

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

Ramadan price pledge rings hollow

Food prices continue to climb as holy month begins

We are disturbed by the total failure of the government's price control measures ahead of the holy month that saw prices of most essentials, especially those related to iftar, reach insane heights. In the span of just a few days, the prices of eggplants, green chillies, coriander leaves, cucumbers, tomatoes, pulses, lemons, dates, potatoes, chickpeas, sugar, ginger, garlic, and gram flour have all seen alarming hikes. The price of onion, as per a report, has seen an unbelievable 223 percent hike per kg compared to its price during the last Ramadan. Prices of other Ramadan essentials like Tang and Rooh Afza have similarly risen, as have those of both local and imported fruits.

It is any wonder, then, that ordinary consumers have described this hike-fest as insufferable? The government's repeated assurances of stability in kitchen markets during Ramadan ring hollow in the face of such stark realities. The question is: why can't the authorities control prices despite supposedly enhancing market monitoring, vowing tough legal action against price manipulation, shoring up supplies, and reducing import duties on some items? While the lack of effective monitoring mechanisms and interventions is certainly an issue, one major factor that continues to be ignored by the policymakers is extortion during the transportation and sales of goods.

Traders, while talking to this paper, have stressed the importance of putting an end to the extortion culture, which they believe would really help in keeping prices in check. Traders are reportedly being forced to pay extortionists at multiple stages while bringing a product from grassroots to the wholesale markets. Even after buying from wholesale markets, retailers also have to pay additional money to secure their release. Unfortunately, the gaggle of syndicates, middlemen, hoarders, and extortionists that generally exert an oversized influence on the supply chain draw their power from their association with the ruling establishment.

It is, therefore, essential that the government takes stern action to prevent these people and forces from destabilising the market. It is equally important to undertake regular drives across the country to punish errant traders and retailers inflating prices. The fact that prices have skyrocketed despite there being sufficient food supplies is totally unacceptable. As Ramadan unfolds, we urge the government to honour its commitment anyway possible. The spirit of Ramadan must not be overshadowed by the burden of astronomical prices.

Alarming level of hill cutting in Sylhet

Authorities must take stern action against the culprits

While reports on hill cutting from Sylhet and other regions of the country are nothing new, a new revelation has raised alarm. According to a report by *Prothom Alo*, around 20-30 percent of hills in the four districts of Sylhet have been cut down over the last 25 years. Only around 1,875 hills remain today, but these are in constant danger of being flattened by private individuals and even government agencies. This is really alarming. The question is: can Bangladesh, being one of the most climate-vulnerable countries in the world, afford to chip away at its own natural resources and thereby call for disaster?

In 2012, the High Court had banned all kinds of hill cutting in Sylhet. But as the rampant practice of hill-cutting suggests, hardly anything has been done to enforce the ban. And while the Sylhet office of the Department of Environment is known to conduct drives occasionally, reports say officials often show up only after a hill has been cut by the culprits. The effects of this state of affairs have been visible in the intensity of myriad floods and landslides over the past few years, including the 2022 Jaintapur landslide that killed four members of a family. Ironically, the hills are often cut so that structures can be built there, but those can hardly stand the test of such "development" activities in the long run.

In the coming days, unless the relevant authorities and district administration take stern action to prevent hill cutting, we may have to see more human-made calamities in our hilly regions. Usually, it is the most disadvantaged groups that reside at the foot of risky hills or on flattened hilly land. It is crucial for the government to rehabilitate these populations humanely, and also stamp down those who are cutting hills for their narrow interests. It is also vital to raise awareness of the massive harm that such environmental degradation—through cutting hills, encroaching and polluting rivers, destroying forests, etc.—is doing to our future as a nation.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Stop stockpiling for Ramadan

Increasing commodity prices during Ramadan has become a common phenomenon in Bangladesh. And we blame the businessmen as if they are the only ones responsible. But we should also consider our roles. During and before the month of Ramadan, we start buying products such as dates, chickpeas, onions, and cooking oil, in large amounts. This sudden buying spree creates high demand, but the supply is often not enough to cover it, resulting in a supply shortage in the market. Yes, I agree that businessmen are responsible for price hikes during Ramadan; but we can't deny that we are responsible too.

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Why is the irrigation water crisis not getting due attention?



