

# The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

## When will fuel prices be adjusted?

### Government must reduce financial burden for citizens

For traders, there may be a vested interest in keeping prices high. After all, higher prices, justified or not, may mean increased profits which traders are unlikely to turn away from. But how to justify a government position that seems to support the same profiteering tactic? When the government increased prices of different types of fuel by a staggering 42-52 percent in August 2022—later reducing them marginally amid widespread criticism—it was promised that fuel prices would be aligned with international benchmarks, meaning that if prices went down internationally, so would domestic prices. But that has not happened, and ordinary consumers have had to pay for it as the prices of almost every other thing also rose concomitantly. For the government, however, this meant astonishing profits.

Citing data from the state-run Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC), *Prothom Alo* reports that the corporation recorded a profit of Tk 4,586 crore in the 2022-2023 fiscal year, with additional revenue generated through taxes and levies. The first six months of this fiscal year have also seen it make a profit of over Tk 400 crore. At a time when many government agencies have recorded losses year after year, the BPC has been a shining exception, turning profits in eight of the last nine years. As a result, while citizens' coffers shrunk owing to inflated fuel prices, the government's swelled. Besides BPC, we have also seen Petrobangla make profits by increasing gas prices, and Wasa by hiking water tariffs. If the new cabinet wants to bring down commodity prices—as it has vowed to do—this is where it should turn as a starting point.

As things stand, the government, despite its declared intent, seems to be endorsing an inverse relationship between the international and domestic prices of fuel. Experts say it has had the scope to reduce prices, but it didn't. They noted how the IMF, as part of a loan deal, had recommended regular price adjustments based on global market conditions, but the government has yet to follow it through. Initially, the plan was to adjust fuel prices after every three months, but now a monthly review is reportedly being planned from April onwards. Given past trends, there is no guarantee that this will indeed be the case. But whatever the price determination mechanism, we urge the government to take steps to reduce the financial burden for citizens by lowering prices of fuel urgently.

## Restore Shariatpur stadium immediately

### Dwindling public spaces deserve better care, planning

As Bangladesh grapples with dwindling communal spaces and playing fields, the news of Shariatpur Stadium being rendered unusable due to the imprudent actions of a single authoritative figure has come as a surprise. According to a *Prothom Alo* report, the stadium was supposed to be the site for Bangabandhu T20 Cricket Tournament as well as players' practices. However, it was then leased to a local organisation for organising a fair, compromising its sporting function for at least two months. The district commissioner allegedly made this decision without consulting with local sports organisations or government officials.

The situation has since spiralled into an intractable conundrum as, in response to protests, the authorities halted the fair, despite its organisers having already begun constructing necessary infrastructure. The organisers, who were supposed to restore the stadium after the fair, now claim they had invested Tk 40 lakh and need a further Tk 10 lakh for restoration—and without fair profits, they cannot afford it. Consequently, with the half-finished infrastructure abandoned, the stadium can neither host the fair nor is suitable for sporting activities. This is ludicrous.

If the allegations about the DC's role are true, we wonder how such unilateral action could occur, and what could have possibly influenced it. As things stand, facilities for professional sports in Bangladesh, particularly in regional areas, are already inadequate, and incidents like this show how—even with a dedicated stadium, considerable incentives, and funding—sporting purposes can be sidelined by other ventures. We also have to talk about unplanned infrastructural development that has considerably shrunk public spaces in the country. Often, spaces dedicated to recreation are also appropriated for other activities. The Shariatpur stadium itself was subject to several such interventions in the past.

We cannot deny the importance of communal events like fairs and concerts, and hence the Shariatpur incident should be viewed within the broader context of systemic neglect towards both sports and communal spaces. This deserves a wider conversation about how we can preserve both in an increasingly urbanised Bangladesh. For now, however, we urge the Shariatpur authorities to take steps to restore the stadium immediately.

New Message

To: \_\_\_\_\_

Subject: \_\_\_\_\_

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# TIB: The forever 'villain'

## Learn from its reports and give this anti-graft body its due



THE THIRD VIEW

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As expected, the Awami League government—three ministers, to be specific—reacted sharply after the publication of a research report titled "The 12th Parliament Election Process Tracking," which included a survey on 50 constituencies in the January 7 election by Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB). The research found the election to be one-sided—one that was staged to appear competitive. "It is an ominous sign regarding the future of democracy and democratic elections in Bangladesh," said TIB's executive director Iftekharuzzaman. The research, which was conducted in 50 out of 300 constituencies in eight divisions between June 2023 and January 2024, found multiple irregularities in all the constituencies surveyed on election day.

