

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

A disaster waiting to happen

Building codes have no value without an authority to enforce them

ARE buildings in Bangladesh immune to disasters? One would certainly assume so from the government's lack of initiative to form a body to enforce the Bangladesh National Building Code (BNBC). The gazette for the BNBC was issued two years ago. It mentions that the government must form a separate agency called the Bangladesh Building Regulatory Authority (BBRA) to enforce the code. Fast forward two years, and we still don't have any such dedicated authority. What was the point of the revised building code then? Was it so that the authorities could simply pretend that they did something to ensure proper building safety? Or was it to actually ensure that building safety is maintained in our country? If it was the latter, then the authorities have done an atrocious job at it.

Urban planning expert M Abu Sadeque, who was in the team that formulated the revised BNBC, said the revised code is a complete set of rules to ensure safe construction of buildings, use of quality materials, accountability of professionals, and conservation of the environment. But in the absence of a regulatory body to implement it, loss of lives and properties continue to happen in various building disasters. Fire safety measures are being largely ignored during building construction across the country. And such negligence makes high-rise buildings particularly vulnerable to fires, as we very recently saw in Gulshan, Dhaka.

Following the devastating FR Tower fire in the capital's Banani area in 2019, the Rajdhani Unnayan Karttripakkha (Rajuk) carried out a field survey on buildings that are 10 storeys and higher, and found 475 of them to have been constructed without its approval and 1,343 others with more floors or floor space than approved by Rajuk. Fire escape, fire alarm system, fire suppression system, and fire safety drills are almost non-existent in high-rise buildings in Dhaka and other urban areas of the country, according to experts.

Complying with the building code will ensure that a life-saving system is in place in buildings with enough fire safety measures and earthquake resilience. Yet, in spite of the disasters that have taken place in our country in recent times, and even the devastating disasters that we have seen occurring elsewhere – the recent earthquakes in Turkey and Syria, for example – the authorities seem to be least concerned about enforcing the necessary safety measures that could make the difference between life and death for hundreds of thousands of people.

Such attitude on the part of the authorities is not only unacceptable, but it is criminal. They are literally putting hundreds of thousands of lives at risk on a daily basis. There is no reason for the authorities to be arrogant enough to believe that sooner or later Bangladesh, too, would not be a victim of a serious natural disaster such as an earthquake. In fact, it is almost guaranteed that it eventually will be. Are we to hold our breath and hope that the authorities will come to their senses before that?

The authorities need to realise that waiting and hoping in this case is a recipe for disaster. The government should urgently form the BBRA, and work on enforcing the BNBC for all our sakes.

Don't dump on the environment

The hillocks of the port city must be protected from unscrupulous razers

IT is highly disappointing that Chattogram's Banshkhali municipality authorities are building a garbage dumping station by destroying two hills, putting the environment of the area in danger in the process. Almost 10,000 square feet of the two hills have reportedly been cut. Two excavators were spotted razing the hills, while three dump trucks were seen transferring the soil by a reporter of this daily. According to sources, these hills have been cut down over the previous three to six months. A local municipality councillor has even claimed that the mayor has chosen the hilly area over other alternative sites so that the hillocks can be razed and the soil can be sold for a profit. If true, this is not only alarming, but downright horrific.

Local leaders should not be able to misuse their power in such a manner, especially when it is common knowledge that the action will cause damage to the environment on a grand scale. The mayor's alleged actions are criminal, and must be dealt with by the authorities as such. The applicable fines and imprisonments should apply to the person(s), no matter their proximity to power.

We are also appalled by the sheer callousness shown by the various relevant authorities regarding this matter. Cutting a hill without the approval of the Department of Environment (DoE) is prohibited under the Bangladesh Environment Protection Act, 1995 (amended in 2000), but this is still a common practice even after years of protests and activism on this issue. As per data from the Bangladesh Environment Forum, 120 hills disappeared from Chattogram city over the last four decades. The port city had 32.37 square kilometres of hills in 1976, which has declined to 14.02 square kilometres in 2008. According to the statistics, there were 200 hills in the port city 40 years ago, and 60 percent of those have now vanished. This raises the question of whether this is just callousness or a case of criminal negligence by the local administration and the DoE.

