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

LPG market needs urgent disciplining

Enforce set rates to protect consumers, fix pricing issues

It is unacceptable that households across the country are having to pay exorbitant prices for LPG despite the government fixing the rates. On November 2, the Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission (BERC) set the price of a 12kg LPG cylinder at Tk 2,060. But consumers in Dhaka are having to pay Tk 2,300-2,500, or Tk 300-440 more than the official rate. Outside the capital, cylinders are reportedly selling for Tk 40-240 above the fixed price. BERC has reportedly increased commissions for importers, distributors, and retailers. Why, then, are consumers still being denied this essential cooking gas at the regulated price? Reports of sellers withholding cylinders, refusing to sell to unfamiliar customers, and charging excessive prices suggest that weak oversight is allowing some market players to exploit the supply uncertainty.

Since February, the official retail price of LPG in the country has risen by nearly 52 percent, from Tk 113 to Tk 171.68 per kg. Over the same period, the increase was around 34 percent in Pakistan, 12 percent in Sri Lanka and 7 percent in India, while Nepal's latest available rate was about 6 percent higher than its February price. So, consumers in Bangladesh are paying much more than the published retail prices in those countries. This raises questions about our pricing structure and procurement arrangements. Understandably, disruptions to international supplies caused by the US-Israel war on Iran have contributed to the situation. Bangladesh has had to shift much of its sourcing from the Middle East to the United States, with US-based firms accounting for 85 percent of imports in September, compared with 27.4 percent a year earlier. This has increased shipping distances, freight, and insurance costs, as well as the premiums importers have to pay to secure cargoes. These are genuine pressures.

Why is BERC continuing to use Saudi Aramco's Contract Price as its principal benchmark even as importers increasingly source LPG from the US and other markets? BERC must therefore review its methodology and ensure that price adjustments are based on transparent and verifiable cost information rather than a benchmark that may no longer reflect the market.

But the question is, why is BERC continuing to use Saudi Aramco's Contract Price as its principal benchmark even as importers increasingly source LPG from the US and other markets? BERC must therefore review its methodology and ensure that price adjustments are based on transparent and verifiable cost information rather than a benchmark that may no longer reflect the market. Our dependence on a small group of importers also makes the market vulnerable. Although around 35 companies hold licences, only 10-12 are active importers. This, combined with heavy reliance on spot-market purchases and limited alternative sources, leaves the country exposed to supply disruptions and price volatility.

The government must encourage more competition, help importers secure diversified and reliable long-term supply arrangements, and develop adequate storage infrastructure to reduce dependence on costly spot purchases. It must also expedite BPC's long-delayed plan to import LPG and reduce our dependence on private suppliers. The government must also stop overcharging in the domestic market. The BERC and the Directorate of National Consumer Rights Protection must monitor the entire supply chain, find out where the additional costs arise and take action against companies, distributors and retailers found to be violating regulations.

Address the anaemia crisis among women

Child marriage, malnutrition, and poor healthcare remain major concerns

A recent study published in the Health Science Reports has revealed an alarming disparity in anaemia prevalence between women and men in rural Chattogram. Among 459 adults seeking healthcare, 77.9 percent of women were found to be anaemic, compared with 39.7 percent of men. Women were also disproportionately affected by moderate and severe anaemia. Although the study was based on data collected between 2016 and 2017 in just four unions, its findings raise serious concerns about a longstanding public health problem that continues to affect women across Bangladesh.

Malnutrition from adolescence, excessive menstrual bleeding, early marriage, repeated pregnancies, and inadequate access to nutritious food all increase women's vulnerability to anaemia. The persistence of child marriage is particularly worrying. According to the Bangladesh Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) 2025, 47.2 percent of women aged 20–24 were married before turning 18, while 13.4 percent were married before 15. Although child marriage has declined over the years, these figures show how far we remain from protecting girls from its consequences. Inadequate healthcare, on top of early pregnancies, places additional demands on bodies that may already be nutritionally depleted.

Troublingly, the same national survey found that 53.1 percent of pregnant women were anaemic. This reinforces concerns that anaemia remains a widespread problem. It not only undermines women's health and wellbeing but can also increase pregnancy-related risks and affect the health of their children. Yet, poverty, rising food prices, and unequal access to food within households often mean that women's nutritional needs are neglected.

The study findings on rural women in Chattogram, as well as the national data on anaemia among pregnant women, expose a critical gap in our understanding of the crisis. We urgently need comprehensive, nationally representative studies covering women and men across age groups, regions, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Such research must investigate the underlying causes, including deficiencies in iron and other nutrients, infections, and inherited blood disorders.

Meanwhile, the government must strengthen routine haemoglobin screening, particularly for adolescent girls and women of reproductive age, and ensure affordable diagnosis, appropriate treatment, and nutritional support through primary healthcare facilities. It must also launch sustained awareness campaigns through television, schools, community centres, and other platforms to educate people about anaemia, its causes and prevention. Above all, anaemia must be recognised not merely as an individual health problem but as a reflection of wider inequalities that compromise women's health.

