

## Stop migrant abuse during medicals

Why do the authorities keep failing to protect migrant workers at every step?

On top of the many obstacles that aspiring migrant workers already have to deal with, another alarming one has now come to our attention. To enter any of the Gulf countries – Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and UAE – any Bangladeshi willing to get a work or residency visa needs a health clearance from one of the 133 medical centres listed by the Gulf Health Council (GHC) in the country. According to a report by this newspaper, many of these centres are exploiting potential migrants, giving them fake negative medical reports (unless migrants are willing to pay bribes) and thereby ruining their chances of going abroad for work.

For example, Nesar Mia, one such individual who was supposed to go to Qatar, was told he had tuberculosis at the Stemz Health Care BD Pvt Ltd in Dhaka. Septical of the test result, he submitted his samples to Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University, where he tested negative for the disease. When he contacted Stemz, the centre's officials proposed that he could be shown as TB negative if he paid them Tk 1 lakh, on top of the Tk 8,500 fee he had paid for his medical examination. He refused, so they uploaded the fake result online, making it impossible for him to go to Qatar.

An investigation by the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) found that many aspiring migrants have been victims of similar irregularities at the hands of some of these centres, including being blackmailed and charged additional money in the name of different fees. Most migrants, however, refrain from lodging complaints, fearing further hassles. Alarmingly, in two cases that were reported, the DGHS completed its duty just by issuing suspension orders and show-cause notices, only to withdraw the suspension orders a few days later.

As per an estimate, the Ministry of Expatriate Welfare and Overseas Employment has received at least nine such allegations in the last year. A deputy secretary at the monitoring and enforcement wing at the ministry, however, somewhat contradicted it by saying they have not received such allegations in the last six months, even though they do not have any official channel dedicated to receiving such complaints. This is a perfect example of how different government ministries are trying to escape responsibility for the sufferings of migrant workers.

Why wouldn't the expatriate ministry have such a mechanism that can ensure the welfare of our migrants? Why can't the DGHS – with whom these private medical centres are required to be licenced – take any effective measures to stop the abuse?

There is no reason for our migrants to suffer like this. The concerned ministries need to cooperate with each other and save migrant workers from all the hassles. They should also immediately start discussing the matter with the GHC so that an initiative can be taken about bringing all the health check-up centres under the ministry's supervision and to avoid extortion and fraud, and also to quickly bring the GHC-authorised health centres under the ministry's recently published guidelines for migrant health check-up.

## We need a neuro-inclusive world for all

Govt must create proper conditions for the people with autism to thrive

On the occasion of the World Autism Awareness Day, we join the call for building a neuro-inclusive world in which people with autism are recognised and celebrated for their diverse contributions to our collective progress. In a statement issued on Sunday, the UN secretary general has rightly emphasised the need for greater support for those with autism to fully reach their potential, as they continue to face social and environmental barriers to the full exercise of their rights and fundamental freedoms. He also stressed the need to promote inclusive education, equal employment opportunities, self-determination and an environment where every person is respected.

These demands apply particularly to Bangladesh, where the authorities are yet to develop a practical understanding of how to integrate neurodivergence into public life as well as policies governing education, employment and other basic rights. This year, the Ministry of Social Welfare has celebrated the autism day with special programmes and arrangements for blue lighting at the buildings of various government agencies and departments as well as Bangladeshi embassies and missions abroad. It also reportedly conferred special honour to ten individuals and three organisations in five categories for their contributions. The flurry of activity on the government's part suggests growing policy attention to autism. But progress achieved in terms of building mass awareness and supportive infrastructure for autistic children and adults has been painfully slow.

In terms of education, for example, autistic children still suffer from lack of access and inclusion. As per a report by *Prothom Alo*, the specialised educational institutions authorised by the ministry and those awaiting its authorisation are suffering from various problems, including lack of funding support and conducive learning environment. Under the ministry, there are 74 MPO-listed specialised educational institutions and 57 authorised but non-MPO ones. Apart from them, there are over a thousand others that are yet to be officially recognised. The government says that necessary support is provided upon authorisation and MPO inclusion, but the process of verification and background clearance is vital to ensure public resources are not wasted. Reportedly, more than 100 teachers of the 74 MPO schools haven't got any salary since October, and they have been forming human chains at various places including Shahbag in Dhaka.

