

Welcome promise of ever-elusive 'justice'

Sultana's case must not meet the same fate as countless others

We welcome the High Court's assurance to deliver justice following a report in this daily of the death of Sultana Jasmine in Rab custody. Stating that the state has a responsibility to file a case if the family does not, the High Court bench, on its own initiative, raised questions as to why she was arrested, who arrested her, where she was taken to after the arrest, where and under whose presence she was interrogated, who interrogated her, whether she sustained any fresh injury after her arrest and whether any law was violated during her stay in custody. Given the deplorable track record of the state in holding law enforcement agencies accountable for deaths and torture in their custody, we can only hope that the court's intervention signals a marked departure from the way such cases have been dealt with in the past.

We have noted with increasing alarm the reluctance of the state to ensure systems of accountability for unwarranted deaths in law enforcement custody. In fact, faced with mounting criticism nationally and internationally over the years about the failure to independently investigate such killings, our government seems to have been more interested in defending the questionable actions of our law enforcement than instituting much-needed reforms. This has essentially given wholesale immunity to Rab, police and other law enforcement members to carry out unconstitutional and unlawful acts against Bangladeshi citizens - whom the former are mandated to protect - without so much as a slap on the wrist.

Almost a decade has passed since Bangladesh enacted the Torture and Custodial Death (Prevention) Act, 2013, but there has only been one known verdict against three policemen for the death of Ishtiaque Hossain Jonny. Even in this case, the verdict was only possible because Jonny's family could secure a judicial investigation, which is treated as optional under the law. Had the investigation been left to the law enforcement agency itself (which, unfortunately, is what the law mandates) it would be safe to surmise that the case would have met the same fate as countless others before and after it.

We are not confident that Rab, as the accused party, or police detectives for that matter, can act with courage or neutrality, especially when the government is so invested in proving Rab innocent in the face of US sanctions. We urge the court to initiate a judicial investigation into what really happened to Sultana and ensure a proper trial, thwarting any attempt to compromise it or slow down the proceedings. It must also guarantee safety for Sultana's family, who, if the past is any indication, are likely to be intimidated, threatened or harassed in the months/years to come. Finally, we hope that the court will ensure that a verdict is swiftly delivered. Without convictions, which are rarely witnessed in cases of custodial deaths, we cannot expect to put an end to extrajudicial excesses in Bangladesh.

As for the government, it must take urgent steps to institute long-needed reforms within law enforcement. We need not remind them that this is the second allegation of extrajudicial death at the hands of Rab in 10 days, and as such, need to be dealt with sensitively and urgently, if they are to prove their commitment to human rights with the whole world watching.

Govt ineptitude fuelling inflation

Domestic prices should drop as global prices do

It is unacceptable that the government has failed to deliver to Bangladeshi consumers the benefits of a fall in the prices of food items on the international market. At a programme on March 27, the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) observed that prices of essentials are on the rise in the domestic market compared to those in overseas markets due to market manipulation by a group of businesses and absence of internal governance. It is something that the media has previously reported on, and that we have also mentioned in this column.

According to the commerce ministry's own data, the price of soybean oil has dropped by 39 percent in the international market over the past year but has increased by more than 10 percent in the country during the same period. Prices of other imported items such as palm oil and red lentils have also dropped substantially on the global market, but the benefits of that drop have not reached local consumers. A number of other essential items such as rice, sugar, and beef, according to the CPD, are more expensive in Bangladesh than in other developing countries. As a result, many families, including minimum wage earners across all sectors, are struggling to meet their needs. Some have even been forced to exclude meat and fish from their diets altogether.

Researchers at the CPD revealed that the average monthly food expense for a family of four is now about Tk 22,664, which was Tk 18,115 a year ago. The fact that traders waste no time to raise prices of essentials when their prices go up in the international market, but are unwilling to compromise on any profits whatsoever at a time when the majority of the population is struggling due to exorbitantly high prices, should be urgently addressed. Government agencies themselves have a tendency of doing the same in regards to energy prices, which of course adds to the inflationary pressure by pushing up the prices of everything - while providing no respite to consumers when global prices eventually drop.

Market distortions by a small number of dominant firms and lax regulations are the major problems facing our markets. The government has to ensure that these influential traders are not manipulating prices to make exorbitant profits. In that regard, the government needs to revise the existing laws that regulate competition of essentials in the market.

