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Will food prices finally come down?

Latest govt plan is promising, but questions remain

After a year that saw the prices of essentials constantly climbing up—with food inflation peaking at 12.56 percent in October, the highest in at least a decade—the government's latest decision to go for a coordinated effort to control the market is certainly good news. If successful, the average citizen will finally get respite from these relentless price hikes. However, the big question is whether this move will truly bring relief or it will be akin to many of the efforts that failed to put a dent on this seemingly perennial problem.

The new government seems to be taking this matter seriously, as multiple ministries and government bodies have come together to address this issue. The finance ministry is set to prepare a plan of action for the first 100 days of this government, highly prioritising steps to tackle inflation. Meanwhile, the food and commerce ministries have issued a host of directives to administration officials and businesspeople. These are certainly promising signs of change.

To control the chaos in the market, however, the administration has to take measures that address the structural issues. As we have seen before, random raids to catch hoarders do little to bring the prices down, unless there is strict implementation and follow-through by the authorities. Over the past few years, we have seen the unchallenged dominance of a few syndicates who are manipulating the supply chain and hiking up prices. The government, curiously enough, has thus far refused to identify these nameless, faceless syndicates and bring them to book. The good news is that the state minister of commerce has assured us that the mention of syndicates—which were responsible for doubling the price for onions overnight last year—may not be heard from July onwards. We desperately hope for that reality, but again, such ambitious goals cannot be realised without comprehensive measures and political goodwill.

Another pertinent issue is that of imports. During a meeting, sugar and edible oil importers said US dollars have to be made available in the market so they can easily open letters of credit (LCs) ahead of Ramadan. The holy month is a time when we see prices of essentials soar, so it is imperative that the government resolve such matters to ensure proper supply. On a broader level, we must take long-term measures to address our dependence on and mismanagement of imports. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization, Bangladesh is the third-largest food importer in the world. Because of the dependence and mismanagement of imports, the authorities often fail to play a timely role in dealing with food crises within the country when other countries enact export bans.

Ultimately, on-paper measures, like the price fixing of essentials last year, and ineffective initiatives such as raids will bear little fruit. The administration has to make large businesses accountable, eliminate syndicates, and manage imports with accurate data to pull us out of this crisis. We hope the new government will prepare actionable plans to these ends.

Dengue continues to haunt us

Govt must have a proper action plan to fight dengue this year

There are not enough words to express our frustration at the incompetence that the authorities have shown over the past years to contain the spread of dengue in Bangladesh. While January is supposed to be a lean season for dengue, in reality, the viral disease is spreading like any time of the year, with people still dying and getting hospitalised on a regular basis. Reportedly, in the first 17 days of this year, at least 10 dengue patients died and 756 were hospitalised, while in the whole of January last year, the death toll was six and the number of cases was 566. This is a warning sign that dengue may be even deadlier this year.

In 2023, a total of 1,705 dengue-related deaths and 321,179 cases were reported in the country—the highest since its first outbreak in 2000. But even then, the situation was not so dire in the first few months of the year. Now, the question is, how should the authorities prepare to fight dengue this year? The answer is simple: they need to find out what they did wrong in the previous years.

The failure of the two city corporations in Dhaka in identifying and destroying the breeding grounds of Aedes mosquitoes was unacceptable. And when they finally started spraying imported insecticides throughout the city, experts raised questions about their effectiveness. The last thing we want to see this year is the inefficiency and lacklustre attitude of the city corporations in performing their duty.

Last year's dengue outbreak also laid bare the weaknesses of our healthcare system. We witnessed how patients struggled to get admitted to the hospitals or acquire the necessary medications for treatment. While the government fixed the costs of dengue tests, it could not ensure the sufficient supply of life-saving drugs for dengue patients. This should not be repeated this year.

Last but not the least, the government must develop a proper dengue monitoring system this time around, by including data from all private and public hospitals and clinics across the country that provide dengue treatment. The government's vector control programmes would only be effective if the exact number of patients, their locations and the distribution of the serotypes of the virus were available. And the time to take all these actions is now, if we want to lower the risk of another widespread outbreak this year.