Unscrupulous parties have been destroying the natural beauty of Chattogram city for personal gains for a long time. This needs to be stopped immediately. The Department of Environment (DoE) needs to step in and assert its authority to stop this onslaught on the environment. The local administration also has the duty to intervene to curb this blatant abuse of power by the politically influential quarters. In this case, the local UNO said that the mayor had promised to take legal action against those involved in the illegal act. But the question remains: why were steps not taken earlier, before the hills were cut down?

Even if the DoE charges the parties responsible for cutting down the hills with fines, it is unlikely that the larger trend of hill cutting for financial gains will stop in the port city. Though many businesses have been fined by the DoE already, razing still goes unabated. It is clear that something more comprehensive is necessary to stop this hill-cutting spree in Chattogram. The local administration as well as the government must prove their political commitment to work together to protect the environment of the city.

Making our public food distribution system work



Dr Sayema Haque Bidisha is professor at the Department of Economics in Dhaka University, and research director at the South Asian Network on Economic Modeling (Sanem).

SAYEMA HAQUE BIDISHA

With the soaring inflation rate in recent times, the importance of effective public food distribution cannot be emphasised enough. While already recovering from pandemic-incurred losses, it is proving difficult for people at the lower end of the distribution chain to cope with the price hikes without adequate support from the government. However, the recent statistics from public food distribution appear to be not addressing this inflationary pressure.

According to the latest data of Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), despite showing a slight decline, food inflation (from the base of 2005-06) is recorded at 7.76 percent, with the rate in rural areas being 7.92 percent and that in the urban areas being 7.41 percent. If we take into account people's income growth, we can observe that their real earnings, based on these two indicators, are in fact exhibiting a declining trend. For example, point-to-point growth of the wage index (with 2010-11 being the base year) across several months was less than that of the consumer price index. The average increase in the price levels for January-October 2022 was 7.45 percent, whereas the average growth of the wage index for the same period was 6.44 percent (rebased for the year 2010-11).

Against this backdrop, we can also observe a downward trend of the public food distribution system (PFDS). Between July 2022 and February 9, 2023, around 1.62 million metric tons of rice and wheat was distributed under the PFDS, while the amount was 1.72 million metric tons between July 2021 and February 3, 2022 – as per food ministry data. The decline is linked to the steep fall in the distribution of wheat (from 400,000 metric tons to 290,000 metric tons during the corresponding time periods) with a moderate decline in rice distribution (from 1.62 million metric tons to 1.33 million



PHOTO: COLLECTED

metric tons). As for rice, 197,000 metric tons were distributed under the Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) programme, 133,000 metric tons under the Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF) programme, and 27,000 metric tons under the food for work programme. On the other hand, within the wheat distribution scheme, the corresponding amounts were 46 metric tons, 262 metric tons, and 40,000 metric tons, respectively. The overall fall in wheat distribution can be linked to the supply disruption caused by the Russia-Ukraine war. In such cases, however, it would be expected that the distribution of rice would be raised to compensate for this decline in wheat stock.

It is worth noting that, despite a relative decline in the overall price level in the last few months, on February 16, 2023, the retail price per

the total public stock of cereals (comprising rice, wheat, and paddy) amounted to around two million metric tons, with the stock of wheat amounting to 390,000 metric tons, that of rice being 1.63 million metric tons, and paddy amounting to 3,000 metric tons. It is crucial that the government utilises its stock of cereals, especially that of rice, under its food distribution system.

There is no denying that, against the backdrop of the adjustments made to accommodate post-Covid recovery, the steep rise in the prices of commodities have put people with fixed incomes under immense pressure. The PFDS can therefore act as a crucial tool for providing support not only to the poor and the vulnerable, but also to middle-income people with fixed earnings.

The authorities must expand the distribution system to reach those at

be the first step towards ensuring food security.

One important consideration in this regard would be to expand the PFDS in a way that, in addition to the poor, the non-poor yet vulnerable population can also be accommodated. As for the middle-income group, fair price shops (in addition to the PFDS) can be administered by employers in urban areas to support their workers.

All these initiatives should, however, be complemented by sufficient distribution of foodgrains. In maintaining the minimum stock, the distribution of foodgrains should match not only the requirement, but also the domestic production. In this regard, total procurement and distribution should not be affected even if the amount of production or import price of one of the cereals is unfavourable.

Prioritise piped water supply in our municipalities



Dr Nawshad Ahmed, a former UN official, is an economist and urban planner.

