

The Daily Star

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Let there be restraint in Ramadan market

Increase monitoring to check manipulation of food prices

As we enter the holy month of Ramadan, there is a lingering concern writ large among ordinary consumers: will prices continue to remain unstable and soar higher? To expect a dramatic change from how things were pre-Ramadan would be unwise, despite assurances of "sufficient food supplies" which are expected to bring stability in the market. While talking to *The Daily Star*, a number of people from the low-income group have shared their frustration. For example, one woman described how she bought 250-gram dressed chicken at a staggering Tk 110 for her family of five. "I will store the chicken in a neighbour's fridge and cook it on the first day of Ramadan," she said, adding that buying beef, fish, milk or fruits is "out of the question" for them.

This is the story of most low-income households caught between their stagnant income and ever-increasing prices of essential items. According to the Trading Corporation of Bangladesh, sugar was Tk 80 a kg just before Ramadan last year; now it's Tk 115-120. The price of chickpeas rose from Tk 70 to Tk 85-90 a kg, and lentils from Tk 95-100 to Tk 135-140 a kg. The price of dates rose by 26 percent, eggs by 24.32 percent, broiler chicken by 62.5 percent and beef by 8.89 percent. How are the poor supposed to bear such expenses?

Sadly, there are at least three laws to check abnormal price hikes – namely, the Control of Essential Commodities Act-1956, Consumers' Right Protection Act-2009, and Agricultural Marketing Act-2018 – and as many government bodies to enforce them – namely, the Directorate General of Food, the Directorate of National Consumers Right Protection, and the Department of Agriculture Marketing. Apparently, the food ministry is working on amending the Control of Essential Commodities Act to incorporate a provision for capital punishment for hoarding. This marks a rather absurd turn of events at a time when it is evident that it is not lack of laws but their enforcement that is responsible for the total chaos in the market. Toughening up penalties, just like those periodic warnings/assurances issued by the government, minus visible results, are little more than ill-timed PR exercises that the public could do without right now.

While the effect of the Russia-Ukraine war is no doubt a big factor behind the high prices of essentials, the lack of market regulation is equally to blame for that, with corrupt traders taking advantage of the situation. It's been like "a cat and mouse game" between the regulators and traders, as a former food secretary claimed. Drives are carried out when prices of essentials are artificially raised, she said, but those only bring temporary relief and the problem persists. However, those drives are rarely carried out or followed up on, and hence rarely been effective. The question is, how long will the government try to deflect attention from its own failures?

As things stand, people's suffering may continue during this Ramadan as well. We, therefore, urge the authorities to take strong action to prevent any market manipulation. Unscrupulous businessmen must be restrained and brought under the law.

A step closer to ending homelessness

Govt should build on Ashrayan-2 project success to address plight of all homeless people

It is encouraging to see that the government's plan to ensure that no one remains homeless in the country is going strong. On Wednesday, in the fourth phase of the Ashrayan-2 project, 39,365 more houses (along with land documents) were handed over to beneficiaries from 493 upazilas. With this, the number of houses handed over under this project since January 2021 stands at 215,827. In total, there are now 211 upazilas that have been declared homeless-free. This is nothing short of remarkable, coming as it does at a time when the poor are struggling to meet their basic needs, including housing. Reportedly, the PM has asked all concerned to identify families that remain landless in areas already declared homeless-free, which we hope will be quickly followed up on. We must, however, convey some concerns that deserve appropriate attention.

One may recall that in July 2021, after houses were donated over the first six months of that year, multiple reports cited incidences of poor construction and corruption in the Ashrayan-2 project. For instance, in Pabna's Santhia upazila, over 100 houses under the project were found to be 1.5 feet shorter than what was in the construction plan. This allegedly happened due to the hastiness of workers and lack of monitoring by the implementing team. During the same period, seven such houses in Bogura's Sherpur upazila partially collapsed after a moderate rainfall. There have been also reports of families being forced to pay hefty sums of money to access houses that should have been given free, as well as instances of solvent landowners sneaking their way into lists of beneficiaries.

To the government's credit, however, there have been initiatives to rectify some of the irregularities. In the face of houses collapsing due to poor-quality construction, for instance, the government upped the budget for the construction of homes under Ashrayan-2 project beginning from its third phase last year. In August 2021, we saw the arrest of a union parishad member for illegally occupying three houses built under the project in Thakurgaon Sadar upazila. Efforts to address such loopholes and irregularities should continue. But the sincerity shown so far by the higher-ups is admirable. It gives us hope that the government's goal of zero homelessness is indeed achievable, if the present momentum is kept up.

By ensuring that one of the most basic human needs (housing) for all citizens is met, the government is also taking the country further in terms of achieving a number of Sustainable Development Goals related to reducing poverty, inequality, and improving life on land. We would encourage the authorities to expand their schemes to address the plight of the urban homeless/street population as well, and also address any irregularities in the Ashrayan-2 project as they appear. No one should have to suffer homelessness in a free country.

