

## The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

### Prioritise gas supply to fertiliser plants

#### Doubling gas price risks endangering food security

It is difficult to understand how long the current practice of leaving fertiliser plants starved of gas can continue. The irony of this practice is that it either harms the domestic farming sector or increases the country's dependence on imported fertiliser. If we want to keep local fertiliser factories running and produce essential agricultural inputs ourselves, these plants will need more gas (in the form of LNG) sourced from abroad. If not, the country will be forced to import fertiliser from foreign sources, and any supply chain disruption will also mean importing more food from abroad.

There is no doubt that Bangladesh is facing gas shortages because of its failure to give sufficient priority to the exploration of new wells and extraction. Importing LNG, originally meant to be a short-term measure to manage emergency shortages, has instead persisted and increased dramatically over time, as most of our power plants also depend on natural gas.

Volatility in the international energy market, owing to heightened geopolitical tensions and instability, indicates that gas prices are unlikely to come down soon. A 2022 study by the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) showed that imported LNG was 24 times more expensive than locally produced gas. Yet, over the past three years, no significant steps have been taken by the authorities to accelerate exploration activity or add newly discovered gas to the supply grid. According to a *Bonik Barta* report, only 18 wells were dug out of the planned 50; due to a lack of progress in laying pipelines, about 120 million cubic feet (mcf) of extractable gas could not be supplied to the national grid.

Activists have long alleged that cronies of the previous regime lobbied successfully to push the country towards greater dependence on LNG imports. So, one would have thought that, following the fall of that regime in August 2024, the state policy would shift towards reducing costly LNG dependence and increasing domestic gas production. Unfortunately, the present government seems inclined to continue with the old arrangements.

Even more worrying is the move to raise gas prices for fertiliser plants. Following a request from Petrobangla, the Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission (BERC)—the energy market regulator—has, pending a final decision after public consultation, recommended raising the gas price from Tk 16 to Tk 30 per cubic metre. We cannot but agree with Consumers Association of Bangladesh (CAB) adviser M Shamsul Alam that this price hike will increase farming costs and undermine food security.

It is worth noting here that while the textile sector has long enjoyed priority in receiving uninterrupted gas supply, the farming sector has become increasingly dependent on imported fertiliser due to shortages of gas for domestic fertiliser plants. This is not a sustainable model, and these policies must be reviewed and adjusted with prudence.

### Appoint a full-time DSCC administrator

#### Govt must fill all vacant posts to ensure smooth service delivery

It is quite frustrating that Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC) has been operating without a full-time administrator for over a year, with 11 other key positions also remaining vacant. This leadership vacuum has severely disrupted service delivery, increasing the sufferings of the residents. At present, Md Shahjahan Mia, an additional secretary at the Local Government Division, is serving as DSCC's administrator, while also holding the position of Managing Director of Dhaka WASA as an additional duty. This dual burden on one person has understandably compromised the functioning of both institutions.

In the absence of a permanent administrator and other key personnel at DSCC, essential services such as road repairs, mosquito control, waste management, safeguarding assets, and providing birth certificates and other documents are all progressing at a sluggish pace. With no executive officers appointed in the corporation's five out of 10 zones, service delivery there has nearly collapsed, forcing local residents to travel to the central office even for minor issues. Some residents have expressed frustration that they are not receiving basic municipal services despite paying regular taxes. They further complained that when they visit ward offices, designated officials are often absent, and important paperwork remains stalled for months. Moreover, the current administrator is also unable to regularly attend office at Nagar Bhaban, visiting only occasionally to sign files. Is this how a city corporation is supposed to operate?

Furthermore, efforts to boost revenue have stalled due to the absence of a Chief Revenue Officer, while the lack of a Property Officer has allowed re-encroachment of previously recovered lands. The absence of a Chief Urban Planner has led to uncoordinated development, posing long-term risks to the city's infrastructure. At the same time, financial transparency and accountability remain a question mark due to the vacancies of accountant and auditor positions. This is unacceptable.