According to the CPD, the tax burden on at least 28 imported essential food items is now quite high. The government needs to reduce import duties and VAT to bolster supply and meet current domestic demand. It has to realise that prices have surpassed the purchasing capacity of the majority of Bangladeshi consumers and that it must intervene effectively in the market.

EDITORIAL

Inefficient system, criminal traders making people's suffering worse



A CLOSER LOOK

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Earlier this year, Commerce Minister Tipu Munshi asked people not to panic purchase Ramadan essentials or buy in excess, as there would be enough supply in the market and no change in prices. The minister's thought, unfortunately, bears little resemblance to reality. The prices of Ramadan essentials, including lentils, sugar, brinjal and lemons, were on a soaring trajectory even before the month of fasting began, and the government failed to ensure fair prices for the common people.

Ironically, a paper by the commerce ministry, released last week, suggested that due to high prices, demand for Ramadan essentials might fall by 20 percent year on year. And why not? The price of sugar - a basic Ramadan necessity as people break their fast with a cooling glass of *shortob* - has skyrocketed to Tk 115-120 per kg from last year's Tk 78-80 per kg - an almost 50 percent hike. This certainly comes as a surprise because to tame it, the National Board of Revenue (NBR) removed import duty in February on both refined and raw sugar till May this year. Moreover, regulatory duty on sugar import was reduced to 25 percent from 30 percent. Despite this, sugar remains beyond the common people's purchasing capacity, with the Trading Corporation of Bangladesh (TCB) even suggesting a rise of Tk 5 per kg, despite the NBR initiatives. One cannot help but ask the obvious question: who are reaping the benefits of these tax waivers?

Among the Ramadan essentials that are beyond the purchase capacity of lower-income groups is animal protein as well. The price of broiler chicken has shot up to Tk 270-280 per kg in the kitchen markets, from Tk 170-175 per kg last year. While the increased cost of poultry feed has been cited as a major cause, according to a March 19 report by the Directorate of National Consumer Rights Protection (DNCRP), production costs of broiler chicken should be between Tk 135 and Tk 160, depending on the size of the firm. So why such a high margin for broiler chicken in the kitchen markets?



A kilogram of eggs now costs Tk 45-47, compared to Tk 32-35 last year. Fish have also become pricier. Coarse rice prices have also risen by Tk 2-5 this year. One kilogram of lentil costs Tk 136 this year, up from Tk 115 last year. Given the current scenario, how are the low-income groups expected to survive this fresh onslaught of rising prices?

Now, everything can be blamed on the economic aftershocks of Covid pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war, but the reality is that what we are experiencing are not organic hikes. These are rather deliberate price manipulations - criminal activities that we are allowing to be carried out in broad daylight. And the three bodies that we have to ensure fair prices for consumers and protect their rights - Directorate General of Food, Directorate of National Consumers Right Protection, and the Department of Agriculture Marketing - are to be blamed for the additional burden on people.

There are also an equal number of laws - Control of Essential Commodities Act, Consumers' Right

Protection Act, and Agricultural Marketing Act - to check unnatural price hikes and bring the criminal business syndicates and traders to justice. But these laws are not being enforced, which is giving a sense of security to the unscrupulous syndicates and traders.

These three bodies have no synergy

can't there be a single body - perhaps a separate ministry - to protect consumer rights?

It is high time the government and policymakers took this problem seriously and demonstrated a strong political will to enforce the laws on curbing price manipulations. It is only natural and understandable that

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those who are blessed with four meals a day, with adequate access to good quality protein and imported fruits and vegetables, the plight of the poor would seem a distant issue. But given that it is with the votes of these poor, limited-income groups that they have come to power, the government and policymakers owe it to them to ensure the basic three meals a day for them.

If the bureaucrats are not doing their jobs properly, they should be investigated to see if there are ulterior motives behind their reluctance (read: underhand dealings with market syndicates), and if proven guilty, they should be brought to book as well. Anyone who is found involved in this mess should be dealt with strictly.

In fact, this entire system should be overhauled and replaced with one empowered, efficient, and honest authority to weed out corruption and malpractices from the market. We have suffered for years already - the last three have been especially excruciating - and now people are teetering on the brink. Before greater consequences befall us, we must rein in the prices.

NEW CANALS FROM TEESTA

The hydro-hegemony in South Asia

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The West Bengal government recently decided to dig two new canals to divert water from the Teesta, a transboundary river that India shares with Bangladesh. Water from another transboundary river, Jaldhaka, will also be channelled to the canals for agricultural purposes. The canals are expected to benefit 100,000 farmers in Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar, and the West Bengal Irrigation Department has already been allocated 1,000 acres of land for the canals under the Teesta Barrage Project.

