

Classroom shutdown is only logical

Reopening schools amid sweltering heat was a poor decision

Let's be frank. The reopening of schools and colleges amid a persistent heatwave was as whimsical as it was inconsiderate given the suffering it has caused. It took only a day for the imprudence of the decision to be clear after two school teachers died and numerous students and teachers fell sick on Sunday, when classes resumed after a long hiatus. That such tragedies may occur during the longest heatwave on record in 76 years is understandable – that this obvious possibility would be lost on those who should have known better is not. This has once again highlighted how arbitrarily crucial decisions about the well-being of citizens are often taken in Bangladesh.

One may recall how the government similarly flip-flopped on lockdown decisions at the height of the Covid-19 outbreak. Every time the nation is confronted with a crisis with major health implications, it seems to be bogged down by indecisions, inconsistencies, and lack of coordination among the relevant authorities. The classroom shutdown decision too has been marred by inconsistencies. After the incidents on Sunday, the education ministry decided that secondary schools, madrasas and colleges would be closed in five districts, despite the minister earlier opposing closures. Why only five? On what basis were they selected? Primary schools, on the other hand, were to remain open—a decision subsequently withdrawn on Monday, with a new shutdown announced until May 2 when temperatures are expected to fall.

During a crisis like this, shutdown or reopening decisions can be taken on a day-to-day basis. There is no harm in that. But one cannot but question the recent decisions taken by the different ministries related to education. The continued heatwave has caused massive sufferings with frequent outages in many parts of the country only exacerbating them. If adults are struggling to cope with this situation, can minors be expected to be different? Of course, we cannot afford prolonged school closures, especially after the learning loss suffered during Covid years. But this unprecedented heatwave has presented a challenge that must factor into all decisions.

Already, the meteorological department has extended its heatwave alert numerous times. Its latest alert—eighth in April—was extended to May 1 morning. The next few days will thus be crucial, and it is only logical that all pre-tertiary educational institutions will remain closed during this time. We urge all relevant ministries and departments to work judiciously and collaboratively in this regard. They also must have plans in place to address the learning loss when students are finally safe to return to classes.

Badda criminal gangs must be reined in

Political affiliation should not get in the way of police action

We are alarmed to learn of the recent increase in gang activities in and around Dhaka's Badda and Bhatara areas. These armed gangs, in many cases led by listed criminals living abroad, have been competing with each other over who gets to extort the roadside vendors, rickshaw pullers, and small business owners, according to locals and police. In Bhatara, five groups reportedly have been vying for control, with two of the gangs run by mob bosses living abroad. Moreover, some members of the gangs are ward- and thana-level leaders of the ruling Awami League. Hence, victims are reluctant to file cases and get in the crosshairs of these ruthless criminals.

Reportedly, there have been numerous cases of armed extortion in these areas over the last few months. In one instance, a group of criminals shot a businessman in the leg for refusing to pay extortion money. On another occasion, more than 25 men entered a restaurant and beat up its manager, threatened to kill him and also vandalised the shop after he failed to pay Tk 10 lakh as demanded. Even though police have made multiple arrests in connection with such cases, and recovered many firearms, it seems they are failing to keep up with the gangs because of how active they have become. And the fact that multiple Awami League-affiliated individuals are parts of these gangs naturally strengthens their positions against any law enforcement drive and also the intimidation factor for victims.

The situation calls for stricter police and political interventions. Clearly, more police personnel need to be deployed to neutralise the gang activities. Law enforcers must also be able to provide proper protection and anonymity to all complainants, so that people receiving threats of extortion can muster up the courage to report them. Additionally, the police must be assured that no gang members, regardless of their political affiliation, are above the law, so that they can act impartially in gang-related cases. The government should also use its diplomatic channels to take action against mob bosses operating from abroad.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Stop cutting old trees

I don't know why, but for some odd reason, our authorities tend to forget the importance of old trees in a community. From May to June last year, Dhaka's city corporations cut down so many trees without taking appropriate permissions from the forest department that now we are having to pay the price in this oppressive heat. The lack of shade in this city is obscene, and the people that suffer the most are those who have to live and work on the streets. I urge the authorities to keep in mind that a city that prioritises beautification without assuring the comfort of its citizens is unlikely to prosper. It is high time we shifted our focus to a kind of development that makes people's lives better, instead of making them dread living in a city like Dhaka.

