

A policy of choosing profit over lives

How could govt allow cardiac stent prices to go this high?

That increasing numbers of people are getting priced out of receiving life-saving cardiac treatment, after the government hiked the price of cardiac stents by 20-35 percent from February 1, is heart-wrenching. At a time when ordinary people are struggling heavily with the rising costs of living, this increased cost of a critical surgical component, which was costly to begin with, is making it impossible for many people to afford such treatment.

The government's reasoning for increasing the price of cardiac stents was the steep depreciation of the taka against the dollar. However, a deeper look into the matter reveals that there are more reasons why prices of stents in Bangladesh is much higher than in countries such as India and Nepal. Compared to India, the price of stents in Bangladesh is nearly double. A Xience Xpedition stent made by Abbott, a US manufacturer, costs about Tk 47,000 in India and Tk 70,000 in Nepal. But in Bangladesh, its maximum retail price is Tk 125,500 after the hike by the Directorate General of Drug Administration (DGDA), up from Tk 108,628. Such massive price differences were found in the case of stents made by other companies as well.

The price of stents in Bangladesh is determined as per the markup set by the DGDA's price-fixing committee. The markup was set at 1.42 percent, which includes the taxes and profit margin of the suppliers and the dealers, and also includes an 11.5 percent "retail commission" for middlemen. According to a former director of the National Institute of Cardiovascular Disease, who led the 2017 expert committee for fixing stent prices, it is high time to revisit the markup formula to ensure transparency in the stent supply chain. To start, Bangladesh needs to bargain with foreign companies to get stents at a discounted price - which foreign stent companies have done for Nepal.

But aside from that, prices of cardiac stents would be much lower if suppliers did not need to pay a commission to the physicians, health staffers, and various middlemen. And this is something that needs to be urgently cut out of the equation. According to local suppliers of cardiac medical devices, it is mainly the physicians who are getting a commission of around 20-50 percent from the stent price. In some cases, stent suppliers are also paying other health staffers involved in the process. This is pushing prices up to much greater levels for patients seeking treatment, and is an extremely unethical practice that is literally causing people to die instead of being treated.

We are shocked that this is something that the government has not yet addressed. How many people over the years have had to lose their lives so that a few middlemen - including physicians who are supposed to be saving lives - could pocket extra profit? The government urgently needs to revisit its stent pricing policy. It needs to bring the cost of cardiac treatment within the reach of ordinary people on an urgent basis.

How prepared are we for a major earthquake?

Listen to the experts and implement the guidelines

The two earthquakes with epicentres close to Dhaka, in a span of 11 days, have certainly caused many citizens to fear what may happen next. And their anxiety is justified as leading experts are also concerned and have given rather ominous indications of the possibility of a major earthquake happening "anytime". What they are most worried about is the unbelievable level of unpreparedness for such a petrifying disaster. So why have the authorities not been jolted into action?

The Daily Star's report informs us that in the last month we have already had 14 earthquakes within 300 km radius of Dhaka according to the National Center for Seismology of India. Research by experts in Bangladesh has found that these foreshocks could indicate a major earthquake, which would cause the entire capital to crumble. Unplanned urbanisation over the last few decades has led to a chaotic, congested concrete jungle where most of the buildings are not earthquake proof. A survey by the Rajdhani Unnayan Karttripakkha (Rajuk) has predicted that around 865,000 buildings may collapse in an earthquake with a magnitude of 6.9 originating in the fault line in Tangail. The death toll has been estimated to be around 210,000, with 229,000 sustaining injuries if the disaster happens during the daytime. The survey was done between 2018 and 2022.

We have very recently seen the horrific consequences of major earthquakes in Turkey and war-torn Syria this February that killed more than 20,000 people. After knowing all this, what have we been doing? The answer is, not enough. It's true, the government has carried out risk assessment and mapping for earthquakes in major cities such as Dhaka, Chattogram and Sylhet, as well as set up more earthquake observatories and specialised equipment to detect tremors in vulnerable locations. It has a National Earthquake Contingency Plan that includes anticipating future risks and disaster management after a major earthquake. The government is supposed to have trained 62,000 volunteers.

