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Ripple effects of fuel squeeze

Clumsy execution of fuel rationing causing crises

Every year, as Eid-ul-Fitr approaches, millions of people leave the congested capital of Dhaka for their ancestral homes. Even in normal times, the annual exodus is a logistical nightmare. This year, however, the journey faces an additional obstacle: a severe fuel shortage that has left buses hesitant to leave the terminals.

The origins of the squeeze lie far beyond Bangladesh's borders, of course. The US-Israeli attacks on Iran and Tehran's subsequent retaliation have sent tremors through global energy markets, delaying the arrival of crucial fuel shipments at the port of Chattogram. Faced with a genuine supply shortfall, the new government responded with rigid fuel rationing: motorcycles are now limited to two litres a day, private cars to ten. More importantly, long-haul buses have seen their allocations drastically reduced, according to a report in *Samakal*.

Even the announcement of strict quotas set off a rush at filling stations. The government initially cut octane and petrol supplies to filling stations by 25 percent before easing the restriction to 15 percent in an attempt to stabilise the market. The adjustment eased the immediate crisis slightly. The constraint is not only the volume of fuel available but also the time required to obtain it. Drivers who once spent ten minutes filling their tanks now wait in queues for up to three hours. Fuel rationing has begun to weigh on the country's supply chains. In the northern agricultural hub of Bogura, the cost of transporting 10 to 12 tonnes of vegetables to Chattogram has jumped from Tk 25,000 to Tk 35,000 in a matter of weeks, according to *Prothom Alo*. Fares for shipments to Dhaka's Karwan Bazar have risen by Tk 9,000 per trip.

The economic ripple effects have spread quickly. In construction, the price of steel rods has already begun to climb. The garment sector—the lifeblood of Bangladesh's foreign exchange earnings—depends on a constant flow of covered vans transporting goods to Chattogram port. Exporters say pre-Eid freight costs have risen by as much as Tk 6,000 per van.

The official response, we must say, has been heavy on reassurance and light on economic realism. Ministers have offered comforting promises that fuel will soon flow more freely and prices will remain unchanged. Rationing may indeed be unavoidable during a severe supply shock, but applying it bluntly across every sector is an unforced error. If the government hopes to prevent a surge in inflation, it must gradually introduce monitored exemptions for daily essentials and export shipments.

To be fair to the government, this crisis was largely inherited. No administration would welcome geopolitical turmoil and delayed fuel shipments just as it assumes office. The fragile energy supply chain and procurement vulnerabilities predate the current leadership. Still, the responsibility now lies with the government to prevent economic paralysis and an inflationary spiral. Extending depot operating hours and prioritising freight transport over private vehicles would be sensible first steps. Attempting to suspend the laws of supply and demand by decree rarely ends well. Panic, after all, is a very poor substitute for fuel.

Stop landfill fires, open waste burning

Poor waste management a major source of Dhaka's air pollution

It is alarming that smoke from burning garbage at the Matuail and Amin Bazar landfills frequently blankets Dhaka's skies, worsening the capital's already severe air pollution. The city regularly ranks among the most polluted in the world, with the average Air Quality Index (AQI) hovering around 200 and occasionally exceeding 600. On the AQI scale, any value above 300 is considered "hazardous," and Savar recorded an AQI of 640 on March 4. These numbers reveal how air pollution has worsened over the years in the absence of proper planning and effective action by successive governments.

At the Matuail landfill—where waste has accumulated for decades—towering mounds of garbage, reaching 50 to 80 feet high at many points, frequently catch fire. According to officials, methane gas trapped within layers of waste often triggers spontaneous fires, sending thick plumes of smoke up into the air. These fires can burn for long periods unless fire service units intervene. The site reportedly emits thousands of kilograms of methane every hour. Moreover, along highways going out of Dhaka, waste collectors and traders frequently burn rubbish (especially polythene), releasing large amounts of toxic pollutants. Emissions from brick kilns and older vehicles, along with dust from construction, further worsen air quality.

Last August, the government declared Savar a "degraded airshed," ordered the closure of 106 brick kilns, and also banned open waste burning. However, several brick kilns have reportedly resumed operations after securing court orders to do so, while open waste burning continues. Meanwhile, in January this year, Dhaka's average PM2.5 concentration rose to 193 microgrammes per cubic metre, which is 38 times higher than the WHO's recommended limit of five microgrammes.

The consequences of such unchecked pollution are devastating. The National Institute of Diseases of the Chest and Hospital, the country's premier respiratory treatment centre, reportedly remains packed with patients suffering from respiratory illnesses including breathing difficulties, asthma, and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). Hospital data show that the number of patients has been rising steadily in recent years, reaching around 195,000 last year alone. Doctors attribute this surge largely to worsening air pollution.

The situation demands urgent action from the relevant government authorities. They must ensure proper management of landfills, prevent fires by using modern waste treatment technologies, and strictly enforce the ban on open waste burning. At the same time, stronger measures are needed against polluting brick kilns, ageing vehicles, and uncontrolled construction dust. Without immediate and sustained intervention, Dhaka's air pollution will only worsen and continue to threaten the health and wellbeing of its residents.

