

Bangladeshis paying way more for essentials

This did not happen by chance, but because of poor governance

It is unfortunate that people in Bangladesh are unable to benefit from the fall in the prices of essentials in the international market. On the contrary, Bangladeshis have been struggling to make ends meet with domestic prices remaining extremely high. As a result of the Russia-Ukraine war, prices of essentials in the international market hit a record high 10 months ago. Since then, prices of most commodities have come down in the international market, but not by the same amount or at all in our domestic market, according to *Prothom Alo* findings.

The price of soybean oil, for example, went up to \$1,883 per tonne back in May 2022. That has dropped to \$1,331 this month in the international market – a 29 percent decrease. Yet, in Bangladesh, the soybean oil price has dropped by a measly nine percent. Similarly, the price of palm oil has also come down in the global market by 36 percent per tonne, but in the domestic market, the price has been reduced by 26 percent. The price of lentils, one of the few sources of protein which the lower-income groups can afford – especially when prices of meat and fish are still high – has gone down by 20 percent internationally. But in Bangladesh, the price has been reduced by 10 percent only. The main reasons for such discrepancies, according to traders, are the rise in the prices of dollars, gas and electricity. And for that, the blame must fall on the government's poor policies.

Had the government not artificially propped up the taka's value against the dollar over the years, but allowed it to depreciate gradually instead of suddenly all at once, as experts have opined, the price shock would not have hit consumers this hard. The government's refusal to explore gas within the country – despite multinational organisations and experts remaining confident that it would pay dividends – and opting to import expensive LNG, in defiance of all logic, have been terribly detrimental for us. In fact, the only explanation behind this government decision which makes any sense is that the government wanted to benefit some politically connected importers of gas, as some have recently proposed.

Meanwhile, the price of flour, which has remained steady internationally, has gone up by 35 percent in Bangladesh in the last 10 months, apparently because its import from India has stopped completely since last November. The price of onions, which has gone down by 25 percent in the international market, has gone up in Bangladesh because of shortage rumours. In both cases, poor market monitoring and the government's inability to assure that there are no shortages, or to squash rumours of shortages, are to blame.

What all these government failures and poor policies show is that the government is either terribly unaware of how badly people are suffering as a result of high commodity prices, or it just doesn't care; but given the scenario on the ground, it ought to. The government needs to own up to its past mistakes, listen to expert advice, and work overtime to bring prices under control and within people's reach.

The crumbling coasts

Illegal sand mining is eating away people's farmland and wildlife habitats

That our environment – and by extension, people's lives and livelihoods that depend upon it – is at the mercy of powerful quarters is no longer news. Yet, we can't help but be horrified by the extent shipbreakers and influential locals are exploiting the environment in Chattogram's Sitakunda upazila. According to our report, they have been extracting huge amounts of sand from the Sandwip Channel of the Bay of Bengal – as usual, with impunity – resulting in the destruction of embankments and coastal forests. At least two kilometres have reportedly already collapsed due to uncontrolled sand mining, while more embankments are at risk of collapsing, putting the area and its inhabitants at tremendous risk of natural calamities. Meanwhile, saline water from the sea is now inundating cultivable land in the surrounding areas, leading to a loss of prized farmland and farmers' income. With coastal forests taking the hit of the sand mining, hundreds of wildlife species have already been displaced and thousands of trees will likely die if nothing is done to stop it.

What is most upsetting is that this has been happening because the Ministry of Industries gave special permission to shipbreakers to lift sand from their yards, apparently to facilitate the anchoring and navigability of the ships. Many shipbreakers, it seems, have taken this provision as permission to lift sand at will, whenever and from wherever, even going so far as to lift sand from the sea and selling it to local buyers. As much as 300,000 cubic feet of sand has already been excavated from the Sitakunda coast, according to an enquiry report from the Department of Environment (DoE), even though it is illegal to lift sand from the sea, rivers and water bodies for commercial purposes, without permission from the relevant authorities.

There can be no doubt that destruction on such a massive scale has taken place because the authorities failed to do their job. And as usual, no one is willing to take the blame. The DoE, for instance, says that it can only levy fines on miners, but that it falls upon the Ministry of Land to take harsher steps. But even if that were true, thus far, they have only fined three companies a meagre Tk 250,000, which, when compared to the tremendous profits they are making from the mining, is a drop in the ocean. Are we to believe these are the only companies that are grossly violating the law? Meanwhile, the Ministry of Land, which is supposed to implement the Sand Fields Management Act, has apparently conducted only 10 mobile courts in two years to stop sand mining, which has clearly been inadequate in detecting and deterring the lawbreakers. As for the Ministry of Industries, why would they grant such a special provision if it couldn't guarantee coordination among the relevant authorities to ensure monitoring and compliance?

