

# How are electrolyte drinks regulated in Bangladesh?



A CLOSER LOOK

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My husband was sipping on a locally-made electrolyte drink after a run on the treadmill when the news of a case filed to ban the product popped up on my social media newsfeed. This particular drink is very popular in my home, and on occasions—mostly after sports—I allow my child to drink it as well. I still have about a dozen packs left in the refrigerator, and I am not sure what to do with them anymore.

Bangladesh Food Safety Authority (BFSA) has recently sued the owners of seven companies for selling five popular brands of electrolyte drink without necessary approvals. The brands are SMC Plus, Aktive Plus, Bruvana, Recharge, and Turbo. In the case filed with the Pure Food Court, arrest warrants have been issued against the top management of the companies, and the board chairman of one of the companies involved in marketing one of the brands has been slapped with a fine of Tk 16 lakhs over the electrolyte drink's unauthorised sale.

While the BFSA should be commended for taking the much-needed initiative to ban the unauthorised sale of these drinks, the obvious question is: why did it take the authority more than two years to file the case? Most of these locally-produced brands have been in the market for some years now. Take SMC Plus for instance: it was launched in March, 2021. From ads to events, these brands have been promoted widely. How is it possible that the food safety authority did not take note of this earlier?

This issue has raised some further questions on the regulation of electrolyte drinks in the

imported and sold under a wrong category, and should be immediately lifted from the market, until a proper BSTI standard can be assigned to them.

Interestingly, in the BSTI list of Bangladesh Standard (BDS) on Agricultural and Food products, there are standards for multiple categories for beverages, including but not limited to: natural mineral water, lassi (yoghurt drink), flavoured milk, fruit drinks, soft drink powder, artificial flavoured drinks, dry cocoa sugar mixtures for drink preparation, carbonated beverages, non-carbonated, and non-alcoholic beverages, among others. Since BSTI covers so many different kinds of drink, there should be no reason why it should not form a category and standards for electrolytes. Perhaps the inexplicable inertia, red tape and gross lack of accountability that are so characteristic of our public institutions are to be blamed for BSTI's inaction and failure.

In the sweltering heat of Bangladesh, it is only normal for people, especially those who are engaged in physically demanding tasks, to resort to drinking fluids with added nutrients, such as the traditional home-made *lebur shorbot*, plain lemon water, saline, and even electrolytes. Under such circumstance, the regulators should have acted promptly on the request of the companies making electrolyte drinks locally. After necessary testing and review, they should have enabled their sale in the market, especially at a time when we should be promoting the growth of local industries and reducing our import dependence.



VISUAL: ABIR HOSSAIN

country. To start with, which regulatory body should give approval for electrolyte drinks—the Bangladesh Standards and Testing Institution (BSTI) or the Directorate General of Drug Administration (DGDA)? Since electrolyte drink brands claim that the products are hydrants and address issues of blood pressure and fatigue, some might easily mistake them for medicinal supplements. Interestingly, imported electrolytes are being sold with BSTI approval. This addresses the aforementioned question to some extent.

The local electrolyte drinks, however, did not get BSTI approval. Officials of some of the companies have said that they reached out to BSTI and also met the authorities, but according to BSTI officials, since electrolyte drinks do not fall under the compulsory product category, they could not approve it. BSTI would be able to approve the drink once such a category is created. So, how long does the BSTI require to create such a category?

These products are widely consumed globally, and there are best practices in other countries which one can simply study and implement. For instance, in the US, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is responsible for regulating the safety of bottled water including those "with flavouring, others may also contain added nutrients such as vitamins, electrolytes like sodium and potassium, and amino acids." The authorities in Bangladesh need only to look at the regulations required and replicate the system for the locally-produced electrolyte drinks.

Imported sports drinks with electrolytes have been available in Bangladesh for a long time now. Interestingly, the import sticker of one of these massively popular global brands flaunts a BSTI seal under BDS 1581:2015, categorised as per BSTI standards as "fruit drinks." Electrolytes are not fruit drinks, therefore BDS 1581:2015 should not apply to it, which means these are being

The price of imported electrolyte drinks is very high in comparison to local options. While a 500ml bottle of a local electrolyte drink costs around Tk 75-80, a 500ml bottle of an imported electrolyte drink costs around Tk 450.