This is all impressive. But the government needs to make sure that in the event of a major earthquake these measures actually work on the ground. Experts have given many recommendations regarding how we should prepare. The overall message is to have extensive awareness and practical training. This includes regular drills in schools, offices, departmental stores, etc., retrofitting risky buildings, enforcing earthquake safety technologies in new buildings and implementing the government's guidelines on how to deal with the aftermath of an earthquake.

We must build capacity for prompt response, rescue and evacuation operations and treatment facilities in hospitals. Volunteers need refresher courses. The Fire Service has to be equipped with sophisticated machinery and trained personnel for rescue operations.

It is virtually impossible to predict when exactly a major earthquake will occur. The only thing to do is to be as prepared as we can be. The government must now consult with our local and international experts and start implementing a strategy that will work to reduce as many casualties as possible, in the event that the earthquake nightmare comes true.

How sustainable is our 'electricity revolution'?



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On November 1, 2022, the State Minister for Power, Energy, and Mineral Resources Nasrul Hamid informed parliament that \$28.3 billion was invested in the electricity sector between fiscal years 2009-10 and 2021-22, of which \$9.73 billion was invested for private sector electricity production. The question is: why couldn't such a huge investment save people from load-shedding?

The current electricity crisis can be attributed to five reasons. Firstly, there is an acute shortage of primary fuel such as oil, gas, and coal, alongside a dependency on fuel import. Secondly, we are going through an economic crisis and are faced with high capacity charges that are payable in dollars. Thirdly, the country's investment in renewable green energy has been inadequate. Fourthly, there is a lack of coordination in production, transmission, and distribution infrastructure development projects. And lastly, our power generation centres and machinery

A lack of investment in green and renewable energy is also a major reason behind increased load-shedding. A minuscule amount of our electricity is renewable. The remaining majority is produced via fossil fuels that have to be bought with dollars from domestic and foreign sources. Almost all new power plants are coal-powered. As a result, our energy and power sectors remain largely unsustainable.

are substandard and dysfunctional. Additionally, the dollar crisis has caused a huge amount of debt accumulation in terms of importing coal, oil, and gas. Inadequate transmission and distribution capacity are also exacerbating the crisis.

The government has not ensured uninterrupted supply of primary fuel prior to building electricity production capacity. Stable large-scale contractual or G2G imports were not focused on. Efforts to discover and