NAWSHAD AHMED

Ensuring safe water to urban households remains a major public health challenge in Bangladesh. The Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6 is to ensure access to water and sanitation for all. Bangladesh has been experiencing rapid increase in urban population since independence: urban population as a percentage of total population increased from about eight percent in 1971 to nearly 40 percent in 2022.

With the rise in urban population, the number of municipalities has also increased in Bangladesh. In 1974, there were only 50 municipalities in the country, which went up to 329 in 2020. However, about half of the municipalities have no piped water supply system, most of which are small towns. Again, except the four largest cities, less than 10 percent of the population in most other towns are connected to the piped water networks. Although access to water in the residential premises increased from 74.2 percent to 82.4 percent between 2013 and 2019 in the country, the water sources are mainly deep or shallow tube wells and are not necessarily free from contamination.

The quality of water is critical for maintaining household health, since poor quality water is directly linked with communicable diseases, such as diarrhoea. It is estimated that more than 80 percent of diarrhoeal disease is attributable to drinking contaminated

water, improper sanitation, and poor hygiene.

The Department of Public Health Engineering (DPHE), which is under the LGED ministry, is mandated to construct water supply infrastructure, such as production tube wells, water treatment plants, and distribution pipelines in all the municipal areas across the country. When the construction work is completed, the DPHE hands over the system to the municipalities to operate and maintain. The capital assets are provided free of cost to the municipalities through the Annual Development Programme (ADP) without any repayment requirements, but the local bodies are expected to cover operating costs and the overall financial viability of the water supply systems. The government has been strongly emphasising the need for cost recovery in the water sector in recent years.

The Local Government (Municipality) Act, 2009 legally delegated the responsibility to the municipalities for providing clean water to their urban residents. However, despite the fact that the DPHE is constructing the systems and upgrading them where needed, the municipalities cannot afford to run the water supply systems in an efficient manner. They also cannot make it financially viable due to low water tariff on the consumer end. Most of the municipalities impose

water tariffs ranging from Tk 200 to Tk 400 per household per month. The industrial and commercial water tariffs are slightly higher than the domestic rates. The water metres are not in use in smaller municipalities. With low water tariffs, the collection efficiency is also low and may vary between 50 percent and 70 percent, depending on the municipal council's initiatives and the collection efforts made by the water supply staff.

While the DPHE is yet to install the water infrastructure to cover most of the smaller municipalities in Bangladesh, the urban local bodies are unable to run them properly where they do have the system. The revenue earned from water supply is inadequate to maintain a basic piped water system, and therefore remain virtually dependent on the subsidy given out of the holding tax revenue collected by the municipal bodies. Most of the municipalities have also failed to increase the number of water connections, maintain the required quality of water, and collect higher water fees from the consumers. In this situation, most of the urban households continue to use ground water from both deep and shallow tube wells.

The government has a Sector Development Plan (2011-2025) for drinking water and sanitation. The plan had a target for piped water supply coverage of 80 percent in large municipalities and 70 percent in small municipalities by 2020. By 2025, the sectoral plan has a target of 90 percent coverage in large municipalities and 80 percent in small municipalities. In order to achieve these targets, there is an urgent need to enhance the level of investment in the water sector in the municipalities. It is essential to raise investment in water supply to also achieve the SDG6 target of "safe and

sustainable sanitation, hygiene and drinking water used by all."

The municipal bodies must take water supply as their mandatory function more seriously and draw up a medium-term plan to bring 100 percent of urban population under a piped water supply network by 2030. They are expected to provide clean water to the people and at the same time establish a water tariff as per Model By-Laws (Water Supply), 1999 that is adequate for achieving full cost recovery of water supply. The municipalities should use modern methods such as computerised billing and collection of water tariffs to attain financial viability.

While it is essential to increase piped water supply provision, it is also necessary to raise public awareness to increase demand for clean water and regularly pay the bills. There is a tendency among many urban households, as socioeconomic studies have shown, to continue using water from tube wells for drinking and everyday use and not accept piped water because they need to pay the water tariff.

To change this attitude, the government should revisit its policy of free or heavily subsidised distribution of tube wells in urban areas. When the urban households compare the cost of piped water with tube well water, they find it cheaper to continue with their tube well water. Therefore, there is a need to undertake a communication campaign to popularise piped water and raise demand for it from the perspective of its health consequence, as tube well water contains many impurities.

Therefore, in densely populated municipal areas of Bangladesh, all households must be brought under safe piped water supply networks within the shortest possible time.