Insiders say that lack of funding support is just one of the many challenges facing autistic children. There is also a need to expand vocational training programmes for those who drop out, which is a common phenomenon, so that they can go on to become productive citizens of the country. Creating proper employment opportunities and neurodiversity-friendly workplaces is also vital. We hope the authorities will take appropriate steps in this connection soon, and ensure that the rights of autistic people are fully protected. The society in general also has to come forward to ensure that they are treated with the care and dignity they deserve.

# The illusion of food self-sufficiency



Kallol Mustafa is an engineer and writer who focuses on power, energy, environment and development economics.

KALLOL MUSTAFA

In October 2020, at a seminar organised by Farming Future Bangladesh and Bangladesh Institute of Research and Training on Applied Nutrition (BIRTAN), Agriculture Minister Dr Md Abdur Razzaque said Bangladesh had achieved self-sufficiency in food over the past decade. In June 2022, at another event, he again said the country had achieved self-sufficiency in food under the leadership of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. Earlier in 2019, Food Minister Sadhan Chandra Majumder said the same.

But in February 2022, when the prices of oil, sugar and lentils increased in the domestic market, Commerce Minister Tipu Munshi justified the price hike saying it had happened “due to the increase in prices in the international market.”

It is quite a paradox. If the country is self-sufficient in food, price hikes in the international market should not affect the domestic prices. Conversely, if price hikes in the international market cause price hikes in the country, then we cannot say that the country is self-sufficient in food.

Some may say when the ministers talk about self-sufficiency in food production, they may be referring to food grains only. But Bangladesh is not self-sufficient in grain production either. According to the Bangladesh Food Situation Report (Volume 131, October-December 2022), Bangladesh imported 988,000 metric tonnes of rice and four million metric tonnes of wheat in 2021-22. In 2022-23, rice and wheat imports are projected to be 1.71 million and 3.2 million tonnes, respectively.

According to the latest quarterly global report of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), Bangladesh has to import more than 10 million tonnes of cereals annually; in FY2021-22, the amount was 10.4 million tonnes (Pg 42). And per the data provided by the Bangladesh Bank, we import food products worth about \$5.7 billion every year. In FY2020-21, Bangladesh imported wheat worth nearly \$1.83 billion, rice worth \$850.9 million, milk and cream worth \$344.1 million, spices worth \$404.4 million, edible oil worth \$1.92 billion, pulses worth \$681 million, and sugar worth \$799.7 million. Thus, the total cost of importing these food items in FY21 was \$6.83 billion. In FY22, this import cost increased by 22 percent to \$8.34 billion.

There are many food items that are produced in the country, but the



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Self-sufficiency in food production requires being impervious to changes in the international food prices.

raw materials needed for production have to be imported. For example, 50 percent of the maize and 90 percent of soybean required to make poultry feed have to be imported. That's why when the price of maize or soybean increases in the global market, it creates an upward pressure on poultry prices in the local market.

Also, as Bangladesh needs to import 80 percent of the chemical fertiliser needed to grow crops, the foreign exchange reserves come under pressure when fertiliser prices spike in the international market. Due to the shortage of gas required to produce fertiliser and a lack of proper maintenance of the state-run fertiliser factories, this import dependency is increasing, and so is the pressure on our forex reserves. As per Bangladesh Bank data, the cost of fertiliser import for Bangladesh increased more than three times, from \$1.36 billion in 2020-21 to \$4.39 billion in 2021-22, which in turn pushed fertiliser prices in the local market upwards. In August 2022, the government increased the price of urea fertiliser by 37.5 percent, burdening the farmers with an

abnormally and puts pressure on the forex reserves. Moreover, food is such a strategic commodity that, in times of crisis, it cannot be imported even by spending additional money. Also, imports of essential food items cannot be reduced suddenly because the domestic production cannot be increased overnight. Since the amount of agricultural land in the country is limited, specific plans and initiatives are needed to determine what kind of crops will be produced in this limited agricultural land, which ones need to be increased, and which ones need to be reduced.