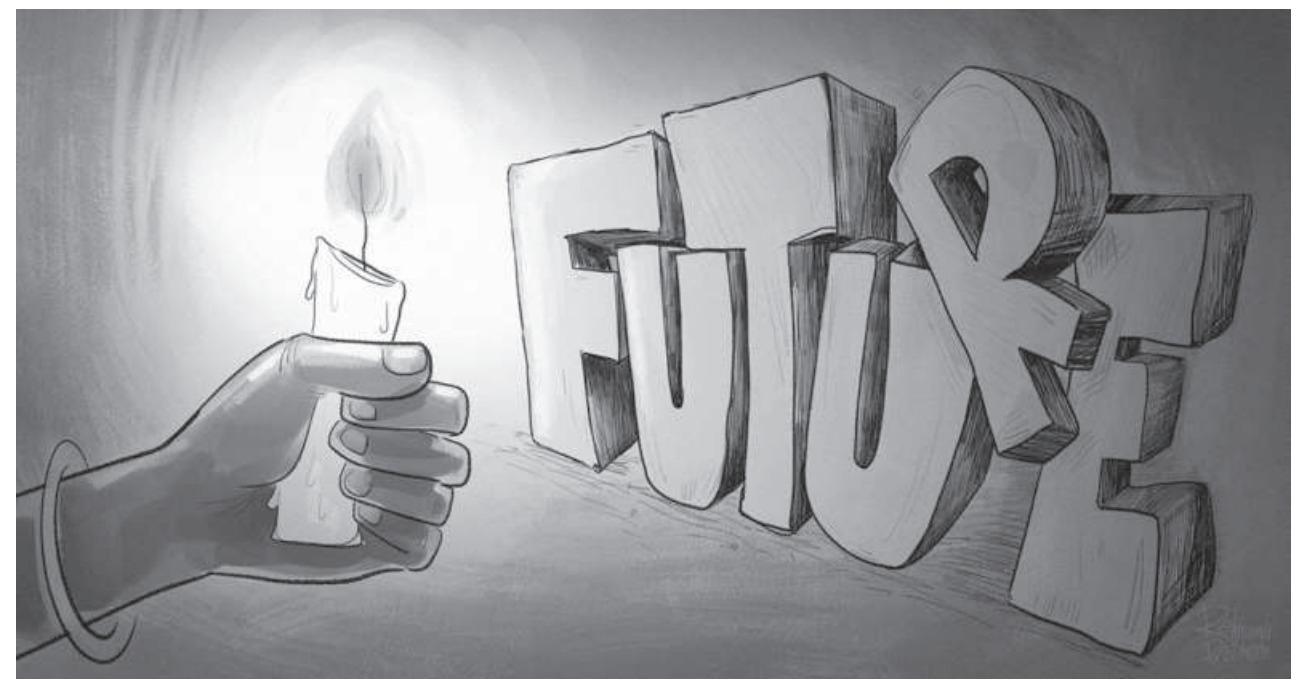


ILLUSTRATION: REHNUMA PROSHOON

acquire new gas reserves in the country and offshore areas have not progressed as expected. Nearly 50 percent of total oil and gas imports were from the spot market, endangering the country's energy security. Politically motivated, commission-savvy spot market importing of primary fuel seems to have been the main motivator. Hence, it became difficult to keep power plants operational during times of necessity.

Private power plants are enjoying capacity charges at unjust rates even when they are not capable of producing electricity when necessary. The average production expenditure of the Power Development Board (PDB) has increased by 81 percent over the last one and a half years, with bills amounting to nearly Tk 28,000 crores between September 2022 and January 2023 for rental, IPP, and various government power plants.

At present, even though global energy prices have decreased, the government is not able to buy enough fuel due to the foreign currency crisis. New problems are worsening the import dues for oil, coal, and gas.

Due to commercial banks' inability to pay back their LC debt, the import of oil has accumulated a significant amount of outstanding payments, approximately Tk 4,157 crores. Seven foreign companies have informed the

Limited (IOCL) has requested the BPC to clear its outstanding dues through the Indian Embassy in Bangladesh.

Even in terms of internal energy sources, there is a risk of load-shedding. Chevron, which contributes around 60 percent of domestic gas supply from gas fields, has reported arrears of about Tk 1,800 crores between September 2022 and February 2023.

Despite the dollar crisis, there are other infrastructure-related reasons for load-shedding. During the hot summer days when demand for electricity increases, more than 50,000 transformers of power distribution companies run at a risk of burning out if load-shedding is not conducted periodically. In other words, the investment for increasing the capacity for distribution infrastructure has been insufficient. Even after an investment of \$28 billion, transmission and distribution capacity could not be proportional to installation capacity.

Another reason behind load-shedding is how maintenance of regional gas pipelines and coal shortages lead to closures of large power plants. The Rampal power plant has had to be shut down twice between January and April due to coal shortage.

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renewable energy is also a major reason behind increased load-shedding. A minuscule amount of our electricity is renewable. The remaining majority is produced via fossil fuels that have to be bought with dollars from domestic and foreign sources. Almost all new power plants are coal-powered. As a result, our energy and power sectors remain largely unsustainable.

The load-shedding problem is also

worsened by inefficient thermal power plants and their low plant factor (capacity to operate continuously), and by the frequent maintenance of faulty power stations.

According to experts, production capacity should be kept 15 percent higher than demand, factoring in maintenance and overhauling. So, against the highest demand recorded in Bangladesh of 16,221 MW (on April 17), a production capacity of 18,000 MW would have been sufficient. But the PDB could not manage to generate more than 16,000 MW of electricity. This proves that, even keeping aside coal and gas supply issues, many of these power plants are simply charging high prices for their seemingly false installed capacity.

On April 18, State Minister Nasrul Hamid expressed his sorrow over unexpected load-shedding and cited reasons related to the heatwave. Sadly, his statement does not reflect reality.

It's time to address the technical, operational, managerial, design and planning aspects of the energy crisis. Load-shedding is directly related to the economic crisis, corruption, and inconsistent planning. Despite more than \$28 billion in investment, the energy sector has not improved sustainably, but has instead put the country in darkness by causing a deep "dollar drain".