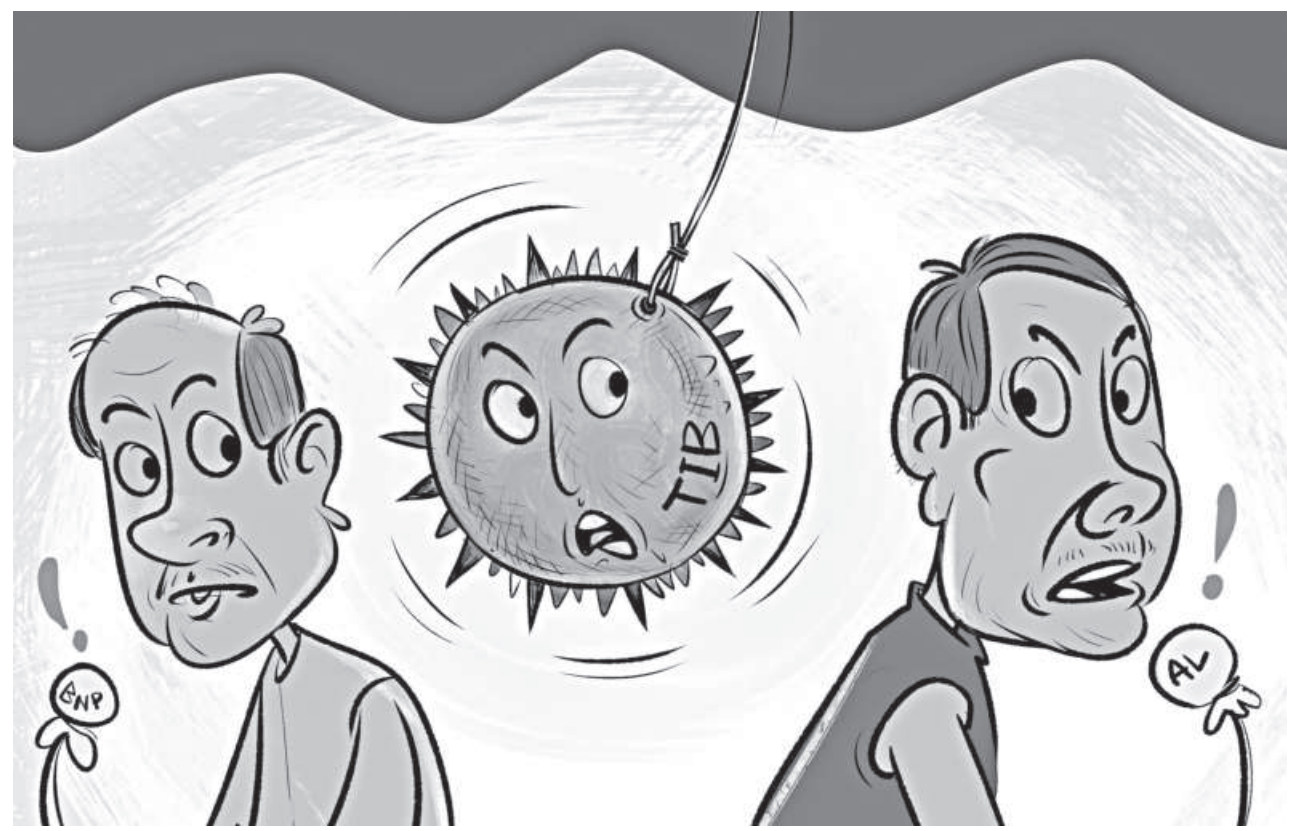
No sooner had the report hit the newsstands than AL General Secretary Obaidul Quader accused TIB of speaking in the language of BNP, and even went one step further by terming it to be BNP's agent—reminiscent of Mannan Bhuiyan, former secretary general of BNP, bringing up a similar accusation in 2006. Regarding the TIB report, Foreign Minister Hasan Mahmud said, "It seems that there is a similarity in terms of language between what BNP says and what TIB is saying." Meanwhile, the State Minister for Information and Broadcasting Mohammad Ali Arafat said, "TIB has done the research in 10 days of the national election and reached many conclusions. I don't know how it is possible to conduct the research within a short period." Of course, the report was not done "in 10 days" but over seven months, as mentioned above.

