

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

Finally, some good news for economy

Exports growth shows the resilience of our businesses

That Bangladesh's merchandise export earnings have crossed the milestone of \$50 billion for the second consecutive year is a notable achievement indeed. In FY2022-23, exports fetched a record \$55.6 billion, which could provide the economy with some much-needed breathing space. Amid challenging conditions at both home and abroad, it is one of the few bright spots for our economy.

The receipts amount to an increase of 6.67 percent from a year earlier, thanks in part to a strong showing in June which saw \$5.03 billion come into the country, according to the Export Promotion Bureau. Even though the total amount fell short of the \$58 billion export target set for the fiscal year, it is a good sign at a time when international markets are going through extreme turbulence. As Bangladesh's major export destinations are grappling with a slowdown and high inflation, the increase managed to surpass many economists' expectations. Moreover, during this time, exporters had to deal with a number of production-related challenges, including low gas pressure and frequent load shedding.

The lion's share of the export burden was carried, predictably, by the garments sector which, despite the slowdown in Western markets, managed to diversify some of its products to other emerging markets. Since garments sectors of other countries struggled during the same period, this also shows the resilience of our own garments sector – although, admittedly, the depreciation of the taka against the dollar did play a big part in making ours more competitive.

Despite this additional advantage, however, other sectors failed to increase their export amounts. For example, important sectors like leather, jute, home textiles, and agricultural products registered negative growths in FY23. A major reason why leather products did badly was the issue of non-compliance at the Savar tannery estate. Despite spending more than Tk 500 crore and waiting for nearly a decade, Bangladesh is yet to reap the full benefit of the central effluent treatment plant (CETP) at the estate. Without a fully functional CETP, Bangladeshi companies will not be able to obtain the Leather Working Group certification, which is essential to attract international retailers and brands.

It is unacceptable that such hindrances should continue to slow down promising sectors of our economy. The government should identify what issues export sectors other than garments are facing, and address them promptly so that Bangladesh's exports can continue to grow.

Can we triumph over dengue this year?

Authorities must ramp up efforts to control it

At the beginning of May, experts had predicted that Bangladesh might see an even worse dengue outbreak this year than before. Unfortunately, all numbers point to this becoming a reality. While the number of dengue cases in June last year was 737, this June saw a staggering 5,956 cases, easily dwarfing the corresponding figure from 2019 – the worst year yet in terms of dengue infection in the country. In all likelihood, warnings about a surge in the breeding of Aedes mosquitoes post-Eid may come true. Adding fuel to the fire, a yet-to-be released survey conducted by DGHS in the two city corporations of Dhaka has detected Aedes larvae in 20 percent of houses under DNCC and 15 percent of houses under DSCC.

For a country dealing with dengue outbreaks for over two decades, Bangladesh still seems to be taking a novice's approach to the problem. This has reflected in the dengue situation getting worse with each passing year. In 2022, the highest number of people died of dengue – 281. The question is, why are the authorities still faltering in their efforts? One area of failure is their delayed drive to detect Aedes larvae. The survey of houses to find Aedes larvae should have been conducted at the beginning of the year (before the first monsoon rain). Why did the health directorate wait until June to carry it out, despite news of rising infections in the early months? What measures are being taken to prevent water stagnation in areas with a drainage problem? Once identified, are the breeding grounds of Aedes larvae being destroyed?

The authorities must be able to address these and other concerns regarding our dengue preparedness. The DGHS survey should provide useful information in identifying dengue hotspots and taking targeted measures in Dhaka, but other major cities should also be included. The coming three-four months are going to be crucial, so the authorities must dedicate all efforts to raising awareness, undertaking preventive drives, and keeping dengue numbers in check. The DGHS and all city corporations must not fail us this time.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Poor road condition in Dhanikhola union

The country has made great leaps in development in all major sectors. But some rural areas are still lagging behind. There are some mud roads in Dhanikhola union in Trishal upazila, Mymensingh that badly need the authorities' attention. Because of the poor road condition, schoolchildren here struggle to go to school, especially during monsoon. The locals here mostly depend on agriculture and fisheries. But they struggle to transport their commodities to the local marketplace due to the dilapidated roads. These roads need to be paved urgently so that the people of Dhanikhola and also Trishal can have an easy life and livelihood.

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When green chillies become too hot to handle



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KAMAL AHMED

What a week has passed, with everyone feeling the heat of green chillies – many without even consuming it. If the term skyrocketing needs to be explained, the price of green chillies should be included in textbooks, as we saw it shoot up from Tk 400 per kg to Tk 1,000 within three days during this Eid-ul Azha. Netizens were quickly comparing its price with a kg of beef, which was selling around Tk 750.

Green chillies proved so hot to handle for the government that at one stage the commerce minister attempted to redirect the media to the agriculture minister for an explanation about the crisis. Though the crisis did not lead to any disorderly situation, the home minister, too, stepped in, and tried to placate consumers by saying the prices would come down soon.

Some apologists have tried to blame weather extremes, saying prolonged heatwaves have burnt chilli plants and crops in the northern parts of

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the country, and few others have said recent excessive rainfall is the reason for further damage. It may very well be true that this particular crop has suffered significant damage owing to weather adversity, but where was the government's appropriate and timely response? Weather extremes are nothing new in Bangladesh as heatwaves and floods are occurring

more frequently, like the rest of the world, as a result of climate change, so some sort of a back-up plan and preparation ought to have been in place.

