

Essentials getting further out of reach

Concerted actions crucial to control surging prices

Ordinary people seem to be caught in an unrelenting cycle of rising prices for essential goods. Various reports have recently highlighted the continued rise in the prices of essentials, especially food, causing immense hardship for low- and fixed-income households but also shocks for many who expected a change. Evidently, events of the past few months—the mass uprising and political changeover in July-August, followed by unprecedented rainfall and flash floods in August-September—have had significant impacts on the production and supply of most food staples. However, there are indications of artificial price inflation as well.

Reportedly, vegetable prices have risen by Tk 20-40 per kg, while broiler chicken now costs Tk 20 more. The price of a dozen brown eggs has surged by Tk 15, with a total increase of Tk 20-25 per dozen in just three weeks (as of October 5). Prices of green chilies have skyrocketed by Tk 60 in just one week. Soybean oil prices have gone up by Tk 5-10, and palm oil by Tk 15. While extreme weather and global factors have undoubtedly affected production and supply chains, they don't fully explain the scale of these price hikes.

Reports also suggest the involvement of market syndication. Large corporate entities are allegedly controlling the market as always, manipulating the prices of essentials—a familiar situation from the tenure of the previous government which did little to break the syndicates. But their continued operation now has prompted many to ask: what is the current administration doing about it?

Since taking office on August 8, the interim government has initiated several key reform initiatives across different sectors. However, there have been no significant measures aimed at controlling the kitchen market and providing some relief to struggling citizens. While steps such as making onions and potatoes duty-free did help lower their prices, and attempts were made to fix the prices of eggs and chicken, these efforts have largely been ineffective.

On Monday, Youth and Sports Adviser Asif Mahmud announced the imminent formation of a task force to monitor markets and rein in the soaring prices of essentials. While this is a welcome step, much more needs to be done. With people's purchasing power remaining generally stagnant, any further increase or instability in prices will only deepen the burden on already vulnerable households.

The interim government, therefore, must prioritise a comprehensive plan to address the price issue. This may include temporary initiatives such as increasing the imports of essential items and making more items duty-free to increase their supply, and also reducing fuel prices so that the transportation cost drops. But more importantly, the administration must make it a priority to free the market of the influence of syndicates and extortion so that there is zero scope for manipulating the prices.

DU must reclaim its unutilised land

Addressing housing issues, implementing masterplan urgent

At a time when Dhaka University students are facing a severe accommodation crisis—with many forced to share beds and reading tables or live in unhygienic conditions in the overcrowded dormitories—it is disconcerting to see many acres of university land remaining unutilised or lost. Despite calls to take action in this regard, there has been little effort to reclaim or repurpose these areas for student housing or educational facilities. Reportedly, the DU began its journey with 650 acres of land. Of them, only 274 acres have been effectively utilised. Alarmingly, over 12 acres have been lost due to the negligence of the university's estate office, while some 51.99 acres allotted by the government remain unused due to a lack of funding. This is quite unfortunate.

Of late, the land issues have been exacerbated by the fact that the university has yet to implement the masterplan drawn up in 2021, which could bring much-needed infrastructural improvements to the campus. This masterplan envisions 17 new academic buildings, 24 residential halls for students, 34 residential buildings for faculty and staff, and a modern library. It also involves renovating existing structures, constructing a multi-storey facility at the Teacher Student Centre (TSC), installing solar power, creating dedicated walking and cycling lanes, and building an underground road from Shahbagh to Dhaka Medical College Hospital and Chankharpul. The question is: how can the DU implement this ambitious plan if it cannot even recover its land?

It is understandable that reclaiming lost land during the previous regime may have been fraught with political challenges. However, with a non-political, interim government now in charge, these hurdles should be less formidable for the new DU administration. They must capitalise on this window to resolve these longstanding issues, and devise a strategic plan to reclaim lost land and ensure its use benefits both students and the broader university community. Addressing the students' accommodation crisis must be a top priority, given the appalling living conditions many face. Most critically, the university should begin implementing the masterplan without further delay.

By reclaiming and properly utilising all of its land, the DU can not only alleviate its housing and educational issues but also create a more supportive environment for students going forward. The future of Dhaka University depends on it.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Kashmir earthquake of 2005

Killing at least 79,000 people, an earthquake struck the Pakistan-administered portion of the Kashmir region and the North-West Frontier Province of Pakistan on this day.