Anybody with rudimentary knowledge of Bangladesh's politics, at least of the last 33 years—since the fall of autocrat Ershad—knows that AL and BNP differ on practically everything under the sun. I could throw a riddle at my readers and ask: "Can you name one thing or issue or an institution in the hatred of which both our leading parties are united?" The answer is, of course, TIB.

TIB, which is the Bangladesh chapter of Transparency International (TI), was founded as a trust in 1996 and registered as an NGO in 1998. TI launched its first global Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) report in 2001, which coincided with the last year of Awami League's first term in office (during 1996-2001). The report identified Bangladesh as being at the top of the list of countries perceived as highly corrupt.

All hell broke loose immediately, to say the least.

Given its proclivity to smell a conspiracy in everything that does not sing its praise, AL reacted with unprecedented rage, saying that the index was nothing but a "conspiracy" to discredit the party before the election



CARTOON: BIPLAB CHAKRABORTY

which was to be held some months later. The publicity apparatus of AL, which was considerable since it was the ruling party at that time as well, began a concerted tirade against this newly formed body. The disclaimers that the report was not of TIB—which is based in Bangladesh—but of TI—which is based in Berlin—and that the former had nothing to do with it fell on deaf ears.

BNP, on the contrary, could not hold back its joy and considered the 2001 CPI the most authentic vindication of all its anti-AL propaganda. Its praise for TIB knew no bounds.

However, when BNP came to power in 2002, its tone, as expected, reversed. It was now BNP's turn to be angry and attack TIB. While AL's praise continued unabated, BNP carried out a tirade against TIB for the four successive years that Bangladesh occupied the same slot, saying TIB was a pro-AL body and that its secret agenda was to discredit Khaleda Zia's government and bring AL back to power. Separately, TIB—through its own research—exposed BNP's failure to curb corruption and showed how this malaise had spread throughout the country. In 2006, BNP's anger reached such a pitch that it threatened to close down TIB's branches in 64 districts by lodging cases in all districts. One of TIB's reports exposed corruption in local government in particular, whose minister, Mannan Bhuiyan, made it his personal crusade to castigate TIB and used the whole government machinery to harass, discredit, and intimidate the organisation. BNP's local-level leaders and activists even ransacked at least

more with AL returning to power in 2008. In reaction to a TIB report exposing the highest rate of corruption in legal services through the National Household Survey, three defamation cases were lodged against TIB by pro-AL lawyers in different places (Cumilla, Khagrachari, and Chattogram), each containing exactly the same narrative of allegations.

Under both regimes, tirade against TIB featured even in parliamentary deliberations.

In a furious reaction against a TIB report titled "Parliament Watch," which had exposed the weaknesses of the functioning of the Jatiya Sangsad, the veteran politician and late chairman of the Parliamentary Standing Committee, Suranjit Sengupta, threatened the cancellation of TIB's registration. Based on his draft, the parliament followed up by introducing a provision in the Foreign Donations (Voluntary Activities) Regulation Act 2016 that presently regulates the work of NGOs. By this provision, criticism of the constitution and of all constitutional bodies was criminalised, creating an atmosphere of intimidation not only against TIB, but against NGOs in general and those working in governance and rights.

Ministers and senior officials under both regimes have consistently raised motivated, ridiculous, and unsubstantiated doubts about the funding source of TIB. This is despite the government being the first to know what the source of funds is, thanks to monitoring by the NGO Affairs Bureau. The BNP government had come up

with a theory that TIB received funds from corruption-ridden Enron and WorldCom, while the AL government alleged TIB to have received funds from BHP, an Australian mining outfit. However, none of these organisations has ever had any interaction with TIB.

Under both regimes, TIB has been subjected to targeted harassment by relevant government entities like

NGO Affairs Bureau, National Board of Revenue, and also surveillance by agencies.

