

Who will feed the unfed?

Govt must rethink strategies to combat persistent food insecurity

That a large section of the population is struggling to afford daily meals has been once again brought out by the latest survey of the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS). According to its findings, 3.77 crore people in Bangladesh suffered some degree of food insecurity throughout 2023, meaning that one in every five households were food-insecure last year. Among them, 14.77 lakh—0.87 percent—experienced a severe form of it.

Surveying 29,760 households across the country in June 2023, the state-run statistical agency found that 4.30 percent of respondents had to skip at least one meal in the previous 12 months because they could not afford it, while 1.50 percent said they starved for an entire day. Three percent of respondents said they suffered hunger once or twice a month. The crisis is further evidenced by surveys conducted by the UN's World Food Programme (WFP) which, in August last year, reported that 24 percent of Bangladesh's population were struggling to meet their daily nutritional needs. Another survey in October-November 2023 revealed that 36 percent of the country's low-income households faced food shortages, despite seasonal changes in income opportunities.

Over the last few years, Bangladesh has been struggling with the effects of severe economic shocks: shrunken income opportunities, rise in unemployment, and a persistently high inflation rate that has created an unprecedented cost-of-living crisis. The relentless increases in prices of essential food items, which the government has consistently failed to bring under control despite repeated urgings, do not help either. Things seem to have turned worse with the country heading into the holy month of Ramadan, with the prices of iftar essentials and ingredients particularly witnessing a jump.

What are households with low or fixed income supposed to do, then? Not having their nutritional needs met means a large section of them are at high risk of malnutrition, which will affect their productivity, further restrict their income-generating capacity, and have long-term medical consequences. Clearly, existing measures are doing little to alleviate their struggle. Our policymakers need to come up with a strategy to ensure basic nutritional support to all poor and low-income families on an urgent basis. As an expert has rightly said, it is unacceptable that one-fifth of our population is food-insecure especially at a time when we are preparing to become a developing country.

Israel must be stopped from invading Rafah

World must be able to end Palestine genocide

We are most disturbed by the Israeli prime minister's recent vow to send ground forces into Gaza's southern Rafah city. This comes after more than five months of merciless attacks on Palestinians that have forced most of Gaza's population to seek refuge in Rafah. With more than 31,500 Palestinians already killed, Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu now seems dead set on inflicting more horrors on the more than one million displaced people who have sought shelter there.

For once, Israel's allies have urged it to not attack Rafah, especially without a plan to protect civilians. Given the huge number of civilians Israel has a record of killing even when it supposedly looks to "protect" them during its security operations, one can only imagine the extent of destruction that might be headed towards the defenceless people of Rafah. Despite sustained international pressure, and the urging of its allies, Netanyahu has vowed to ignore it all, insisting on Israel's "right to defend itself". But as we have seen repeatedly, when Israel talks about its right to defend itself, what it basically means is gaining a free reign to attack and destroy the Palestinians.

The World Health Organization chief has urged Israel not to launch a Rafah invasion, warning that "this humanitarian catastrophe must not be allowed to worsen." As many human rights organisations have alleged, Israel is deliberately starving Gazans, having unleashed what can easily be called a genocidal campaign. And because of the unconditional backing extended by the West, it has been able to get away with it so far.

But the world cannot continue to remain silent and watch the complete annihilation of the Palestinian people. Israel has been able to create the narrative that criticising Israel should be considered ipso facto antisemitic and, therefore, frowned upon. Given that the West has always been its main supporter, it's time for the Western countries in particular, and the international community in general, to take meaningful action to end Israel's aggression against Palestine and arrange for a peace agreement.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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We need diligent people

The quality of diligence, which is frequently referred to as a combination of hard work, persistence, and dedication, can make dreams come true. If we want to make our country economically self-dependent, we have to be hardworking people. We need hardworking people in order to foster a smart economy, smart businesses, smart administration and for the development of the country. If we want to realise our dream of being a developed country by 2041, we will have to be more hardworking and disciplined.

Md Muzibur Rahman
Dhaka

What should we make of Petrobangla's new oil, gas exploration tender?



