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FOUNDER EDITOR: **LATE S. M. ALI**

The price of subsidised delay

Govt must manage impact of fuel price adjustments on economy

Governments that try to hold back the tide of global commodity prices usually end up paying more than necessary. Bangladesh has now learned this lesson for the second time in four years, and the price is steep.

Late on Saturday, the energy ministry announced the increase of fuel prices to record levels. Across the four fuel types, including octane and petrol, the average increase was roughly 16 percent. It was also the first mid-month adjustment since Bangladesh introduced its automatic monthly pricing mechanism in February 2024—a reform pushed by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, designed precisely to prevent politically driven price suppression. In lockstep, the energy regulator also raised liquefied petroleum gas prices, adding another shock in a single week.

The increase was seemingly inevitable. The Strait of Hormuz continues to be effectively shut amid the protracted Middle East conflict. Brent crude, which began the year at $61 a barrel, surged to $118 by the end of March. Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE shut production, while several suppliers invoked force majeure. Bangladesh, which imports nearly all of its refined petroleum, saw its import bill expand by the week. The government chose to absorb the shock through subsidies rather than passing it on immediately. An additional $3 billion is estimated in subsidy requirements for the March-June period, mostly for fuel and fertiliser. Bangladesh is now seeking $2 billion in external support to cushion its exposure to volatile fuel markets.

The timing of the latest price hike makes it worse. On Friday, the day before the gazette notification, Brent crude fell 9 percent to below $90 a barrel after Iran announced that the Strait of Hormuz was "fully open" to commercial traffic, before closing it again. But prices are forecast to fall further, with Brent expected to drop below $90 in the fourth quarter of 2026 and average $76 in 2027. But the government opted for a politically painful correction at precisely the moment global prices began to reverse.

The consequences will be uneven and largely negative in the near term. Transport and logistics costs will pass through quickly, pushing up freight charges across the economy. In northern Bangladesh, where the Boro paddy season drives the country's largest rice harvest, irrigation depends heavily on diesel; higher fuel costs will squeeze farmers directly unless offset by policy support. Price effects will push already elevated inflation higher still.

The opposition has already called the hike "very unfortunate." It is, but not for the reasons they suggest. The unfortunate part is not that prices rose. It is that they had to rise this far, and this fast, because the government waited until it had no choice. Every month of subsidised delay shifted the burden from the present to the future, from the exchequer to the consumer, and from a manageable adjustment to a record-breaking shock. That is a failure of policy design, not of circumstance. Bangladesh cannot control the Strait of Hormuz, but it can control whether its pricing mechanism is strong enough to function when tested. On this occasion, it was not.

Stop abusing cyber security ordinance

Content creator's arrest reminiscent of Hasina-era limit to freedom of expression

We are outraged by the attack on freedom of expression through the misapplication of Cyber Security Ordinance, 2025. This happened through the recent arrest and detention of content creator AM Hasan Nasim allegedly over his social media post on Jatiya Sangsad Chief Whip Nurul Islam Moni. This arrest highlights the stark gap between BNP's rhetoric and actions. On Saturday, BNP boasted about ensuring freedom of expression in the country—one of the 60 milestones the party claimed to achieve in its first 60 days. Ironically, the night before, around 8 pm on Friday, April 17, police picked up Nasim from the city's Agargaon area, allegedly for "blackmailing" Moni using social media posts.

The case filed by BNP activist Nazrul Islam at the Gulshan Police Station later on Saturday, April 18, under sections 25 and 27 of the Cyber Security Ordinance is also flawed because Section 40 of the ordinance states that only the aggrieved person, or someone authorised in writing by such aggrieved person, or a member of a law enforcement agency can file cases under this law. Nazrul Islam had no written authorisation from the chief whip. Yet, the police not only took the case but also detained the person even before the FIR was drawn. Such behaviour by the police is reminiscent of the Sheikh Hasina-era arbitrary detention and arrests of thousands under the draconian Digital Security Act, 2018 and Cyber Security Act, 2023. The July uprising was a collective protest against such human rights violations. Yet, Nasim's arrest indicates that police have reverted to their decades-old nature of catering to the ruling party's whims, instead of upholding the law. Sadly, the justice system failed the arrestee as well—his bail hearing was postponed on Sunday, April 19, further extending his detention.

The premise of the case is equally disturbing. One of the Facebook posts allegedly used to "blackmail" the chief whip is a cartoon depicting Moni serving three MPs a whale and a shark on a plate. The caption quotes Moni himself, who jokingly said in parliament on April 10 that such items would be served at a lunch. How can a joke made in a public forum, printed in newspapers, and a cartoon based on that joke constitute "blackmail"? Does this signal the return to an authoritarian climate where political cartoons are effectively censored? This was not expected from BNP, whose electoral pledge suggests otherwise.

We urge BNP to uphold its promise of protecting freedom of speech and expression and to prevent overzealous supporters from undermining this right. We also call for Nasim's immediate release and an end to arbitrary arrests and the misuse of laws.