However, the benefits will come at the expense of Bangladeshi farmers in northern Bangladesh. As Teesta is a transboundary river, both Bangladesh and India should share its water in an equitable and reasonable manner, as per the international water-sharing convention. Unfortunately, Bangladesh has been denied such equity and reason as upper-riparian India unilaterally constructs barrages, dams, and canals, restricting the river's flow to Bangladesh.

This has also resulted in a scarcity of river water, with only 100 cumecs (cubic metres per second) available during the dry season, compared to the 1,600 cumecs required for agriculture in both countries.

Bangladesh and India share 54 rivers that flow from the Himalayas to the Bay of Bengal. The best practice across the world is to manage such

international or transboundary rivers in accordance with international rules and conventions such as Helsinki Rules, Berlin Rules, and the 1997 UN water-sharing convention. But in South Asia, this takes the form of bilateral agreements between the relevant stakeholders. As a result, the upper-riparian countries often enjoy advantages and unequal shares. For instance, India's construction of canals and barrages affects Bangladesh adversely. In the same manner, India also faces the same issue with China in the case of Brahmaputra River. As a result, Bangladesh has managed to get India to sign agreements on only two rivers: the Ganges and the Kusiyara. The Kusiyara agreement came nearly 25 years after the Ganges River treaty. Decade-long negotiations have failed to ink the treaty on Teesta water-sharing.

The delay in signing the Teesta treaty and the uneven water distribution have resulted in serious environmental and agricultural concerns in northern Bangladesh, where the river is drying up, biodiversity is under peril, and food production is being adversely affected. Between 2006 and 2014, the northern region of Bangladesh, known for its ample Boro rice harvest, lost Tk 8,132.6 crore in production due to water shortages caused by India's arbitrary withdrawal from the river.

Why has the water-sharing deal stalled when both Bangladesh and India have built much more fruitful relationships in other areas? The answer probably lies in the concept of hydro-hegemony.

Hydro-hegemony is a relatively

new theory that argues that water-sharing, conflicts, and river management between the countries that share transboundary rivers are influenced by their riparian position, power dimensions, and exploitation potential. Prominent Indian scholar Brahma Chellaney used the term to explain China's activity in the upstream that affected India. In the case of Bangladesh-India transboundary rivers, India holds the upper hand as the country is upper-riparian. When India has a demand for river water, it can simply dig canals and redirect the river's flow, or build a barrage to navigate the water flow.

Bangladesh lacks the political and economic power to force India to provide its rightful share of water. Because of this power asymmetry, India influences the negotiation process often in its favour. The decision to drain water from Jaldhaka River without informing Dhaka is a prime example of such influence. Not only that, but India consciously depoliticises bilateral disputes between the two countries.

India also gets to exploit Bangladesh based on its technological projects. Historical water flow data suggests that Bangladesh's share should not fall below 4,500 cusecs (cubic foot per second), but India's upstream interventions with technologically advanced barrages have decreased Bangladesh's share to one-third of that amount. Similar riparian and power dynamics have harmed India's equation with China over water sharing on the Brahmaputra. The river is shared by China, India, and Bangladesh, but because China is upstream, it can build dams and

barrages that threaten water flow to India and Bangladesh in the absence of any treaty. While India narrates China's behaviour as unequal, interestingly it does the same with lower-riparian Bangladesh.

River disputes will persist in South Asia because the region's largest rivers - the Indus, Ganges, Brahmaputra, Teesta, Mahananda, Surma, and Ghaghara - are transboundary. The region is largely dependent on these river basins. As a result, disruption and unjust water flow can lead to conflicts. Brahma Chellaney in his book *Water: Asia's New Battleground* also discussed such.

War or conflict for water has been going on for ages. For decades, conflicts between Egypt and Ethiopia often escalated over the Nile River's water-sharing. Water also played a central role in the civil war in Sudan. Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon also had a series of confrontations with Israel in the 1960s over the Jordan River that ultimately culminated in the Six Day War.

In the case of Bangladesh and India, river basin management has been always suggested to avoid such conflicts. But for that, the upper-riparian side must acknowledge equity and reason. Yet, the hydropolitics between Bangladesh and India can be of great interest to researchers as it has unique hegemonic elements in river management. How the upper-riparian and its federal governance structure is posing challenges to the lower-riparian is quite a new phenomenon in hydropolitics. Therefore, researchers may take a keen interest in developing further understanding.