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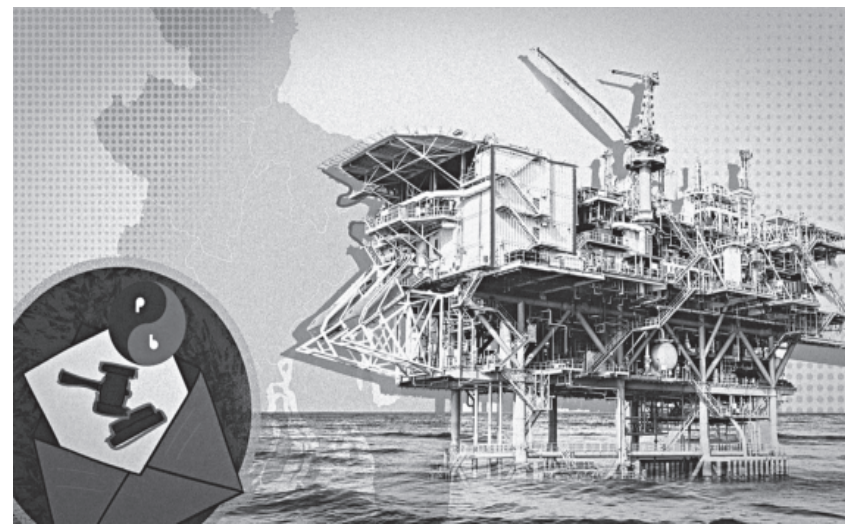
In a landmark development, Bangladesh took a notable stride in its energy sector by announcing new oil and gas exploration ventures. On March 10, Petrobangla floated an international tender for shallow and deep sea oil and gas exploration. Despite being delayed by at least a decade, this decision marks a pivotal moment in the country's quest for energy independence. Bangladesh, blessed with promising geological formations, has long been recognised for its potential in the gas sector. However, the exploitation of these resources has been limited. The recent announcement signals a shift towards unlocking the full potential of the nation's hydrocarbon reserves and exploring untapped reserves.

The exploration tender has been launched with much domestic appreciation. Yet, amidst the global investment shift towards green energy sources, the level of attention from international investors remains to be seen. Moreover, the introduction of this initiative is quite delayed. As the world transitions towards cleaner energy sources, Bangladesh's strategic move underscores its commitment to sustainable development while harnessing its natural resources for the benefit of its citizens. However, the country faces economic challenges due to its heavy reliance on oil and gas imports. Exploring untapped hydrocarbon reserves could alleviate this dependency and mitigate the economic crisis. From an energy planning perspective, Bangladesh is moving towards a transformation that includes LNG, hydrogen, and ammonia as primary fuels all being import-oriented, and so energy sustainability remains a major concern.

The success of Bangladesh's exploration endeavours will depend on various factors, including technological implementation, regulatory capability, trade negotiation expertise, professionalism, transparency, and geopolitical influence. Overcoming these challenges will be crucial for realising the potential benefits of oil and gas exploration in the region. Nevertheless, the prospects are promising. With the right strategies in place, Bangladesh has the potential to address its deep energy crisis and reduce its dependency on foreign currency reserves.

The international tender for shallow and deep sea oil and gas exploration sparks some questions regarding its potential success in attracting offshore oil and gas exploration. Between 2016 and 2019, Petrobangla proposed

conducting extensive deep and shallow sea surveys, aiming for a multi-client survey. However, the government's indecision on the proposal and subsequent delays, exacerbated by the Covid pandemic, resulted in wasted time. In 2022-2023, Bangladesh, in collaboration with a foreign consortium (Schlumberger), finally initiated a crucial multi-client survey in the Bay of Bengal, with a focus on the deep sea area. While such surveys are vital for major oil companies, concerns arise regarding the failure to release historically preserved survey data, to involve relevant international oil companies (IOCs) in past surveys, and to organise the sale of this new survey data into accessible packages. Petrobangla has outlined the availability of eight data packages for purchase by interested IOCs. However, before delving into the specifics, it's crucial to define what makes these packages lucrative. Understanding why IOCs would perceive these data packages as valuable and view both deep and shallow sea blocks as having potential is essential.



VISUAL: SHAIKH SULTANA JAHAN BADHON

Bangladesh's oil exploration journey dates back to 1974 when six foreign oil companies surveyed our sea. Subsequent surveys by Cairn India, Santos Ltd, ConocoPhillips, and Posco Daewoo generated valuable reports, stored in Petrobangla's database. However, the reluctance to utilise this existing data and the lack of incentives in the Offshore Model Production Sharing Contract (PSC) hindered progress. The Ministry of Power, Energy, and Mineral Resources (MPEMR) and Petrobangla's combined failure to leverage stored data for bidding purposes underscores the

significant setbacks, particularly in two potential blocks—SS-10 and SS-11. Myanmar has successfully extracted substantial gas reserves from wells named Mia and Shwe since 2013, following the resolution of a maritime boundary dispute in 2012. The reasons behind Bangladesh's delay since 2013, whether attributed to corruption, inefficiency, or diplomatic issues, needs a thorough examination. Woodside Energy, an Australian company, expressed interest in exploring for oil and gas in five blocks adjacent to Myanmar, where they had confirmed reserves. Despite this, Bangladesh

did not pursue the proposal based on advice from advisors. Two survey bids were cancelled by the ministry because their favoured company did not get them. Geopolitical considerations may also be at play, with the US seeking entry into Bangladesh's deep sea territories to counter China's influence in the region. Major companies like ExxonMobil and

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Chevron have shown keen interest. However, doubts persist regarding the technical and negotiating capabilities of Petrobangla and the MPEMR. These concerns underscore the complexity of the challenges involved in navigating Bangladesh's oil and gas sector.