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How do we protect the worst victims of inflation?



MACRO MIRROR

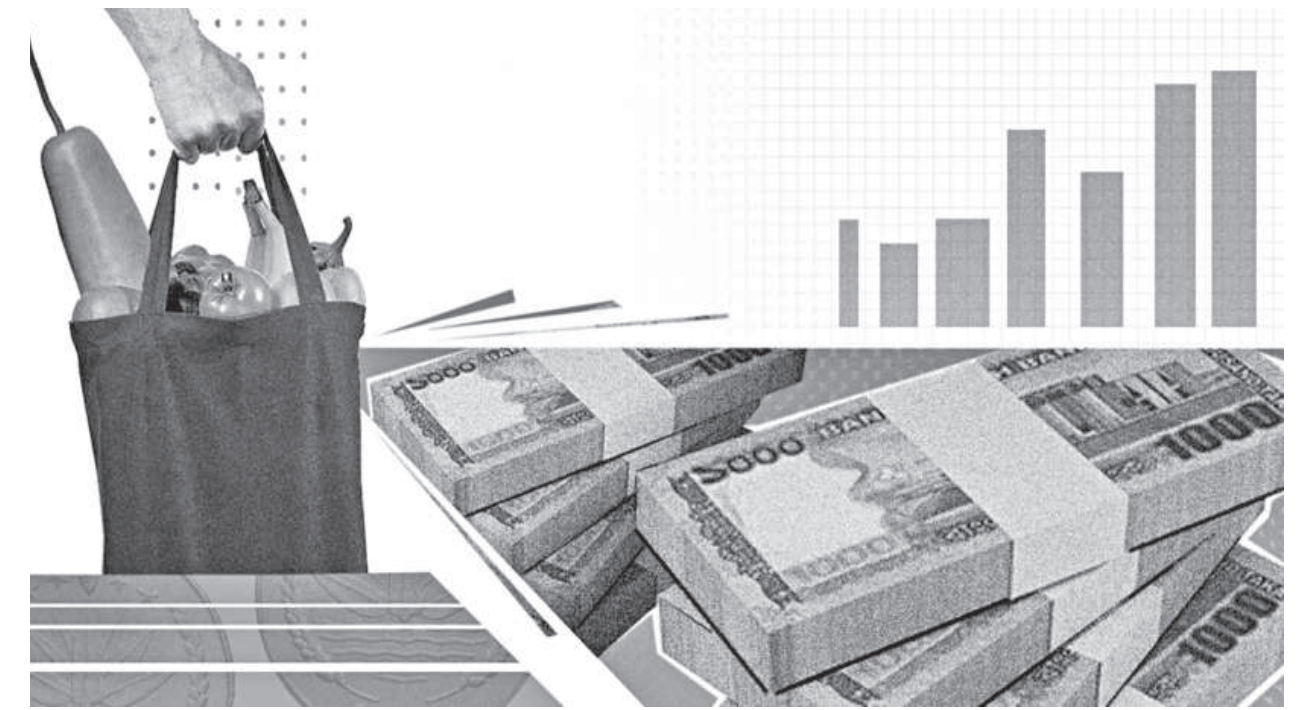
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For more than two years, Bangladesh has been experiencing high inflation. The average inflation in FY2022-23 was as high as 9.07 percent, compared to 5.56 percent in FY2020-21. The point-to-point inflation reached 9.81 percent in March 2024 compared to 5.47 percent in March 2021. One may recall that the pre-pandemic inflation rate was 5.48 percent in FY2018-19, according to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS). Food and energy prices in the international market were high throughout 2021, which led to consumer price inflation around the world. Bangladesh has been facing similar challenges as well. However, the prices in the international market came down in 2023, which is not reflected in the domestic prices here. Though several developed and developing economies, and even a troubled economy such as Sri Lanka, could manage to tame inflation through appropriate policy measures, Bangladesh is still caught in the high inflationary waves.

