

Citizens’ safety must come first

Strictly monitor top criminals now out on bail

We are concerned about the rise in crimes allegedly linked to the release of several top criminals from jail following the fall of the Awami League government. Reportedly, on September 20, a 26-year-old mason named Nasir Biswas was stabbed to death by a group of criminals. The victim’s brother alleged that associates of Imamul Hasan Helal, also known as Pichchi Helal, were responsible for the murder—due to past enmity—and filed a case in this connection. Helal was listed in 2001 as one of the top 23 criminals in the country. Then a Chhatra Dal dealer, he was arrested on January 12, 2000, and released on bail on August 16 of this year.

According to the Department of Prisons, Helal is among the 43 top criminals and militants who secured bail in various cases since August 5. After his release, several residents of Mohammadpur have reported that his associates have been intimidating local business owners to assert their control in the area. Other top criminals who have secured bail include Abbas Ali, also known as Killer Abbas of Mirpur; Sheikh Mohammad Aslam, known as Sweden Aslam of Tejgaon; Sanjidul Islam, known as Emon of Hazaribagh; Khandaker Nayeem Ahmed, known as Tipton; and Khorshed Alam, also known as Rasu or Freedom Rasu. Some of them were also on the home ministry’s 2001 list of top criminals and have been accused in numerous cases, including for murder and attempted murder.

Jail is supposed to be a place to not just punish convicts, but to also reform their criminal tendencies so that they are fit for social reintegration when the time comes. But exploiting our poor prison system, notorious criminals, far from going down that path, often control criminal activities from within the jail. We are now getting a sense of what they can do if released on bail, unreformed. Police sources have already reported that another top criminal, Ibrahim Khalil, alias Killer Ibrahim, who had been hiding abroad, returned home after mid-August and resumed his activities. A leader of Bhashantek Slum stated that Ibrahim’s associates have already begun extortion, threatening arson and vandalism.

Unfortunately, the police still seem too preoccupied with their internal issues caused after the regime change to closely monitor these top criminals and ensure that they don’t break any laws again. As a result, the safety of ordinary citizens is being compromised. This cannot be allowed to happen. The government must instruct all security forces to closely monitor and prevent any criminal activities by those released on bail. And those found to be breaking bail conditions must be held accountable.

High time to save our rivers

BELA’s finding on Khulna’s dying rivers serves a warning

It is disheartening that our rivers continue to face neglect despite its many consequences for the nation. This apathy is once again reflected in the findings of the Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association (BELA) that more than a fourth of rivers (37 out of 138) in the Khulna division are in dire straits due to encroachment, unplanned infrastructural development, siltation, industrial pollution, and the construction of man-made barriers. BELA also noted that 20 of these rivers are no longer flowing, while one—Hamkura—is on the brink of extinction.

It is not just in Khulna, but all across the country, that hundreds of rivers are dying or have lost their navigability because of greed as well as a lack of foresight by government bodies as reflected in the arbitrary construction of dams, embankments, sluice gates, and polders. A report by *Prothom Alo* highlighted another BELA finding about 35 rivers in the Sylhet division, which too are in distress. Unfortunately, there is no reliable official data on rivers facing such conditions, with figures from different government bodies contradicting each other. For example, as per the Water Development Board, Sylhet has only 36 rivers, but the National River Conservation Commission (NRCC) puts the number at 168. The commission’s 2023 publication on the number of rivers in Bangladesh is also riddled with mistakes.

Until now, no government in Bangladesh has shown a genuine interest in freeing rivers from the grip of encroachers, polluters, illegal sand miners, etc. Neither were there any significant efforts to ensure coordination among the different agencies involved, or to conduct proper feasibility studies before building infrastructure that may disrupt river flow. However, since being appointed, the interim government’s adviser for environment and water resources has issued several important directives. These include preparing a comprehensive list of rivers within two months and requiring action plans from divisional commissioners to evict 66,000 identified encroachers. She also expressed the government’s intent to free at least one river in each division from encroachment and pollution.

Given how entrenched and widespread river encroachment has been, saving our rivers will be a massive and potentially disruptive task, requiring firm and even unpopular measures that may impact businesses and livelihoods. But that is doable for a non-political interim government if there is genuine intent. It is also vital that the NRCC is empowered to hold future governments accountable for any failure to protect our rivers. Public awareness campaigns are also essential to remind people of the importance of saving rivers.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY



Demise of Wangari Maathai

On this day, Kenyan politician and environmental activist Wangari Maathai, the first Black African woman to win a Nobel Prize, died at age 71 in 2011.