To overcome gas crisis, upgrade field management



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BADRUL IMAM

The depleting reserves of most major gas fields, decline in cumulative gas production, and disruption in the expected LNG supply mean that Bangladesh is going through the worst gas supply shortfall in recent history. This is not unexpected by any means, because energy experts, for a long time, have been warning about a major gas crisis coming due to the widening gap between the supply and demand of gas in the country.

On the supply side, local gas production has declined from a peak annual rate of 973 billion cubic feet (Bcf) in FY2016 to 840 Bcf in FY2022, according to Petrobangla. The increasing industrialisation and urbanisation over the last decades, on the other hand, led to a fast uptick in gas demand. The attempt to remove the gap by supplementing the gas supply through liquefied natural gas (LNG) import did not bear the expected result, because Bangladesh cannot import enough LNG to meet its requirement for two reasons. First, the price of LNG is very high and the country currently has a dollar crisis, which would not allow the funds readily available to pay for the import bill. Second, the country has yet to build a robust LNG import infrastructure.

Waning reserves, falling production

In the 1960s, the Shell Oil Company helped place Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) on the world map for gas reserves by discovering several world-class multi-Tcf (trillion cubic feet) gas fields, including Titas, Habiganj, Bakhrabad, Kailashtila and Rashidpur. After independence, new gas fields were discovered on a regular basis, but that did not significantly change the reserve situation, because most of the newly discovered gas fields were relatively smaller in size. In 1997, Bibiyana, yet another multi-Tcf gas field, was discovered by a major international oil company (IOC).

Among the very large gas fields, Titas' initial gas reserve was estimated to be 6.36 Tcf in 2010. At the beginning of 2023, the Titas gas reserve declined to 1.14 Tcf, per Petrobangla data. Similarly, Bakhrabad's initial reserve was estimated to be 1.23 Tcf, which has been reduced to only 0.35 Tcf. Habiganj, another major gas field, has

been depleted from the initial reserve of 2.63 Tcf to 0.097 Tcf. The reserve in Bibiyana, the gas field with the highest production volume in Bangladesh, has declined from the initial 5.75 Tcf to 0.33 Tcf at present. The same trend is visible in some other large gas fields. The Sangu, the only active offshore gas field in the country, has been completely depleted and abandoned.

From the above, it is clear that most of the currently operational gas fields are past their youthful strength and cannot be relied upon for meeting our gas needs in the future. To attain future gas security, Bangladesh has to enter a robust exploration programme to find yet-to-find new reserves of gas.

