

A step in the right direction

Tough measures needed to keep Ramadan prices under control

We are glad to see that the newly formed cabinet is thinking ahead of time to keep prices of essential food items stable ahead of Ramadan. According to a report by this daily, at an inter-ministerial meeting on Sunday, an array of price control measures was discussed. Given how price hikes become almost inevitable around the month of fasting, and how Bangladesh has been grappling with a raging inflation for well over a year, we believe the government has taken a step in the right direction, and with proper follow-ups, it can yield the desired results.

The meeting, as per our report, reviewed data on letters of credit (LCs) and imports and stocks of Ramadan staples such as chickpeas, lentils, sugar, edible oil, etc, and concluded that there was no substantial reason for any shortage or increasing prices of these items before or during Ramadan. The meeting also discussed duty cuts to keep imported food items like sugar and dates affordable, engaging with the relevant authorities to ensure smooth transport of goods from ports to kitchen markets, and regular monitoring to prevent manipulative practices, among other measures.

Speaking with reporters after the meeting, the newly minted finance minister made it clear that "drastic measures" would be taken against any attempt to destabilise the market. Such an approach against market manipulators, if indeed acted upon, is praiseworthy at a time when a significant segment of the population is struggling to get three square meals a day because of the inflation. With hardly any preventive measure in place, it is bound to get worse in the coming days.

With the holy month less than two months away, the market is already getting heated up. There have been reports of the prices of chickpeas, edible oil, dates, and all kinds of meats rising. Without strict actions from the authorities concerned, it is unlikely that the market will deviate on its own from the usual trend. To follow through with the prime minister's directive—and her party's electoral pledge—to bring down the prices of essentials, some tough calls must be made. So, while we appreciate that relevant ministries are willing to make those tough calls, any success will depend on how well and persistently the authorities can implement planned measures. We urge all stakeholders to cooperate in this regard.

Double standards on Gaza must end

Gaza death toll has crossed 25,000

We're beyond disturbed that the death toll in Gaza has crossed 25,000, according to the Gaza Health Ministry. On January 21 alone, at least 178 Palestinians were killed in Israeli strikes. Two months and a half into the conflict, Israel continues its attacks despite being under trial for committing genocide at the International Court of Justice (ICJ). From bombing hospitals and other civilian infrastructure to desecrating cemeteries, its assaults not only violate international law but also seem to confirm its underlying motive to annex Gaza, with Netanyahu doubling down on his rejection of a Palestinian state.

Yet the US continues to provide Israel with deadly weapons, under special mechanisms that shield it from US human rights laws. Germany, another Israeli ally, rushed to defend it in South Africa's genocide case at the ICJ invoking the Holocaust, as if crimes of the past can justify crimes of the present. The daily deaths in Gaza have exceeded all other conflicts in the 21st century, according to Oxfam, but the West continues to defend Israel. The shameful double standards that are on display make a mockery of the West's commitment to universal rights and values.

We are similarly aghast at the duplicity of the Arab states. Though the Arab League vowed to break the siege and blockade, and voiced support for South Africa's case, they are far from turning their lip service into meaningful action. Saudi Arabia and Egypt had defied the US on OPEC oil production and relations with China and Russia, but have remained rather withdrawn on Israel's war crimes. Egypt, which condemned Israel publicly, has also obeyed its command, refusing to take in injured Palestinians for treatment unless Israel approved their names.

This collective inaction amid Israeli massacres is totally unacceptable. How many more innocent Palestinians will have to die before the world takes action? We urge world leaders to force Israel to agree to an immediate ceasefire, and help build a world order where human lives matter more than narrow national and geopolitical interests. They all must walk the talk.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Why is healthcare so expensive?

The rising cost of public healthcare in Bangladesh is a severe threat to the well-being of its citizens. From doctor's visits and tests to medications and hospital stays, affordability seems like a distant dream with each passing day. In extreme cases, people are forced to sell their possessions, while others simply cannot afford treatment and are forced to discontinue it. This is unacceptable. On the one hand, we see environmental pollution wreaking havoc on public health with respiratory and waterborne diseases, while on the other hand, treatment costs are so high that it becomes another burden. This isn't merely a matter of economics; it's a fundamental violation of human rights. Access to affordable healthcare is not a privilege, it's a basic right. Policies must be enacted to curb the rampant inflation in healthcare costs, address environmental concerns to stem the tide of preventable illnesses, and invest in accessible, quality healthcare infrastructure.