‘Administered prices don’t work’

Dr Hossain Zillur Rahman, executive chairman of Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC) and former adviser to the caretaker government, speaks with Tamanna Khan of The Daily Star about effective and ineffective government interventions to rein in high prices of essentials.

Recently, we have seen that the interim government tried to fix the prices of chicken and eggs to no avail. Previous governments also made similar efforts without success. Why does this measure fail?

If you respond to consumer demands through these administered prices—which is a populist measure to try to address consumers’ call for relief—it usually doesn’t work. Decision-makers, meaning the government, have to have an updated understanding of the realities of the supply chain, not a theoretical understanding. They need to understand whether there are blocks somewhere and if those blocks can be overcome. For example, are there groups who are in a way exerting pressure on the market prices?

We often hear that market syndicates are responsible for artificially raising prices. Who are these syndicates?

Syndicate has been a widely used term for many years now. The syndicate is a reality; it is a unified group of market players who can control the supply chain and also influence the policymakers in that space. That was what we saw during the ousted regime.

When the commerce minister of the Hasina government said he couldn’t do much, he was basically saying that he was part of the syndicate, so he couldn’t do much.

Now the situation is different. However, we need to understand how far the syndicate is still influencing the supply chain. They are unlikely to disappear anytime soon. Although the current policymakers are not necessarily aligned with them, they have to be effective in terms of understanding and influencing the supply chain management if they want to act on certain variables that can affect the supply chain.

Being non-political doesn’t automatically make the government effective in this matter. They need to understand if the influence is in the policy process or if it is just bureaucratic. Are the policymakers on top of the bureaucrats? Do they have a field understanding? I haven’t seen much effort by the incumbent government to go out and understand the field realities of supply chain management.

What should the government do then?

They have to find the answers themselves. I am also not fully aware of the supply chain realities right now. But trying to control the market with a law-and-order mentality doesn’t work.

There can be other measures. For example, when people hold supplies in storage, they rely on bank credit for these sorts of businesses. The Bangladesh Bank has the option to play with the terms of these bank credits. Say, I’m a supplier and I’ve taken Tk 1 crore bank loan, and I’m holding the supplies in the storage and not releasing it in the market, and my loan will mature in 90 days. Here,

policymakers can change the loan maturity tenure to 30 days. Then I have no option but to sell the goods. This sort of interventions require a good understanding of the supply chain processes and the current realities. Is the price higher because there is an actual lack of supply or is it because the supply is being held somewhere and not released?

Also, if producers say that they need to charge a higher price because of the high cost of production, then the question should be how the cost of production can be reduced.

Are there opportunities to bring down this cost of production that will automatically have an impact on the price? Are there opportunities to improve supply chain management? Are there incentives to be provided?

Besides, the government can always play the role of becoming a market player itself through open market sales (OMS) and other similar tools. They can expand the OMS policy in a bigger way, which will put pressure on the suppliers,



Dr Hossain Zillur Rahman

who are withholding supplies.

Of course, it depends on whether the government has the fiscal capacity to do that.

Another way to approach this is by looking at the types of incentives that can be given to growers, seed producers, traders, exporters, or importers of say animal feed or various types of agricultural inputs. They can have a look at the whole incentive system and creatively try to incentivise those who may improve the supply chain, which would result in more rational prices.

So, there are three areas the government should look at: i) the incentive for growers, importers, etc and looking at how production can be boosted; ii) the governance of the supply chain, where financial instruments like loan maturity can be used as control tools; and iii)

governance issues, for example barriers created by *chandabaji* (extortion). The known *chandabaj* (extortionists) may not be around now, but are there new *chandabaj* on the prowl? Can we contain them in a way?

Some of these syndicates or those who are responsible for high prices often come up with a counter-argument that these are market processes. They keep the prices high and manage the processes for their own interest. But the government should manage the market process in the interest of general people. And it has the instruments needed to do so. It just cannot rely on bureaucratic structures, but also go out in the field, as I mentioned before.

Is there a way to create a market monitoring mechanism?

Again, we are very fond of bureaucratic solutions. If the market monitoring process means another committee to be appointed, I’m sceptical of that. Monitoring is a dynamic activity and several monitoring processes already

Market monitoring requires updated, usable data, which is available to multiple users in the policy process. Besides, civil society bodies like the Consumers Association of Bangladesh can also be activated to play a bigger role. This government has an opportunity to do something

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new. They can go out to the field and activate all this more dynamically.

Do higher prices trickle down to the producers? And who gets the biggest share of the pie?

