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Even basic items are getting out of reach

Govt must address the rising food prices immediately

Despite the government's repeated declarations of tackling food insecurity, citizens have not felt any relief from the burn of rising food prices. According to a report of the UN World Food Programme (WFP), in 2022, the cost of buying food for people living below the poverty line was Tk 1,851 per capita per month. Due to rampant food inflation, the amount increased to Tk 2,923—a staggering 58 percent rise—in February 2024. This illustrates that the authorities' actions are simply not bearing fruit, with people continuing to struggle for the most basic necessity—a meal.

Over the last two years, inflation has hovered around 10 percent, leading to basic food items such as rice, flour, meat and vegetables getting increasingly expensive. According to another WFP report, 17 percent of people were facing food insecurity in February, 68 percent reduced their expenses to make ends meet, 43 percent were borrowing food, and 22 percent reduced medical expenses. After taking office, the new government decided to make coordinated efforts to curb inflation, and yet, food inflation was 10.22 percent last month.

Experts suggest that despite improvements in the supply chain, a group of influentials are destabilising the market. Instead of tackling this group, the government has been busy fixing prices of produce, which historically has not worked. When the source of the problem is right in front of them, why are authorities still latching on to ineffective methods? Time and again, questions have been raised about the identities of these influentials and whether the administration is feigning ignorance due to the power they hold. It's time for the government to address these questions and root out the perpetrators—immediately.

Bangladesh has been affected by a number of global events that led to depreciation of the taka, dwindling foreign exchange reserves, etc. However, while the world has been recovering, our country continues to struggle. This is evident by the fact that, despite the price of wheat continuously declining over the past six months, the local price has not fallen. All of this is nothing but the result of policy failure.

The government must now formulate a robust plan of action, which must address import issues, market manipulation, and valuation of currency. Additionally, it must bring more vulnerable people under social safety net programmes in the next fiscal year, and increase the allowances through higher budget allocation. Ad hoc and ineffective measures like price-fixing and sporadic raids cannot address the looming crisis of food insecurity among a significant portion of our population.

Spare us from road-digging in monsoon

City corporations, utility agencies must strictly adhere to the rules

It is unfortunate that Dhaka residents continue to suffer from the torments of excavated roads and alleys in different parts of the city during the rainy season, despite clear guidelines to the contrary. The guidelines were issued in 2019 and one-stop cells at both city corporations were assigned to coordinate the construction, repair and other development work by various agencies. However, a recent report by a Bangla daily highlights how road digging is very likely to continue at several places even into the rainy season, thus increasing the risk of accidents, waterlogging, insufferable traffic, and dengue.

According to the report, officials of the city corporations claimed late submission of project proposals by different agencies as one of the reasons for project work to spill into the monsoon season, which is typically from May to September. While proposals are accepted by city corporations between October and April, the officials claimed that many agencies submit project proposals in late March. The report added that even the city corporations' projects sometimes run into the rainy season. Although there are penalties for breaking the rules, we wonder to whom the two city corporations answer when they carry out road excavation between May and September.

While road excavation work is necessary for the development and maintenance of various utility services required by millions of residents in Dhaka, it should not come at the cost of their physical and mental well-being. Construction that makes a road unusable for half the year, without options for alternative routes, or creates gridlocks around the city, is not just taxing on the patience of commuters, but also impacts the economy by increasing unproductive work hours.

The two city corporations should set examples by following the guidelines and encourage other government agencies to do the same. The one-stop cell at each city corporation must work with the agencies to make sure that their projects are completed within the stipulated time. Exemplary action should be taken against the actors who fail to abide by the stipulations to end the menace of unfinished excavation work that holds Dhaka dwellers hostage come every monsoon.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

India joins the nuclear club

This day in 1974 marks the first successful detonation of a nuclear fission bomb in Pokhran, India. India commenced work on developing nuclear weapons in the early 1970s amid a time of rising tensions with neighbouring China and Pakistan. Through the testing, India became the world's sixth nuclear power. The resumption of nuclear testing by India in 1998 led Pakistan to drop its first nuclear bomb the same month.

SOURCE: HISTORY.COM

An invisible killer on the loose

Dhaka's never-ending air pollution woes



A CLOSER LOOK

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TASNEEM TAYEB

Imagine an invisible serial killer lurking around the corner, waiting to suck the life out of you with its all-consuming, toxic embrace. This is what Dhaka's air has become. Every day, we breathe in and breathe out toxic air, full of pollutants and carcinogenic heavy metals and chemical elements like arsenic, lead, cobalt and cadmium. According to a report published in this daily, the concentrations of these elements are almost double the permissible limits set by the World Health Organization (WHO). The report also added that among the 27 locations that have been studied, Dhaka is the only one where the combined carcinogenic risk "exceeds the benchmark for both adults and children."

