

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

Acute suffering as gas crisis hits hard

It's another wake-up call for the energy sector

We are worried about the weeks-long gas crisis that followed the shutdown of an LNG regasification terminal in Cox's Bazar's Moheshkhali after being damaged by Cyclone Remal. According to a report, the crisis has plagued many households, factories, and vehicles running on compressed natural gas (CNG). For many residents in Dhaka and elsewhere, cooking has become a daily struggle. The situation is no better for the industrial sector, where factory closures and operational disruptions have resulted in significant economic losses and job insecurity for thousands of workers. Meanwhile, CNG filling stations have been overwhelmed with long queues of cars and auto-rickshaws. The power supply in rural areas has worsened as well.

Reportedly, the crisis will continue for some more time as the damaged LNG unit—which reduced our LNG supply by almost half, and was taken to a dry dock abroad for repairs—is not expected to be back for another two weeks. That means more outages, more disruptions, and more sufferings. The Moheshkhali unit is one of the two floating storage and regasification units (FSRUs) in Bangladesh that convert LNG, or liquefied natural gas, back to gas before supplying it to the national grid. While the present crisis has again brought into focus the country's poor LNG import/supply infrastructure—it was only recently that we commented on the risk of surplus LNG regasification capacity as well as gas compressor stations lying idle amid insufficient supply—it also exposed deeper systemic issues surrounding our energy policy.

At the heart of it is the over-reliance on imported LNG amid dwindling local gas reserves. As experts have repeatedly said, a short-term, small-scale dependence on LNG import is reasonable, but tying it with our long-term energy future is not sustainable. Yet this is what the government has been doing, and doing rather badly as it cannot pay for the import thanks to the dollar crisis. What we need to focus and indeed invest more on is diversifying our energy sources so as not to be so vulnerable to economic and natural shocks like Cyclone Remal. That, right now, should start with exploring local gas, including the 48 gas wells that the government flagged for exploration in three years. We should also invest more on renewable energy sources which haven't yet got the traction they deserve.

So, while we call on the government to do everything necessary to address the present gas crisis, we should also keep an eye on the future. Exploring and extracting local gas must be a priority going forward, and the national budget must reflect that priority before it is passed. The government should also work on our vulnerable energy supply/distribution infrastructure, which is seldom discussed despite the sufferings it caused in recent years.

Rehabilitation must come before eviction

DSCC drive against Harijan families raises alarm

We are outraged by the Dhaka South City Corporation's (DSCC) recent eviction of multiple families at the Miranzilla Harijan Colony in Bangshal. The way these vulnerable and marginalised members of our society have been made homeless, without any proper rehabilitation plans, sets a dangerous precedent that could have alarming impacts.

The sweeper colonies in the city are like ancestral homes for the Harijan community and others, who were mostly brought here during the British period. Generations grew up in these colonies, doing the same cleaning jobs for pitiable wages, which means almost none of them can save up enough to enjoy a comfortable retirement, release themselves from the grips of poverty, or leave the colonies. Therefore, the DSCC cannot just write off those no longer employed by the city as "illegal residents". Besides, how can the DSCC justify expanding a kitchen market by evicting marginalised people who have no other place to call home?

Ironically, a DSCC official has told this daily that the kitchen market expansion decision was taken in 2016; they are just implementing it now. This means that the DSCC had eight years to rehabilitate the now-evicted Harijan families but did nothing. How does this feudalistic attitude, reclaiming their land without any consideration for the gravity of the situation of the Harijans, align with the idea of a social welfare state?

While we understand that the decentralisation and development needs of the city would ultimately drive the relocation (or migration) of many families and communities, such actions should not take place in a haphazard manner. The higher authorities must come up with a long-term plan for the communities likely to be evicted as the city corporations increasingly reclaim their land for development or commercial purposes. In the meantime, immediate steps should be taken to rehabilitate the evicted families of the Miranzilla Harijan Colony. These communities also need special allocations under the social safety net to reduce their vulnerability from extreme poverty, job loss, or old age. The state must steer them out of poverty so that they do not have to live in constant fear of eviction or at the mercy of others.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY



Election of Boris Yeltsin

On this day in 1991, Boris Yeltsin was easily elected president of Russia (then part of the Soviet Union) in the republic's first direct, popular election, and he was president of independent Russia until the eve of 2000.