Since policymakers in Bangladesh like to believe that the country is self-sufficient in food production, there is no emphasis on the long-term strategic plan to increase import-substituting food production. When the price of a particular food item increases in the international market, they ask the farmers to increase the production of that food item. For example, if the price of onions increases in the international market or when India bars onion exports, the price increases in the local market, and the government says onion

optimally to what types of food, and the necessary incentives and support that should be provided to this end. For example, in order to reduce the import of sugar, proper incentives should be given to sugarcane growers and the state-owned sugar mills should be utilised to their full capacity instead of keeping them closed down. In order to reduce the imports of edible oil, the potential of cultivating sunflower, soybean, groundnuts and mustard should be explored. A choice has to be made between continuing to increase the salinity of land in coastal areas to produce shrimp for export and increasing cultivation of various import-substituting food crops in those areas. Moreover, initiatives can be taken to increase the production of import-substituting food by reducing the cultivation of crops like potatoes, which are sometimes produced in surplus.

None of these options can be realised by making decisions at the individual level. This requires long-term and coordinated planning from our policymakers. But that won't be possible unless the illusion of food self-sufficiency is overcome.

## How to prevent gas explosions

A cheap solution has been around for decades



Habibullah N Karim is a digital entrepreneurship promoter, investor, and writer.

HABIBULLAH N KARIM

Bangladesh is fortunate to have natural gas resources that we have been using for cooking and other household uses, for commercial-scale kitchens at restaurants and hotels, and for industrial-scale manufacturing at factories for many decades now. The gas is supplied for consumption at homes, restaurants, and factories by a network of pipes that carries the gas from generation to transmission to distribution.

In this piped network, the quality of infrastructure varies from point to point, but most often the connections at the terminal devices such as burners, heaters, and ovens tend to be leaky. In fact, in most countries where piped natural gas is used, this is usually the case. One can see the similarity with leaky water taps that drip and waste water supplied by Wasa all the time.

However, dripping water, though wasteful, is not dangerous to those around, while leaking gas can be disastrous. We got a harsh reminder of that last month when more than 20 people lost their lives as a commercial building in Gulistan collapsed due to gas explosion caused by leaks in commercial gas connections there. This was neither the first, nor can we say that it would be the last, of such ghastly accidents caused by undetected gas leaks.

Natural gas extracted in Bangladesh is one of the purest methane gas available in the world. This highly flammable gas, chemically denoted as CH<sub>4</sub>, is colourless and odourless in its natural form, making it impossible to detect when it escapes into the atmosphere through leaks and cracks in burners, ovens or pipes along the way. This gas is also

heavier than ambient air and so when methane escapes through leaks, it can accumulate in shuttered kitchens, basements or underground tanks. From the slightest electric spark or cigarette lighter, such accumulated gas can wreak havoc as it blows up in a huge fireball.

One would think that since natural gas – not only methane, but also other variants such as propane and butane – is used around the world, there must be some solutions to this explosive problem. When I was going to university in the US back in the early 80s, I recall an incident when I visited my roommate's home during a break. I found this odious but fleeting smell in their kitchen, and being naïve about the origin of the odour, I pointed out to my friend that there might be something rotting in the kitchen. He laughed and said, “No my friend, that is the smell of the gas leaking. I probably did not close the burner knob all the way.”

I immediately retorted that in our country piped gas does not smell so foul! It was time for a lesson in humility when my friend explained that their gas is also odourless, as is any natural gas, and this has caused many accidents. Then they came up with an additive that is very smelly,

so that any time it leaks, people around would be aware of it and take precautions to avoid any accidents. In fact, this additive is a chemical called mercaptan that is highly odious, harmless and very cheap, and is needed in very small quantities – as little as 1.6 parts per billion, i.e. 1.6 cubic metres of mercaptan for one thousand million cubic metres of methane gas – to make natural gas easily detectable. In other words, Titas Gas, the largest natural gas transmission and distribution company of the country, needs only three cubic metres of mercaptan per year to make all gas leaks detectable by humans.

The global market price of mercaptan gas ranges between \$2 and \$4 per cubic metre or per kg in liquid form. This means that for a few stinky dollars, we could have saved the two dozen lives killed in Gulistan last month, and hundreds of others that died in gas explosions over the years.

Isn't it time we woke up to this simple and ridiculously cheap solution used around the world to detect gas leaks and prevent accidents? Or is it an opportunity for some smart cookie to conjure up a billion-dollar project in the name of gas safety?