We need a stronger lightning policy, and fast

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In recent years, lightning has emerged as one of Bangladesh's most fatal climate hazards, although policy responses have yet to evolve proportionately. Since lightning was formally declared a natural disaster in 2016 and incorporated into national disaster management frameworks, including the National Plan for Disaster Management (NPDM) 2021-2025, annual death tolls have continued to exceed 300 in most years. This persistence of high casualties indicates a lack of proper policy recognition that would translate into effective protection for those most vulnerable to this hazard.

Between 2015 and 2024, lightning strikes resulted in at least 3,485 deaths, with annual fatalities ranging from 226 in 2015 to a peak of 427 in 2020. Although reported deaths declined to 322 in 2023 and 271 by mid-2024, the pattern in 2025 seemed to take a severe turn again, with April 28 alone recording the deaths of 23 people, including 19 farmers. This year, as per a report by *Samakal*, there have been 60 fatalities as of April 18. On Saturday, *The Daily Star* reported at least 13 deaths from lightning strikes, causing renewed concerns. Districts often identified as high-risk include Rangpur, Dinajpur, Nilphamari, Kurigram, Kishoreganj, Sunamganj, Netrokona, and Sylhet. Parallel reporting by non-governmental organisations suggests that official statistics may not fully capture the scale of mortality.

The intensification of lightning risk has a strong correlation with climatic change. Lightning frequency is estimated to increase by about 12 percent for every one-degree Celsius rise in global average temperature. Regional projections also indicate that convective available potential energy over Bangladesh could rise by up to 45 percent during the pre-monsoon season, creating conditions conducive to more frequent and intense thunderstorms. According to the Bangladesh Meteorological Department, 62 percent of lightning strikes occur during this short pre-monsoon period, which overlaps directly with the agricultural calendar. This convergence of climatic and occupational factors has significantly increased fatality risk.

Environmental and land-use changes also play a role in further amplifying exposure. In the haor regions, the removal of tall trees to expand agricultural land has all but eliminated natural conductors that previously helped dissipate lightning discharges. As a result, farmers and fishers working in open fields and wetlands have effectively become the "tallest objects" in the landscape. This has created a harmful feedback loop in which agricultural expansion aimed at maximising output simultaneously increases disaster risk, which in turn raises mortality, particularly during labour-intensive periods such as the Boro rice harvest.

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Atmospheric pollution has also emerged as a contributing factor. Increased lightning activity has been associated with higher concentrations of fine particulate matter and aerosols during the pre-monsoon season. Transboundary dust and sulphate particles, largely originating from agricultural burning and industrial emissions across the Indo-Gangetic Plain, can alter cloud microphysics and enhance electrical charge separation, potentially leading to higher lightning flash rates. Because these pollutants are transported over long distances, lightning risk is being shaped not only by domestic conditions but also by regional environmental dynamics.

The human and economic toll of lightning reveals its deeply unequal impact. Nearly 80 percent of lightning victims are farmers and fishers who work outside, and rural residents face an almost ninefold higher risk of being struck than their urban counterparts. Fatalities occur especially when people are engaged in essential livelihood activities such as harvesting rice, fishing in open water, or tending livestock. It goes without saying that when the primary earner of a rural family is killed, many households face immediate financial collapse. Families are forced to borrow at high interest rates, exhaust savings, and sell productive assets, trapping them in a vicious cycle of poverty. These distress sales compromise long-term food security, housing stability, and children's education.

Moreover, lightning strikes also kill livestock, damage homes, and cause fires. But there is no comprehensive national data capturing these losses. For many rural households, livestock is the primary store of wealth as well as economic security. The absence of systematic accounting means that the full economic burden of lightning remains underestimated, weakening the design of any mitigation and compensation measures.

Government initiatives such as palm tree planting, installation of lightning arresters, and expansion of early warning services have established a foundation for risk reduction, but lightning remains institutionally under-prioritised to this day. There is no dedicated mandate or ring-fenced budget for detection, forecasting, and warning, and resources are frequently diverted to other hazards. Existing investments also tend to focus largely on static infrastructure, even though effective protection also depends on rapid human response as well as accessible shelter in high-risk rural settings.

Given these realities, there is no alternative to stronger policy interventions to ensure that early warnings reach those most at risk. The full activation of the Cell Broadcast system in high-risk districts would allow location-specific alerts to be delivered instantly to all mobile phones without any prior registration or cost. This should be reinforced through local dissemination using mosque loudspeakers, union parishad announcements, megaphones, and established volunteer networks, ensuring rapid and clear communication of warnings through trusted local systems.

Protective infrastructure must also be aligned with behavioural realities. Small, strategically located concrete shelters in agricultural hotspots would provide farmers and fishers with accessible refuge during storms, provided they are directly linked to early warning triggers and clear operating protocols. Updating the National Building Code to require certified lightning protection systems for public buildings and new tall structures—particularly schools and health centres in rural areas—would further play an instrumental role in reducing exposure.