What if the Rohingya are not repatriated?



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Bangladesh has been hosting nearly one million Rohingya refugees for six years now. In 2017, following the mass exodus of the Rohingya from Myanmar's Rakhine state to Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh, two failed attempts at repatriation were made in 2018 and 2019, respectively. In both cases, the Rohingya refused to return to their homeland for fear of fresh persecution and lack of congenial environment for repatriation. With the 2021 military takeover in Myanmar, the junta responsible for mass murders and genocide against the Rohingya was busy consolidating its power, with no interest in resolving the crisis, despite many efforts and initiatives by Bangladesh and other allies.

A pilot project to repatriate over 1,100 Rohingya refugees is now in discussion between Bangladesh and Myanmar, negotiated by China. As of March 2023, some progress (such as verification of the list of persons in the pilot project) has been made. However, according to experts and informed sources, Myanmar is taking this symbolic step to "lighten the responsibility" in its next submission to the International Court of Justice

(ICJ) in May regarding the Rohingya genocide. As of writing this piece, no repatriation has taken place.

So, what if the Rohingya are not repatriated? The symbolic pilot repatriation, which is like a drop in the ocean, could very well be another ploy by the Myanmar junta to delay the genocide case and extend the Rohingya refugee crisis. Since the military coup, the political, economic, and humanitarian crises in Myanmar have only grown more dire, with reports indicating nearly 3,000 killed, 17,000 detained and more than 1.5 million internally displaced.

The pilot repatriation plan does not address the root causes of the crisis and offers no tangible resolution. In fact, it has already come under fire from various quarters, including the Human Rights Watch. After the exodus, there have been numerous calls for the trials of senior military officials based on the many atrocities, rapes, and state-sponsored violence, and for addressing the issues of rights, citizenship, and repatriation of the Rohingya with safety and dignity. The pilot repatriation initiative has reportedly brought unease to the refugees in

Cox's Bazar due to its failure to address the ongoing militarism, lack of safety, and continued hostility towards the Rohingya in Myanmar, Bangladesh, and other countries of the region.

Faced with brutal state-sanctioned oppression since 1962 that led to various forms of atrocities - for instance, arbitrary arrest, abduction, confinement in military camps, stripping of citizenship rights in 1982 - and forced thousands to flee the country, of an estimated 3.5 million Rohingya in Rakhine state, over three million now live as refugees or migrants in countries like Bangladesh, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, the United Arab Emirates, India, Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia. The rest who live in Rakhine are either confined to camps or completely at the mercy of the Myanmar army.

Would the pilot repatriation be good for Bangladesh or for the Rohingya refugees? The answer could be "yes" and "no" at the same time. The programme may be seen as a start of the long-overdue repatriation, which may build confidence for future repatriation in greater numbers. It is also possible that the Rohingya are afraid and unwilling to return if those involved, both military and civilian, are not made accountable for the past atrocities and brought to justice. Experts view the pilot repatriation as being beneficial to Myanmar due to the ongoing cases at the ICJ. This will also likely dent and chip away at the criminality of the Myanmar military, and persistently marginalise and alienate the repatriated Rohingya, without their rights being re-

established.

The troubled question for Bangladesh, then, would be how to deal with this refugee crisis for potentially years more to come involving funding, administration, inclusive and equitable treatment of the refugees and host populations, and national security issues, among others.

There are no easy answers. However, Bangladesh should avoid any shortcuts (such as the pilot repatriation initiative seems to be) without addressing the root causes and a just and sustainable solution which would be acceptable to Rohingya refugees. The agenda should include not only the numbers of people to be repatriated, but also issues of their citizenship and right to return to their homes, not to any supervised pilot camps courtesy of the Myanmar military.

Bangladesh and the international community should intensify their pressure on Myanmar to address the root causes to resolve the crisis. Myanmar should not be allowed to avoid accountability for the genocide against its own Rohingya population. In my view, a full assessment of the current situation in Myanmar must constitute a part of the equation for any sustainable move towards Rohingya repatriation. The deteriorating and potentially destabilising and bloody crisis in military-run Myanmar has already triggered a popular armed resistance that the military seeks to violently crush. In sum, the overall environment domestically within Myanmar itself is not right for Rohingya repatriation at present.