

Police excesses must stop

Report on police raid leading to girl's suicide is deeply alarming

It was only the other day that we commented on an incident in Natore in which five cops allegedly tortured three men in custody, leading to the local court asking the police authorities to file a case against the officers responsible. While a court's intervention on behalf of helpless victims is laudable, the truth is, bereft of institutional accountability, it is hardly a deterrent against police excesses, which have been occurring with frightening regularity in the country. The latest to be reported by the media occurred in Pallabi, Dhaka, where Baishakhi Akhter, aged 16, allegedly took her own life after police attempted to detain her mother during a raid.

There have been contrasting claims about what really happened. Police allege that the family ran a drug business and that the aim of the raid on their home was to "recover narcotics." But the family denied these allegations. Our concern is not about whether the family had any criminal history, but what happened after the so-called raid and whether police were somehow responsible for the tragedy that followed. According to Baishakhi's family, not only did the police team attempt to extort money from them, but they also tortured mother and daughter before hauling Baishakhi off to a room where, locked from outside, she threatened and subsequently committed suicide.

The truth of the matter will only come out if a thorough investigation is conducted. However, from what has been reported, several facts stand on their own: 1) police conducted the "raid" in plain clothes; 2) a young girl killed herself during the raid; and 3) something happened during the raid that prompted it, leading to angry protests by locals. These facts are enough to indicate foul play at some stage of the raid. The picture that emerges from media reports – as well as the history of police involvement in extortion using the well-worn excuse of narcotics possession – is once again a reminder that beyond token disciplinary measures, not much is being done to ensure accountability of the errant members of this vital force.

In the past, we have often seen how the authorities tried to discredit allegations of police misconduct by citing the supposed criminality of victims. But in the eyes of law, everyone deserves to be treated with dignity and given a fair chance to be heard in a court of law. But it is because of police's vigilante-style raids – using the cover of plain clothes – that such principles stand violated, and that people find it hard to trust them. In these columns, we have also often raised concerns about how such police excesses and extrajudicial actions have created fears among ordinary citizens. A continuation of this situation will be most frustrating.

We, therefore, urge the police authorities to ensure a fair investigation into the Baishakhi tragedy and bring anyone responsible to book. Unless they take proper steps in such cases, public trust in police may never be recovered.

Black Sea grain deal must be upheld

Russia should consider the bigger picture of global food crisis

We are gravely concerned about Russia's decision to not rejoin the Black Sea Grain Initiative. Reportedly, the country recently rejected the UN chief's call in this regard, which we fear may severely affect global food supply, especially in countries that are dependent on grain imports. Ukraine is a major producer of staple crops such as wheat, corn, maize, oilseeds, etc. For three years prior to the Russia-Ukraine war, about 10 percent of the wheat and 15 percent of the corn traded globally came from Ukraine. Russia, too, had a major contribution to global food as well as fertiliser supplies.

Given how food prices in the international market shot up as Ukraine's grain exports got disrupted following the war, the UN and Türkiye stepped in to broker the Black Sea Grain Initiative in July 2022 – which opened up Ukraine's ports in the Black Sea for grain exports. Under the deal, the World Food Programme (WFP) procured more than half of its global wheat supply from Ukraine to run aid operations in several countries.

With Russia refusing to rejoin the deal now, chances are those ports will become inaccessible, which means Ukraine won't be able to ship grains anymore. That does not bode well for the rest of the world. Already, this development is affecting food prices. In Bangladesh, which is the third largest importer of wheat from Ukraine, the price of low-grade wheat shot up by Tk 20-30 per maund at Chattogram's Khatunganj wholesale market the day after Russia announced it was pulling out of the deal.

Russia's refusal does have some merit, however. It says it sees no reason to uphold the deal as the commitments made to facilitate its food and fertiliser exports under the deal have yet to be fulfilled. While Western sanctions on Russia do not apply to food and fertiliser exports, restrictions on payments, logistics and insurance have certainly hindered shipments, according to Moscow. We understand its troubles, but Russia must see the bigger picture and consider how its decision will affect millions of people around the world. On humanitarian grounds, as well as to strengthen its global standing, Russia must consider rejoining the deal to avert a potential catastrophe. At the same time, we urge the UN to find ways to accommodate Russia's demands so that the integrity of the initiative is upheld.

