

## Stop manipulators of the LPG market

Companies, traders selling LPG at inflated prices must be reined in

What's the point of fixing the prices of imported liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) if those are inflated at will before it reaches consumers? What's the point of a regulator if it has little to no control over the implementation of its regulation? These questions come to mind when you think how LPG is currently being sold at up to Tk 300 or 20 percent more than the official rate. Earlier this month, the Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission (BERC) fixed the price of the 12-kg LPG cylinder – the most common form of marketed cooking fuels – at Tk 1,498 for February. It marked an increase of Tk 266 from the previous price, in a blow to ordinary people already overwhelmed by the high cost of living. But a bigger blow still was when even that increased price was further inflated.

At a recent meeting, the LPG market was rightly described as "chaotic" by the director general of the Directorate of National Consumer Rights Protection. As revealed by market sources, importers, dealers and retailers were all involved in inflating the price illegally. For example, importers were selling a 12-kg cylinder at around Tk 1,520-1,532 to dealers/distributors, who were selling it at around Tk 1,550-1,600 to retailers, who in turn were selling it at Tk 1,700-Tk 1,800 to general customers. The rates vary, of course. If you ask the importers, dealers and retailers, each will blame the previous player. Each have their unique reasons, which they were not shy of sharing at the BERC meeting.

This is not the first time that officially set prices – not just of LPG but many other consumer products – have been overlooked with such reckless abandon. Over the years, there have been numerous occasions when poor regulation and oversight allowed illegal practices such as hoarding and artificially inflating prices to take place. Despite extensive coverage of price fluctuations/manipulations in the market, lack of preventive steps and alleged complicity of state officials make it easy for the unscrupulous traders to get away without punishment. The question is, what about the ordinary people? Who will protect their interests?

In the LPG market, it is supposed to be the BERC, which not only sets prices but is also responsible for ensuring compliance of its decisions, which it is evidently failing to do. As it stands, the BERC has set a rate that neither the consumers nor those on the supply side are happy about, each for different reasons. The BERC secretary has promised to hold a public hearing within 15 days to a month if all the companies send documents supporting their demand for a more favourable pricing formula/structure. If that means revising the LPG price further upwards, consumers have every reason to worry about.

We urge the BERC and other relevant departments and ministries to think of the consumers as well. They must ensure compliance of the officially set prices of LPG through proper market oversight, and must punish those who are violating them arbitrarily. Citizens' interests must be put at the centre of policymaking.

## Ramp up support for quake victims

Inadequate response in Turkey and Syria is deeply worrying

The humanitarian crisis that has unfolded in Turkey and Syria following a 7.5 magnitude earthquake, the strongest to hit the region since 1939, has shaken us to the core. As of writing this editorial, the death toll has crossed 17,000 – with at least 14,014 confirmed dead in Turkey, and 3,162 dead in Syria. As the rescue operations are continuing, the death toll is certain to rise further. But there might not be much hope for those still trapped after the passage of 72 hours – the most crucial point of time for rescue after such disasters. Officials and locals believe that many people are still under the rubble, waiting to be rescued. However, the Turkish government's response has been criticised by many because of its severe "shortcomings", which the Turkish president has also admitted.

Under the circumstances, Turkey and Syria both sought international support to help them accelerate their response. The World Health Organization chief also warned that time was running out for the thousands still feared trapped and injured. According to a survivor in the rebel-held town of Jindayris, Syria, "there are around 400-500 people trapped under each collapsed building, with only 10 people trying to pull them out. And there is no machinery." This reveals the sorry state of rescue operations in Syria.

We understand that it is extremely difficult for any nation to deal with a disaster of such a massive scale. Which is why the world must extend its full support to not only help rescue the quake-hit people in the affected areas, but also provide the survivors with food, shelter, medicine and other necessities. Our government has already sent a rescue team with necessary training to Turkey. While other countries have also extended their support, there still remains some difficulties in sending such teams in war-torn Syria. But we think during such a tragedy, our goal should be to save lives, and all other considerations should make way for that.