After August 5, 2024, the activities of Dhaka's two city corporations came to a standstill. While Dhaka North City Corporation managed to handle the situation relatively better after the appointment of a permanent administrator, the DSCC continues to lag far behind. Moreover, the disruption created earlier this year, when BNP leader Ishraque Hossain led over a month-long siege of Nagar Bhaban demanding his reinstatement as mayor, further intensified the volatility in DSCC. We, therefore, urge the government to take immediate steps to resolve these issues. It must fill all key positions of the corporation without delay to ensure uninterrupted service delivery. More than one crore people reside in the DSCC jurisdictions, so the government must take urgent measures to alleviate their sufferings.

### THIS DAY IN HISTORY

#### Che Guevara captured and executed



On this day in 1967, Che Guevara, a key communist figure in the Cuban Revolution and a South American guerrilla leader, was captured and later shot to death by the Bolivian army.

# The harsh truth behind Bangladesh's poverty reversal



Dr Selim Raihan is professor in the Department of Economics at Dhaka University, and executive director at the South Asian Network on Economic Modeling (SANEM). He can be reached at selim.raihan@gmail.com.

SELIM RAIHAN

The recent finding from the Power and Participation Research Centre's (PPRC) survey—that over one in four people in Bangladesh now live in poverty, a sharp increase from the rate reported by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) in 2022—should serve as a sobering alarm bell. This represents a shift in narrative and challenges us to rethink our understanding of the country's development success story. For years, Bangladesh was considered a "poster boy" for economic growth, a country steadily moving up the ladder of advancement. But this growth apparently was on unstable footing, as is now being revealed by a confluence of crises. The question we must confront is not simply why poverty reversal (when decreasing poverty levels start to rise) is happening, but why the earlier gains proved so vulnerable in the first place.

To understand the current predicament, we have to look back at the data that shaped our previous optimism. The official BBS figures for 2022, which showed a much lower poverty rate, standing at 18.7 percent, were always somewhat puzzling. That survey was conducted in 2021, a period when the economic scars of the Covid-19 pandemic were still raw and the recovery was far from complete. That is, the point in time when the data were collected mattered. Other research organisations, like South Asian Network on Economic Modeling (SANEM), BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD), and PPRC also conducted surveys during 2020-2021, but found a sharp rise in poverty. This discrepancy means that the official snapshot of life in 2021 may have grossly underestimated the depth of economic distress households were living through. This implies that the foundation of our poverty reduction narrative was perhaps weaker than we assumed, making the recent reversal less of a sudden shock and more of a delayed acknowledgment of underlying weaknesses.

At the core of the issue is the nature of our structural transformation and the pattern of economic growth. For a long time, we have been experiencing "jobless growth." The economy was expanding, but this expansion did not translate into sufficient, high-quality employment opportunities. The connection between a rising GDP

and falling poverty was also weak, a phenomenon that economists call low elasticity of poverty reduction. Put simply, the growth was not inclusive. This means that the benefits of growth were concentrated, leading to rising inequality—a condition that global experience consistently shows countries with high inequality rarely achieve success in reducing poverty.

This exclusion is starkly visible in our most dynamic sector: ready-made garments. Workers in this multi-billion-dollar export industry are often paid a minimum wage (Tk

12,500 or \$113 per month) that falls below the poverty line income of \$4.20 per day or \$126 per month for lower-middle income countries like Bangladesh. They are the engine of our growth, yet they're not reaping their fair share of that growth. They struggle to maintain a basic standard of living, revealing a critical failure. Most private investments have not led to dignified, well-paying jobs; rather, it has deepened a cycle of low wages and high vulnerability.



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

From 2022 to 2025, the economy suffered from lingering impacts of Covid, global supply shocks, and prolonged inflation, reflecting a

crisis is a constant threat to millions.

The July 2024 uprising and the subsequent formation of interim government have brought a mix of cautious optimism and deep-seated anxiety. We are seeing improvements in some economic indicators, like an increase in remittances and exports. However, we must be cautious in interpreting these macro-level improvements. We can draw a similar hypothesis of a macro-micro mismatch as we observed during the pandemic. When informal channels for remittances are blocked due to political unrest or anti-corruption drives, more money may flow through

will to truly fix these broken systems. The youth's anxiety is a direct reflection of this profound institutional distrust. The story of poverty reversal in Bangladesh is a complex one, but it has one simple moral. Growth that leaves people behind is fundamentally fragile; stability that breeds injustice is ultimately wobbly, and data that does not reflect reality is ultimately unsustainable. The PPRC numbers are a timely reminder that true development is measured not by the wealth of a few, but by the resilience and wellbeing of many. Without changing our basics, we can not alleviate poverty in Bangladesh.