Due to the extreme hot weather conditions the country is witnessing this year, sale of beverages have seen a 20-40 percent spike. Interestingly, both the local and imported electrolytes are still available in the market, especially on online platforms. So, in terms of enforcement, who is going to ensure that these products are not sold until BSTI has tested and approved them? Or are they going to be consumed by the public without BSTI testing or with wrong BSTI labels? In that case, where is the accountability of BSTI here?

It is unfortunate that despite electrolyte drinks being sold in Bangladeshi markets for so long, we are now having to ask these basic food safety questions. While the companies have wronged by selling electrolyte drinks without the necessary assessment and approval from BSTI, what is worse is BSTI's inaction in this regard. They have neither banned the sale of these products in the market, nor have they given it their approval. If these drinks do not meet basic consumption standards then they should immediately be taken off the market. At the same time, BSTI and related bodies should be held accountable for allowing rampant sale of electrolyte drinks (including imported ones under wrong BDS category) in the market without necessary approvals.

Food safety is a critical and highly sensitive issue. The authorities concerned, including BSTI, should immediately look into this and resolve it at the earliest. BFSA should look at the labelling problem of imported electrolyte drinks. The authorities should also check if the BSTI labels on other imported products are incorrect. Most important of all, BSTI should be held accountable for such gross negligence of their responsibilities.

# Humanitarian funding: A crisis within a crisis

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TANBIR UDDIN ARMAN

Every morning, I wake up with a sense of dread as my email is already flooded with requests from different stakeholders—government authorities and humanitarian aid partners—seeking assistance for displaced populations. The stark reality of dwindling global humanitarian funds breeds this dread. If you ask humanitarians how things are going these days, they, too, will tell you they are facing a serious problem: a funding shortfall. There are too many ongoing crises around the world with insufficient funds to help those in need. Regrettably, a quick resolution to this funding crisis remains elusive.

Each year, the United Nations appeals to its member states for funds to respond to global crises and provide lifesaving assistance, including food, sanitation, healthcare, and shelter. In 2023, approximately 128 million people received lifesaving assistance. However, due to funding shortages, humanitarian organisations fell short of reaching their target, assisting less than two-thirds of the people they aimed to support. Response plans for 2024 are ultra-prioritised, with extremely tightened budgets to address the most urgent needs. UN agencies have already been forced to reduce food assistance in Bangladesh, Syria, the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Afghanistan, and Yemen. This year, humanitarian efforts aim to reach nearly 184.1 million out of the 302.2 million people who are in need of assistance and protection in 73 countries.

The consequences of these funding shortages are deeply troubling. In Afghanistan, 10 million people lost access to food assistance between May and November last year. This loss worsens food insecurity, raising the risk of malnutrition and hunger-induced issues. In Myanmar, over half a million people endure inadequate living conditions, lacking essentials like shelter, water, and sanitation. Yemen faces a dire situation, with over 80 percent of the targeted people having no access to proper water and sanitation facilities. In Nigeria, only 2 percent of the women in need of essential sexual and reproductive health services and gender-based violence prevention received it in 2023, leaving them vulnerable to severe health risks and increased violence. These examples underscore the urgent need for consistent and sufficient funding to support global humanitarian efforts. Without adequate resources, the ability to deliver life-saving aid and essential services to those in crisis is severely challenged, perpetuating cycles of suffering and worsening existing emergencies. This funding shortfall is causing a crisis within a crisis.

Conflicts, climate emergencies and collapsing economies are wreaking

havoc in communities around the world, resulting in catastrophic hunger, massive displacement and disease outbreaks. If the current trends in displacement due to protracted complex conflicts with a high risk of relapse, urbanised conflict, and growing inequality continue, the gap between needs and response will continue to widen.