The reason for continued high consumer prices in the country despite prices dropping in the international market is a combination of policy and institutional failure. The lack of a truly independent monetary policy by the Bangladesh Bank has contributed to the uncontrolled inflation. The central bank imposed an interest rate cap on lending and deposit rates in April 2020 as part of its expansionary monetary policy to overcome economic challenges due to the pandemic. At the beginning of FY2023-24, the interest rate cap was withdrawn, and the variable six-month average rate of treasury bill (SMART) reference rate was implemented in an attempt to rein in inflation by rate hikes. However, the outcome of such a monetary policy is not observed yet. Indeed, this move was too little, too late. Besides, no policy can function in isolation. The associated policy responses and measures such as restrained fiscal policy, breaking of market distortionary steps by a small group of market players, and market monitoring must be pursued in tandem with appropriate monetary policy.

The spike in inflation has affected people from different socio-economic strata differently. Poor and low-income households are the worst victims of price hikes. They are struggling to deal with high food and fuel prices as their



FILE VISUAL: REHNUMA PROSHOON

incomes have not increased to make up for the loss of their purchasing power. During the Covid pandemic, many lost their jobs due to shrinking economic activities. Once they returned to work, many had to compromise on their wages and salaries as most businesses had to recover from the pandemic-induced economic shocks. With high prices, the real income of the salaried people and micro- and small businesses has shrunk. High inflation has reduced people's disposable income too.

High food inflation means food insecurity in poor and vulnerable households as they are forced to compromise on their diet. As it happens, food inflation is mostly higher than the average inflation. For example, food inflation in March 2024 was 9.87 percent and non-food inflation was 9.64 percent, per BBS data. While this is lower than the 12.56 percent food inflation in October 2023, the risk of food insecurity remains.

Besides, the average food inflation often does not reflect the actual price increase of some commodities. The daily price records of essentials by the Trading Corporation of Bangladesh (TCB) indicate that prices of some essential commodities have increased by a much higher rate than the average inflation. High energy prices also raise food prices as food production costs go up through high fuel, fertiliser,

and transport costs. Therefore, high inflation comes with the menace of rising poverty and food insecurity. With limited income, poor families do not have any options to change their food and essential expenditure, since they are already in the lowest category of consumption pattern. Additionally, they almost have no financial options such as savings, loan facilities

rise of Gini coefficient to 0.499 in 2022 from 0.458 in 2010.

High inflationary pressure on the poor, low-income and even lower-middle-income families can only accentuate inequality in the medium term. This is worrying, because not too long ago, the pandemic created new poor who are still fighting to come out of their economic distress.

from banks or any other financial instruments.

Concerns of increased poverty due to high inflation and weak private consumption have been raised by the World Bank in its recent macro poverty outlook. It has projected that between FY2022-23 and FY2023-24, about five lakh people will fall into extreme poverty—defined as a person living below an income of \$2.15 a day. The report also indicates that moderate poverty, defined as people living below \$3.65 a day, will increase from 29.3 percent in FY2022-23 to 29.4 percent in FY2023-24, which will be equivalent to 8.4 lakh people.

Along with high poverty, high prices also lead to inequality within and among countries. Inequality of all types—income, consumption and wealth—is high around the world, and Bangladesh is no exception, even though the country has been experiencing high growth over the last decade, barring periods during and after the pandemic. Though the World Bank report forecast inequality to remain stagnant, it is already high and increasing over time. The Gini coefficient, which measures inequality on a scale of 0 to 1, is increasing over time despite increase in per capita income. According to the Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) 2022, Bangladesh has witnessed the

They are being pushed back further during the period of high prices. Unless tackled, this could fuel the existing social tensions due to limited and unequal opportunities, increased youth unemployment, and high-level corruption among the powerful people.

The persistent high inflationary pressure is here to stay for some time, given the poor response of policy measures taken by the central bank so far. Therefore, policymakers should adopt strong social protection measures for the poor and low-income families against the perils of rising prices. Social safety net programmes such as direct cash transfers and increasing availability of essential commodities at affordable prices for the poor and low-income groups are effective measures to provide a cushion to them on an immediate basis. However, these programmes must be adequate, well-targeted and efficiently managed by avoiding wastage and corruption to cover the genuinely affected people under the programme. However, in the short to medium terms, prudent fiscal management and sound monetary policy are critical to curb inflationary pressure and protect the erosion of purchasing power of the poor, low- and lower-middle-income households.

