

## Here we go again

Another round of price hikes of essential items, more misery for ordinary people

Whatever little hope we had of a respite from inflation in the coming days seems to have disappeared once again, with a fresh hike in prices of essential items. Earlier this month, data from the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) suggested that food inflation had declined by 28 basis points in rural areas and four basis points in urban areas in April, leading to an overall decline – though slight – in inflation. Over the past week, however, the price of one-litre bottled soybean oil increased by Tk 12, while the price of loose soybean oil increased by Tk 9 a litre. A kg of loose sugar now costs Tk 10 more, while prices of potatoes and onions have gone up by Tk 5 a kg. The retail price of eggs – a vital source of protein for people who have already cut down on chicken and fish consumption – also rose by Tk 10 a dozen.

The spiralling costs have already paralysed many households, with even the most basic necessities becoming increasingly unaffordable. As prices continue to soar, an overwhelming majority of people are being forced to make difficult choices between paying bills, putting food on the table, and meeting other essential expenses. With this new round of price hikes, how are people, who have already cut down on food consumption significantly to make ends meet, going to survive, with no corresponding increase in their disposable incomes?

We are disappointed at the government's lacklustre efforts to curb inflationary pressure and make food affordable to all, despite assurances of adequate food supply. While we understand that the supply chain disruptions brought about by the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war has hugely impacted the economy and food imports in a way the government could not have predicted, the fact remains that it has not done nearly enough since then to check collusion and corruption within its supply chains, and to address the governance failures that are pushing prices ever upwards. As a result, though prices of many essential items, including sugar, oil and flour, have remained stable or fallen in the global market, the fates of Bangladeshi consumers have not changed for the better.

Meanwhile, dishonest businessmen, aided and abetted by dishonest policymakers and bureaucrats, are making a mockery out of people's miseries, taking advantage of the global cost-of-living crisis to artificially raise prices in the domestic market. Take, for instance, the price of soybean oil, which has decreased significantly in the global market (by 29 percent in March this year). But when the government withdrew the VAT exemption privileges in light of the price drop, businessmen hiked up the prices again, using it as an excuse to earn extra profits. It's high time the government seriously addressed the issue of greedflation. It should be obvious that conducting drives and fining some traders from time to time cannot make up for the failure of regulatory oversight.

Given that the Russia-Ukraine war is likely to cause fluctuations in supply in the near future, the government must also find alternatives to and/or reduce its import dependence for essential commodities. But none of this can happen unless our policymakers come down from their ivory towers to the level of the ordinary people, living from hand to mouth, to fully understand the urgency of the crisis and react to it accordingly.

## Tourist spot or dumpster?

Why are hotels and resorts without STPs being allowed to operate in Cox's Bazar?

We are alarmed that untreated sewage from hundreds of hotels, motels, and resorts in Cox's Bazar is polluting the environment of the town as well as the sea. According to a recent Prothom Alo report, among the 538 hotels, motels, resorts, and cottages built in the Kalatali area next to the beach, 532 do not have any sewage treatment plants (STPs). These hotels and motels are still using septic tanks for their sewage management, which are leaking and spreading sewage around the city and into the sea. The situation particularly worsens during the peak season and also during monsoon. The untreated sewage is now posing a serious threat to the marine animals and the biodiversity of the area, while also degrading the overall environment of the tourist city.

The question is, what were the authorities doing when all these hotels and resorts were built without STPs? Did they make it clear to the owners that STPs were mandatory in their establishments? According to the hotel owners, they didn't. Instead, they reportedly allowed them to build three-chambered septic tanks underground. And there are still many hotels that do not even have septic tanks. Now, when thousands of people crowd these hotels during the peak seasons, the sewage management systems in these hotels completely fall apart.

Unfortunately, sewage pollution from hotels is just one of the many problems that Cox's Bazar has been facing in recent years. The tourist town still does not have a proper waste management system, and plastic pollution has become one of the major threats to its ecology. Moreover, sewage from shrimp hatcheries is directly polluting the sea at many points. By now, a large part of the district's forests, mountains, and rivers have been grabbed by influential encroachers. Many projects taken up by the government have also proven harmful to its environment. The saddest part is, such environmental destruction has been going on under the very nose of the authorities and despite the existence of several High Court orders and directives to stop them.

We urge the Cox's Bazar Development Authority (CoxDA), the Department of Environment and other relevant government agencies to do what is needed to save the town from pollution and encroachment once and for all. As for setting up the STPs, the CoxDA should construct a central sewage treatment plant in the town as soon as possible – with the help of the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank (ADB), since they are reportedly interested to invest.