Our social safety budget is neither equitable nor efficient



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Social protection is an important component of the national budget in Bangladesh, which essentially aims to improve the welfare of vulnerable citizens. Identifying the pitfalls of the social protection system and realising the importance of improving it to meet certain objectives, Bangladesh adopted the National Social Security Strategy (NSSS) in 2015. Thereafter, it was agreed that the recommendations of the NSSS will be implemented through medium-term five-year plans and annual economic plans, such as the national budget. Based on this, the analysis for the social protection budget should ideally be carried out in line with the NSSS.

Reforms outlined in the NSSS fell under two broad categories: programmatic reform and institutional reform. On the other hand, the reforms may also be considered from equity and efficiency lenses. The proposal to cover 50-60 percent of vulnerable citizens, increase social protection expenditure to three percent of GDP, and enhance transfer values to reflect the needs of beneficiaries originate from an equity perspective. Improvement of the payment system (such as G2P), installation of an MIS system, establishment of a single registry, and digitisation of data are some of the proposals adopted in the NSSS on grounds of efficiency. Improvement of the beneficiary selection (that is, minimising the exclusion and inclusion errors) covers both equity and efficiency.

How does the social protection budget for the 2023-24 fiscal year fare when analysed through the lenses of equity and efficiency?

Allocation and equity

The government has allocated Tk 126,272 crore, around 7.4 percent more than last year's social protection allocation of Tk 113,576 crore. However, in terms of GDP, the allocation in FY2023-24 is 2.52 percent – which falls short of the NSSS target of three percent of GDP. This is a disturbing development. The Tk 126,272 crore allocation may be considered as gross allocation, since it includes a number of items which are not usually categorised as social safety net items. These include pensions for retired government employees and their families, interest payments for national savings certificates, agriculture subsidies, interest subsidy for SMEs, and allocation for health risk and natural shock management. Together, these constitute around 59 percent of the total social protection budget allocation for FY2023-24. In other words, the net social safety allocation for vulnerable citizens is



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only around 41 percent of the social protection budget. This amount was around 64 percent of the gross allocation in both FY2020-21 and FY2021-22. But a significant drop occurred in FY2022-23 by about 18 percent, and by 23 percent in FY2023-24. Again, the declining trend in net allocation is a serious cause of concern.

Another important observation is that, due to rural to urban migration, poverty and vulnerability have been shifting to urban areas in Bangladesh. However, the social protection system is not keeping pace with this development. As a result, the coverage gap (the difference between poverty rate and social safety expenditure) has widened for the urban poor in Bangladesh. The government must use the social protection allocation to reduce these gaps and establish parity in social safety budget allocation between rural and urban areas.

Beneficiary selection and efficiency Bangladesh's social safety system is still beset with myriad exclusion and inclusion errors, reflecting the inefficiency in reaching out to deserving beneficiaries. To remedy this, the NSSS recommended establishing a single registry system (that is, a comprehensive database of existing and potential beneficiaries), a robust management information system (MIS), and a grievance filing mechanism. Progress has been slow on all these fronts. In particular, the country has neither established a single registry system, nor installed a robust MIS. The National Household Database (NHD) was initiated by the

criteria used for beneficiary selection were prepared in 2013 and are still in use, raising serious concern about their usefulness due to their lack of dynamism and adaptability.

Since it is more or less accepted that the NHD has failed, it was expected that for the FY2023-24 social protection budget, the government would have rectified its position regarding the NHD by discarding it and experimenting with new alternatives that would be home-grown and less expensive. In this context, it should be mentioned that under the Asian Development Bank (ADB)-supported Covid-19 Active Response and Expenditure Support (CARES) programme, and in collaboration with the Department of Social Services (DSS), a pilot community-based targeting and selection process (CBTSP) was carried out in two unions in Bangladesh between March and April 2023. Only two programmes – old age allowance and widow allowance – were considered. In terms of selection efficiency, the pilot CBTSP produced encouraging outcomes suggesting that, with community involvement, it is possible to better identify beneficiaries for social protection programmes. And following focused group discussions, social mapping, transect walks, and dedicated household surveys, it would be possible to prepare a master beneficiary list and separate beneficiary lists for most of our social safety programmes.

