

Bangladesh Faces Food Crisis Article



Bangladesh faces food crisis

By Mark Dummett
BBC News, Bangladesh

There is a simple enough way of judging how serious Bangladesh's food crisis has become this year - it is to count the changing number of people queuing up to buy government-subsidised rice each day.

As the weeks have passed and the sun above Dhaka has become stronger, so the queues are now forming earlier, and more and more people are joining them.

The shops are little more than bamboo and sheet-metal sheds set up on patches of waste ground, and the men working in them are soldiers of the Bangladesh Rifles.

" I would call the price changes, which followed the high price of oil, as a crime against humanity "

Dr Sajjad Zohir
Dhaka Economic Research Group

This unit's normal job is to guard the country's borders.

But for months now it has been helping preserve the country's stability by selling cheap food to the poor.

The rice they sell is three-quarters of the market price.

New shoppers

The shoppers are no longer just rickshaw pullers and day-labourers, as they were in January, but government workers, security guards and teachers.

Instead of two orderly queues, one of men, the other of women, there are now often four queues, and a scrum of frustrated people at the front.

"The price rise has been really hard on the people of Bangladesh," Milon Das, a primary school teacher, said.

"Though I am a teacher, my salary is low, and I cannot afford rice at the normal markets. This is our country's biggest problem."

The price of a kilogramme of coarse rice, the staple food of Bangladesh's poor, has more than doubled over the past 12 months, to about \$0.60 (30p).

By contrast, workers' wages have not changed.

Economic pressures

Day 2

The owners of Bangladesh's garment factories, the backbone of the economy, are especially reluctant to raise wages, so as to keep the country competitive with China.

Their clothes are exported to many of the West's largest brands, such as Levis, Tesco, Carrefour and H&M.

Local problems, such as worse than average floods and the devastating Cyclone Sidr last year, have compounded global supply problems to push prices up.

The military-backed government has blamed speculators for making the situation worse, but many Bangladeshis think the authorities have been slow to handle it effectively.

At the government-run food shop in front of the American Embassy, many people told me they had responded to the price rise in three ways.

Firstly they had cut one meal a day out of their diets.

Secondly, they had stopped eating meat, fish and eggs.

And last, they had stopped saving money.

Food, they estimated, consumed more than half their earnings. Rent took up almost all the rest.

Social unrest

A former government minister has predicted social unrest if this situation worsens.

One of the shoppers agrees.

"There will be chaos, there will be demonstrations, there will be muggings, there will be hijackings, there will be strikes," Mohammed Akhtar Hossein, who works as a security guard at a luxury block of flats, said.

"If people don't have food in their stomachs they will go out into the streets to take whatever they can because they have to survive."

But salvation is not far away - by the end of April, Bangladesh's most important rice harvest, called Boro, is due.

Bumper crop

The government expects a bumper crop, so its effort now is to get enough food onto the market to last until then.

"This is the critical period; the period when the government really has to offload all it has got," says Dr K A S Murshid, of the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies.

"The government says it has 100,000 tonnes, but I would have preferred something like 200,000 tonnes."

But despite the short-term relief the Boro harvest should bring, experts agree that the long-term trend of food price rises in Bangladesh will continue.

Day 2

"A country like Bangladesh, which imports both food and oil, is on the losing side," says Dr Sajjad Zohir, of Dhaka's Economic Research Group.

"I would call the price changes, which followed the high price of oil, as a crime against humanity," he added.

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<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/business/7341111.stm>

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In Class:

Read Bangladesh Faces Food Crisis and then discuss as a class

- Whole class must contribute ideas for participation points.

Ask questions:

1. Have you heard about this food crisis before you read this?
2. what did this article make you think as you read it?
3. Give examples of the level of change that would be needed to counteract these issues.
4. Do you believe this is a global problem, meaning the entire world, or just a problem that is localized to the poorer nations?

Homework:

Complete worksheet on article discussed in class