Not road accidents, but 'murder' by neglect



THE THIRD VIEW

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MAHFUZ ANAM

FROM PAGE 1

Every time a tragedy occurs on our roads and highways, we report that most buses don't have the necessary papers for them to be in service – most vitally, no "fitness certificate" that proves their roadworthiness. We also report that the fitness-certificate-issuing personnel and machines are inadequate to meet the demand. At the moment, there is only one Vehicle Inspection Centre (VIC) in the whole country, inspecting about 100 buses and trucks daily out of 229,369 buses, trucks, and minibuses. Why its capacity is not increased and why more such centres are not set up all over the country is a question to which we have received no answer. It may not be inappropriate to conclude that the buses that ply on our roads are most likely unfit to carry passengers, and as such are potential "killing machines." But, of course, bribes can solve everything.

We have also reported over the last decade, if not even before, that most bus drivers are without licence. Many of them carry fake ones because they are faster and easier – not to mention cheaper – to get than the real ones. Again, why this situation is not addressed, with all the digitalisation that is going on, is a question that is never answered. Maybe we are forgetting the magic of bribes.

Most drivers have only a rudimentary knowledge of driving and perhaps no awareness or training about special conditions, such as driving in the rain when roads get slippery and traction of the tyres with the road surface is far weaker. Driving in tropical Bangladesh without this particular training is like asking for "accidents" to happen.

We import the chassis for our buses. The rest is built here – body, seats, and all the safety measures. It is a highly technical task given that a safe balance needs to be ensured between the strength of the material used, the weight it can support, the impact on the frame when on a curve (especially when the bus is full), the speed-weight ratio while driving, pressure on the tyres during a sudden brake with a full load of passengers, passengers being seated or standing, etc. All of these are vital elements to consider in preventing an accident. What are the compliance standards to be met when a bus is registered? Are those who monitor compliance appropriately trained?



The bus that crashed in Madaripur on March 19, 2023 had no fitness certificate.

PHOTO: SUZIT KUMAR DAS

There is nothing called a "health check" for bus drivers, especially their eyesight and whether they need glasses. This is especially true for those who drive at night. Random studies have revealed that about 60-70 percent of the drivers need glasses and suffer from degrees of night blindness.

Then there is the issue of working hours. There is hardly any mandatory rest time for bus drivers. Often they fall asleep while behind the steering wheel as owners prefer to pay "overtime" rather than hire an additional driver, which could save lives. We have seen cases where the accident occurred because the conductor was driving the vehicle instead of the driver.

Name the possible violations that can occur in any road transportation system, and we have it. And the main reason behind all this is the magic of bribes.

Above all the laws, regulations, practices, government directives – above everything – operates the "law of bribery." It is far more effective, fast and accountable than any law in our statute book. *The Daily Star* investigation has revealed that a mobile network is in operation that extracts monthly "fees" from buses and trucks proportionate to their size and the number of trips they make. Something like a "mobile app" exists that has numbers of all the buses and trucks on whom these "fees" are imposed. Payment is noted on the

app and can be verified by designated traffic officials in any part of the city. So, any defaulter is immediately identifiable and punishable. The collection is done digitally and is shared according to the hierarchy of the institution.

Widespread bribery destroys the whole legal edifice and is the main reason why, after decades of exposure

because we appear to be too nosy.

All this happens and has been happening over the years because those who rule us (meaning all governments) do not think much of our right to life.

According to Bangladesh Jatri Kalyan Samity (BJKS), a private body set up to protect passengers' rights, 39,522 people have been killed and 58,791 injured between 2018 and 2022

by government investigations and media reports, nothing has changed. The rationale is impregnable. The more bus owners break the law, the greater is the hold of the law enforcers on them and stronger is the need to pay bribes. As many owners have said to the media, albeit anonymously for fear of repercussions, "We have to pay bribes anyway, whether we have all the papers or not. So why get papers for which, again, we have to pay bribes on top of government fees, which have grown increasingly higher." This network of bribery is known to all. The power dynamics is such that the government prefers to look the other way.

The stark fact that stares us in the face is that, as passengers, when we board a bus, we have no guarantee of what should be our fundamental right – the right to a safe journey. We do not know if the bus we are boarding is registered or plying illegally. We do not know if the bus is fit for the road. (In the accident that killed 19 people, the media reported that the driver was told about a problem with the brake, and that it may fail. He decided to fix it upon return to Dhaka.) We do not know if the bus driver has a valid licence. We do not know about the state of his mind, health, eyesight and whether he was drunk – a fact that is vital for night-time driving. In fact, we know nothing and also cannot ask for fear that we may be bumped off

in 28,299 cases of road crashes. The figures were compiled from media reports. It needs to be added that not all road crashes are reported in the media, so the real death toll can be assumed to be much higher. Police say 20,413 people were killed in 21,625 accidents during the same period, based on the cases filed with them. Not all accident victims file cases with the police due to various reasons; hence their number is lower.