And to stop unplanned constructions in the town, the authorities must take action against those who have built their hotels without environmental clearance, no matter how powerful they are. They should also prepare a master plan of town development and ensure that all the structures are constructed following the rules and regulations. All this must be done to retain the beauty of the beach town and safeguard its ecological balance.

# Trouble brewing in AL's backyard



### THE STREET VIEW

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#### MOHAMMAD AL-MASUM MOLLA

Elections are festive times providing an opportunity for the candidates to connect with their voters, and for the voters to have the ear of their candidates. It is a rule of thumb that the ruling party candidates pledge to continue with the government's initiatives, while the opposition candidates slam the government for failing to ensure the people's welfare and pledging that they would do a better job if elected to office. This electoral sparring between the government and the opposition is a common phenomenon in the election campaign culture.

But the statements and declarations from the mayoral aspirants in the upcoming five city corporation elections, following the announcement of nominations by the ruling Awami League, seemed to flip that script.

Let's begin with Barishal, where Abul Khair Abdullah got the party ticket to run for mayor – the position currently held by his nephew Serniabat Sadiq Abdullah. Abul Khair's first announcement after getting the party nomination was to say, "My only goal is to turn Barishal city, which lacked development activities over the last five years, into a *tilottoma* (modern) city, to restore the dignity of the citizens of all classes and occupations in this city."

On April 29, Zaheed Farooque, local lawmaker and the state minister for water resources, said at a programme that the prime minister had nominated Abul Khair Abdullah to stop the injustice, exploitation, and criminal activities happening in Barishal. "The people of Barishal can breathe today," he pronounced. He also said that people even teased them as they talked about turning Barishal into a city like Singapore. Seeing the dilapidated roads, even rickshaw pullers scoffed at these promises, the state minister added. His comments were quite in line with those of the mayoral candidate.

All this rhetoric is presumably directed at the incumbent mayor. Both the challenger and the incumbent are from the ruling party and belong to the Serniabat family, akin to royalty



Abul Khair Abdullah, the Awami League-nominated mayoral candidate in the Barishal City Corporation elections, exchanges greetings with the locals in Barishal city on May 4, 2023.

PHOTO: TITU DAS

within the Awami League, ranked after the Sheikh family. However, such disparaging remarks about a ruling party mayor and slamming of the state of law and order essentially point the finger at the ruling party itself, accusing it of having failed the citizens of Barishal.

Whether this is a reflection of internal party feud or not, the question that begs to be asked is why Barishal citizens should vote for the same party (as the mayoral election is partisan) a second time despite its abject failure, and that, too, when the admission of failure is implicit in discarding the incumbent and nominating another candidate.

Turning to Gazipur, we see that a former mayor, failing to secure the party's nomination, decided to submit his nomination as an independent

candidate, only to be rejected later. However, after submitting the nomination paper, he said he was running against a person who had destroyed Gazipur. Although he did not mention the name, it was evident that he was hinting at the ruling party's mayoral candidate Azmat Ullah Khan, who contested the city polls in 2013 too, when Gazipur had just been

strengthen the opposition camp's claims, but also indicate a complete lack of governance. A former mayor is saying that the ruling party nominee has destroyed the city, that he could very well be disappeared for running as an independent candidate, and that the election office is not neutral. Zahangir has stopped short of directly accusing the Awami League for having the

declared a city corporation and had its first elections. Zahangir Alam, too, had filed his nomination for Gazipur mayor in the 2013 elections, going against the party wishes to support Azmat. He allegedly went missing as he refused to step aside at the time. He reappeared just before the polls and announced his support for Azmat, visibly weeping while addressing a press conference.

This time, after tendering his nomination, he alleged, "I may be arrested or disappeared after tomorrow." Then, when the election officials rejected his nomination, Zahangir said, "The Election Commission has deviated from the neutral position it had. I don't know under whose pressure they buckled. But I want justice."

Zahangir's allegations not only

## The heat is on

Unravelling the spectacle of the Dhaka (North) chief heat officer



### BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

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#### SHAMSAD MORTUZA

There has been a heated welcome for the new chief heat officer in Dhaka. Comments started pouring in as scores of people rushed to judge and ridicule the appointment of an official who will oversee a heat action plan in the city. Most of these comments slandered the assignment. Our sexist patriarchal national psyche came to the fore as most commentators smeared the position with many innuendos.

It has become a trend to extend our opinion on any topic without thinking it through or knowing the full facts. The Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC) has signed an MoU with the Adrienne Arsht Rockefeller Foundation Resilience Center (Arsht-Rock) to build individual and community resilience in the face of climate change impacts. The Heat Action Platform is designed to assist regional or municipal authorities across the world in reducing the "human and economic impacts of extreme heat."

