

Hear the plea of Gaza residents

World must do more to stop the humanitarian crisis in Gaza

We are distressed by the rapidly spiralling situation in the Gaza Strip, where more than two million people are trapped as Israeli airstrikes continue to flatten the territory. In retaliation to the deadly attack that Hamas launched on October 7 – in which 1,400 people were killed, per Tuesday's tally, and many taken hostage – the Israeli government has placed the Palestinian enclave under full siege and has been bombarding it every day in an act of war. So far, more than 2,800 people have been killed in Gaza, with thousands more injured. It is feared that at least 1,000 Palestinians are trapped under the rubble of buildings demolished by Israeli bombing. People have been killed in the occupied West Bank, too.

With food, water and fuel supplies cut off for more than a week due to the siege, a humanitarian crisis is unfolding in Gaza where people are on the brink of starvation and dehydration. The Israel Defense Forces claims it is "concerned" about the situation, but there is no sign of a ceasefire or the opening of the Rafah crossing at the Gaza-Egypt border for transporting humanitarian aid to the besieged civilians, as all diplomatic efforts to that end have failed so far. While humanitarian workers wait at the border with life-saving aid, people on the Palestinian side continue to languish in despair.

Israel, we must say, has broken international laws by putting the entire population of Gaza under siege in the name of self-defence. Israel's right to self-defence doesn't justify its barbaric persecution of innocent Palestinians. It is evident that the Israeli government is subjecting Gaza residents to collective punishment, which is in complete violation of the Geneva Convention.

With an Israeli ground offensive looming, the situation will only get worse if the international community, especially Israel's long standing allies, don't play a more proactive role to protect the Palestinian civilians. We hope that the US president, who is scheduled for a visit to Israel on Wednesday, will remind it of the equal value and dignity of Palestinian lives. World leaders must do everything to spare them from what Israeli President Benjamin Netanyahu has promised to be a "mighty vengeance" against Hamas. Palestinians deserve the same sympathy, on the same scale, and with the same vigour, as any other persecuted people in the world.

An inspiring case of river management

But much more remains to be done to stop environmental degradation

We are delighted to see the transformation of an old channel of the Buriganga River that has been virtually given a new life by Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC). As revealed by a back-page photo in this daily, the authorities have cleared waste dumped into the channel and also knocked down illegal structures built along the riverbanks, increasing water flow in the process. While clearing/dredging initiatives like this are not uncommon, these seldom produce results, thanks to a lack of awareness about waste disposal as well as the myriad challenges associated with river land reclamation. Thus, the sight of a once-polluted riverbed transformed into a flowing channel serves as a confirmation of the efficacy of such initiatives, if undertaken seriously.

The urgency of taking effective steps cannot be overestimated. Our rivers, and all other water bodies and low-lying areas, especially near cities, are fast becoming sinkholes of waste. We have seen its disastrous effects during this past monsoon when any above-average rainfall invariably led to waterlogging in major cities, including Dhaka and Chattogram, because drains were mostly clogged and could not hold excess water. Waterlogging is but one of the many fallouts of indiscriminate dumping of waste. It also has profound health, socioeconomic and environmental implications. Encroachment or unauthorised construction along riverbanks further exacerbates the problem.

In this connection, we find the DNCC mayor's call to quickly finish the ongoing road repair/development work in many areas quite relevant. He rightly pointed out the connection between prolonged work and waterlogging, but also, importantly, drew attention to our unplanned urbanisation with roads and buildings constructed by filling up ponds, drains, low-lying lands, and water bodies. Clearly, this has been a long-festering problem, and both individuals and institutions contributed to it in an equal manner. Who shall we turn to for a solution then? Reversing this situation is beyond the scope of any one public agency or department, although they all must do their parts. We urge the higher authorities to undertake more effective and sustainable measures to stop pollution and encroachment.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Stigma surrounding odd jobs

Prejudice against people in non-specialised work is still highly prevalent in Bangladesh. In our culture, employees in professions like ride-sharing and food delivery services are often perceived as holistically inferior human beings. This stigma is not as prominent in most other parts of the world. People in Bangladesh should realise that all professions have value, and not everyone is blessed with the same life experience. It is essential for us to focus not only on developing our economy but also on improving our social notions.