The authorities involved must answer for their part in enabling such a large-scale devastation to take place. Most importantly, they must stop their usual blame game and take coordinated steps to urgently stop all sand mining in the area, and protect people's lives, livelihoods, forests and wildlife habitats.

For whom the titles toll



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

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SHAMSAD MORTUZA

I have the best job in the world. I read stories and poems for fun. I share my joy with my students. And I get paid for it. The best part is, with every new batch, I return to old texts and find new meanings and new reactions. The freshness of young students keeps me alert and agile.

I don't blame those who are envious of my profession. Little do I care if people call me "Sir" out of love, respect, conviction or protocol. The great master I had, under whose apprenticeship I got accepted for my highest academic degree, never insisted that I address him as "Sir," even though he was native to the country responsible for the colonial hangover that has led to our obsession with being a sire while in a position of power. I called my PhD supervisor by his first name. That was the norm at graduate schools in the UK. In a formal setting or at an undergraduate level, you are expected to use a title with surname, but never Sir or Madam. So I don't mind if people call me by my first name without any honorifics as long as I know that the address is sincere and genuine.

I teach my students to learn from the essential human spirit embedded in human triumphs and downfalls, engagements and detachments. We deal with characters in every possible permutation and combination of lived and imagined experiences to prepare for life. When characters from the pages of our imagination appear, I start making connections. That's what literature is all about.

The young rebels that I teach about appear in the real world in the guise of some little girls of Bogura Government Girls' High School. My passion for life is renewed by their spirit of redressing wrongs. The older generation, represented by their parents and teachers, surrendered to the whims of an additional district and sessions judge who allegedly threatened her daughter's classmates with jail terms under the Digital Security Act (DSA).

While the old ones boosted the ego of the judge by apparently begging for her mercy by touching her feet to protect their daughter from her wrath, the young ones staged a protest that



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has now allowed the judge to be judged. The protesters insisted that at school the only identity that the judge has is that of a mother and guardian. When other girls are expected to sweep the classrooms to keep them clean, the daughter of the said judge should have done the same. On the contrary, the young girl, powered by her mother's haughtiness, refused to join her peers in the cleaning process. The girls acted as the voice of democracy. Their boldness makes me alive. They are my Joan of Arc. These little ones exposed one instance of abuse of power within the system. The judge has now been recalled.

A similar tension over power dynamics was felt when the deputy commissioner of Rangpur insisted on being addressed as "Sir." She got into an altercation with a university teacher who went to her office for an official purpose. The officer did not like the way she was being addressed as "*Apa*" (sister) and told her visitor to follow the official decorum. The university teacher staged a protest, which drew media traction.

The "*Apa*" address was a sign of her not being taken seriously enough.

The debate that has erupted now involves the desire to de-sire colonial legacies. As a student of postcolonial literature, I would welcome any such move that would revisit some of the colonial biases and practices and end all forms of asymmetrical power arrangements. But I think what the officer said about her post is important: you need to show respect to the chair. A personalised *bhai* and *apa* often compromise the dignity and integrity of the post. We often face such odd examples in real life. For instance, if a minister comes to our campus, a university teacher is expected to address him/her as "sir." Then again, our politically active students, who address us as their sir or madam, would address the minister as "*bhai*"/*apa*," latching onto their party camaraderie.

In *The Prison Diaries*, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman shares a funny anecdote. One thief was promoted to the position of a guard. He wrote to his wife about the prestige and honours

Sometimes reality is stranger than fiction. The internet is rife with a modern-day Count of Monte Cristo. An absconding prisoner returns to city life with an immense amount of wealth to settle some scores. On second thought, Arav Khan, the Dubai-based gold jewellery shop owner, is showing off his wealth with the naivety of a teenager. He is playing pranks with the police like the childhood game that we used to play, "See croc, we have dipped into your water." The crocs are probably his old patrons who sponsored his business.

In Ben Jonson's animal allegory *Volpone*, a fox is outwitted by his parasite, a fly called Mosca. To avoid his sex scandal, the fox uses his parasite's help to announce his death. The moment the fox is presumed dead, the slave fly claims himself as the fox's sole heir and takes possession of his property. The slave fly does not anticipate the "master" stroke: the fox comes back to life to expose the cheat.

Volpone was a gold worshipper who treated gold as his soul. My job is fun. I connect stories.