EDITORIAL

Aynaghar should be a site of remembrance



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Completing a tour at the The ESMA Museum and Site of Memory, located on the grounds of what was once the officers' quarters of the Navy School of Mechanics (ESMA), in the city of Buenos Aires, Argentina, takes around 90 minutes. The museum, which was a former clandestine centre of detention, torture, and extermination, features 17 rooms hosting traditional and contemporary museographic exhibits centred around survivor testimonies, historical documents from the National Commission on the Disappearance of People, the Trial of the Military Junta, declassified state documents, among other archives.

During the military dictatorship in Argentina from 1976 to 1983, the officers' quarters at ESMA became a key site for suppressing the opposition as part of a national strategy. Thousands of people, both armed and peaceful, were abducted in Buenos Aires, brought to ESMA, and subjected to interrogation, torture, and often death. Some 5,000 of the approximately 30,000 people who disappeared at the hands of the military junta during those years passed through ESMA, making it the largest torture centre of that era.

After the crimes committed on the site became known, and after years of uncertainty about its future, the recovery process to transform the ESMA premises into a Space for Memory and for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights began in 2004. On May 19, 2015, after years of debates and consensus reaching, the ESMA Museum and Site of Memory was inaugurated. In September 2023, UNESCO recognised it as a World Heritage Site, a site of "outstanding universal value" that belongs to the common heritage of humanity.

According to UNESCO, the building has been protected as judicial evidence since 1998 owing to the crimes against humanity committed there during its operations as a clandestine detention and extermination centre. From then on, any kind of modification was prohibited. In the

present day, all efforts to conserve and restore the building are guided by scientific studies, aimed at preserving it both as a piece of legal evidence and as a valuable historical record. That's why all kinds of markings and inscriptions, denoting the stay of the detained-disappeared at the place, are preserved. These include different types of inscriptions on the walls, as well as on both the iron and wooden structures in the building. There are markings that were made with unidentified sharp objects, and others with ink or graphite: names, phone numbers, initials, inscriptions of party affiliations, dates, drawings.

That is why it is very important to preserve the secret detention centres in Bangladesh, popularly known as "Aynaghar," used for enforced disappearances during the Hasina regime due to its huge historical, heritage, and judicial value as evidence in carrying out crimes against humanity. In Argentina, evidence dating back more than 40 years remains intact, but in Bangladesh, within two months of the fall of the Hasina regime, many kinds of evidence of enforced disappearances have been destroyed.

The Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances, which was formed to investigate cases of enforced disappearances during the past Awami League government, has found evidence of destroyed materials at the secret detention centre run by the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI). Messages, names, phone numbers, and addresses written on the walls of the detention centre by the victims were erased by painting over the walls. Not only that, Law Enforcement Agencies (LEA) want to destroy the secret prisons to protect their image on an international level.

Furthermore, according to a report by the daily *Samakal*, work is underway to demolish the cells inside the DGFI-run detention centre and change the interior of the one-story building.

But keeping Bangladesh's secret detention centres intact, like

Argentina's, is important for both legal and historical reasons. Allowing the demolition or alteration of Aynaghar in the name of protecting the international image of LEAs would on the one hand destroy important evidence for the trial and on the other hand create an opportunity to deny historical truth in the future.

According to the Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC), at least 623 people were victims of enforced disappearance in the country from 2009 to 2022. Of those, 84 bodies were recovered, 383 were either returned alive or shown arrested later. Still missing are 153 people, and there is no information about three others.

Within two days of Hasina's government being overthrown in a mass uprising, several of the missing persons have returned from the secret detention centres, but many are still missing; many others do not know



FILE ILLUSTRATION: BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY

what happened to their relatives. The aforementioned commission had received nearly 400 complaints of forced disappearances within two weeks of starting their work. There are also many questions about who were involved in the disappearance. Even in the cases where people have returned alive, it is not clear who detained them and where.

The LEAs that were involved in enforced disappearances during the Hasina regime are still the same with no fundamental changes. The LEAs have not acknowledged the responsibility, nor revealed who were involved in the enforced disappearances. Rather, they seem to be actively destroying the evidence of enforced disappearances.

Not only as legal evidence, but to ensure that the forced disappearances

passed through Villa Grimaldi, and it is known that 240 of them were killed or disappeared.