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With all three pumps of the Ganges-Kobadak (GK) Irrigation Project out of order, hundreds of thousands of farmers in Kushtia, Chuadanga, Jhenaidah and Magura, who depend on water from the GK project for irrigation, are in a deep crisis as they are not getting the irrigation water they need for Boro cultivation. The GK project is the largest surface irrigation system in the country set up by the Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB) on the bank of Padma (Ganges). According to Banglapedia, the project covers 197,500 hectares, of which 142,000 hectares are net irrigable and are under the jurisdiction of Kushtia, Chuadanga, Jhenaidah and Magura districts. Under this project, water is pumped from the Padma River and distributed to the fields using the canal system that stretches 1,655 km. Three main pumps with a designed capacity of 37 cumec (cubic metre per second) each and 12 subsidiary pumps with a capacity of 3.5 cumec each are used for pumping water from the river to the canal.

Because of the Farakka Barrage, it is often not possible to pump the required water from the Padma during the dry season, as during that time water levels are way below the level for which the pumps have been designed. As Padma's water level has fallen, water supply has been kept normal only in Kushtia and Chuadanga during the Boro season, while water flow to the canals in Magura and Jhenaidah has been kept shut for several years. Moreover, according to the BWDB, the condition of the project's physical infrastructure has deteriorated gradually due to insufficient funding for proper maintenance.

Out of the three pumps in the project, pumps 2 and 3 have been out of order for the past few years. The 12 subsidiary pumps also have been out of order since 2001. In such a situation, when the only working pump went out of order on February 19 this year, the supply of irrigation water was completely stopped. BWDB officials cannot say when the water supply will resume. Representatives of the farmers have been told to make their own "arrangements" for irrigation.

Thus, hundreds of thousands of farmers are suffering due to lack of investment in timely maintenance of the GK project. As an alternative, some are trying to lift water with the help of shallow machines, but the cost of irrigating one bigha with water from



Farmers in the Barind region have been suffering from irrigation water shortage due to the depletion of Padma water and uncontrolled extraction of underground water using deep tube wells.

FILE PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

the GK project is Tk 300 per year, while the cost of lifting water from underground to irrigate the same area of land is about Tk 5000. As a result, many farmers are unable to start cultivation on time. Facing the risk of a decline in this year's Boro harvest and huge losses for themselves.

Farmers in the Barind region have also been suffering from irrigation water shortage for a long time due to the depletion of Padma water and uncontrolled extraction of underground water using deep tube wells. The groundwater level has dropped especially in 21 unions of Rajshahi, Naogaon and Chapainawabganj. As a result, on the one hand, adequate water is not available from the deep tube wells under the irrigation project for the Barind region, while on the other hand, farmers are being deprived of the fair share of the little water that is available. That's why they are forced to cultivate other crops instead of rice.

Farmers are not getting enough water on time due to irregularities

and corruption by operators of the pumps from which water is available. According to the rate fixed by the Barind Multipurpose Development Authority (BMDA), farmers are supposed to pay Tk 125 per hour for a two cusec (cubic foot of water per second) pump and Tk 110 per hour for a one cusec pump. But in most cases, farmers are forced to pay more

since 1992.

When the project was functional, the irrigation cost was only Tk 2,000 per acre, but now the farmers have to spend Tk 8,000-10,000 per acre for irrigation by lifting underground water using deep tube wells. Moreover, surface irrigation would reduce the pressure on underground water and also save 70 percent of energy on

to get irrigation water. There is also no remedy as deep tube well operators are politically appointed. Two years ago, two Santal farmers, Abhinath Mardi (36) and his cousin Robi Mardi (27), died by suicide in Godagari, Rajshahi allegedly after the local tube well operator refused to give them the irrigation water they were entitled to. Yet, the situation has not improved.

Meanwhile, around 50,000 farmers of Brahmanbaria's Ashuganj and Narsingdi's Palash upazilas have been deprived of irrigation water for three years, since the Ashuganj-Palash Agro-Irrigation Project was not renewed upon expiry. As a result, Boro cultivation in 15,000 hectares of land under the project is being disrupted. Under this project, the cooling surface wastewater of power plants, which is collected from Meghna and Shitalakkhya rivers, was used to irrigate the command area of the project. This has been a green project of Bangladesh Agricultural Development Corporation (BADC)

average. The BADC proposed a new project worth about Tk 470 crore to keep the irrigation system running, but it has not been approved even after three and a half years.