We need education reforms that actually work



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People's expectations about real reform in education have been raised by the busy round of meetings and expression of resolve seen in Minister of Education Dr Ehsanul Haque Milon and State Minister for Primary and Mass Education Bobby Hajjaj. The ministers announced a 12-point initial agenda for action, reflecting some of the election promises of the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). They have also spoken about controlling rampant corruption in education, bringing students back to the classroom (from coaching centres), and schooling that prepares young people for the world of work.

Each individual objective sounds reasonable and justifiable, but discrete action on each would make for fragmented and partial steps. It may end up being a false remedy for a symptom of a disease rather than for the disease itself.

For example, the near-universal practice of private coaching and tutoring is villainised for making students memorise guidebooks instead of studying textbooks, burdening parents with huge costs, and keeping students away from classrooms. The solution prescribed is to ban or severely restrict private coaching and tutoring. This remedy ignores the fact that coaching centres are the symptoms—the disease is that teaching and learning do not happen in the classroom. Students do not see a good reason to be in the classroom. They feel compelled to rely on coaching to prepare for their exams. Restrictions and bans on coaching have proved difficult to enforce because both suppliers and customers believe it is needed.

A multifaceted, multi-layered, and holistic approach is necessary to find a workable solution for the problem. Key issues have to be simultaneously addressed related to teachers' preparation and performance, school and classroom management, learning content preparation, learning assessment and exams, and teachers'/schools' interactions with students and parents. The solution has to work for each school and classroom and be supported by the administrative superstructure extending from the ministry, directorate, education boards, curriculum board, teachers' training colleges, and field-level

administration.

Why does the miserably poor quality of instruction in mainstream school education—excepting the elite high-cost English medium schools and the selective Bangla medium ones—persist in Bangladesh and much of South Asia? Despite many development projects with international assistance carried out over the last four or five decades, studies point to a critical failure: the power dynamics of policymaking and decision-making by politicians and administrators who fail to prioritise inclusive and equitable education of acceptable quality for all children.

A further probe into the non-action or misguided action of decision-makers suggests a common deficiency, which is the fragmented, partial,

outcomes.

Political neglect and system incoherence are evident in the non-action and wrong actions following the adoption of the 2010 National Education Policy. Instead of a systematic effort and coordinated work plan to implement the policy, development projects and activities were undertaken in a fragmented manner for sub-sectors without an integrated view or time-bound goals regarding quality, equity, and inclusion in education. The lack of political vision and leadership has been filled by bureaucrats in the two ministries by default. The bureaucrats by their nature are inclined to protect the status quo. This double failure has landed us in today's education debacle. Can repetition be avoided? Some early signs are not that promising.

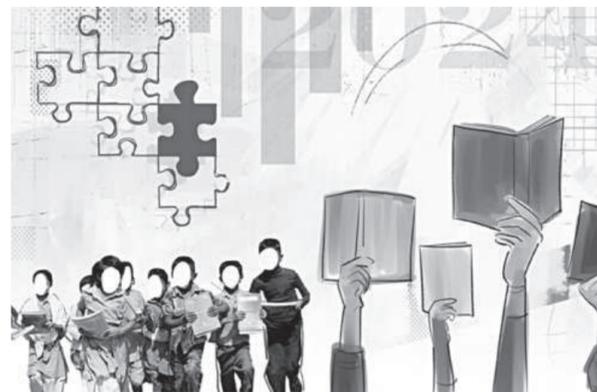
Observers have been arguing that school education—pre-primary to pre-university—should be put under one ministerial jurisdiction. Thereby, an integrated plan for quality, universal school education can be planned and implemented to meet the demand for basic competencies in our youth. It seemed this logic had won when a minister and a state minister were

may be so for those who are already good performers in a class, as only these 10-20 percent students are sent for the scholarship exams. But teachers' time and effort are diverted to these students at the cost of the remaining 80 percent of pupils who need more help from the teachers. Regular classes are halted in schools where the scholarship exams are held. Well-heeled parents of scholarship examinees support these exams; they are usually more educated, better-off, and more vocal than the parents of the disadvantaged majority.

These are instances of a bureaucratic mindset that has prevailed while sacrificing the best interests of children and education. A holistic systems thinking approach has been absent. The highly centralised management structure and the personnel there, mired in the routine tasks of regulating and controlling a large system from the capital, are not equipped in terms of training or temperament to work out and implement a major educational reform agenda.

Two consultative committees on primary and non-formal education and secondary education, respectively, were appointed by the interim government. Based on research, field visits, and stakeholder consultation, the reports of the two committees presented a critical review of school education in the country and recommendations for reform, indicating necessary short-, medium-, and long-term actions. Both reports examined the causes of past reform failures and suggested essential steps for an effective new initiative. But it is clear that reforms are not likely to take place if the task is left to the current administrative apparatus and actors as an additional duty. The reports proposed that a high-level task force should be appointed to take education reforms forward. Other subsectors of education—such as higher education, vocational-technical education, madrasa education, higher professional and technology education—also deserve to have their respective task forces. Joint strategies for preparing young children for school are needed from the ministries of education and women and children affairs.

