022, as opposed to 7.8 percent in 2021. These figures indicate that the region's economy was making progress even after the Covid-19 pandemic. As such, the slowdown in 2022 can be attributed more to the Ukraine war.

But it is important to ask whether the global economic situation is sufficient to provide an explanation for the countries' economic woes. Take, for example, Pakistan, which is on the verge of bankruptcy as the prospect of sovereign default stares it in the face. It didn't come to this situation in a single year. In early December, government officials estimated that the country will require USD 26 billion to service its USD 124 billion in foreign debts in the fiscal year 2022. Almost 30 percent of it has been borrowed from China. These loans were taken over the years, and have been used in unproductive sectors and lost in corruption.

When Sri Lanka defaulted in early 2022, it became well-known that its borrowing from external sources was significantly high. In November, after

foreign debt has doubled. In 2022, Bangladesh's debt service obligation was USD 23.4 billion, which includes deferred letters of credit (LCs), and short and long term debt obligations. It is not to say that the economic crisis of these countries is solely down to their external debts, but to suggest that they were in the making for quite some time and the current global economic crisis only exacerbated the problem. In the case of Pakistan, the devastating floods added to the misery.

The borrowing practices of these countries are a result of the economic policies of the ruling parties. They have, in large measures, opted for dazzling GDP growth figures without considering how much growth is being distributed among common citizens. The 2022 economic crisis of the region has laid bare the hollowness of the non-inclusive economic policies pursued by the ruling elites of the region, and once again reminded us that GDP is not always a good predictor of the economic health of a country. Reckless policies, unsustainable spending, unrestrained corruption and disregard for the larger segments of society are the factors which are at the heart of the problem. These are intrinsic parts of the system of governance.

Cronyism was not an exclusive preserve of Sri Lanka's Rajapaksa government; it is equally true for the current governance system of Bangladesh. The deliberated dispensation of accountability mechanisms and adoption of an authoritarian style of governance allowed the economy to rot from within. Unfortunately, those who caused this crisis are not bearing the burden, but those at the receiving end are now asked to pay the price. Their lives have been upended, thanks to the

Portraying the activism of the people as only a reaction to rising costs misses this point. While the current economic crisis has triggered the demonstrations, the demands are not only about the economy, but of fundamental reform of the political system. In Bangladesh, it is about demanding a voice in governance; in Sri Lanka, it is about dismantling a system that allows a small group of people to dictate policies, and in Pakistan, an end to the fractious politics where the military plays a pivotal role from behind the scenes. In all instances, personalisation of state power became a hallmark of governance.

As these countries begin a new year, the question is, what does the future hold? The economic and political crises that engulfed these South Asian countries are not going to go away soon. For how long Pakistan's fractious coalition government can hold on to power remains an open question, and whether it can deliver on its promise to take the country out of the economic crisis is something to be seen. Their record so far is not very promising and an election is scheduled in 2023, which may cause further acrimony among political forces. Sri Lanka continues to struggle, and the government is yet to secure loans from the IMF. The changes the demonstrators demanded have not been implemented yet.

The worst of Bangladesh's economic woes may yet come, but the political situation is gradually changing. The questions are whether the incumbent is willing to acknowledge that the country is in crisis and political direction warrants a change, and whether the opposition will succeed in burying their differences and mount pressure on the government to hold a free and fair election.

IN REMEMBRANCE

Sabihuddin Ahmed: An Extraordinary Gentleman

Nehad Chowdhury
is global head of Sovereign Credit Management at Citi and son-in-law of Sabihuddin Ahmed.

NEHAD CHOWDHURY

A selfless servant of the public, Ambassador Sabihuddin Ahmed, passed away on October 31, at age 76. Most people knew him as a distinguished Civil Service officer who set the highest standards of integrity and had an unwavering devotion to serving Bangladesh. Few were fortunate to know him intimately enough to understand why he will be so missed by those closest to him – his family and friends.

Sabihuddin Ahmed obtained his undergraduate and Master's degrees in Economics at Dhaka University. His love for his country drew him into student politics and he served as the cultural secretary of DUCSU (Dhaka University Central Students' Union) in the 1960s. He had a visible presence in the main student organisations

of the time (East Pakistan Student Union, Salimullah Muslim Hall) and all significant demonstrations and gatherings. He lost a friend, Asad, in a tragic incident memorialised by the poet Shamsur Rahman in his poem "Asader shirt urchhe".

After graduating, he joined the Central Superior Services and began what would be a stellar career in Bangladesh's Civil Service, culminating in his elevation to Secretary of the environment, forest and climate change ministry, and appointments as Ambassador to the Nordic countries and High Commissioner to the United Kingdom. After retiring, he served as the Foreign Affairs Advisor to the chairperson of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). He always sought to help people through various means and conducted himself with humility.

He had a larger-than-life personality, and never failed to charm people with his keen intellect, humour



PHOTO: COURTESY

Sabihuddin Ahmed (1946-2022)

and knowledge. To his friends, he was the most loyal and trusted comrade. With his sonorous voice and easy, jocular manner, he was often the life of the party and the favourite uncle among his friends' children.

To his family, he was a trusted advisor – a rock. He shared a close

bond with his siblings and their children, and especially with his brother, who was one of his closest friends. With his wife, he shared a deeply affectionate relationship, protecting and guiding her till his last breath. He was uncommonly close with his own children, who saw him as their compass as well as a friend with whom they could openly discuss anything. He was vociferous and successful about ensuring that his daughter was as loved and empowered as his son. Most of all, he doted on his two grandchildren.

Over time, he also developed an abiding spirituality, and spent time studying and practicing Islam in an exalted form – privately, without ever imposing his perspectives on others.

To his loved ones bereft of his light today, may you find solace in the wisdom of Kahlil Gibran: "When you are sorrowful look again in your heart, and you shall see that in truth you are weeping for that which has been your delight."