These are alarming facts without a doubt, but having breathed this toxic air over the years, are we surprised? I certainly am not.

Commenting on the overall deteriorating air quality, the environment minister told this daily recently, "We all know how grave and critical the air quality situation is and we did not get here in one day. There can be no overnight fixes but now that we have identified the sources of the pollution, have acknowledged the problem, and have been honest and upfront about it, I think we are now headed in the right direction."

If anything, the minister is right. We have not come to this overnight and there is no instant solution to it. What is not clear to me is where the "right direction" is, and who is going to guide us there.

Some of the key reasons why Dhaka's air is so toxic is because we allow unfit vehicles to ply the roads. We have enabled an entire e-waste recycling industry to flourish without proper environmental impact assessment and without developing an e-waste management system. Under the very noses of the authorities, coal-

fired brick kilns are operating in full swing in and around the capital, and trees are being felled by the authorities who should have been guarding them in the first place.

A 2021 study by the Centre for Atmospheric Pollution Study (CAPS) revealed that 15 percent of the air pollution in Dhaka is caused by unfit vehicles. The study also found that unplanned and uncontrolled construction and road work lead to about 30 percent air pollution



Smoke rises from the chimneys of a brick kiln on the outskirts of Dhaka, Bangladesh on March 17, 2024.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

in the capital. Pollution caused by industries and brick kilns stands around 29 percent, irresponsible waste incineration causes seven percent, transboundary air pollution around 10 percent, and nine percent from cooking stoves. Many of these parameters impact the level of carcinogens in the air.

But what is the gain in reflecting on our past failures? It is time we looked forward and identified areas of improvement. Instead of diverting

our focus from real issues at home to transboundary air pollution—over which we have little control—we should look at what we can do to gradually improve the situation, and there are at least four major areas that we should work on.

Unfit vehicles come first. Of the 60 lakh registered vehicles in the country, about 6.17 lakh run with no or expired fitness certificates, according to the BRTA. In July 2019, the High Court banned unfit vehicles from plying the roads, later HC banned fuel sale to unfit vehicles and finally it directed the authorities to form a nationwide task force to take unfit vehicles off the roads. Nothing seems to have come out of these directives. In addition to turbocharging air pollution, unfit vehicles are a major cause behind road accidents, resulting in the killing of thousands. It has become imperative for us to prioritise national interest above vested interests and take

the circuit boards. Burning this waste releases harmful toxins in the air, posing a significant public health hazard. Being an informal sector, there is little control over its operations. Although the e-waste management rules were published in 2021, the government has not been able to implement it due to resistance from various quarters and an obvious lack of political will. It must push the implementation of the e-waste management rules, which have set clear limits on the usage of heavy metals. At the same time, a conducive ecosystem and required infrastructures should be ensured so that those involved in e-waste recycling can work in conditions that are not hazardous for them and the environment.

Illegal brick kilns come next. In 12 towns surrounding Dhaka, there are around 1,246 illegal brick kilns. In Dhaka and five of its adjacent districts, there are about 559 illegal brick kilns. These need to be shut down permanently and immediately. In the recent past, 737 brick kilns have been shut down. The current environment minister has taken legal action against 458 brick kilns, 209 of which have been shut down across the country. But then there remain the others that need to be taken care of as well and soon.

Finally, we should prevent felling of trees and focus on organised urbanisation of Dhaka. Trees not only give us fresh air to breathe, but also remove pollutants from air. In the name of development and beautification, the city corporations and other authorities, including the BIWTA, have felled hundreds of trees across the capital, which has taken its toll on air quality. BIWTA has promised to plant 1,620 trees, and DNCC and DSCC are taking initiatives to plant new trees, but these are only piecemeal measures. The sustainable approach would be organised and green urbanisation of the capital, which should be the focus of all relevant bodies.

As citizens, we can do our part to improve air quality by making responsible choices: from not using unfit vehicles, to responsible disposal of e-waste, and planting more trees in our surroundings. However, at the national level, the onus is on the government to chalk out and implement watertight measures to curb air pollution. The question is, do they have the political will? Only time will tell.

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

Protests of despair



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SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK

These are crazy times. Biblical disturbances in nature, such as the repeated torrential rain in Dubai or the mass fish die-off in Vietnam's overheated reservoir, seem to mirror our overheated politics and social environment.