What should the minimum wage be for garment workers?



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Following widespread protests by garment workers, the government recently formed a wage board that has pledged to finalise a new minimum wage by December. Under the amended Bangladesh Labour Act, it should have formed the board several months earlier to comply with the requirement to revise minimum wages every three years. Its failure to act on time, coupled with the still-limited presence of trade unions in the sector, left workers with little choice but to take to the streets, where they faced attacks and arrests. One worker, Toufiq Hossain, even lost his life in an attack during the protests.

The question now is what criteria the wage board will use to determine the new minimum wage. Will it follow a transparent and credible methodology, or will employers once again use their influence to impose an unjust wage on workers?

ILO Convention № 131 stipulates that minimum wages should be determined by considering workers' and their families' needs, the cost of living, social security benefits, productivity and employment levels, among other factors. Section 141 of Bangladesh's labour law similarly requires consideration of living costs and standards, production costs, productivity, inflation, the nature and risks of work, employers' capacity to pay, and the country's socioeconomic conditions.

Yet Bangladesh has no transparent, widely accepted formula for translating these criteria into a minimum wage. As a result, wage revisions across the garment and other private-sector industries remain opaque, heavily influenced by the bargaining power of business interests.

The government, however, takes a different approach when determining salaries for public-sector employees. Before preparing recommendations for the ninth pay scale, the National Pay Commission engaged the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) to conduct a living standards survey in September 2025, covering 3,000 households across rural, urban and city corporation areas. It showed average monthly household expenditure of Tk 46,778 in city corporation areas, Tk 37,344 in other urban areas, and Tk 32,532 in rural areas. Based on the findings, the newly fixed minimum monthly salary for a Grade 20 government employee is Tk 33,250 at the district and upazila levels, and Tk 36,250 in Dhaka.

In the absence of a comparable formula for the private sector, the minimum government salary offers a reasonable benchmark for garment workers' wages. Both groups buy food and other essentials in the same markets. Government employees also receive pensions and other benefits, while garment manufacturers enjoy tax concessions and other state support that workers do not. Therefore, there is little justification for setting the garment sector's minimum wage below the lowest public-sector salary.

On this basis, 35 workers' federations belonging to four alliances have demanded a minimum monthly wage of Tk 37,125 ($300) for garment workers.

Can the industry afford higher wages?

The industry's capacity to pay should be considered when determining how far wages can rise above the minimum needed for a decent life. It cannot, however, justify paying workers less than that minimum. Factory owners must pay for the inputs required to produce goods. Labour is no less essential than other inputs. Why, then, should its price be pushed below its cost simply because employers claim they cannot afford more?

The cost of reproducing labour power depends on what workers and their families need to survive and maintain their ability to work. When wages fall short, they are forced to compromise on nutritious food, education, healthcare, recreation, etc. Their health and well-being deteriorate. No industry can remain sustainable by condemning its workforce to such conditions. Employers' capacity to pay cannot be a legitimate excuse for denying workers and their families a decent standard of living.

Besides, wages account for only 10-13 percent of garment production costs. So even if wages were increased in line with workers' demands, the overall cost of production would not rise to a level that would undermine the industry's viability. Moreover, when the government sets minimum salaries for public employees, does it first limit them to what existing revenue can afford, or does it assess their living costs and then find ways to finance the salaries? Why should the same principle not apply to workers in garment and other industries?

Bangladesh versus Vietnam

To assess whether the garment industry can afford the proposed wages, we need to compare Bangladesh's minimum wage with those of competing countries in the international market. Vietnam, one of Bangladesh's principal competitors, provides a useful comparison.

Bangladesh's garment-sector minimum wage is Tk 12,500 a month, or approximately $101. In Vietnam's capital and other major urban areas (Region I), the minimum wage is currently approximately $202 and is scheduled to rise to $221 in January 2027.



Workers at a garment factory in Gazipur return to work following disruptions caused by protests over a new minimum wage on November 5, 2026. PHOTO: **MEHEDI HASAN**

Bangladeshi manufacturers often justify low wages by arguing that local workers are less productive. One industry estimate puts Vietnamese workers' productivity 10-15 percent above that of their Bangladeshi counterparts. But productivity depends heavily on employers' investment in technology, factory conditions, and worker training. It is unreasonable to place the responsibility for low productivity on workers while overlooking these factors.

Even accepting the industry's productivity estimate, the wage gap is far greater than the productivity gap. If Bangladeshi workers are 10-15 percent less productive, that cannot explain why their minimum wage is roughly half that of Vietnam. Moreover, low wages can themselves undermine productivity. Better-paid workers can afford more nutritious food and enjoy better living conditions, which can improve their health and performance. Efficiency wage theory also suggests that higher wages can motivate workers and increase productivity.

