

A clear-cut case of corruption

Take action against those overpricing products in Matarbari project

It is absurd that the state-run Coal Generation Company Bangladesh Limited (CPGCBL), which is constructing the Matarbari power plant in Cox's Bazar, has imported two pipe cutters for Tk 93 lakh. While inspecting its shipment, custom officials have also found the price of two German-made hammers being shown as Tk 1.82 lakh. However, on the German company's website, the same items were discovered to be priced at Tk 1,668 (for each hammer) and Tk 7,232 (for each pipe cutter) respectively. This means that the CPGCBL has shown an inflated price of 55 times more for the hammers and 642 times more for the pipe cutters.

Customs officials have said that these were not the only two items whose prices were inflated. In fact, all 19 items in the same shipment had been imported at absurdly high prices. Documents from the National Board of Revenue (NBR) show that the import cost of these products has been shown as five to 18,545 times higher than the value recorded in NBR's export-import database. According to the physical examination report by the customs authorities, the price of the pipe wrench that came in the shipment is 1,053 times more than the database value, the monkey pliers 912 times more, the screwdriver 833 times more, and so on.

Despite this gross anomaly, the Matarbari Power Plant project director claimed that the prices were "normal" as they were tailor-made upon special orders. However, import documents show that the tools would not be directly used in the power plant, and are freely importable as they are used in all types of construction and routine maintenance work. Moreover, customs officials confirmed that the CPGCBL did not provide them with any special order. Additionally, NBR records show that CPGCBL had gotten away with importing various goods at inflated prices for the project before.

The claim of procuring hand tools like pipe cutters, hammers and screwdrivers by special orders is ridiculous. As experts have said, this is most likely a case of large-scale corruption that the authorities must urgently investigate. Customs sources say that multiple consignments of other agencies containing such products were also cleared in Chattogram and Mongla from October 16 to January 15. At a time when the country's economy is going through a severe crisis, it is totally unacceptable that such corruption is being allowed to pile on the sufferings of citizens who have to bear these additional expenses. We urge the authorities to take stern action to stop the culture of price inflation in public procurement.

A heinous crime in Mohammadpur

Culprits involved with gang rape must not be allowed to get away

We are outraged by a shocking incident of gang rape that took place in Mohammadpur, Dhaka. According to media reports, a young woman was held captive and raped by three men over 25 days, allegedly assisted by her roommate. She was rescued by police after locals heard her screaming for help through her window and called 999 on March 30 evening. The victim, who is undergoing treatment, filed a case against all four, who have been arrested and placed on remand.

According to the case details, the 23-year-old woman was introduced to one of the accused, Saan, by her roommate Salma alias Jhumur. They got involved in a relationship, and on February 3, Saan forced himself on her with the promise of marriage; he then did the same on several other occasions, and subsequently severed connections with her. But then, on March 5, Saan, along with his two friends Rocky and Himel, went to the victim's residence and tied her up with shackles, blindfolded her, and taped her mouth. Over the next 25 days, the trio took turns to rape her and record her during forced sexual acts with the help of Jhumur, the victim told police.

It is quite distressing to think of the physical and mental trauma that she has endured. Police say they have seized various video clips from the flat and are working to see if any of them has been posted online. We appreciate the police for their prompt intervention. But what happens next? Will justice be delivered? Can we hope to see the accused being put on trial, and not the victim herself, as we have seen happen many times before? The shamefully low conviction rate in rape and sexual violence cases in Bangladesh does not evoke much confidence that the victim will get the justice she deserves. And this is why rapists and sexual predators can commit such heinous crimes and walk away with impunity.

If we want to get rid of this menace, strict enforcement of law and swift and proper delivery of justice must be ensured, without any exception. We demand that the victim of Mohammadpur gang rape is provided with all necessary medical, psychological and legal support by the state, and the accused are meted with appropriate punishment.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Ensure safety at bus stops

The Abdullahpur bus stop along the Dhaka Mymensingh highway has become a hotspot for hijacking and pickpocketing incidents. This poorly lit area lacks adequate security. Numerous individuals have fallen victim to armed assailants who snatch money and even cause injuries. Additionally, when buses are stuck in traffic due to broken roads, thieves in this area snatch phones out of commuters' hands through bus windows. It's astonishing that this bustling spot has remained crime-prone for so long, without proper attention from the authorities. I urge them to address this issue promptly and enhance security in the area.

Zahin Ahmed
Utara, Dhaka

WORLD AUTISM AWARENESS DAY

What are we doing for people with autism?



Nazifa Raidah is a member of the editorial team at The Daily Star.