How Bangladesh can survive in a geopolitical age

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After spending months studying the issues related to the US-led Indo-Pacific Strategy, the foreign ministry of Bangladesh has finalised a draft strategic paper on Dhaka's position on this matter. The paper, provisionally titled "Indo-Pacific Outlook," expected to be released in April, is meant to clarify Dhaka's stance on how it sees the Indo-Pacific Strategy and what it wants to achieve in the context of the growing geopolitical contest between the United States and China in the region. By highlighting the importance of not leaning towards any side, the responsible foreign ministry officials suggested that Dhaka considered the Indo-Pacific Strategy mostly from the economic point of view.

As a rising middle power, Bangladesh is being wooed by major powers as a market, investment destination, and strategic outpost. Its rising importance is recognised in the protracted great power competition (GPC), particularly between China and the US. Qin Gang, China's former ambassador to the US and the newly appointed foreign minister, made a surprise "technical stopover" at the Dhaka airport, meeting his Bangladesh counterpart Dr Abdul Momen before making his first diplomatic trip to Africa on January 10.

Just four days after the Chinese foreign minister's visit, US Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asia Donald Lu arrived in Dhaka for a

two-day visit on January 14. This was the second high-profile visit by a US government official within a week, following the four-day visit of US National Security Council's Senior Director for South Asia Rear Admiral Eileen Laubacher on January 7.

These visits by high-ranking US and Chinese government officials were soon followed by Anne-Marie Trevelyan, UK's minister for the Indo-Pacific, who visited Bangladesh on March 10.

With Bangladesh becoming the site of major power rivalry, Dhaka needs to understand the unfolding dynamics of the great power competition by figuring out a more effective way to ensure its survival in this new geopolitical age. Dhaka's ability to handle foreign affairs and relationships with other countries will determine whether Bangladesh is torn apart by the rivalry of bloc politics or succeeds in preserving its political independence by safeguarding its national interest.

One overriding national interest of Bangladesh is its physical survival as an independent sovereign state. In order to preserve and defend its hard-won independence, Dhaka has a vital stake in ensuring that the region as a whole is peaceful while the neighbouring countries remain friendly (or at least not hostile) towards Bangladesh. The rationale behind "Friendship to all, malice to none," therefore, is to

dissociate Bangladesh from military alliances by avoiding alienating major powers.

Another important national interest of Bangladesh is its economic security for the people. In order to continue the growth of exports, the flow of foreign investment, and official development assistance, it is in Bangladesh's economic interest to keep friendly relations with other countries for trade, assistance and support.

The fact that Bangladesh, as the foreign minister suggested, is getting so much geopolitical attention means the country can no longer fully insulate itself from major power rivalry in the Indo-Pacific region. Bangladesh has successfully established good relationships with different countries and major powers by adopting a policy of peace and non-alignment. However, with South Asia and the Indian Ocean region increasingly becoming a significant site of major power competition, it will be very difficult, if not impossible, for Dhaka to continuously adopt this middle-ground approach.

Bangladesh wishes to avoid upsetting China, since China is crucial for its socioeconomic and infrastructural development. As Foreign Minister Abdul Momen puts it, "[W]e need to help develop our economy, and they (China) have baskets of money. They come with the baskets of money with affordable and aggressive proposals." On the other hand, the US has exerted great efforts to persuade Bangladesh to join the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), and the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF).

But the reality facing Dhaka is, while the US is keen to incorporate Bangladesh into the Indo-Pacific Strategy, China has (already) made

its displeasure known over the possible consequences of Dhaka's participation in the anti-Beijing "club." In this context, maintaining a good relationship with both Washington and Beijing at the same time, even as Momen admits, is a challenging task.

Furthermore, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has put Bangladesh in an awkward position. Except voicing its support for the territorial integrity of Ukraine and peaceful settlement of all disputes, Bangladesh has abstained on every UN resolution condemning Russia. Since the US seeks to intensify sanctions against Russia, Bangladesh's "neutral" stance may amount to a form of tacit support for Russia's act of aggression. Dhaka's room to manoeuvre by maintaining a balanced foreign policy is, inevitably, shrinking.

Bangladesh's vital national interest lies in its extensive decision-making autonomy. Therefore, rather than paying attention to the attitudes of major powers towards the country (in order not to upset them), Dhaka has to demonstrate its ability to conduct an independent foreign policy by evaluating whether becoming part of US Indo-Pacific Strategy, including joining the QUAD and the IPEF, is in its national interest.

With the Russia-Ukraine war dragging on, and both the US and China vying for influence in the Indo-Pacific, there is no better time than now for Bangladeshi policymakers to think and reflect on their country's geopolitical value, re-evaluate its relationship with major powers, and have the nerve to come to grips with some tough decisions. After all, siding with a major power on the basis of common interests instead of having the best of the two worlds may be crucial to Bangladesh's fundamental survival in this geopolitical age.