It is evident that due to long-standing neglect on the part of the relevant authorities, hundreds of thousands of farmers are facing irrigation water crisis in the country. Although the government is spending thousands of crores of taka on various megaprojects, it is not investing adequately and timely to solve irrigation problems faced by farmers for a long time. The country's politics has been dominated by business elites for so long that, although agriculture is very important for the country's food security and employment generation, farmers' interests are not given much priority by policymakers. These problems do not seem to get the attention they deserve as national issues. No wonder farmers' suffering due to the lack of irrigation water is not ending.

Progress null if we fail rural women



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LIPi RAHMAN

My work as a women's rights activist has taken me across Bangladesh to some of its remotest and rural parts. Witnessing the struggles of women in these regions led a group of us to establish Badabon Sangho in 2016, with the intention of empowering vulnerable female landowners, fisherfolk, and farmers along the coastal belt. In the last 20 years, I have witnessed progress in some areas, but for a lot of these communities, I find that the situation remains largely the same.

Yes, we have been able to mobilise more women to assert their rights and engage with their local government. We do see stronger leadership among women who are raising their voices against discrimination. There are more female representatives on different committees of local government to build women's leadership. I'm so proud of our young activists opposing child marriage who have also formed their own football team, against all odds. But these numbers are small and not enough. I know change takes time and we must celebrate our progress, but I can't help but feel impatient about this slow rate of change, especially when some of the basic problems still remain. I still meet countless

women being deprived of their right to inherit land by their own family members and land grabbers. Child marriage, trafficking, and violence against women and girls persist. I still find women with no decision-making power, who are completely dependent on their husbands or fathers. I still meet men who view women's labour as "helping the family" rather than contributing to the economy.

Before working in the coastal belt area, I had no knowledge about fisherfolk women or their immense contribution to the food supply chain. This community of women in the Sundarban area spends around 12-14 hours a day in the water, catching fish and processing them to sell in the market. Ironically, their contribution is not recognised because it is still socially unacceptable to label women as fisherfolk. They might be doing hard labour and earning for their family, but aren't granted the title of fisherfolk. Not getting recognition means not getting fisherfolk cards, not getting the card means not receiving the social safety net benefits they are entitled to. It is noteworthy that government guidelines in 2019 do not discriminate between genders and dictate that all women fisherfolk

should receive the fisherfolk social safety cards. So the policy exists, but its implementation remains unrealised because of patriarchal ideas around women's work.

I often think of Amina (one of the group members of Badabon Sangho) who said, "I work on my own family land without pay." Although the contribution of women in the

climate change and persisting poverty are pushing more men to migrate to urban areas for job opportunities and the participation of men in the agriculture sector has diminished by over 10 percent in the last decade. This void has been filled by female workers, but with little change to their existing situation.

These problems have existed for decades, across generations and communities, and even when progress is made, it is often undone with worsening climate change. Though the communities in Bangladesh's coastal belt have faced the wrath of Mother Nature their whole lives, an increase in salinity, rising sea levels, unpredictable weather, and natural disasters are destroying livelihoods and homes at a rate that we cannot imagine. We are witnessing the suffering of families with young children who have had to shift homes over 12-14 times. We are encountering large numbers of women who are suffering from various new health and reproductive issues which further impact their social standing.

I wonder if readers are as tired of learning about the dire situation of rural women as I am. And if we are, then imagine how tired they must feel. International Women's Day is meant to inspire solidarity to realise the rights of all women, so we cannot ignore the struggles of women in agriculture. They are huge contributors to our economy and providers of the fish and vegetables we love, but they still remain unaware of their equal rights. Without them, we are far poorer. Let us not falter in our commitment to uplift these women, to amplify their voices, and to ensure their rights are realised.

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agriculture sector is huge, they still do not have sufficient access to the market or to money, and decision-making powers are still held by husbands, brothers, and in-laws. A glaring gap in knowledge about inheritance laws makes it so that many women don't claim their rights. Additionally, being raised in a patriarchal society socialises women to have low self-esteem, and so they are emotionally manipulated to give up control of the land they own and stay dependent on the men in their lives. Interestingly, issues of