The question is: after all these years and perpetual bashing of TIB, did the governments of the respective days benefit from their demonising of TIB? Wouldn't they have benefitted more if they'd really studied the TIB mandate, which was to strengthen the capacity of the state and its relevant institutions to fight corruption and improve governance? TIB conducts 10-12 research studies annually on public institutions to examine the extent of corruption in each and suggest relevant reforms. Its flagship National Household Survey, conducted every two years, reveals the extent of bribery in important sectors like health, education, local government, land, law enforcement, income tax, passport service, etc. This particular study contains a treasure of facts which, when delved into deeply, can provide endless ideas to the government on how to ameliorate public suffering. But instead, the reactions of our governments have been knee-jerk, devoid of facts, and threatening, always with an intention of shooting the messenger.

As the AL government begins its fourth consecutive term, we hope that it will have learned from its past mistake of automatically negating all critical reports and opinions. This time around, it will hopefully approach the critical voices, including that of the independent media, in a more mature and fact-based manner rather than treating critics as enemies.

## Deaths mean nothing to the merchants of war



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"Yes, and how many deaths will it take 'til he knows // that too many people have died?"

Bob Dylan penned his unforgettable work *Blowin' in the Wind* in 1962, when the Vietnam War was at its peak. It was a war that forced innocent young men from all over the US to join the brutal and grinding war and participate in history's (until then) worst atrocities. One inscription at Ho Chi Minh city's War Remnants Museum is especially disturbing: "The US Army used not only lethal weapons to cause casualties but also toxic chemicals to destroy the livelihood of Vietnamese people and prevent the advance of their revolutionary armed forces."

From 1961 to 1971, the US-Americans flew 19,905 missions and sprayed 80 million tons of toxins—including Agent Orange, a highly toxic and persistent organic pollutant linked to cancers, diabetes, birth defects, and disabilities.

After more than 50 years, large areas in Vietnam remain degraded and unproductive. About three million Vietnamese have been affected, including at least 150,000 children born with serious birth defects, whose images will haunt even the hardest of minds.

Strong public opinion forced US citizens to withdraw from Vietnam in 1975. By that time, 58,220 US-Americans had lost their lives. The Vietnamese suffered much more; about two million civilians were killed, not to mention the incidents of rape, arson, chemical poisoning, and carpet bombing. But war never ended. Instead, it spread all over to become a global phenomenon causing more deaths and devastating more lives.

The 1990-91 Persian Gulf War caused as many as 100,000 deaths and displaced five million, making it the

single-most devastating event, until then, in the Middle East since World War I. But more conflicts followed. Violent insurgency continued all over Iraq, killing many, including unarmed civilians. Several new terrorist groups became active, including the infamous Islamic State (IS or ISIS). A 2016 study by the University of Maryland found 33,000 deaths linked to IS activities. This group caused many more deaths in Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere till its decline in 2019.

The Afghanistan War started in 2001 when US President Bush ordered a large-scale assault leading to the fall of the Taliban in December. He justified it with a promise to end Al Qaeda forever. But in the following two decades, the number of such groups rose from four to at least 20. Brown University estimated that crossfire, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), assassinations, bombings, and cluster bombs had killed as many as 157,000 since 2001.

In Ukraine, countless war crimes including extrajudicial killings, torture, and sexual violence, as well as indiscriminate bombings of civilians, schools, hospitals, and residential areas have been reported. Infrastructures, especially energy networks, have been deliberately destroyed, making civilian lives insecure. More than 14 million Ukrainians have been forced to flee

their homes.

And now the world is witnessing another tragedy unfolding in Gaza, triggered by Hamas' unexplainable "surprise" attack on Israel in October last year. Just what Hamas hoped to achieve is unclear, but it led to a massive retaliation, which was entirely predictable. After the first few days of confusion, Israel's high-tech military machine unleashed an unimaginably brutal attack on the world's most densely populated area with more than two million inhabitants.

On December 20, the BBC reported that the pace of killing in this war has been exceptionally high and indiscriminate. As of January 25, at least 25,700 people have been killed in Israeli attacks on Gaza since October 7, while Unicef reported that a shocking average of more than 480 children are dying each day. A chilling UN Human Rights statement on January 16 said: "Currently every single person in Gaza is hungry, a quarter of the population are starving and struggling to find food and drinkable water, and famine is imminent. Pregnant women are not receiving adequate nutrition and healthcare, putting their lives at risk. In addition, all children under five are at high risk of severe malnutrition."

How many more deaths will satisfy the war merchants' thirst for profit?