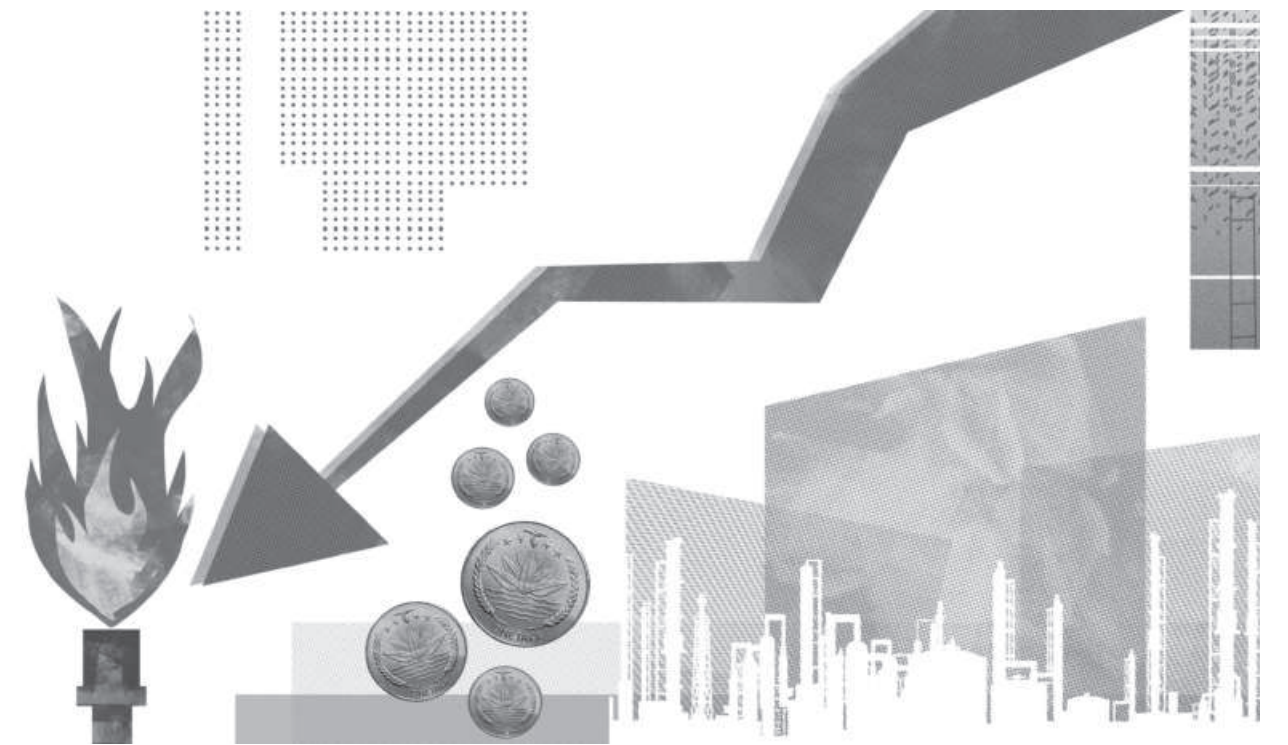
At present, Bangladesh reels under a severe gas supply shortfall. About 78 percent of the gas supply is met through production from local gas fields. The remaining 22 percent is met with imported LNG. While domestic gas production has been on the decline for several years now, the LNG supply suffers from international price hikes and poor LNG infrastructure. The production facilities in local gas fields do exhibit various weaknesses,

including less than optimum production volume per well compared to IOC wells. Energy experts opine that there is a scope for enhancing the rate of production in individual wells in the national gas fields.

How to boost gas production

The present gas crisis is more of the result of failure to exploit our gas resources enough, rather than the lack

of IOC controlled Jalalabad gas field, with about half the reserve of either Kailashtila or Rashidpur, produces about 150 mmcf. These are clear evidence of the underdevelopment of the nationally managed gas fields. Gas field development is not rocket science; simple improvement in technological and operational procedures can enhance production.



VISUAL: REHNUMA PROSHOON

of it. That means we may add more gas to the production line if better technology and management are employed.

There are two ways the gas output may be increased. Production may be increased by drilling more development wells in the known reserves. The Chhatak gas field, for example, has a large reserve, but it has never produced through more than a single well. Largely untapped, the gas field, which faced a blowout accident in the late 1980s, still has the potential of production at a healthy rate.

In the Titas gas field, the largest gas field in the country, 26 wells have been drilled, and it currently supplies 390 million cubic feet per day (mmcf) of gas to the national grid. In comparison, IOC-controlled Bibiyana, the second largest gas field with 26 wells drilled, produces 1,180 mmcf—three times more than Titas.

Kailashtila and Rashidpur gas fields, two of the five largest fields in Bangladesh, do not produce even close to their capacity. Kailashtila produces only 25 mmcf and Rashidpur produces only 42 mmcf. Comparatively, the

In 2011, internationally renowned oil-gas service company Schlumberger was engaged by Petrobangla to find ways to increase the production rate of individual gas wells in several gas fields across Bangladesh. Schlumberger detected 49 wells that it thought were underperforming and suggested procedures to enhance the production rate in those wells. These were procedures designed to perform from the surface, involving minor issues of wellhead repairs, adjustment and additional instrumentation, including higher diameter tubing. No subsequent follow-up of the recommendations was ever done; the technical report has been gathering dust till date.

So, it appears that the local companies dealing with production in the nationally managed gas fields need to upgrade their technology to a more upscale system. A comparison between the production of a gas well operated by a national company with that of an IOC-managed gas well makes this point evident. Bangladesh needs to catch up with modern technology to stand on par with the international standards.