NAZIFA RAIDAH

About April 2, World Autism Awareness Day, the UN's website says the day's purpose is to serve as a means to "affirm and promote the full realisation of all human rights and fundamental freedoms for autistic people on an equal basis with others." Reading this premise, I couldn't help but feel the tinge of tokenism attached to the big claims about acceptance and equality of people with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in the context of Bangladesh.

In Bangladesh society, the word autism is cloaked in layers of stigma. And even though the government has taken some steps to rectify this, parents are still profoundly lost about their next steps when they discover that their child has ASD. But has the government truly done enough for children and people with ASD and their parents? If so, why aren't there any state-funded schools for them? Does the government have a plan for creating an "inclusive" society for people with disabilities? What does this "inclusion" look like? Will we ever see people with ASD coming into the mainstream? Or will they be forever sidelined, with no recourse?

So far, the government has undertaken positive initiatives such as the Rights and Protection of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2013 and the Persons with Neuro-developmental Disability Trust Act, 2013 under the Ministry of Social Welfare, which was established to implement 24 different functions to improve the quality of life for people with ASD and other neuro-developmental disabilities (NDDs).

According to the ministry's terms of reference, published in 2021, the NDDP Trust has been working with a number of initiatives, including one on the establishment of service centres, a fully government-funded project, in different locations of the country. Each centre will work like a one-stop service centre comprising a multi-disciplinary team to provide services like early intervention, age group-based therapy, counselling, physical

therapy, occupational therapy, speech and language therapy, psychosocial counselling, regular treatment, behaviour change, daily activity living, group therapy, parents and caregivers



VISUAL: BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY

training, integrated services with special NDD schools and many others. The said team is supposed to include a physiotherapist, occupational therapist, speech and language therapist, clinical psychologist, medical doctor, nurses, etc. If this sounds too good to be true, I hate to break it to you that it is.

On World Autism Awareness Day 2022, the prime minister had announced the launch of two apps: Bolte Chai and Smart Autism Barta. Even though I questioned the utility of the apps to an average person residing in a village or marginalised community, I decided to download them anyway to judge for myself. In all honesty, the Bolte Chai app, although made with the intention of helping individuals with speech disorders or disabilities, looks like it was made by a first-year computer science

student for a class project. The app is incomplete, with no text-to-voice features integrated for individuals to communicate personalised messages. It has a set of pre-selected messages only in English. The voice output is also in English, making the app completely futile to the masses who probably needed this assistance the most.

The second app, Smart Autism Barta, proved to be a lot more useful, with information such as the nearest health complex parents can access, care and health sections with a list of disability affairs officers and their contact numbers. Disability Affairs

Going back to the mandates set in the Persons with Neuro-developmental Disability Trust Act, 2013, weren't these centres supposed to be "one-stop service centres"? Where are the nurses, therapists, special educators, and physiotherapists who were promised for this facility?

Government services aside, private services for people with ASDs and NDDs are not faring that well either.

"The biggest problem is that we do not have enough external funding to support our staff or students fully. The training of teachers for children with special needs is expensive to bear. It's a challenge to convince a teacher, who will get paid a bare minimum wage, to receive training that may cost them anywhere from Tk 15,000 to Tk 25,000," said Tania Akter, a special educator at ALC Advanced Learning and Special School. Tania also mentions that she has experienced discrimination when she was hired on an ad hoc basis at regular schools, saying that she doesn't receive the same level of respect as a "regular" teacher because she takes care of children with special needs.

Aklima Chowdhury Asa, deputy manager at DRRA Amarjoti Special School in Bhatara said, "If these training were funded by the government, it would've relieved us a bit from our financial crunch. Many ASD and NDD children require epilepsy medication regularly. Since we cater to a marginalised community, most of these children's medical needs are not met due to a lack of finance. We also lack special assistive devices to help the children who suffer from physical disabilities."

In most cases, these practitioners witness how backward our society still is when it comes to autism acceptance. In many cases, it's mostly single mothers who are left to deal with these challenges all alone because their husbands left them.

The government, although well-intentioned in its endeavours so far, must pay attention to the discrepancies in the system. The first step is to launch a mass campaign, beyond World Autism Awareness Day, to actively ensure inclusion. This may include door-to-door counselling or dispersing useful information via mainstream media. The second would be to ensure that the finance being injected into the system is being utilised properly. Otherwise, no matter how many apps are launched, we risk remaining a country that advocates for inclusion only in the form of tokenism.

Bangladesh's struggle with GHG emissions in textile and RMG

Erica Shuvra Halder is a private sector expert, currently working with SREUP project in Bangladesh.