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Why CPD's minimum wage proposal is not acceptable



Mahtab Uddin Ahmed is a writer, researcher and activist.

MAHTAB UDDIN AHMED

On October 8, the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), a well-known think tank in the country, proposed a minimum wage of Tk 17,568 per month for garment workers. Despite highlighting the plight of garment workers in Bangladesh in their presentation while proposing a minimum wage, the method used by CPD to calculate that minimum wage betrays a terrible insensitivity towards the workers. Not only that, a number of serious methodological questions arise regarding CPD's calculations.

CPD's adopted accounting method is structurally unfair to workers

How did the CPD calculate the minimum wage for garment workers to be only Tk 17,568, despite stating that the living cost for a family of 3.7 members is Tk 31,942 in their presentation? CPD said they used the accounting method of economist Richard Anker – known as the Anker methodology – to determine the minimum wage. According to this method, when calculating the living wage of a worker, the living cost of the worker's family is divided by the number of full-time workers in the family. Then, a certain percentage of savings is added. As a result, a living wage calculated with the Anker method will always be much lower than the actual cost of living. This is exactly what happened in this case.

But the main problem here is Anker's methodology itself. Anker basically wants to throw away the public perception of the living wage that was established worldwide through the workers' struggle over the past two centuries – a wage which covers the minimum cost of living of the worker and of his/her family. Anker is telling us that the living wage will not be determined by the cost of living of a worker and their families. Rather, it is to be determined by dividing the cost of living by the number of full-time workers in the worker's family! In this case, Anker argues, "One full-time worker per household is unrealistically low for the 21st century. Labour force participation rates for both men and women are too high all around the world to justify this assumption. The days when it might have been appropriate to use a one-person (presumably male) household breadwinner model of the family, as in the United States in the early 20th century, are long gone – if it ever was appropriate."

But if there are two people working in a family, why shouldn't that family get the full wages of two people? In the past, when only one person worked in the family, if you could assume that the entire amount of money calculated to meet the minimum expenses of the person and their family was their living wage, then why, when two members of the



VISUAL: REHNUMA PROSHOON

family are working in hopes of living a little better, would you not take into account the entire family's expenses when determining the salary for each of them? Are they all working less because two people are working?

This means you are making arrangements for the owner to get almost two workers at the cost of one. The question can be posed from the other end, too: when a factory owner has multiple factories, does the owner reduce the profit per factory to keep the total profit the same? If he does not do that, then why is the living wage of the worker reduced by dividing it by the number of working persons in the family? Is this not wage theft?

Other limitations in CPD's calculations

While the CPD itself estimated in March this year that the food cost for a four-member family in Dhaka is Tk 22,664 per month, in their proposal for the minimum wage of garment workers, they estimated that the required food cost for a worker's family of 3.7 members is only Tk 16,529. According to their previous calculations, this should have been around Tk 25,000. So why is there one calculation for those who live in Dhaka and a different one for garment workers? Why should there be two different food standards for two social strata?

Not only that, the food basket used by CPD to make the calculation is also questionable. The food basket that CPD has considered for an adult worker/an adult member of the worker's family includes rice, flour, millet, potato, grass pea, taro, water spinach, banana, pool barb fish (*punti*), milk, soybean oil, palm

oil, jackfruit seeds, and sugar. Is this list of food realistic for workers? Do workers not need fish, meat or eggs? Will they meet their protein needs by eating only jackfruit seeds and small fish? Do workers eat millet regularly?