EDUCATION IN FY2024-25 BUDGET

A futile debate achieving little



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Views expressed in this article are the author's own.

MANZOOR AHMED

For the past 15 years since the Awami League government took over, there has been pre-budget discussion every year about the need for increasing the miserably low public expenditure for education and health. And then the proposed annual budget paid little heed to the plea for a change in priorities, causing frustration and disappointment. The proposed FY2024-25 budget has been no different—it follows the same pattern.

The new budget can be described as a "crisis response" one that the government has prepared in the face of the formidable challenges of unabated inflation, economic slowdown, revenue shortfall, dwindling foreign exchange reserves, and a rising annual debt burden. Allocations have been tightened for every sector, while there is a nominal increase in the total budget from the previous one and a high level of deficit financing. There is, therefore, no expectation of any significant increase in education and health allocations as borne out by the proposed budget. Nor is there an indication of any shift in strategy and priority responding to long-standing issues in education and human development, which have been periodically raised by educationists and concerned citizens.

Out of a Tk 7,97,000 crore budget, education allocation is Tk 94,710 crore or 11.88 percent of the budget and 1.69 percent of GDP. Allocations proposed for sub-sectors of education are: Tk 44,108 crore for secondary and higher education; Tk 38,819 crore for primary and mass education; and Tk 11,783 crore for technical and madrasa education. The education allocation for the outgoing fiscal year was Tk 88,162 crore or 11.5 percent of the budget and 1.76 percent of GDP. The revised budget was, however, reduced to Tk 74,597 crore. The proposed education budget is only nominally higher than the allocated amount for the past year, which is actually a reduction if the inflation of over nine percent is counted.

Noteworthy is the fact that the education sector is not able to use all of the funds allocated for it in the outgoing financial year. As much as



VISUAL: REHNUMA PROSHOON

Tk 14,000 crore will not be spent, as the revised allocation indicates. It is difficult to make a case for increased budget when the fund available cannot be fully utilised.

As this author as well as other education activists have often pointed out, the education authorities—the two ministries—have to make a case for public investment priorities in education and be persuasive about it. When the national budget fails to give due recognition to the needs and priorities of a vital sector such as education, it is as much the failure of the education ministries as it is of the finance ministry, who presents the budget on behalf of the government.

It is not, but should have been, in the public domain what the two ministries asked for in respect of increasing allocations and whether any innovative thinking found a place in their budget submission. There was no opportunity for public discussion when the budget proposals by the two education ministries were being formulated. There hasn't been a great receptivity on the part of the two education ministries, the political

leadership and the administrative decision-makers regarding the civil society education advocates' pleas for re-thinking the needs for 21st century education. There is rhetoric aplenty about Smart Bangladesh and a smart new generation, but the serious and holistic planning and systematic efforts for achieving results have been lacking.

have put forward an agenda for re-imagining education for the 21st century through their advocacy, such as Education Watch reports. This agenda includes moving towards a greater and genuine decentralisation of education governance; attracting talented people to the teaching profession and keeping them there; a major initiative to widely

Educationists have argued that the various initiatives taken by the two ministries have been fragmented, partial and treating the symptoms of diseases rather than the roots of problems. These initiatives have not been based on a holistic and coordinated sector-wide effort to achieve well-articulated medium- and long-term educational objectives. Cases in point are the introduction of the new curriculum and student assessment without preparing the ground; the sub-sector activities such as the series of primary education development programmes (PEDP5 or the fifth round is supposed to be under consideration now); the decision again to shift Classes 6 to 8 from secondary to primary schools (after several failed attempts since 2010 Education Policy was announced); various largely ineffective and frequently re-formulated teachers' training projects; and token efforts towards building a decentralised, responsive and accountable system of school education.

Academics and researchers

and effectively apply the blended approach (merging tech-based and teacher-supported learning); building partnerships between government and non-state actors; and establishing a permanent education commission to guide and monitor education system changes. These could be the components of an education sector plan and a 10-year megaproject for education. All of these would lay the ground for equitable, quality and inclusive school education for all children, thus building the foundation for an education system fit for a higher middle-income and eventually a developed country. Such a sector plan would demand larger resources and efficient use of the resources.

