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FY23 BUDGET

Little room for trimming as austerity fails

REJAUL KARIM BYRON and JAMIL MAHMUD

In the end, was the government's austerity stance just lip service?

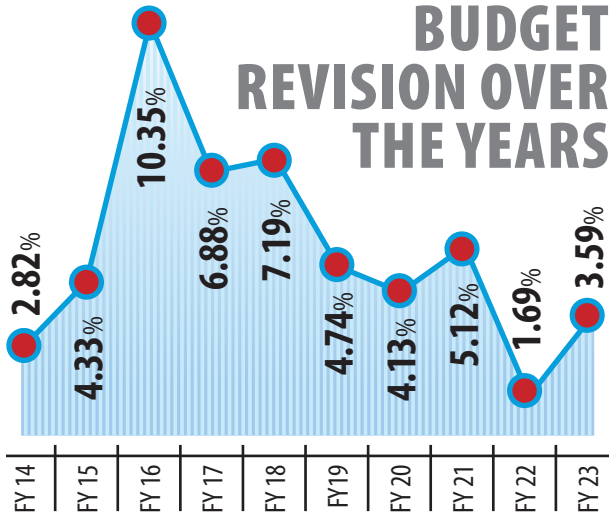
After rolling back most of the austerity measures earlier this month, the government's apathy towards prudence was reflected in the revised budget.

In the revised budget, more allocation has been made for interest payment and subsidies for food, agriculture and power, while funds were made available for resumption of normal service after the retraction of austerity measures.

As a result, the budget could be downsized by about 3.6 percent to Tk 654,537 crore, The Daily Star has learnt from finance ministry officials involved with the proceedings.

On the first day of the fiscal year, the government announced several austerity measures such as bans on vehicle purchases and foreign trips and reduced allowances for petrol, oil, fuel, lubricant and gas.

Now, vehicle purchase is allowed, while the ministries and divisions can spend up to 80 percent of their



allowance for petrol, oil, fuel, lubricant and gas. Only the ban on foreign tours by government officials remains.

As a result, Tk 11,500 crore has been made available for these purposes in the revised budget, down from Tk 18,000 crore in the original budget.

In other words, it can be assumed that the austerity measures yielded savings of about Tk 6,500 crore.

"Although the allocation is there in the revised budget, the total amount might not be spent at the end of the year," said one of the officials on the condition of anonymity.

For instance, the ban on foreign tours remains but some officials need to go abroad out of extreme necessity. "So an allocation was kept to accommodate such trips," the official added.

In the revised budget, the government's subsidy for the power sector has increased by a staggering 59 percent to Tk 27,000 crore despite the recent increases in the electricity price.

At a time when fuel and energy prices are on the decline around the world, the government thrice increased the electricity price by 5 percent each time this year.

However, the subsidy for liquefied natural gas purchase has been slashed by a third to Tk 4,000 crore as LNG prices plunged more than 70 percent since the start of

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Smoke emitting from a large earthen stove in which bricks are being burned in the Chenchuri area of Khulna's Dumuria upazila yesterday. At least 12,000 bricks are burned every day in one of these stoves and the process requires almost 100 maunds of wood. The whole process lasts at least 25-30 hours, with massive amounts of smoke spreading throughout the area, posing health hazards for the locals and causing harm to the environment.

PHOTO: HABIBUR RAHMAN

'We'll deliver justice'

Says HC voicing concern that state hasn't filed case

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The High Court has expressed grave concern and resentment as the state has not filed any case after the death of Sultana Jasmine in Rab custody.

"Her death in law enforcers' custody after sustaining injury in the head has become a burning issue in the country. A case has to be filed in connection with the incident.

"If her family cannot lodge the case, the state has the responsibility of filing one. The people of the country want justice to be delivered on the matter. We will deliver justice," the HC bench of Justice Farah Mahbub and Justice Ahmed Sohail told Assistant Attorney General Md Abul Kalam Khan Daud during a hearing on the issue yesterday.

The bench made the observation on its own

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SULTANA'S DEATH IN CUSTODY
She had head injury, cause still unknown

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Rajshahi

Sultana Jasmine, a union-level land employee in Naogaon who died in the custody of Rapid Action Battalion on Friday, had suffered a head injury along with brain haemorrhages but what caused it all remains unexplained.

Forensic doctors at Rajshahi Medical College (RMC) conducted an autopsy a day after her death that triggered a barrage of criticism from human rights groups with the High Court asking questions.