The tragedy in Turkey and Syria has also reminded us of our own weak earthquake preparedness. Bangladesh being situated in an earthquake-prone zone, we are at risk of being hit anytime. And if an earthquake of a similar scale does hit us, the level of devastation would be unprecedented – experts believe that up to 300,000 people may die if a 7-magnitude earthquake strikes Dhaka. Dhaka and other major cities including Chattogram have many buildings that were not constructed following the building code. Have we taken the necessary preparation to avert the danger that it entails? It is time we took lessons from the Turkish-Syrian experience.

Finally, we extend our heartfelt sympathies to the victims and survivors of the quake-hit people in the region, and hope that the world will stand by them at this most critical time.

# Child abuse and our crumbling social norms

The way we treat them says it all



THE THIRD VIEW

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The underlying issue is of "entitlement." Be it due to money, feudal legacy or political power (the last being far more effective than others), some people feel entitled to do anything – insult, humiliate and publicly abuse others, as if the more vulgarity on display, the more it is a testimony of their power. Nothing depicts the vulgarity of this discrimination more dramatically and painfully than the way we treat the children of the poor.

A municipal mayor in Narayanganj's Arahazar upazila, on February 6, allegedly tortured, beat, tied hands of, and paraded three kids (aged 7, 9, and 11) along a two-kilometre route, for – what the mayor claimed – "trying to steal" some rusted parts of some old machines from an abandoned factory.

The machines were lying in the open before being shifted to another site. Two of the kids were playing and picked up some pieces, maybe to play with them. The mayor saw this from a distance, which triggered his violent rage and the consequent beating and torturing. Then he summoned



ILLUSTRATION: BIPOLO CHAKROBORTY

**Theoretically, laws are to protect the powerless. But our legal system is so complex, layered, cumbersome, and expensive that the poor would rather submit than contest. As for politics coming to the aid of the downtrodden, the masses are only good for votes once every five years. For the rest of the time, money and muscle speak far louder than the voices of voters.**

the third child from his home and continued torturing them together. It was not a sudden and uncontrolled outburst that subsided soon after. No, it was his way of showing his power, his anger, and it continued for more than two hours while the kids were paraded through the local bazaar. During the period, the children's parents and families begged and pleaded with him and sought his forgiveness, which came after these kids were publicly humiliated with the final act of having their heads nearly shaved so that, for weeks, they would be mocked, continuously verbally abused and stand out to be pointed at as thieves.

First, it is an issue of class and stature. We are quite certain that the mayor would not have dared harm a trio of 7-, 9- and 11-year-olds if they belonged to the people of the same stature, wealth or political power.

Second, it is also that of power. He felt certain that these kids' parents and families would not dare go to the

police – who are likely to be under his influence anyway – and did not have any powerful "connections" that would hold him to account.

That left the media. We commend the local journalists for rising to the occasion and reporting this violence against the three children who are, we repeat, aged 7, 9, and 11.

The physical and psychological impacts of what the mayor did to these kids cannot be fully fathomed now or even in the near future. The beating, the torture, the hand-tying, and the parading through the locality are likely to leave a lifelong scar on their psyche, far deeper and long-lasting than the beatings they got. The humiliation in front of their parents, families and playmates may leave such a deep sense of shame that they may never ever have a healthy sense of self-respect. Such traumas are known to permanently damage a child's sense of dignity. Obviously, the mayor in question is far removed from the world of respect and dignity to understand, far less appreciate, what we are talking about.

I wonder by whom or how this mayor will be held accountable. Because of the publicity, he is now hiding, waiting for it to blow over and the media to lose interest.

Is there any structure or mechanism that will generate an inquiry, collect evidence from the locals and hold the mayor accountable? Is there any authority to whom the concerned parents could go to seek justice? As I realised that there are none, I shuddered at the thought of how the poor and the powerless live with a constant sense of servility, as victims of the arbitrary exercise of power, legal harassment by the police and the physical threat of violence by local hooligans. The scene becomes nightmarish if we think of the women and children.