At the same time, a comprehensive five-year education sector plan and a ten-year perspective plan need to be developed, guided by a dedicated education development council. The sector plan should combine and integrate the various sub-sector plans prepared by respective task forces. The task forces and the council may be transformed eventually into a permanent statutory education commission. These are the necessary next steps for launching an education reform effort that may have a better chance to succeed.



FILE VISUAL: REHNUMA PROSHOON

incoherent, and non-holistic response to problems. This highlights the absence of a systems approach which is a scientific method for designing, implementing, and evaluating teaching-learning as an integrated whole. The aim is to optimise educational outcomes by analysing and working on interconnected components—inputs (students, teachers, infrastructure), processes (instructional methods, assessment of learning, management of teachers), and outputs (student performance and learning outcomes). Feedback loops allow for corrections in the system. This systems approach ensures goal-oriented, efficient, and learner-centric instruction that produces the learning

appointed for the whole education sector. But now the tasks have been redistributed and the state minister has been placed in charge of the old Ministry of Primary and Mass Education. Is this a retreat to the old order and a vindication of Parkinson's law (which, in essence, says that work and staff keep expanding in a bureaucracy)?

Another problematic move concerns scholarship examinations. High-stakes public examinations after Class 5 and Class 8, respectively, have been discontinued. But there is a lobby to retain the scholarship examinations at these levels based on the argument that it is an inducement for better student performance. This

How tobacco companies target schoolchildren



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Targeting young children to gain future smokers is a longstanding tactic of tobacco producers globally. One of the most effective ways of doing this is by ensuring that cigarettes and other tobacco products are sold near schools, making it so that children are repeatedly exposed to tobacco branding and imagery, making smoking seem familiar, normal, and accessible.

Bangladesh is paying an enormous price for the tobacco epidemic. At least 1.61 lakh people die every year from tobacco-related diseases in the country, according to the National Heart Foundation of Bangladesh. A study by Economics for Health and Institute of Health Economics, University of Dhaka found that the total economic cost of tobacco use is Tk 87,544 crore, nearly double the amount the government earns in tobacco tax revenue.

However, the burden is not only reflected in deaths and economic losses; it is also present in the steady exposure of new generations to tobacco products. Among teenagers

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Among teenagers especially, smoking is often associated with adulthood, rebellion, or looking "cool." Children and adolescents are more susceptible to visual cues, branding, and product placement. This is what makes the retail environment around schools so important.

Historically, there has been very limited public data on the actual situation around Bangladeshi schools. The evidence that does exist has long pointed to a serious problem. A

2016 study by the Bloomberg School of Public Health at Johns Hopkins found that around 90 percent of selling points within a 100-metre radius of 110 schools in Dhaka sold tobacco products. In 2018, Dhaka Ahsania Mission conducted a study across 157 schools and 23 playgrounds nationwide and found that about 90.5 percent had nearby vendors selling some form of tobacco. Most of these vendors were also advertising tobacco products and selling single cigarettes, making tobacco even more accessible.

More recently in November 2025, a study by the Power and Participation Research Centre on 121 schools and their surroundings in four divisions found 666 tobacco points of sale, averaging 5.5 outlets within 100 metres of each school. The density was slightly higher in urban areas than in rural ones. Cigarettes were found to be almost universally available, sold at 99.1 percent of all surveyed outlets. Flavoured cigarettes were available at 84.4 percent of points of sale surrounding schools, with slightly higher availability in urban areas.

The problem is not only that tobacco is being sold, but also how it is being made visible and attractive. Overall, 71 percent of outlets openly displayed tobacco products, often at a child's eye level. Placement near candy, sweets, or toys was also widespread. Some outlets even allowed customers to reach out and take cigarette packs themselves, while others used branded display units. Dummy or empty cigarette packs

were the most common advertising material, followed by stickers, posters, and branded price lists.

Bangladesh is a party to the World Health Organization Framework Convention on Tobacco Control and has taken several legislative steps to regulate tobacco use, marketing, and consumption. The country enacted the Smoking and Using of Tobacco Products (Control) Act, 2005 and later amended it in 2013 to strengthen restrictions on tobacco advertising, promotion, and sponsorship, expand smoke-free public spaces, and introduce larger pictorial health warnings. A new amendment came into effect, issued by the interim government, on December 30 last year. The amended ordinance explicitly prohibits any person from selling or causing the sale of tobacco or tobacco products within a 100-metre radius of educational institutions such as schools and colleges. It also reinforces the ban on tobacco advertising, promotion, and sponsorship while introducing broader smoke-free provisions, including bans on smoking and e-cigarettes in all public places and public transport.

On March 12, the ordinance was placed before parliament. The onus is now on the new government to ensure its passage into law and, subsequently, its effective enforcement. If we are serious about protecting our children, then we cannot allow schools to remain ringed by tobacco branding.