By the time the government decided to allow importing green chillies and tomatoes in bulk quantities, market volatility had reached the boiling point. Interestingly, we haven't heard anything about the demand and prices of tomatoes at retail or wholesale level, but green chillies have made their place in the headlines. It shows the difference between an essential condiment and a non-essential one. The Bangalee menu can be okay without any tomato, but not without chillies, most preferably the green ones. More importantly, it's essential with soaked rice, a staple food for the poor.

The green chilli fiasco is not the first such failure to manage the market – in other words, ensuring a balance between demand and supply and not allowing price volatility that could cause consumers' backlash and social unrest. The list of other essentials that have caused such an unreasonable price spike is too long, and includes rice, salt, sugar, onion, ginger and edible oil.

Unfortunately, past experiences

tell us that the government has consistently failed to anticipate the ensuing crises, be it due to genuine shortage or artificial supply disruptions by scrupulous trade syndicates. These recurrences have happened despite the fact that the commerce ministry has established a Price Review and Forecasting Cell. According to the ministry's website, the cell was set up

"We are discussing the syndicate. It is correct that large companies are doing lots of businesses together. We need to think... We can put them behind bars and we can fine them. That might be possible. But it will be difficult for us to bear the sudden crisis caused by it. That's why we try to remain within the rules and [tackle the situation] through discussions."



ILLUSTRATION: REHNUMA PROSHOON

on November 24, 2014, and "reviews various data including production, demand, import volume, storage and collection situation, distribution system and comparative analysis of domestic and international market prices of daily necessities." Describing its role further, the website says, "As a part of doing this business, this cell collects information from different (organisations) regarding production, stock, demand, supply, local and international market price, information on (opening LCs) and settlement of these essential goods and further works as a helping hand of the Government to keep the market essential (commodities) stable."

The past crises of essentials clearly show that this institutional mechanism hasn't been working since its inception. The government has also established a competition commission and a consumer rights directorate. But none of them has brought relief to the consumers. It's either due to their incompetence, or they have not been allowed to act independently from political interference.

The riddle about the market disorder, perhaps, is best explained by Commerce Minister Tipu Munshi's admission in parliament when he said,

This statement alone is good enough to prove the failure of governance, and poor consumers are being forced to pay the ransom to the alleged syndicates. It is therefore hard to discard the widely held perception of a nexus between the political authorities and the business syndicates. After all, businesspeople now dominate politics, and they will also have to fund their political friends and their parties' election campaigns.

As I write this article, the BBC has reported that the Competition and Markets Authority of the UK has just concluded its investigation into the fuel market and found that competition is not working, and retailers are overcharging motorists at the pumps. Responding to the finding, the UK government has announced a plan to introduce a new legislation to make retailers follow a price transparency scheme, so that consumers can easily find out the cheapest pump. It is aimed to restore effective competition among retailers and benefit the consumers. The UK example may not be comparable in Bangladesh, but at least it shows that free market doesn't mean reckless profiteering and monopolisation by the powerful businesses – individually or through syndication.

Looking back at London Climate Action Week 2023

POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

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SALEEMUL HUQ

Sadiq Khan, the mayor of London, has been holding an annual weeklong London Climate Action Week (LCAW) in summer every year since he was elected mayor five years ago. The week consists of a series of different events held all over London by different groups focusing on actions to tackle climate change. This initiative has been an extremely successful way to raise awareness about the issues in London and, more importantly, to galvanise actions by different stakeholders in the city.

One of the characteristics of London is that it is not only the capital of the United Kingdom, but it is also an extremely international city with people from every country in the world living there, including a large number of people of Bangladeshi origin.

I have had the privilege of being invited to speak at a number of events during LCAW every year. At this year's event, my first observation was that there had been a major shift in the understanding of what tackling climate change means. In the previous years, almost all the events held during the week would focus on mitigation or reducing emissions of greenhouse gases (GHGs) through campaigns such



REPRESENTATIONAL PHOTO: REUTERS

as net zero, etc. However, this year I was very pleased to see a significant number of events focusing on adaptation and even loss and damage from human-induced climate change, as the UK and Europe suffered from heatwaves over the last few weeks.

One of such events that I was invited to speak at was a gathering of high-level

representatives from the insurance and reinsurance industry, for which London is a global hub, who have started to recognise the importance of dealing with losses and damages from human-induced climate change. This is indeed a welcome shift in awareness of this important sector, which has significant resources in terms of both

and migration, including with the London office of the International Organization of Migration (IOM), which brought together a significant number of policymakers and practitioners working on the issue.

One such event focused on the role that the Bangladeshi diaspora in London can play in tackling climate change in the UK, as well as connecting with their families and relatives in Bangladesh. There is a tremendous scope for collaboration between the Bangladeshi diaspora in the UK and Bangladesh on tackling the global climate crisis together.

The International Centre for Climate Change and Development (ICCCAD) also co-organised a major event on tackling loss and damage with the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), under the ALL ACT initiative we launched in Dhaka in March. This initiative now has many new partners in Least Developed Countries and Small Island Developing Countries, in which we will be carrying out research and capacity-building efforts to address loss and damage.

So, overall, LCAW 2023 has seen a breakthrough in the issue of supporting adaptation, building resilience, and addressing loss and damage.

Going forward, this may be an inspiration for the Dhaka city mayors to organise a similar climate action week in our capital city, and perhaps invite the mayor of London, so Dhaka and London can join forces to become global leaders in tackling climate change.