"Sultana Jasmine suffered an injury to her head apart from haemorrhages in her brain," said Associate Prof Kafil Uddin, who led a three-member board formed to conduct the autopsy.

The team sent her heart sample to RMC's pathology department for a histopathological report.

"We will know the ultimate cause of her death after the report is available," added Kafil Uddin, head of forensic medicine department at the

college.

Sultana, 38, an office assistant of Naogaon Municipality-Chandipur Union Land Office, was picked up by a Rab-5 patrol team on Wednesday while she was walking to her office from home.



Later in the day, she was taken to Naogaon Sadar Hospital and then to Rajshahi Medical College Hospital, where she breathed her last on Friday, according to hospital authorities.

In her death certificate, the cause of death is stated as

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ROHINGYA CRISIS
US committed to long-term solutions

Biden writes to Hasina, says she set example of empathy for world

UNB, Dhaka

US President Joe Biden has said his country made a commitment to finding long-term solutions to the Rohingya refugee crisis and holding perpetrators of the atrocities accountable.

"You set an example for the world of empathy and generosity in practice," the US president wrote to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

The US embassy in Dhaka shared the letter on Sunday which was originally sent on March 21.

The US president said Bangladesh has opened its arms and welcomed nearly one million Rohingya refugees.

In a message to Hasina, Biden on behalf of the United States wished her and the people of Bangladesh a happy Independence Day.

Bangladeshis understand deeply the value of freedom and independence, as they fought courageously in 1971

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PM slams BNP's call for movement in Ramadan



BSS, Dhaka

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday criticised the BNP's call for movement during Ramadan.

"They [BNP] have announced that they will continue movement even during the Ramadan. At least give people relief from the movement during Ramadan," she said.

The PM was addressing a discussion, organised by the Awami League marking

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BUSINESS

Focus on containing all risks: CPD

The budget for the next fiscal year should target containing risks stemming from global turbulence and the absence of discipline, good governance and reforms in macroeconomic management, said the Centre for Policy Dialogue yesterday.

Fahmida Khatun, executive director of the CPD, termed Covid-19 and Russia-Ukraine war as external storms while a lack of good governance as internal storm. "Because of the storms, project implementation has become slower, jobs are not being created and corruption is rising."

STORY ON BI

Commodity prices soaring due to domestic reasons

Says CPD; rice, sugar, soybean oil pricier here compared to other developing countries

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Prices of essentials are rising sharply and going beyond the people's reach due partly to domestic reasons, including market distortions by a small number of dominant firms and lax regulations, said the Centre for Policy Dialogue yesterday.

The CPD made the observation at an event titled "CPD's Recommendations for the National Budget FY2023-24", held at its office in the capital's Dhanmondi.

There are some essentials such as rice, sugar, soybean oil and beef that are more expensive in Bangladesh than in other developing or industrialised countries, said Fahmida Khatun, executive director of the think-tank.

Many families, including those having minimum wage earners, are struggling to afford them. So, many of them are excluding meat and fish from their menus, she said.

Comparison of prices shows that the prices of essentials don't fall in Bangladesh even when the international prices decline. Moreover, the prices of some food items have remained consistently higher at home than those in the global markets, according to Fahmida.

At least 28 imported essential food items carry high incidence of tax, she observed.

"In the backdrop of the soaring inflation, the National Board of Revenue should reduce the duties and taxes both at the import and domestic levels in order to provide some respite to consumers with low and limited incomes."



People queue up in front of an OMS truck to buy rice and flour at subsidised price at Basila in the capital's Mohammadpur yesterday. Each of them was allowed to buy five kg of rice at Tk 30 per kg and two kg of flour at Tk 24 per kg.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

CLASH ON MAR 26
Police sue 265 BNP men in Netrakona

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Mymensingh

Police on Sunday evening sued 265 BNP men in two cases field in Netrakona's Durgapur upazila over alleged attack on police and obstructing police in performing their duties that morning.

Sub-Inspector Sanwar Hossain and Sub-Inspector Shuvashish Ganguly filed the cases with Durgapur Police Station, said the station's Office-in-Charge Shibirul Islam.

Of the accused, 35 were named and 13 people have already been arrested, said the OC.

After interrogation, they were produced before a Netrakona court this afternoon that sent them to jail, added the OC.

The detainees include ex-president of BNP Durgapur upazila unit Imam Hasan Abu Chan; convener of Durgapur municipality BNP Aatur

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