The breadcrumbs of the appointment of the chief heat officer (CHO) by the DNCC led me to the Arsht-Rock site and its resilience-in-action initiative. The foundation has estimated that "by 2050, heatwaves will affect more than 3.5 billion people worldwide – half of them living in urban centres – affecting human lives and livelihoods."

Heat is a silent killer, the most

lethal among all the meteorological phenomena. The casualties of heat outnumber those of floods, tornados, and cyclones. Cities are the most vulnerable as the lack of greenery as well as the type of materials used for accommodating the dense population in a compact area result in the creation of "urban heat islands." There can be an excess of four degrees Celsius in the cities due to the use of certain construction materials, emissions from cooling devices and other utility services. Heat also harms our productivity, which can dent the GDP.

Under the pilot project, Arsht-Rock has so far appointed seven CHOs in Florida, US; Santiago, Chile; Freetown, Sierra Leone; Melbourne, Australia; Athens, Greece; and Dhaka (North), Bangladesh. They also have a responsible officer at the UN headquarters. The stated job descriptions of these CHOs include unifying their city governments' responses to extreme heat.

Bushra Afireen, the newly appointed CHO of DNCC, holds a bachelor's degree in global development studies and drama from Queen's University in Canada. Her CV tells us that she has worked to make Bangladesh's garment sector sustainable, advocate the Animal Welfare Act, and bring in microfinance initiatives. Bushra has the potential, resources, and networks to become

a policy advocate at a local level and liaise with our international partners. The fact that her father is also the city father, whose office has processed her nomination for the CHO post, indicates that she can be a real changemaker.

The blogs posted by the other CHOs suggest different strategic interventions undertaken by the partnering cities. Miami, Melbourne, and Freetown have undertaken urban greening projects by installing green canopies for concrete jungles. In Santiago, the focus is on protecting the workers from extreme heat.

Last month, when the temperature was hovering at 40 degrees Celsius, our phone smartly reminded us that it "feels like 45." Our boiled brains looked for ideas. There were social media posts about leaving water troughs for birds and stray animals. But I don't think we talked about giving heat-protective gear to our workers who work under extreme heat, or making enough provisions to keep them hydrated.

The DNCC's move to partner with Arsht-Rock is a welcome one as it will introduce us to some of the best practices in Dhaka North. But questions need to be asked: why did both the city corporations not join this initiative? Is the other part of Dhaka way too cool to consider the heat impact? Why nominate a family member for this post? Was there an open call for the position? Without taking away any credit from Bushra's credentials, the due diligence requires a transparent recruitment process that would have averted the controversy.

The title of the position lacks cultural sensitivity. I understand there is a hook to make this position noticeable. But as an international organisation, which has so far recruited female-only officers

election office disqualify his candidacy.

It appears, then, that the Awami League's bold rhetoric of development and prosperity, transparency and good governance, and fostering democracy is rendered hollow by its own partymen – unwittingly or not.

With the ruling party's own men making such allegations, it appears to have taken the words out of the opposition camps' mouth, because this is essentially what the party has been trying to say all long. When the ruling party's own leaders are disgruntled and disillusioned so as to articulate the opposition's argument better than the opposition itself, it does not bode well for either the ruling party or the government.

For now, the BNP can simply watch from the sidelines as the Awami League men slam their own party.

for this post, it should have been more imaginative in making the title more meaningful. The function related to heat should have been focused on instead of tagging heat to the officer.

Funnily enough, this happened around the time when news broke that there was a protest going on in the Dhanmondi area of the city's southern parts as thousands of trees had been chopped down in a bid to correct the road islands – once again. The endless circus of construction and reconstruction of Dhaka reminds me of the proverbial ghost in a popular folklore that agreed to be the servant of a barber after being defeated in a battle of wit, on the condition that the man would keep assigning the ghost tasks. Otherwise, the ghost would break his neck. Soon enough, the man did not have any more wishes left. He thus ordered the ghost to erect a long bamboo pole, grease it with the finest butter, and then climb to the top. The ghost climbs up only to slide down. And the saga continues.

The same goes for our city development projects. The ghost comes in different sorts, shapes and sizes. They prefer going up and down, enjoying the butter all along. From the spectator's perspective, the project is nothing but to keep its potential killer distracted.

Our city fathers keep us distracted with the spectacle of endless destruction and creation. One will raze trees; the other will come up with plans to plant plants. The political mercury keeps rising with the election around the corner. People who are rushing to judge will soon rush to the polling booths to keep their judgements. So, it's better to make things accountable and transparent so that everyone can make informed decisions.