Certainly, the MPEMR minister and energy advisor bear significant responsibility in this matter. Their role involves safeguarding the interests of specific groups. If the prevailing uncertainty remains unresolved, it appears that even with a favourable PSC, companies like Santos may opt not to return, exacerbating the situation.

In addition to the challenges mentioned, there are also objections regarding tender-related expenses. The extensive advertisement in nine newspapers across the country, paid reports in prestigious publications like *The Economist*, and the six-month roadshow are perceived as wasteful expenditures of time and resources. In response to this author's questions, Khondkar Saleque, an expert in energy sector tendering and negotiation, suggested that Petrobangla should make historically preserved data accessible to interested parties. Rather than conducting inefficient roadshows abroad, Saleque proposes inviting interested IOCs to Bangladesh for in-depth discussions. This approach aims to streamline the process, minimise unnecessary expenses, and facilitate more direct engagement with potential investors.

Abantika: A victim of institutional neglect



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In a society rife with sexual and mental harassment, the brave few who stand against the tide are overshadowed by the overwhelming silence of the majority. Survivors, crippled by fear and isolation, often retreat from their communities, leaving the perpetrators free to continue their reign of terror. But amidst the darkness, there are those like Fairuz Abantika (a law student of Jagannath University) who refuse to succumb to the shadows. Abantika exhibited the audacity to come forward to expose a harasser, and sought justice from a blind university administration. But in the end, long-term trauma, persistent bullying, and the administration's indifference compelled her to take her life. In her last Facebook post, Abantika held responsible one of her classmates and the assistant proctor of JnU. She also claimed her suicide to be technically a murder. Yet, even after death, she is facing character assassination from a society quick to blame the victim rather than the aggressor.

In public universities across the country, incidents of sexual and mental abuse persist due to administrations' inaction and the deterioration of moral values. When it comes to complaints regarding mental and sexual harassment, not only do university administrations show apathy, but they frequently make offensive remarks about the protesters' characters. Verbal abuse directed towards female students is commonplace, and regrettably, there are instances where teachers are the ones perpetrating this abuse.

Compounding the issue further is the lamentable reality that individuals associated with influential political entities enjoy undue impunity, shielded from accountability even after committing egregious misconduct. This perpetuates a culture of abuse and impunity, and fosters an environment wherein such reprehensible actions persist unconstrained.

Last year, the High Court issued a poignant reminder to educational authorities, stressing the need for the establishment of committees dedicated to addressing instances of sexual harassment within every educational institution. Notably, both the University Grants Commission (UGC) and the Ministry of Education were repeatedly called upon by the HC to adhere to its 2009 ruling mandating the formation of such committees. The High Court, cognisant of the persistent inaction or outright refusal of authorities to comply with this directive, asked them to provide a justification for their non-compliance. Moreover, recognising the gravity of the issue at hand, the HC also urged the government to enact legislation aligned with its recommendations. This judicial admonition underscores the urgent need for concrete measures to combat sexual harassment within educational settings, emphasising the imperative of institutional accountability and the protection of students' rights to a safe and conducive learning environment. It serves as a clarion call to all stakeholders to prioritise the implementation of robust mechanisms aimed at fostering a culture of respect, dignity, and zero tolerance for harassment within the realm of education.

While anti-sexual harassment cells have been established at 45 out of 53 public universities and 71 out of 109 private universities, these cells seem to exist in name only. The majority of students, when polled, reported that they were unsure about where to file complaints or if there was indeed a cell where harassment reports could be made. The universities also didn't organise any awareness activities regarding where and how to file

complaints. Failure to achieve justice in cases of sexual harassment against female students not only sends a disheartening message but also exacts a devastating toll on the lives of bright individuals like Abantika. Her tragic decision to end her life amidst the relentless threats from perpetrators and the deafening silence from the administration speaks volumes about the profound challenges faced by victims in their quest for recourse. Abantika's death epitomises the heartbreaking struggle of those who yearn to stand up against injustice but find themselves thwarted by the overwhelming weight of adversity. Within the bustling walls of Bangladesh's universities, a silent epidemic rages on, leaving behind a trail of scarred or altogether shattered lives. Behind the facade of academic prowess and youthful vigour lies a harsh reality—a significant portion of the student population is silently battling anxiety, depression, and feelings of worthlessness. In contemplating the repercussions of such systemic failures, it becomes abundantly clear that our collective failure to address sexual and mental harassment not only jeopardises the well-being of individuals like Abantika but also casts a sombre shadow over the fabric of our society. It is incumbent upon us to heed this sobering lesson and redouble our efforts to ensure that no more lives are lost; that justice prevails for all who have suffered at the hands of institutional neglect.