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bias against the poor that leads to a general acceptance of violence against them. The logic, however perverted, generally is that when something is missing – money or something else – and if there is a child around, and if that child happens to come from a poor family, then he must be a thief. Beat and torture him, and he will confess, however tenuous its basis may be. Can there be any doubt that the child will "confess"? What else can he or she do?

Three incidents in the last few days tell us how easily and almost casually we torture, physically punish and psychologically devastate children.

In Chattogram, three police officials were withdrawn – what a punishment? – from their post for torturing two children on suspicion of theft. The police officials tied them to a tree and beat them severely for hours. In Jashore, an irate cook threw boiling oil on a 10-year-old child as he dashed against him while coming out of the restaurant. In Feni, police recovered madrasa students who were kept in chains and beaten as part of discipline for any misconduct.

According to a survey conducted by Unicef in 2019, nine in 10 children are subjected to violent discipline or aggression regularly from their caregivers, including parents and teachers. It concludes, "No matter what form of violence a child is exposed to, the experience may lead to serious and lifelong consequences... Evidence also suggests that toxic stress associated with violence in early childhood can permanently impair brain development and damage other parts of the nervous system."

Then there is the finding, in 2022, of the Department of Narcotics Control (DNC) that 56 percent of street children in the country are addicted to different kinds of drugs, and 21 percent of them are used as carriers. Of them, 14 percent said that they had been using drugs since they were 10 years old. The DNC study further found that 64 percent children of those surveyed did not

know how to take care of themselves, and using their vulnerability drug traffickers sell drugs to them and use them as carriers. There is no reliable count of street children in Dhaka or the country. But researchers feel that it would be above a million. Take 56 percent of a million street children, and we get an idea of the scope of the problem.

In addition, there are countless cases of child abduction, imprisonment without legal recourse and sexual exploitation that occur in our society. I have not even referred to the gender-based abuse that a girl child is subjected to, including by extended families. The fundamental injustice and discrimination that is involved in child marriage is better left unsaid.

A lot of lip service is paid for the rights of our children. As a country, we eagerly sign up to all international documents that enshrine all the best values. We were among the first to sign up to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989 and have, no doubt, proclaimed most loudly all our pious intentions in all international fora that we love to attend.

The question is: what have we really done about protecting our children, ensuring a modicum of healthy environment for their growth, and ensuring that they have the minimum of basic rights that they are entitled to as a citizen of a country that never tires of talking about its Liberation War values? Time has come to truthfully answer this question.

As we wrote at the outset, the main issue is of entitlement – the rich and the politically powerful are "entitled" and the poor and the powerless are not. This discrimination lies at the core of the divided society that we are producing. It is also the reason for our general neglect of the children of the poor. Unless we can bring about a fundamental change in how we take care of our future generation, the future of the country – regardless of the myriad graduations we go through – we will not be assured.

Please don't set it aside as a child rights advocacy piece. It is, in fact, aimed at constructing a humane society and us becoming better humans.

(As this piece went to print, the guardians of one of the children had filed a case against the mayor in question with Arahazar police station.)

## Books that you will meet at Dhaka Art Summit

*Bonna* – flood – forms the theme for this year's Dhaka Art Summit. The name contains a character, an action and an occurrence in one word, and it is this melding of stories into history, of literature and art, that reflects throughout the installations being exhibited at the Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy until tomorrow. The literary minded will find almost all of the installations worth poring

over, but for those who are especially interested in literature in book form, the first two floors of the exhibition hold treasures.

Read about *Thakumar Jhuli*, Amitav Ghosh's rendition of *Jungle Nama*, Begum Rokeya and Audre Lorde, and the other book-related installations at Dhaka Art Summit on *The Daily Star* website and on *Daily Star Books'* Facebook, Instagram and Twitter pages.



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