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CHILDREN OF INCARCERATED MOTHERS

Prisoners without committing any crimes



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Recently, the High Court, in response to a writ petition, asked the government to explain why laws would not be framed for the mental and psychological development of children detained with their incarcerated mothers in jails across Bangladesh. The public interest litigation came after a local daily highlighted the plight of 10-month-old Mahida, who lives with her imprisoned mother Husna Akhter in a condemned cell in Habiganj jail. Mahida is one of 304 children detained in 68 jails around the country.

Mahida shares a cramped cell, measuring 10 feet by 10 feet, with her mother and two others, has no access to a window and lives under a high-power electric light that stays on all night. The four of them survive on one bucket of water a day, and hence, there is no way for her to have clean nappies. The sufferings of Mahida point to a legal lacuna and a procedural dead end, as the regulations for children of incarcerated mothers in Bangladesh are inadequate and/or not being implemented.

Bangladesh has ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which is the primary human rights treaty outlining the civil, political, economic, social, health and cultural rights of children. CRC necessitates all signatories to take all available measures to ensure the protection of children's rights, which ranges from formulating and implementing policies to allocating funds for advancing children's well-being. The revelation of an astounding 304 innocent children being detained in jail, effectively suffering the same fate as a convicted offender, is in utter stark contrast with such commitment of the state.

In its preamble, Children Act, 2013 states that the premise of this law is rooted in the CRC. The substantial piece of legislation covers many aspects of juvenile justice and children coming in contact with the law, but it largely fails to cover wellbeing of children of incarcerated mothers. Mahida's mother Husna was sentenced to death along with four members of her family, after being convicted of torturing and



VISUAL: REHNUMA PROSHOON

killing her sister-in-law for dowry. The case was reportedly filed in 2016 and the accused were finally sentenced in October last year. Mahida was with her mother at the time of her sentencing, and as a baby fully dependent on her mother, had to go to the condemned cell with her.

As per section 89(1)(e) of the Children Act, 2013, "disadvantaged children" include children dependent on imprisoned parents or children living in prison with the imprisoned mother. Section 89(2) further goes on to stipulate that the government may take measures to ensure special protection, care and development of disadvantaged children. The act arguably has kept a number of provisions through which disadvantaged children like Mahida can be brought under the care of the Department of Social Welfare. However, in absence of rules, the implementation of this act has been difficult and riddled with ambiguity. The data speaks for itself. If the provisions were being implemented, a staggering number of children would not be detained in inhumane circumstances in our jails.

These children do not exist in isolation. Every day, their presence comes to the notice (or they should) of a number of people who comprise the justice system, including prison officials and police. It is hard to believe that none of them have the influence to take this issue to the next chair in command, and if they have done so, it is heartbreaking, disappointing and

her right to education or healthcare or freedom of expression; we must comprehend and register the fact that this child's days pass in a closed room without windows. Her close family members are on death row, and this cell is the only reality she will know unless the state fulfils its duty to care for her.

Admittedly, it would take a lot of

downright alarming to comprehend that those in power do not care enough to give these children a chance to live a dignified life. Both our legal system and societal outlook towards offenders are based on punishment rather than rehabilitation. Due to our internal ethical conflict, it is naturally difficult for us to comprehend that a prisoner is also deserving of a respectable life, rather than one of condemnation and shame. It is not easy to imagine a life for Husna Akhter other than one of endless torture, as a consequence of what she inflicted on her sister-in-law. By association, we also cannot find it within ourselves to care for her 10-month-old child, whose fate is inescapably tied to that of her mother's. Besides, with the population at large struggling to make ends meet due to skyrocketing inflation, a prisoner's right to a dignified life is definitely an afterthought.

The environment of a condemned cell, where prisoners wait for their death sentence to be executed, is in no way, shape or form remotely ideal to raise a baby. We are not talking about persuasion to convince ourselves that convicted prisoners deserve humane treatment. However, when innocent children are entangled in this process, the state must refocus and find a balance to protect their right to a safe and dignified life. Our government prides itself on enhancing children's rights on various fronts, from healthcare to education. Regardless of how well those development efforts have translated in practice, it is upsetting that a large number of our country's children are living in inconceivably degrading situations, fully left out of even the most fundamental rights despite committing no wrongs themselves. As pointed out, some forms of laws do exist in this regard, and if they are not being implemented, it is due to a lack of political goodwill. As a nation, we are overdue for an overhaul of our prison system, and perhaps a change in cultural outlook in how we treat people coming in contact with the law. Ethically, it is certainly a difficult ask, but it is a natural step towards creating a more human rights conscious society.

