

Bangladesh officials ignore food crisis

Rater Zonaki

"The price of rice is so high that it is beyond my capacity. We are forced to eat only one meal a day, but the problems are with the children: they cannot starve like the adults." Thus is the life of Muhammad Yunus Bahari, a senior teacher of a school in Chittagong, the second largest city in Bangladesh, as he described his life to the media.

Yunus is not the only person who has this problem. Haren Sirker, a carpenter in Faridpur District, needs at least four kilograms of rice per day. However, he is only able to buy three kilograms using all the money he has. Haren is worried how his family will manage as he has no money left to buy other necessities. Jinnat Ali, a transport laborer who says he has already forgotten the taste of fish due to the price hike, is worried whether his family will be able to afford the cost of vegetables as he has spent all his money to buy rice.

All of Bangladesh faces the same problem as the nation moves into the new year of 2008 accompanied by an avoidable food crisis. The problem not only concerns rice: almost all staple foodstuffs, including wheat, edible oil, potatoes and vegetables, are virtually beyond the affordability of ordinary middle-class people. The government's immediate response, however, has been less than satisfactory.

The adviser for the Ministry of Food, Tapan Chowdhury, told the media on January 1 that the government has nothing to do with the situation: the people have to become accustomed to this reality! No additional words are required to explain the level of efficiency of this adviser, or of the military-backed government. Bangladesh suffered from floods on two occasions last year that caused huge damage to crops. In addition, a devastating cyclone destroyed homes and livelihoods in the southeastern coastal areas of the country about two months ago.

People do not understand why the government cannot realize there is a shortage of foodstuffs, including rice, wheat and flour, when the whole country suffered floods causing widespread damage to crops. They wonder what the Trading Corp. of Bangladesh--which is supposed to import foodstuffs on behalf of the government under directions from the concerned ministries--is doing, which is nothing. What is the point of having such an institution in the country?

When the average income of the majority of the population is below 150 taka per day (about USD 2), how can a person in Bangladesh dream of buying one kilogram of rice or wheat at a price of 40 taka to 45 taka per kilo (USD 0.58-0.66) when they need about three kilos to four kilos in a day? Even families which earn 15,000 takas (USD 219) per month, although the majority of the population earn below this amount, are thrown into a crisis when they try to meet their food costs and the cost of education of their children. Of course, those who have ample opportunity for corruption in either the public or private sector will be excluded from those who struggle with the hard realities of life and, at the same time, seek to uphold honesty in their personal and social lives. Is it not a mockery of the dignity and rights of the people when the concerned official representing the top level of the government asks the people to become accustomed to starvation?

Unfortunately, the people of Bangladesh, who have been forced to endure such nonsensical behavior by their rulers, are scarcely surprised to see such a person as the adviser to the Ministry of Food make such comments while the military-backed government itself struggles to maintain its legitimacy to stay in power.

If the government had had the minimum foresight and commitment to address the basic and dire needs of the country's people, it should have had prior plans and programs in place to avoid such a situation as the

tragedy now prevailing in Bangladesh. Government policymakers could have assessed the expected shortfall of basic foodstuffs due to the large loss of crops during the country's natural disasters. Accordingly, the concerned institutions could have looked for opportunities to import required commodities to ensure the availability of food in local markets.

Instead of creating employment opportunities for the people and increasing people's incomes as well as controlling and monitoring price hikes, the government has been blaming private business groups, which are allegedly making money by storing the imported as well as the locally available foodstuffs.

If the business groups do so, then why is there still a government? Let the businessmen make money however they choose! Should not the government have a monitoring and surveying system to discern the existing conditions in the economic sector of the country? Does a government only exist in order to overwhelm the prisons by ignoring the laws of the land and militarizing the institutions of the country? By saying that "the government has nothing to do," do the authorities mean that they have everything to undo?

The government should understand its role and responsibilities. An interim caretaker government should have been established to hold an acceptable general election in the country and to maintain the routine work of government in order to keep the institutions functioning. People do not require anything more from the present government. They hope it will limit its actions and go away!

** This article was originally published on 7 January 2008 for a column entitled *Humanity or Humor?* at http://www.upiasiaonline.com/Human_Rights/.