Also, allowing private participation in social protection could improve efficiency, coverage, and lessen burden on the national budget.

As is apparent, both equity and efficiency have been ignored while formulating the FY2023-24 social safety budget allocation. Unless measures are included to improve equity and efficiency, the benefits of the social protection budget will continue to be low. The government may consider some solutions in this regard.

First, it must commit to enhancing net social safety allocation to around three percent of GDP. The social protection budget should be used to ensure parity in allocation across rural and urban areas and across all age groups.

Since the NHD is not functional, the government must look for an alternative beneficiary selection approach. The CBTSP approach may be an important source of information to prepare an evidence-based social protection budget, which is likely to improve selection, reduce leakage, and improve value for money. However, in order to assess its robustness and scale it up at the national level, the CBTSP may be conducted in eight upazilas spread over four regions – north, south, east, and west – to allow assessments and inclusion of regional characteristics.

Additionally, the criteria used for beneficiary selection for social safety programmes need complete overhauling. Hence, there is a need not only to update them but also include periodic automatic updates in line with economic expansion. The government must also ensure balance between the three social protection pillars to generate maximum benefits and ensure private sector participation.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Go green!

With our world facing increasing environmental challenges, adopting a sustainable lifestyle has become more crucial than ever. We need a movement that encourages individuals to make conscious choices that reduce their impact on the environment. By incorporating eco-friendly practices into our daily lives, we can contribute to a healthier planet and ensure a better future for generations to come.

With the increasing threats of climate change, resource reduction, and environmental degradation, it has become urgent to adopt sustainable practices and promote a green lifestyle. By embracing renewable energy, sustainable transportation, and energy-efficient technologies, we can collectively reduce our carbon footprint and work towards a greener future. Creating an eco-friendly home is a fundamental step towards sustainable living. Start by conserving energy through

efficient insulation, using LED bulbs, and investing in energy-saving appliances. Reduce water consumption by fixing leaks, installing low-flow faucets, and harvesting rainwater for gardening purposes. Embrace recycling and composting to minimise waste and promote a circular economy. Additionally, consider using non-toxic cleaning products and integrating indoor plants into your home environment to improve air quality.

We should also opt for eco-friendly transportation methods – choose public transport, biking, or walking whenever possible. If you need a car, consider investing in a hybrid or electric vehicle. These options not only reduce emissions, but also help save money on fuel in the long run. Additionally, regular vehicle maintenance ensures optimal fuel efficiency and reduces environmental impact.

Before making a purchase, evaluate the necessity and

durability of the product. Choose quality over quantity and opt for items made from sustainable materials. Support ethical and eco-friendly brands that prioritise fair trade practices, use renewable resources, or incorporate recycled materials. Embrace the concept of minimalism, decluttering, and sharing resources to reduce waste generation.

To promote sustainable eating habits, opt for locally-sourced, organic, and seasonal produce. Support farmers' markets and community-supported agriculture initiatives to reduce food miles and promote local economies. As livestock production is a major contributor to greenhouse gas emissions, decreasing meat consumption can also help. Instead, we could embrace a plant-based or flexitarian diet, consuming more fruits, vegetables, and sustainable protein sources like legumes.

When travelling, consider eco-friendly alternatives that

minimise your carbon footprint. Opt for destinations that prioritise sustainable tourism practices, such as promoting local culture, preserving natural habitats, and supporting community development. Choose eco-lodges or accommodations with green certifications. Minimise waste by carrying reusable water bottles, shopping bags, and toiletries. Respect local ecosystems and cultural heritage by practising responsible and low-impact tourism.

Small changes in our daily routines can lead to significant environmental benefits. Let us strive to live consciously, protect natural resources, and inspire others to join this green revolution. Together, it must create a sustainable and thriving future for generations to come.

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