Ramping up preparedness amid severe heatwaves

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As Bangladesh grapples with the El Nino year of 2023-2024, a relentless heatwave tightens its grip on various regions of the country. Recent reports from the Bangladesh Meteorological Department (BMD) indicate that soaring temperatures, ranging from 40 degrees Celsius to over 43 degrees Celsius, have been scorching 51 out of 64 districts and are anticipated to persist in the next few days.

The most severely affected districts include Rajshahi, Pabna, Khulna, Bagerhat, Jashore, Chuadanga and Kushtia, where the heatwave is at its peak. Moderate to severe heatwaves are also sweeping over Dhaka, Rangpur and Barishal divisions, as well as other parts of Rajshahi and Khulna divisions, and the districts of Mymensingh, Moulvibazar, and Rangamati. Authorities have responded by taking proactive measures, including the closure of schools and colleges. The situation is dire, with forecasts indicating a steady rise in temperatures, potentially

reaching 44-45 degrees by mid-May.

Typically, heatwaves in Bangladesh last for three to seven days during April-May each year. However, this year presents an unprecedented threat, with forecasts suggesting the heatwave may persist for three to four weeks starting from April 20. Rising daytime temperatures coupled with minimal changes in nighttime temperatures

The ramifications of extreme weather events are deeply felt, especially among vulnerable groups such as children, the elderly, pregnant and lactating women, slum dwellers, and outdoor workers. Farmers endure substantial losses during the production of summer fruits, vegetable harvesting, and tending to standing crops.

exacerbate the heat stress, particularly in densely populated areas such as informal settlements, slums or char islands.

The ramifications of extreme weather events are deeply felt, especially among vulnerable groups such as children, the elderly, pregnant and lactating women, slum dwellers,

and outdoor workers. Farmers endure substantial losses during the production of summer fruits, vegetable harvesting, and tending to standing crops. Additionally, the significant drop in water levels in northwestern Bangladesh exacerbates threats to the country's food security and biodiversity. Addressing both economic and non-economic losses and damages becomes imperative in mitigating the impacts of these challenges.

Several NGOs, in collaboration with various stakeholders, have initiated measures to address the ongoing crisis. These include the development of heatwave risk communication strategies, distribution of essential supplies such as safe drinking water, and coordination with local authorities to establish cooling centres.

In Bangladesh, heatwaves have historically not been a prominent concern, thus not included as a key hazard in the national Standing Orders on Disaster (SoDs), last updated in 2019. Consequently, there are no outlined Standing Operational Procedures (SOPs) for responding to heatwaves in either urban or rural areas. However, some local initiatives have emerged to alleviate the impact of extreme heat on outdoor workers. The BMD has categorised heatwaves based on temperature thresholds, ranging from mild to extreme, and regularly disseminates forecasts through established channels.

In rural Bangladesh, farmers

harvest the staple crop Aman paddy in the Bengali month of Agrahayan-Poush (pre winter), which they stock for the crisis time like Baishakh-Jaisthya (summer) when people can't grow many crops but fruits. Therefore, a good number of workers migrate to nearby cities to earn as outdoor workers mostly. While the temperature is rising constantly, it is important to take the right preparations to protect people suffering from heat-related diseases, including heat stroke and dehydration.

Bangladesh can leverage its established disaster management infrastructure to tackle the looming threat of severe heatwaves. Early warnings will be disseminated through local channels, prioritising local and understandable languages for effective communication. Those with internet access can utilise the Disaster Alert app by the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief, while others can dial the 109 hotline for weather forecasts and 16123 for agro-met advisories. The government can deploy volunteers, coordinating through disaster management committees, which will amplify the message at scale. These proactive measures aim to prompt early action, drawing on indigenous knowledge to adapt to prolonged heatwave spells. Moreover, amid escalating climate crises, cross-boundary cooperation, data sharing and joint initiatives are essential for comprehensive mitigation efforts.