At such moments, it is crucial to keep a cool head and analyse all the weird phenomena as closely, objectively, and dispassionately as possible. And few phenomena nowadays are weirder than the protests surrounding Israel's bombardment and invasion of Gaza in response to Hamas's terrorist attack in October last year.

We should acknowledge the rhetoric from some politicised Muslims, such as those who recently demonstrated in Hamburg, Germany, chanting "Kalifat ist die Lösung" ("Caliphate is the solution"). And we should concede that, despite the massive presence of Jews among the protesters, there are at least a few true antisemites among them, just as there are some genocidal maniacs in Israel.

While many commentators have noted the parallel between today's pro-Palestinian demonstrations and the 1968 student protests against the Vietnam War, Italian philosopher Franco Berardi points to an important difference. Rhetorically, at least, the 1968 protesters explicitly identified with the anti-imperialist Viet Cong position and a broader, positive socialist project, whereas today's protesters very rarely identify with Hamas, and instead are "identifying with despair."

As Berardi puts it, "Despair is the psychological and also cultural trait that explains the wide identification of

young people with the Palestinians. I think that the majority of the students today are consciously or unconsciously expecting the irreversible worsening of the conditions of life, irreversible climate change, a long-lasting period of war, and the looming danger of a nuclear precipitation of the conflicts that are underway in many points of the geopolitical map."

It would be difficult to explain the situation any better than that. The authorities' obscenely repressive response to the protests supports Berardi's hypothesis. The harsh crackdowns are not motivated by any fear that the protests will launch a new political movement; rather, they are expressions of panic—a futile refusal to confront the despair that pervades our societies.

Signs of this panic are everywhere, so allow me to offer just two examples. First, late last month, 12 US senators sent a letter to the International Criminal Court threatening it with sanctions should it decide to issue an arrest warrant against Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Although this was strictly a Republican undertaking, President Joe Biden's administration also has pressured the ICC not to charge Israeli officials over war crimes committed in Gaza. Such threats signal nothing less than the demise of shared global values. Though this ideal was always somewhat hypocritical (the United States, for example, has refused to join the ICC), governments at least upheld it in spirit.

The second recent example supports the same conclusion. On May 4, France (complying with a German-issued visa ban) denied entry to Ghassan Abu Sitta,

a British-Palestinian surgeon who was scheduled to provide testimony to the French Senate on what he had witnessed while treating victims of the war in Gaza. With such crude acts of censorship and marginalisation happening before our eyes, it is no longer an exaggeration to say that our democracies are crumbling.

Everyone knows that the situation

After the October 7 attacks, Israel emphasised the raw realities of what Hamas had done. Let the images speak for themselves, Israeli authorities said. The brutal killings and rapes had been recorded by the perpetrators and were there for everyone to see. There was no need for complex contextualisation. Can we not now say the same about the Palestinian suffering in Gaza?

in Gaza is unacceptable. But a great deal of energy has been devoted to postponing the kind of intervention that the crisis requires.

One way to help break the impasse is to offer public support for the student protests. As US Senator Bernie Sanders put it on April 28, "What Netanyahu's right-wing, extremist, and racist government is doing is unprecedented in the modern history of warfare... Right now, we are looking at the possibility of mass starvation and famine in Gaza. When you make those charges, that is not antisemitic. That is a reality."

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Can we not now say the same about the Palestinian suffering in Gaza? Let the images speak for themselves. See the starving people in packed improvised tents, the children slowly dying as Israeli missile and drone strikes continue to reduce buildings to ruins, then to rubble, and then to dust. I am reminded of what Michael Ignatieff (then a journalist) wrote in 2003 about the US invasion of Iraq. "For me, the key issue is what would be the best result for the Iraqi people—what is most likely to improve the human rights of 26 million Iraqis? What always drove me crazy about the opposition [to war] was that it was never about Iraq. It was a referendum on American power."

The same point does not apply to today's anti-war protests. Far from a referendum on Palestinian, Israeli, or American power, they are driven primarily by a desperate plea simply to stop the killing of Palestinians in Gaza.

So, what should the Biden administration do? For starters, the US can join the global initiative to recognise Palestine as a state. Far from being an obstacle to peace in the Middle East, Palestinian statehood is a precondition for any serious negotiations between the two sides. By contrast, rejecting (or endlessly postponing) such recognition will inevitably support the fatalistic conclusion that war is the only option.

Strange as it may sound, we are witnessing one of the downsides of the US's loss of hegemonic power (as was also the case with the US withdrawal from northern Syria and then Afghanistan). Ideally, the US would simply invade Gaza from the sea, re-establish peace and order, and provide the population with humanitarian assistance. But don't count on it. One can always rely on the US to miss an opportunity to deploy its remaining imperial power for a good cause.