What skills do logistics and supply chain professionals need?

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In 2023, Bangladesh's logistics industry had a market size of \$28.7 billion and was expected to grow by over 6.5 percent per annum until 2028, according to the Bangladesh Freight and Logistics Market report. Currently, it comprises around 1,000 local small- and medium-sized firms and 20 multinational logistics and freight forwarding companies (World Bank) and employs over 40,000 people (report by Origin to Destination). A World Bank study on the Logistics Performance Index (LPI) in 2023 ranked Bangladesh at 88th place—an improvement of 12 positions from the previous survey.

Despite the improvement, Bangladesh still has the lowest logistics performance compared to other South Asian nations such as India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. This reduced competitiveness is attributed to high logistics costs. Exorbitant costs impact all industry sectors. For example, logistics costs of horticulture products account for 47.9 percent of sales, and leather footwear products for 4.5 percent of sales. A World Bank study suggests that a decrease in the logistics cost by 26 percent could boost \$55.55 billion in Bangladesh exports by 19 percent. Hence, improving logistics performance has become a strategic priority for the government.

A multifaceted approach including investments in infrastructure,

developing and enforcing laws and regulations, incorporating tracing, and tracking services, and establishing world-class warehouses is critical to improving the efficiency of the logistics industry. However, often we overlook perhaps the most critical aspect of this industry: the human factor.

At times, it's considered the missing link in achieving higher performance. Likely, skilled logistics and supply chain professionals would use advanced logistics technologies, such as warehouse management systems, GPS tracking, and real-time monitoring. In addition, they would generally be compliant with the regulations, develop risk mitigation strategies, and get involved in continuous improvement of logistics and supply chain processes, thus offering better service solutions. These benefits and others offered by the skilled professionals are aligned with criteria such as customs, logistics competence, timeliness, and tracing and tracking used by the World Bank's LPI ranking systems. Hence, such skilled professionals play a central role in improving Bangladesh's position in global ranking in logistics services.

Against this background, we conducted a study to identify and prioritise the relevant skills required by logistics and supply chain professionals in Bangladesh.

Through an extensive literature

review in logistics and supply chain service management, a total of 49 skills with 20 soft skills and 29 hard skills were considered for this study. To investigate the skills required by these professionals, a representative sample of relevant managers was asked to rate how important the skills are to perform logistics and supply chain functions efficiently and how competent they are in these skills. Results suggest that the top 10 important skills are inventory management, knowledge of the industry, negotiating skills, ability to see the "big picture," information system management, demand forecasting, customer service, database management, and understanding of supply chain orientation, quality management, and supply chain cost management.

Firstly, both soft and hard skills are essential for logistics and supply chain professionals. Second, all top 10 skills are highly rated with regards to the importance of the skills in the workplace, but the professionals indicated low competence. The gap between importance and competence indicates their weakness and an opportunity for improvement.

Another analysis demonstrates that nine out of 49 skills fell into the "high priority" category. Skills in this category mean that management must concentrate their attention on these skills and develop policies and systems to improve them immediately. These skills are people skills, customer service, distribution planning, ability to see the "big picture," understanding of supply chain orientation, demand forecasting, ability to manage risk, waste management, and knowledge of the

latest technology. Worth highlighting is that out of the nine skills, five are soft skills.

Thus, alongside hard skills, developing soft skills in logistics and supply chain professionals is of paramount importance.

The question is, how do we develop these skills?

One way is to provide on-the-job training. Globally, in-house training is considered the most popular method of developing competencies amongst logistics and supply chain professionals. Likewise, training institutions may design and deliver training programmes incorporating the high priority skills along with other relevant skills. Official recognition of these competencies through certification is advantageous for companies as it enables them to identify experts with ease.

Meanwhile, supply chain and logistics-related courses offered by Bangladeshi universities are very limited. The findings of this study may assist universities in designing new logistics and supply chain curricula that meet the industry needs and prepare job-ready graduates. Perhaps an integrated approach is necessary in this regard. Local universities could join hands with the national peak industry bodies such as the Bangladesh Supply Chain Management Society, and government agencies such as the Skills for Employment and Investment Program under the National Skills Development Authority to co-develop and co-deliver a unique professional development programme. Such a triangular approach would appeal to and attract potential participants and deliver value to all stakeholders.