If we take the BJKS figures, we get an annual death figure of nearly 8,000 (as per police, it would be 4,000) due to road crashes. According to the UN human rights commissioner's office (OHCHR), the non-combatant deaths in the first year of the Russia-Ukraine war has been confirmed to be at least 8,000. Just the deaths on the roads of a country in peace becomes comparable to a country under regular bombardment by a foreign aggressor. What an irony. If we take the police figures, then the death toll is half. Even then, the irony remains just as striking.

Two things need to change: level of respect for human lives, and our government's accountability system. We know a lot of lip service will be paid for the former and an even greater volume for the latter. Thus, we will continue to live in our make-belief world while more Bangladeshis will die – not in any foreign land or due to any aggression, but on our roads.

A model election?

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GOLAM MORTOZA

With the next parliamentary election less than a year away, what unfolded at the Supreme Court Bar Association (SCBA) election last week carries a lot of significance.

The SCBA election has a long-held tradition. Our lawyers are usually directly involved in national politics; they have played pivotal roles in all past movements, including the anti-autocratic movement. Many national-level politicians have come from this pool of lawyers. In the SCBA election, pro-Awami League and pro-BNP lawyers compete. Usually, SCBA elections are widely accepted and deemed fair.

This year, a seven-member subcommittee led by senior lawyer Munsurul Hoque Chowdhury was formed to conduct the election. Among the members, there were an equal number of pro-AL and pro-BNP lawyers. Munsurul is known to be a pro-AL lawyer and has contested under the AL banner in some previous elections. However, his political alignment did not clash with his electoral duties – he was equally accepted by both sides.

However, as the election day drew close, distrust and agitation grew between the two sides. Munsurul had disagreements with the pro-AL lawyers about conducting the

election, printing ballot papers, and counting votes. Allegedly, the pro-AL leaders openly called him biased and disrespected him. Munsurul wanted to use the electronic counting machine (ECM) to count the votes, and to take personal responsibility for printing the ballot papers. The pro-AL lawyers demanded that vote counting be manual, and that the current executive committee members should print the ballot papers. Amid such disagreement, Munsurul suddenly resigned just a day before the election. Crisis started unfolding then, and the election's overall mood shifted.

The electoral duty fell upon Md Moniruzzaman, a member of the convening committee. The pro-BNP lawyers complained that, as per rule, both sides needed to sit down and award the responsibility to a senior lawyer. Instead of that, pro-AL members took a unilateral decision ignoring the seniors and chose Moniruzzaman, a junior lawyer.

On the other hand, pro-AL lawyers claimed that the new convenor was chosen as per rules, alleging that the pro-BNP lawyers were complaining in order to bring the election under question.

The pro-BNP lawyers claimed that their AL counterparts had printed the

ballot papers on their own. Allegedly, 1,000 extra ballot papers were printed, and the pro-AL lawyers had stamped the ballot papers the night before the election, during which the pro-BNP lawyers arrived, and chaos ensued. Pro-AL lawyers denied any foul play.

The next day, pro-AL lawyers prepared to start vote-casting from 10am. However, lawyers from the other side intervened and a scuffle broke out.

At around 11:30am, police entered the fray and started mercilessly beating up the pro-BNP lawyers, who were forced to leave the election premises. Then, police started attacking the journalists who were there to cover the election.

Why were the journalists beaten up? They didn't stop the police as they were beating up the lawyers, nor did they impede the election in any way.

But they were there witnessing what was happening. They captured images and audio of lawyers who didn't commit any crimes being beaten up. The journalists were beaten and driven out so that they would not be able to observe the election.

Who is to be blamed? Who called in the police?

The chief justice told the pro-BNP lawyers that he did not call the police and didn't allow them to enter the premises, as per media reports. Senior lawyer ZI Khan Panna told *The Daily Star* that although there is no law in this regard, police cannot enter the Supreme Court premises without the chief justice's permission.

From the case that was filed with Shahbagh police station regarding this incident, we learnt that the pro-AL lawyer panel's chairman candidate Md Momtaz Uddin Fakir and secretary

candidate Abdun Nur Dulal sought police cooperation. The top brass of police then discussed this issue with the law minister and the attorney general. It is also mentioned that each and every member of the election committee as well as the general lawyers sought help from police. The pro-BNP lawyers, however, said their three members did not seek police's help.

We can safely assume that Munsurul Hoque Chowdhury was disrespected and/or forced to resign. The night before the election, Munsurul's name on the ballot papers was replaced with the new convenor's name, who signed on them. The pro-BNP lawyers claim that votes were also cast at that time. Whatever the truth may be, the pro-BNP lawyers' claim of foul play does have some merit.

It is also evident that pro-AL lawyers had called in the police; the chief justice played no part in it. And why did they start the polling only after driving out the journalists?

The allegations raised by pro-BNP lawyers can be verified. Whether the election was properly conducted or not can also be probed. However, the most critical and debate-worthy question is: what example did this event create? In order to initiate vote-casting, one competing side and the journalists had to be removed via brutal beating. Seeing this, one cannot help but wonder about what may happen in the upcoming general election. If the SCBA election is considered a demonstration of a "model election," what can we expect in the future?

Translated by Mohammed Ishtiaque Khan.