Answers to many questions related to disappearances in Bangladesh are still unknown, including who were involved in the enforced disappearance of how many people, what happened to the persons who are still missing, who were the masterminds of the enforced disappearance, what were the command structures and motivations, etc. In order to know the answers to these questions, bring the perpetrators under justice, and prevent the recurrence of enforced disappearances in future, it is utmost important to preserve all types of evidence related to enforced disappearance. I hope the interim government will take appropriate steps in this regard before it is too late.

Can Bangladesh be the next 'breakout nation'?

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TANVIR GHANI

In his 2012 classic, *Breakout Nations: In Pursuit of the Next Economic Miracles*, Ruchir Sharma outlined his process of forecasting which nations would thrive and which would falter in a world reshaped by slower growth. Of 200 emerging economies globally only 56 nations have ever reached "developed" status. Why do some emerging nations successfully "breakout"? And why do others stay *developing* for decades? Sharma found 10 relevant factors across political, economic, and financial verticals. And based on this, a positive era in Bangladesh might be materialising.

Eight weeks into the Prof Yunus-led 17-person interim government, Bangladesh is on the right track. The appointments have been strong and inclusive: four women, two minorities, two students, one Islamic scholar—all respected, and spearheaded by a respected Nobel laureate. These choices have brought instant credibility to the transitional government, both at home and abroad.

The previous regime died in broadband darkness, with the internet now revived. Tech-savvy Gen Z, angered over the toxic political climate and issues of inequality are finally represented. People are back to work. Law and order has been restored (even though there is some work left),

and the nation has not fallen prey to religious fundamentalism with retributive violence contained. The first steps with our second liberation for democracy are cautiously progressing.

The interim government's first priorities make sense: restoration of security, full investigation of all crimes, reestablishment of the rule of law, structural reforms, and a smooth transition to democratic representation. The good news is our economy is resilient and civil society robust. Bangladesh has become the

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second largest garment exporter in the world, after China. These factories employ more than four million workers, many of them young women, often the first in their families to have a salaried job. Working age demographics are incredibly strong. Per capita income has tripled in the last decade with over 25 million people lifted out of poverty in the past 20 years.

However, Bangladesh was damaged under the growing weight of cronyism;

the capital markets and banking system are weak, the wealthiest 10 percent of the population control 41 percent of the nation's income, while the bottom 10 percent just 1.3 percent. Two-fifths of our young people lack regular employment. Since 2020, 10 percent inflation has undermined stability with the country's foreign reserves falling. While unnerving, remedies are available, particularly with Dr Ahsan H Mansur, leading the charge as Bangladesh Bank Governor and Dr Salehuddin Ahmed as adviser for finance and planning to the interim government. Together, they are Bangladesh's economic dreamteam.

So, what is one of the top economic priorities for the country? Clearly, it is foreign investments. How do you achieve success in attracting FDI? First, by recognising the issue and second by understanding how the pillars of investments work. Political, economic, and financial markets are not discreet verticals. The interim government needs to know how international investors think. Money goes to the least troubled areas. And, as mundane and oversimplified these terms may sound, transparency and rule of law are the foundations of a virtuous FDI cycle. An investor who understands the risk and reward of their investment will decide for himself which risk is worth taking. Legal protection of that capital is a must and trusting the courts to administer the rules around that investment is compulsory. Every market, and Bangladesh is no different, competes for global capital. No policymaker can forget that. No country lives in a financial market vacuum with a war

chest of investment dollars pointed in their direction. Life just doesn't work like that.

Sharma noted, "There is a rough sweet spot for investment in emerging markets. Looking at my list of the 56 successful postwar economies in which growth exceeded six percent for decades, on average these countries were investing about 25 percent of GDP during the boom years."

The interim government must recognise, as I am sure Prof Yunus does, that unlike the political and economic verticals which are inwardly focused, the financial market vertical is external facing. Investor support from foreign institutions, sovereign wealth funds, and private sector FDI are critical. Capital markets, debt and equity are crucial elements of finance. If capital markets don't work, most likely the rest of the economy is not working. A dedicated person liaising with foreign investors is a crucial resource. This is my core message.

For global investors, Bangladesh is an easier country to navigate compared to others in the region: one language, mostly one ethnicity, and high levels of communal harmony (there have been reports of issues and those must be dealt with lawfully) makes it a good destination for FDI. What the country and this new administration must do is understand what drives investment decisions and put a framework in place to reflect that understanding. It is not rocket science, but simple thoughtfulness about investment decision mindset. If done properly, Bangladesh can be and will be another 'breakout nation'—hopefully the 57th economy in Sharma's next book update.