Under the influence of the cold spell



BLOWN' IN THE WIND

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SHAMSAD MORTUZA

One of my Facebook friends recently shared his observation of significantly improved behaviour in his children during the ongoing cold wave. This led him to contemplate the connection between the behaviour of "well-behaved kids from colder climes." The light-hearted post with a political insinuation could be extended to the once-hot topic of our recently held national election. Even the once-assertive rhetoric of many foreign observers and monitors has cooled down during this ongoing cold wave.

This supposed link between weather and culture made me recall a conversation I had with an American friend from my graduate school. He was raised to consider the practice of touching food while eating as uncivilised. I quipped that, back home, we have a similar notion that using water in the toilet is a marker of civilisation. My friend was a converted follower of Hare Krishna. His devotion to and understanding of Indian culture was greater than mine. But his comments made me think of the preconceived notions and biases that we hold against each other, often left unspoken and unaddressed.

Interestingly, cultural practices, such as using utensils to eat, have historical connections to climate. In colder countries, limited access to water and the need to handle hot food necessitated the use of utensils. In tropical countries like ours, the emphasis on washing hands before or after eating is not as critical. Labelling table etiquette as a marker of civilisation is problematic as it privileges one necessity over another, prompting reflection on whether there is a universal standard for judgement. The same is true when the Global North makes us accountable according to their standards.

Cold and dark winters are often linked to mental health concerns. The cold weather in the Scandinavian countries is alleged to make people more prone to suicide. One reason for such deaths is the lack of sunlight, responsible for winter depression, Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD). In winter and its preceding months, less sunlight can affect the body's internal clock (circadian rhythms) and lead to disruptions in mood and sleep patterns.

But for us, the cold wave comes

as a refreshing change from the usual heat. This winter, our mood and sleep patterns were affected by the lukewarm electoral fever. In the absence of a proper opposition, we did not see the usual fiery rhetoric and violence that characterise our elections. The number of voters going to the polling booths declined, too. Now that it's over, a new set of ministers and MPs has been inducted. Some of them are showing their best behaviour in this cold weather, deviating from the usual rhetoric.

I just saw a video of an MP from Sylhet taking a nightly rickshaw ride incognito, talking to the rickshaw puller to find out about the real expectations of the public from the politicians. Whether the MP got this idea from the Arabian Nights tales is anybody's guess. The health minister, whose professional background matches the portfolio for a change, has also identified problems that resonate with the people. Malpractices and corruption make our health sector suffer the most. I hope the cold wave will initiate better behaviour that will persist and make the sector service-oriented. There is no reason why we cannot have the basic health services that force thousands to visit neighbouring countries and spend millions of hard-earned currencies abroad. I hope while the winter good mode is on, our leaders will lead by example by receiving treatments at home, unless it is absolutely critical or crucial.

We also need to recognise that winter requires different social and cultural coping mechanisms. The traditional winter fair that we have

is a strategy to encourage people to participate in social events, who otherwise would have remained cooped up at home and suffered from what is known as depressive cabin fever. Even dietary practices like protein-heavy meals, considered winter delicacies—rice flour *roti* with duck meat, for instance—are necessitated by the body's energy requirements. The weather can indeed have an impact on our body's internal rhythms. But it can also affect our social, cultural, and even political rhythms.

Can we stretch the benefits of this cold wave and give it some durability? For instance, I am yet to see any serious campaign to come in aid to the people who are experiencing the severity of the cold weather. The pro-people promise made before the election should be translated into action. Warming up to the people is what we need when this inclement weather is affecting us all. And this is not only the job of the government. There is a growing tendency to spend obscene amounts of money on social gatherings, events, festivals, and weddings. This shows not only poor taste but also a total disregard for the extreme social polarisation that has happened over the last two decades. The metaphorical cold wave is shrinking the middle class. Their voice is also shrunk and overpowered by those who are privileged to enjoy winter's delicacy.

Let us collectively reflect on how to exhibit our best behaviour and become a nation adaptable to all seasons, fostering inclusivity and empathy.