Even Richard Anker himself has repeatedly said that his method of calculating the cost of living should take into account the cost of a basic but decent life for workers and their

Even Anker himself, in his work on the living wage of garment workers in Bangladesh, has taken the number of full-time working family members as 1.5, not 2. And it is noteworthy that he used the term "full-time workers," not just "earners." It shows that he knows there can be underemployed earners, especially in developing countries.

However, in CPD's calculation using Anker's methodology, they have used

the term "earning member" instead of "full-time worker," and have taken the number of working family members as two. It is important to ask whether this is appropriate because, if CPD had not taken this number as two but as 1.5 (as per Anker's opinion), then even with their flawed calculation of the cost of living, the minimum wage would have come up to almost Tk 23,500. And if they had used their calculation for food costs in March to calculate the cost of living for the worker's family, even the use of Anker's method – which is unfair to workers – would have resulted in a minimum wage of more than Tk 26,000!

The Anker Research Institute itself estimated last year that the living wage of garment workers in Bangladesh should have been Tk 23,254 in 2022, which means that it would currently be Tk 25,000 or more if adjusted for inflation. It is to be noted that the Anker Research Institute took the number of full-time employed persons in the worker's family not as two, but as 1.58.

It is clear that CPD's proposal for the minimum wage of garment workers is in no way justifiable, and therefore is not acceptable. A living wage is a fundamental human right for every worker. Even the minimum wage of Tk 25,000 demanded by various labour organisations for garment workers cannot completely cover their cost of living. In the end, workers are actually demanding less than what they require.

Richard Anker, whose method CPD has used, has repeatedly said that the cost of decent housing must be considered when calculating costs. With the rent of Tk 4,765 and a utility bill of only Tk 508 that the CPD has calculated, can a decent house be rented in any city in this country? It is therefore evident from the food basket and other cost categories given by the CPD that their calculations have failed to capture the reality of garment workers. The actual cost of living is much higher than the cost they have shown.

Even though Richard Anker divides the total cost of living into the number of full-time working members in the family while calculating the living wage, he also clearly says, "Assuming that both parents work full-time is similarly unrealistic." That is why he has suggested that it is better to take 1.5 instead of 2 as the number of people working full-time in the family.

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This article, originally published in the online magazine Sarbojonkotha, has been translated from Bangla by Naimul Alam Alvi.



The need for an admission test

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National University, with 2,257 affiliated colleges and institutions, was established in 1992 and has been playing a pivotal role in unlocking new doors for higher education in the country. Since inception, it has been unparalleled in terms of its student population. But throughout its glorious journey, a crucial matter has been ignored in this institution

since the academic session of 2015-2016: the admission test.

Students enrol in this university every year without taking admission tests, resulting in them lagging behind in competitive fields at the early stages of their careers compared to candidates from other universities at home and abroad. Needless to say, the absence of admission tests has deteriorated the academic environment at the university.

One may wonder why admission tests should be required in place of allowing results-based admission.

Firstly, admission tests help assess the academic abilities and knowledge of prospective students, as it is designed to evaluate whether

a student has the necessary foundational skills and knowledge to succeed in their chosen programme.

Admission tests also allow institutions to select the most qualified candidates, ensuring that the selected students are capable of handling the curriculum and coursework, while reducing the risk of dropouts and academic underperformance. The system is designed to ensure that individuals from diverse backgrounds and demographics have equal opportunity to access quality education.

Thirdly, academic institutions maintaining rigorous admission standards have a better reputation

in terms of academic excellence and can attract the best instructors and students, leading to a virtuous cycle of higher academic quality aligned with Sustainable Development Goal #4.

Considering Bangladesh's current and future goals – the Eighth Five-Year Plan, Sustainable Development Goals 2030, Vision 2041, the Delta Plan 2100 – and the problems, demands, and needs of the country, as well as taking into account the global reality, we hope that the National University will march forward in designing an up-to-date admission test with the aim of producing competent citizens for the purpose of building a Smart Bangladesh by 2041.