## When governance fails, people pay the price



Wasim Bin Habib is planning editor at The Daily Star.

WASIM BIN HABIB

Two headlines printed on the same page of Sunday's edition of *The Daily Star* left me cold. One read, "390 girls raped in first eight months this year," and the other, "417 killed, 682 hurt in road crashes in Sept." At first glance, they seem unrelated—one tied to crime and justice, the other to transport and safety. Yet, together, they reveal an unsettling pattern of governance that too often fails to protect citizens' most basic rights, which include safety and dignity.

Month after month, similar figures emerge, followed by assurances that things will change. Yet, the headlines barely differ. Whether it's the growing violence against women or the unending bloodshed on our roads, both expose deep flaws in how we govern, enforce, and care.

Take the first report of 390 girls being raped in just eight months. This is not new. Year after year, newsrooms are flooded with reports of rape, assault, and harassment. Behind every statistic lies a story of pain, trauma, and shattered trust. We have special tribunals and legal frameworks, such as the Women and Children

Repression Prevention Act, but justice often remains illusive where it matters most. Survivors face humiliation, stigma, and indifference. Justice is often delayed and therefore denied.

The justice machinery itself is weak. Law enforcement is undertrained, under-resourced, and at times, complicit. Cases drag on for years as investigations stall and witnesses are intimidated. Conviction rates are abysmally low. According to a recent report by this daily, between January and August this year, the conviction rate for crimes against children was only 0.52 percent, with a punishment rate of 0.30 percent. For crimes against women, the conviction rate stood at 2.61 percent and the punishment rate at 1.44 percent. In such a system where accountability is rare, perpetrators are emboldened by impunity.

The state's response to road safety mirrors this neglect. The second report on road crashes tells a story we have heard countless times. Despite repeated pledges by successive governments for safer roads, new laws, and awareness drives, our roads remain among the deadliest in the world,

plagued by the same institutional weaknesses and lack of accountability.

Behind each crash lies a web of preventable failures. Unfit vehicles continue to operate by paying bribes. Untrained drivers, some with fake or no licences, roam freely. Reckless driving and violations of traffic rules persist unchecked. Oversight agencies lack coordination and resources. Meanwhile, transport owners' associations—led by politically powerful figures who shift with each change of government—hold the system hostage, ensuring accountability rarely reaches those who profit from this chaos.

The Road Safety Movement 2018 briefly forced the nation to confront this disorder. It prompted the government to enact a new Road Transport Act and sparked widespread awareness and hope. However, years later, the same tragedies unfold daily on our streets. The law exists, but implementation remains weak and selective. The result is a culture of impunity where lives are lost, and lessons remain unlearned.

Both these crises, the rise in violence against women and the continuing road carnage, stem from the same root: the failure to ensure accountability and uphold the rule of law. We have laws, policies, and plans, but they are rarely enforced with sincerity or sustained commitment. Institutions act reactively, not preventively. Once public outrage subsides, inertia takes over.

Good governance is not an abstract concept, nor is it measured by the

number of laws passed or committees formed. It is about systems that serve people. It is measured by outcomes—by whether the state upholds the rule of law, whether citizens feel safe, whether institutions respond effectively, and whether accountability is real. In both road safety and violence against women, our governance fails this test. These issues must be part of the reform agenda that the interim government is now pursuing across sectors.

The absence of accountability has normalised apathy. When someone dies in a reckless driving incident or a woman becomes a victim of violence, society's response follows a predictable cycle: shock, outrage, and silence. Committees are formed, statements issued, and then everything fades—until the next tragedy.

Bangladesh's remarkable progress, from economic growth to infrastructure, rings hollow when citizens live in fear or lose their lives on unsafe roads. True progress is not about how fast we build, but how well we protect. To change course, we must treat these crises as reflections of how our institutions serve us. Road safety cannot depend on occasional drives, nor can violence against women be tackled by laws alone. Both demand sustained enforcement, empathy, and political courage.

Until that happens, the headlines will keep returning as grim reminders, month after month, that when governance fails, it is ordinary people who pay the price, with their lives, their safety, and their dignity.