Mohammed Norul Alam Raju is a development practitioner and currently studying development policy and management in Belgium. They can be reached at shuvradu@gmail.com

ERICA SHUVRA HALDER AND MOHAMMED NORUL ALAM RAJU

Bangladesh's ready-made garment (RMG) sector contributes 15.4 percent of the country's greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions while the textile sector emits 12.4 percent, leading in carbon emissions and posing a challenge to achieving GHG reduction targets set in the Paris Agreement. On the other hand, despite contributing significantly to the GDP, these industries suffer from operational inefficiency, exacerbated by the use of outdated machinery and ineffective energy management.

The surge in industrial energy intensity raises concerns, casting a shadow over Bangladesh's ability to manage escalating energy demands while meeting its GHG emission reduction commitments. Textile and RMG manufacturers grapple with insufficient financial incentives, a shortage of technical expertise, and an absence of an enabling environment, which hinder energy-efficient practices.

Failure to overcome these barriers jeopardises Bangladesh's nationally determined contributions (NDC). The updated NDC commits to a 6.73 percent GHG reduction in the unconditional scenario and an additional 15.12 percent reduction in the conditional scenario with international support by 2030.

The textile and RMG industries in Bangladesh exhibit high energy intensity. Inefficient production

processes and limited natural resource supply significantly contribute to elevated energy consumption, resulting in heightened CO₂ emissions. The adoption of energy-efficient technologies poses a substantial financial hurdle for many enterprises. Additionally, Bangladesh heavily depends on fossil fuels such as coal and natural gas for its energy mix. This reliance on non-renewables accentuates the industries' carbon footprint. Furthermore, these industries generate significant volumes of waste, encompassing chemicals and by-products from dyeing and finishing processes. Inadequate waste management practices amplify environmental pollution, placing additional strain on the ecosystem. Finally, the industry's notable contribution to water pollution arises from the discharge of untreated waste into water bodies, posing risks to both the environment and human health.

In response, Bangladesh Bank introduced the Program to Support Safety Retrofits and Environmental Upgrades in the Bangladesh Ready-Made Garment (RMG) Sector Project (SREUP) in 2018. With 64.29 million euros in consortium support, this project has extended credit fund support to 23 factories and granted investment fund support to seven factories.

One such success story is Snowtex

Outerwear Ltd, whose factory achieved significant reduction in light energy consumption, decrease in carbon footprint, and savings in machine energy usage. This case emphasises the broader potential for positive transformation within the industry through strategic interventions and collaboration.

Beyond Bangladesh, success stories from Welspun India and Mavi in Turkey showcase proactive sustainability integration in the textile industry. Welspun India prioritises sustainability through advanced water management, solar power integration, and responsible raw material sourcing. The company's commitment extends to sustainable farming practices, ensuring environmental and social well-being in its supply chain, showcasing how major players can actively contribute to environmental conservation, reduce carbon footprints, and champion ethical business practices.

Mavi, a well-known Turkish denim and apparel brand, has been actively involved in sustainable practices within the RMG industry, showing a commitment to using organic cotton and recycled materials into its manufacturing processes, reducing the environmental impact of raw material production.

As Bangladesh endeavours to harmonise economic growth with environmental responsibility, key steps include incentivising energy-efficient initiatives, nurturing technical expertise, and formulating policies that champion sustainable practices. This would involve encouraging textile and RMG manufacturers to embrace energy-efficient practices through a comprehensive incentive system comprising tax breaks, subsidies, or

financial benefits, igniting motivation for investments in energy-saving technologies.

To address the shortage of technical expertise, the establishment of training programmes and partnerships within the textile and RMG sectors can be a strategic move. Collaborating with educational institutions and industry experts to craft specialised courses and workshops will also be pivotal. The development and implementation of a robust policy framework are imperative, setting clear environmental standards, offering guidelines for energy-efficient processes, and enforcing compliance to ensure businesses adhere to sustainable practices.

Facilitating collaborative efforts between the public and private sectors should urge dialogue and partnerships that unite government agencies, businesses, and non-governmental organisations. This can help both sectors address challenges, share best practices, and collectively work towards shared sustainability goals.

Lastly, an independent body should be set up and tasked with regularly assessing and reporting on the environmental impact of the textile and RMG industries. By weaving sustainability into their fabric, these industries can stitch together a narrative of resilience, meeting global standards not merely as an obligation but as a promise to the communities they call home. In each conscientious choice, they can thread a tapestry of hope, leaving an indelible mark that resonates not only with the industries but with the very soul of our shared future.

Growth is crucial, but it should never come at the expense of the environment and human life.