That is a supply chain reality. For example, what kind of value addition is happening? If you look at rice prices, typically it should come down after harvest. For some years, this has not been happening. Rice millers are a very important group in this whole process. In 2008, as then commerce adviser, I went out to Naogaon to get a firsthand impression on this because Naogaon is the miller capital of Bangladesh. Millers make big investments and they are an important player. But are they a syndicate? What is their capacity to withhold or not withhold a product from the market? In the case of rice supply, government procurement drives typically have been very political. The actual farmers have not benefited from this drive—middlemen have.

Does it trickle down? In many cases, it doesn’t. But we have to look at it empirically. We cannot assume that it does not. The consuming middle class opinion-makers of Dhaka tend to think of the middlemen as villains in every case. However, we conducted a study in 2006 from the PPRC on the marketing process. We found that the *faria*—those who go out and collect the produce from the growers or primary markets to shift to the next market level—are also part of the extreme-poor group. They often don’t have access to good finance. Agricultural trade is an extremely risky business, especially for those who put money there.

So, while some middlemen are villains, we cannot tag everyone in that category. Also, without middlemen, the produce will not travel from the field to your table; there are multiple layers and chains. And there is a process; people make profits at different levels of this process.

The conundrum of govt job age limit



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The debate on raising the age limit for government job recruitment in Bangladesh seems never-ending. After numerous petitions and movements by jobseekers, the Ministry of Public Administration has finally submitted a proposal to raise the entry age to 35 years and the retirement age to 65 years. If this proposal is approved, the long-cherished dream of many to work for the government might come true.

However, for an economy as reliant on human capital as Bangladesh, the question remains: how justified is this decision? While some may rejoice at the extended age, others argue it could worsen the job market.

For decades, the youth has viewed government jobs as the ultimate career destination, either for the job security they offer, the fringe benefits, or the opportunity to work within the system to contribute to national development.

The demand for government jobs often overshadows other career paths. As a result, university students become engrossed in preparing for

government job exams in their final years of study. It is not uncommon to see students from various disciplines abandoning their coursework in pursuit of success in competitive exams. In this context, the decision to raise the age limit could be seen as a positive change, as it may provide these students with enough time to both complete their education and develop additional skills, knowing they have more time to prepare for government jobs.

For students from rural or underprivileged areas, who often face delays in completing their higher studies due to systemic shortcomings, this policy could be a fair and equitable solution. The extended age limit might give them a chance to compete on a more level playing field, allowing their hard work to finally bear fruit in the form of a secure government job.

However, this move overlooks the deeper structural issues that plague the job market in Bangladesh. The imbalance between the supply and demand for government jobs has always been significant, as the number

of positions in public service remains limited. Increasing the age limit does not address this fundamental mismatch. With the extended age limit, more people will apply for government jobs, leading to a surge in applications each year. Many may choose not to pursue private sector employment in hopes of securing a government position before they turn 35. Thus, increasing the number of older applicants could overwhelm the system, further crowding out younger graduates who are just entering the workforce. This could lead to a vicious cycle, where young graduates are continually added to the unemployment list, lacking the preparation needed to compete with their older counterparts.

Besides, the question remains as to whether those who ultimately do not secure a government job by the age of 35 will be able to transition into the private sector. Even if they manage to do so, how will they fare in terms of skills and competitiveness compared to their contemporaries who have already been active in the job market?

Bangladesh is already grappling with a serious youth unemployment crisis. Many university graduates are unable to find jobs, either due to a lack of skills or a shortage of opportunities. Raising the age limit for government job recruitment may not solve this underlying issue. The real problem lies in the scarcity of job creation, the mismatch between available skills and the market

demand, and an unhealthy reliance on government jobs as the primary avenue for secure employment.

If the policy encourages more individuals to wait for government job openings rather than seeking alternative employment, the private sector, which is crucial for national economic growth, may struggle to attract talent. This stagnation could discourage entrepreneurship and innovation, both of which are vital for driving the economy forward.

To foster sustainable economic growth and alleviate youth unemployment, Bangladesh must implement a comprehensive strategy that prioritises education reform, skill development, and job creation. Reforms must prioritise job creation in industries with high growth potential, such as information technology, manufacturing and agriculture. Encouraging entrepreneurship, reducing bureaucratic obstacles, and fostering a more business-friendly environment can help absorb the growing number of jobseekers. Diversifying employment opportunities is also essential for a sustainable economic future. Furthermore, targeted investments in skill development programmes can bridge the gap between education and employment. By providing access to vocational training and on-the-job learning, Bangladesh can equip its youth with the practical skills required to succeed in various sectors.