The annual budget is not the instrument for a major overhaul of the education system. It can, however, reflect and help prepare the ground for a transformative change, if such a change is envisaged by the policymakers. The new budget, as the ones of past years, following a much trodden path, has not helped a move in this direction.

WORLD DAY AGAINST CHILD LABOUR

Ending child labour needs decisive interventions



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FATARAZ ZAHAN

Child labour, a global problem, is a narrower concept of working children. In terms of national and international laws, child labour is unlawful. The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that there are 160 million child labourers worldwide (as of 2020)—63 million girls and 97 million boys—most of whom are engaged in agriculture, followed by service and industrial sectors, as well as in domestic labour. The majority of them are from the Asia-Pacific region. Nevertheless, the number of children engaged in labour worldwide decreased by 85 million between 2000 and 2020, according to ILO.

Bangladesh has also significantly reduced child labour, but there is still work to be done to completely eradicate the practice. This progress has been facilitated by a number of international agreements that set out legal guidelines and frameworks for action, including the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention (C182) and the ILO's Minimum Age Convention (C138). Over the past 20 years, there has been a noticeable improvement in the rate of child labour reduction. The National Child Labour Survey 2022 finds that Bangladesh has 39.96 million children (51.79 percent boys and 48.21 percent girls) aged five

to 17 years. Out of the entire child population, 3.54 million are working children. The report also highlights their involvement in various sectors, including agriculture, manufacturing, construction, wholesale, retail, and transport. Some 60.8 percent of them are employees, and 99 percent of them informally employed. Despite government initiatives, child labour is still a common practice especially in the rural region of Bangladesh.

However, the government has put in place some measures to lessen child labour, like raising the minimum working age and offering children training and education opportunities. The National Child Labour Elimination Policy 2010 was aimed at addressing the deep-rooted issue of child labour by implementing a comprehensive strategy. The policy was a big step in the right direction towards solving the problem. Its main objectives are to enhance the legal system, provide access to education, and end dangerous kinds of child labour. The National Child Labour Elimination Action Plan (NPA) is another initiative that aims to operationalise the policy by providing strategies for intervention and clearly defined targets.

Socioeconomic conditions, poverty, limited access to education, and

deeply ingrained cultural norms have normalised the idea of children contributing to family income through labour. These contextual factors necessitated a targeted and multifaceted approach to address child labour effectively. There have been numerous international organisations, governments, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working towards the goal of ending child labour for

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decades. Most Bangladeshi children have low-income parents who engage in a range of risky occupations. These kids' physical and emotional health are in danger due to the nature of their jobs, and their basic rights to an education and a healthy upbringing are being infringed. It also has an impact on children's physical and emotional well-being as well as their access to education.

Numerous reports, including those from local NGOs and the ILO, claim

that child labour is still common in a number of industries, including manufacturing, household work, and agriculture. The inadequate monitoring and evaluation of the National Child Labour Elimination Policy has drawn criticism. The policy's poor implementation, monitoring and evaluation have been attributed in large part to a lack of resources, a lack of enforcement, and low stakeholder awareness. The strategy received praise for its emphasis on social security and education, but it has not been enough to solve the underlying issues that lead to child labour in Bangladesh. Because of this, the government has been pushed to step up efforts, such as by tightening the enforcement of labour laws, expanding access to social services and education, and collaborating with civil society organisations.

It is important to note that while the government is dedicated to protecting children, only comprehensive action can have a beneficial effect on reducing or eliminating child labour at all societal levels. National action is, therefore, crucial. However, in order to behave in complete accordance with reality, all relevant factors such as the social, political, cultural, and economic conditions must be taken into account. In addition, a strong child sensitivity approach and the use of multiplier measures are required. Beside our social safety net programmes, it is also necessary to formulate new social policies to improve these conditions.

Lastly, poverty and child labour are inextricably linked, and as long as we ignore or do not recognise child labour as a structural reality of the economy, it will be difficult to eliminate child labour from the supply chain.