This underlines the urgent need for more proactive and innovative responses. Business as usual is not a solution now, as relying solely on humanitarian efforts to respond to emergencies falls short in the long term. Therefore, it is crucial that we harness and redesign the way we do business. To initiate this transformation, we must set forth an ambitious agenda and timeline for a total change. The starting point is a fundamental shift away from crisis response towards crisis prevention, focusing on reducing vulnerabilities and addressing the root causes of

pledge to intensify efforts to pursue political solutions to conflicts. Countries must work with greater determination to prevent conflicts and reduce vulnerability. The 302.2 million people affected by crises and destitution must be at the centre of our collective decision-making on humanitarian actions, development, peace and security.

To effectively reduce vulnerability at its core, donors should shift away from funding isolated short-term projects aimed at quick fixes like a band-aid, and instead prioritise funding initiatives that deliver collective, long-term outcomes. Localisation is key in this approach, as emphasised in the Grand Bargain, an agreement on humanitarian reform that was agreed on in the World Humanitarian Summit 2016, that 48 countries and aid agencies are party to. It is essential that we collaborate closely with local actors, ensuring that our efforts empower



People hold pots as volunteers distribute food in Sudan. PHOTO: REUTERS

displacement.

We need to move beyond institutional silos to materialise the ambition. Humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding actors should work towards collective outcomes based on comparative advantages. As we work to ensure that humanitarian needs are met in a principled manner, investing in development and peacebuilding initiatives that target these root causes and prevent crisis from escalating is paramount. Development actors should play a pivotal role in this transformation, concentrating on initiatives like improving infrastructure, education, healthcare, and economic recovery in vulnerable regions. By addressing underlying issues such as poverty, inequality, and resource scarcity, the factors that often lead to humanitarian crises can be mitigated. This approach requires strategic planning, coordination, and steadfast commitment from governments, international organisations, and stakeholders.

Furthermore, prioritising conflict resolution is essential. The international community must

them rather than replace them. This collaborative effort is vital to get ahead of the curve if we measure success in terms of reducing vulnerability and enhancing local capacity.

Moving towards these changes may indeed require stepping out of comfort zones and embracing new approaches. As the funding gap widens, the focus should be on ensuring that humanitarian aid reaches those in need efficiently. This approach maximises the impact of assistance while maintaining accountability to affected populations. Donors should enhance the effectiveness of their support by offering more flexible funding mechanisms that allow implementing partners to respond rapidly to evolving needs on the ground. This may involve committing to multi-year funding and reducing restrictions on fund allocation. Implementing partners should prioritise maximising direct impact on affected populations by minimising financial intermediaries, overhead costs and administrative expenses, optimising resource allocation towards frontline services and assistance.

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**e-Tender Notice**

e-Tender is invited in the National e-GP System Portal in Bangladesh (<http://www.eprocure.gov.bd>) for the procurement of following work mentioned in the table below:-

SL No.	Tender ID & Package No.	Name of Works	Tender Document last selling Date and Time	Tender Closing Date and Time	Tender Opening Date and Time
01	985836, e-GP/CRD/ADP/EMRB/WP-01/2023-2024	Strengthening of Existing Pavement, DBS Base course, DBS Wearing course, Rigid Pavement, Construction of R.C.C Girder Bridge, Construction of P.C Girder Bridge, Construction of R.C.C Box Culvert, Earth work in Road Embankment, Protective work by RCC Retaining Wall, Brick Toe wall, Cast-in-situ Palisading, CC Block with Geotextile, Construction of Brick "U"-Drain & Saucer Drain, Installation of Overhead Sign, Sign Signal, Kilometer Post, Guide Post, Construction of Bus Bay, Reflecting Road Studs, Delinimator-Reflector and Road Marking work from 1st KM to 12th KM (Ch: 0+000 to Ch: 12+000) of Eliotganj-Muradnagar-Ramchandrapur-Bancharampur (Z-1042) Road under Road Division Cumilla during the year 2023-2024.	23-Jun-2024 16:00	24-Jun-2024 12:00	24-Jun-2024 12:00

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