The comparison with Vietnam thus offers no compelling reason to believe that a substantial increase in garment workers' wages would undermine Bangladesh's international competitiveness. Investment in workers' nutrition, living standards, and skills could instead strengthen the industry's productivity and competitive position.

Therefore, the wage board's responsibility is not simply to determine how much garment manufacturers can afford to pay, but to establish what workers and their families need to earn to live with dignity. It is this need that should guide factory owners in finding ways to strengthen the industry's capacity and improve productivity.

A permanent solution to minimum-wage disputes

To address the recurring disputes over minimum wages, the government should establish a permanent National Minimum Wage Commission, as recommended by the Labour Reform Commission under the interim government. It should include experts in economics and wage policy, alongside elected representatives of workers and employers.

The commission should develop a transparent formula that accounts for monthly household food expenditure, non-food costs such as housing, healthcare, education and recreation, and a minimum level of savings. Based on these calculations, it should establish a national minimum wage for a household with a single income earner and reassess it every three years, taking inflation and changes in living standards into account.

This national minimum should serve as the floor for sector-specific minimum wages. Wages in individual industries may be set higher depending on their productivity and capacity, but never below the national minimum.

Finally, the commission must publish the rationale, calculation methods, and supporting data behind its recommendations. A transparent and evidence-based approach to setting minimum wages is essential to protecting workers' livelihoods, preventing recurring labour unrest and industrial disputes, and building a more productive and sustainable industrial sector.

Transparent agricultural data can help tackle our fertiliser crisis



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Global fertiliser prices have surged by 70 to 80 percent following the US-Israel military offensive against Iran, leading to shipping bottlenecks at the main international trading routes. Because Bangladesh imports over 85 percent of its fertiliser, the shock has hit our domestic supply chain hard. While policymakers in Dhaka focus on foreign exchange reserves and emergency import tenders, they are missing a fundamental truth: the fertiliser crisis is largely a result of agronomic inefficiency and structural data blindness.

To understand how we got here, look at the fiscal engine driving our agricultural policy. Input subsidies now absorb nearly 80 percent of the Ministry of Agriculture's annual budget. This money is meant to shield farmers from global price shocks. But the reality on the ground is stark. In rural markets, smallholders are paying Tk 1,600 to Tk 1,800 for a 50-kg bag of DAP, far above the official price of Tk 1,050. Weak oversight and paper-based tracking allow for localised shortages and predatory hoarding.

Even worse, the subsidy model is fundamentally inequitable. Because benefits are tied to the volume of fertiliser purchased, the largest 20 percent of farm holdings capture nearly half of all subsidy expenditures. The smallest 40 percent of farmers, the ones who need the most help, receive only 13 percent.

We are also paying a heavy environmental price. National data shows that only 5 percent of Bangladeshi farmers apply a scientifically balanced nutrient mix. For decades, artificially cheap urea has encouraged the over-application of nitrogen.

When nitrogen is applied without balance, it negatively impacts the atmosphere since nitrous oxide, a greenhouse gas, is approximately 270 times more potent than carbon dioxide. Moreover, our floodplains are experiencing organic matter depletion, and our soils are becoming acidic. In other words, we are subsidising the degradation of our own land.

How do we break free from this cycle? The answer lies in transforming how we view data. The agriculture sector needs transparent, verifiable records.

Continuing to channel public capital into blanket chemical subsidies without field-level accountability is no longer viable. The global disruptions of 2026 carry a clear message. Our food security cannot remain hostage to international commodity shocks and unmonitored farm practices.

Right now, policymakers do not possess real-time visibility into which agro-ecological zones have specific nutrient deficits, who is actually buying the subsidised fertiliser, or whether fertiliser is being applied efficiently.

That's why we must build the digital infrastructure to capture data directly at the farm gate. By using digital tools to connect soil testing, crop quality grading, and input purchasing into a unified ecosystem, we can pioneer three major shifts. First, we can provide precision support through digital verification, which will allow subsidies to bypass predatory middlemen and reach the actual cultivator, whether they own the land or sharecrop it.

Second, site-specific nutrient management can be achieved by utilising real-time soil data. This will help farmers move away from regional guesswork. Tailoring nutrient applications to exact soil deficits can reduce fertiliser waste by up to 30 percent. Third, we can financially reward best practices among farmers for adopting Integrated Plant Nutrition Systems, which combine balanced minerals with organic matter to regenerate living topsoil.

Continuing to channel public capital into blanket chemical subsidies without field-level accountability is no longer viable. The global disruptions of 2026 carry a clear message. Our food security cannot remain hostage to international commodity shocks and unmonitored farm practices.

The road ahead requires our policymakers, scientists, and financial institutions to treat agricultural data as a foundational resource. It is as essential to farming as seed, sunlight, and water. Initiatives are already emerging to build these digital farm-gate frameworks. To truly transform our food systems, we must illuminate the farm gate with transparent data infrastructure. Only then can Bangladesh lead the Global South in moving away from high-cost input dependency toward intelligent, climate-smart agronomy.

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