Finally, lightning must be addressed as a source of household-level financial shock. The introduction of subsidised micro-insurance or a dedicated social protection window for registered rural workers would enable rapid payouts after strikes, preventing distress sales of land and livestock and supporting recovery. Without such financial protections, early warnings and shelters alone cannot break the cycle of vulnerability perpetuated by lightning.

Bangladesh has taken some steps to mitigate lightning risks, but much more needs to be done, if the annual fatality rates are any indication. We need a coherent policy framework that integrates early warning, infrastructural support, and social protection. As climatic conditions continue to intensify, failure to respond properly will continue to result in deaths and destruction, and those whose labour sustains our rural economy will continue to suffer disproportionately.

The case for a National Security Council that is truly fit for purpose

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In its election manifesto, BNP mentioned plans to establish a National Security Council alongside formulating a new national security strategy (page 21, under "Defence System"). Tarique Rahman, the party chairperson and now prime minister of Bangladesh, reiterated the plan while addressing retired officers of Bangladesh Armed Forces on February 7, 2026, where he said if BNP assumed office, the government would engage former and serving army officers to set the groundwork for an effective National Security Council. As I was attending the address that day, I thought this emphasis on structural security reform was noteworthy.

Bangladesh's security environment has gone through some major changes in the last few decades. Cross-border militant networks, cyber threats, digital financial vulnerabilities, maritime competition in the Bay of Bengal, geopolitical rivalry in the region, violent extremism, radicalisation, and transnational crime now intersect in ways that blur the line between internal and external security. Domestic stability may now be influenced by foreign clandestine activities and digital campaigns. Maritime security affects economic resilience, and regional tensions can quickly generate internal consequences. Managing such complexity requires a structured, permanent system that synthesises intelligence, aligns defence policy with national strategy, and anticipates risk before it escalates.

Bangladesh currently relies on several coordination mechanisms. The National Committee for Security Affairs (NCSA)—established in 2019 after the cabinet approved the National Defence Policy 2018—is headed by the prime minister and includes senior ministers, the service chiefs, intelligence heads, and top civil servants. The NCSA is the highest policy-making authority on national security in Bangladesh. Then there is the National Committee for Intelligence Coordination (NCIC), established in 2009, that focuses on intelligence sharing among key security agencies. The National Security Affairs Cell under the Cabinet Division, formed in 2019, provides administrative support, although it does not have the authority or resources to act as a strategic nerve center.

These mechanisms represent steps towards coordination. However, they remain committee-based rather than system-based. The NCSA is large and consultative, but it does not operate through a permanent strategic secretariat with defined analytical divisions. The intelligence coordination structure improves information sharing, but it does not institutionalise unified national assessment or long-term planning. This results in fragmentation. Bangladesh has capable intelligence institutions such as the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI), National Security Intelligence (NSI), Special Branch (SB), Criminal Investigation Department (CID), Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB), and the Coast Guard, etc. Yet responsibilities are dispersed, and there is no single professional authority tasked with synthesising assessments from different security agencies into consolidated national advice.

This model can create confusion over who defines national security priorities, who harmonises internal and external intelligence, and who ensures that defence modernisation aligns with broader strategic objectives. Large committees are effective for consultation but are not substitutes for continuous analytical work supported by dedicated professional staff. Hence, the absence of a national security adviser's (NSA) role can be considered a weakness, as without an NSA-led secretariat, coordination remains dependent on leadership bandwidth rather than institutional design, and security governance becomes reactive rather than anticipatory.

However, reform does not mean diminishing existing agencies. On the contrary, it can strengthen them. For example, the DGFI can continue to provide defence and external intelligence. NSI may remain central to internal security intelligence and counterterrorism. And law enforcement and border agencies may retain operational mandates. An effective national security council secretariat would not replace these institutions. It would integrate their outputs, identify intelligence gaps, harmonise reporting cycles, and ensure that national leadership receives unified assessments rather than fragmented briefings.

India undertook similar structural reforms and institutionalised a secretariat led by the national security adviser beneath the political leadership. The innovation here was not simply the creation of a council but the establishment of a permanent analytical engine with defined verticals for strategic planning, intelligence synthesis, and defence coordination. Bangladesh can adopt a similar strategy with its own constitutional framework. Most importantly, national security must be nonpartisan, as security threats do not distinguish between governments. An effective National Security Council must be institutional, accountable, and continuity-focused.

A reformed structure should include a national security council chaired by the prime minister, supported by a permanent national security council secretariat led by a security adviser. Beneath that office, defined directorates for strategic planning, intelligence coordination, defence affairs, foreign policy integration, cybersecurity, maritime security, and crisis response would provide analytical depth and structured oversight. Staffing should blend experienced civil servants with former military officers, former intelligence professionals, and former foreign service officials.

Bangladesh stands at a point where incremental adjustments are no longer sufficient. Our growing geopolitical and economic profile demands a mature and disciplined security architecture. Establishing a structured, accountable, and non-partisan security council system would not be a political victory for any party. Instead, it would be an institutional investment in the long-term stability and resilience of the state.

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