



POVERTY & FOOD SECURITY

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Inflation & Food Security

Skyrocketing Rates an Ordeal for Ramazan Shoppers

The rising prices of edible commodities before Ramazan have left people, especially those belonging to low-income groups, at wit's end. The sellers have already started fleecing the consumers and increased the prices from 10 to 20 per cent well before Ramazan. Ramazan is a blessing for Muslims, but some people are using this holy month for profiteering and exploiting the high demand of edible goods. The subsidized bazaars set up by the government are "useless" because they are few in number and are not easily to access. It is a common practice to sell products at inflated prices during Ramazan. Those who make policies do not care for the poor, as they don't know the real situation in the market. According to a recent report published by Free and Fair Election Network (FAFEN) in July, the prices of 25 commodities including poultry products, meat, vegetables, cooking oil, kitchen fuel and some pulses and fruits registered an average increase of 13 per cent; in contrast, 17 commodities registered an average decrease of 4 per cent, which is too meager to offset the sharp increase in the price of important consumer items ahead of Ramazan. FAFEN monitors collected prices of 46 commodities on July 10 from designated retail outlets in 145 towns in 77 districts across the four provinces and Islamabad Capital Territory and compared them against prices in June. The price of tomatoes increased the most, up a whopping 157% from a month ago (from Rs. 22 to Rs. 56 per kg). Potatoes registered a price hike of 18%. Wheat flour registered a 2% price increase; the price of chicken meat increased by 18 per cent, while live chicken registered an increase of 15% and eggs 13%. Mutton and beef each registered an increase of 3% in their prices. Mustard and cooking oil registered an increase of 4 and 1% respectively. In kitchen fuels, LPG's price increased by 12%, whereas the price of firewood decreased by 2%.

[The Express Tribune - August 01, 2011]

Undernourishment on the Rise in Pakistan Again: Oxfam

After decades of steady progress in the fight against hunger, the number of people without enough to eat is again on the rise in Pakistan, global aid agency Oxfam has reported. According to the agency, nearly two-thirds of the Pakistani population spends between 50 and 70 per cent of its income on food, making it vulnerable to rising prices. During the last four years, food inflation in Pakistan has been recorded at 94%, according to the Federal Bureau of Statistics. The agency also notes that food prices in Pakistan have hovered near an all-time peak since late 2010, sending tens of millions of Pakistanis deeper into poverty and a famine-like situation. 36% of Pakistanis are undernourished, according to Oxfam's food price pressure point map, which includes Pakistan among the 21 undernourished nations of the world. The map, part of the agency's Grow campaign, provides a global snapshot of the impact of the international food price crisis. While most identified nations are from the African continent, Pakistan was found more undernourished than Tanzania (35%) and Niger (28%). Pakistan was also found faring worse than Yemen (32%), where nearly every third person is feared to be malnourished.

However, Pakistan ranks better than second-ranked Haiti (58%), which was hit by a massive earthquake the same year as Pakistan suffered intense flooding, and Eritrea which has the highest percentage of affected population (66%). Oxfam recommends that the government of Pakistan should develop a policy framework to not only check unjust food price hikes but also reinvigorate the economy at the local level. Revival of the local economy is extremely important

to generate jobs and challenge the mounting fears of poverty that is directly contributing to malnutrition in Pakistan. Leaders from the G-20 nations have delivered little more than band-aid solutions, giving little hope to struggling communities. People around the globe are clamoring for bold action from world leaders and getting little more than speeches in return. Words sound nice but they don't feed hungry families. It's time for G-20 leaders to step back from their podiums and get to work.

[The Express Tribune - August 04, 2011]

Famine Is Spreading, Warns UN

The UN said the prevalence of acute malnutrition and rates of mortality surpassed the famine thresholds in areas of Middle Shabelle, the Afgoye corridor refugee settlement and internally displaced communities in Mogadishu, the capital. The UN last month said two other regions in southern Somalia were suffering from famine, defined as when acute malnutrition exceeds 30 percent and when the death rate exceeds two per 10,000 a day. About 450,000 people live in Somalia's famine zones. The UN's food arm, the Food and Agriculture Organization, said famine is likely to spread across all regions of Somalia's south in the next four to six weeks, with famine conditions likely to last until December. A humanitarian emergency exists across all other regions of southern Somalia, and there have already been tens of thousands. The current humanitarian response remains inadequate, due in part to ongoing access restrictions and difficulties in scaling up emergency assistance programmes, as well as funding gaps. As a result, famine is expected to spread across all regions of the south in the coming four to six weeks and is likely to persist until at least December 2011. Continued efforts to implement an immediate, large scale, and comprehensive response are needed. Throughout Somalia, 3.7 million people are in crisis, with 3.2 million people in need of immediate, lifesaving assistance, 2.8 million of which are in the south. UN official appealed to all Somalis, both inside and outside the country, to work together to support the peace process and alleviate the plight of those suffering from famine.

[Dawn – August 05, 2011]

Inappropriate Feeding Practices Root Cause of Malnutrition

The root causes for malnutrition in Pakistan are not only linked to the 2010 floods, but to inappropriate infant and young child feeding practices, including late initiation of breastfeeding as well as inappropriate complementary foods and inappropriate weaning foods. Therefore, many of the nutrition problems we see today would be greatly alleviated with increased exclusive breastfeeding and more knowledge around nutrition. UNICEF Country Representative for Pakistan has expressed these views in connection with the 20th annual World Breastfeeding Week being celebrated in more than 150 countries worldwide from August 1-7, 2011. Exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of an infant's life remains essential as the country is still recovering from the impact of the destructive 2010 floods that inundated almost one-fifth of the country. While nutritious food supplies, sanitation and access to safe drinking water remain elusive for millions, exclusive breastfeeding provides critical protection from infection in environments without a safe water supply and sanitation. Acting WHO Representative in Pakistan has also termed exclusive breastfeeding as a core component of the child survival measures which both WHO and UNICEF are supporting the government of Pakistan for.

Initiating breastfeeding within the first hour of birth can prevent 22% of neonatal (under one month) deaths, while 16 per cent of neonatal deaths can be avoided if all infants under one year are breastfed from day one. Breastfeeding is directly linked to reducing the number of children who die before their fifth birthday. In Pakistan, 78 infants out of 1,000 live births die every year

while under-five mortality is 94 deaths per 1,000 live births. Significant numbers of infants continue to die from diarrhea, pneumonia, respiratory infections and under-nutrition. A major source of these diseases is the lack of exclusive breastfeeding and the use of unhygienic bottles, formula milk and teats. These infants can be saved through the natural protection of mother's milk without any other supplements for up to the first six months of their lives. The situation of children in Pakistan is serious with immunization, nutrition and sanitation issues, in particular, needing urgent attention. This is illustrated by only one in five children less than one year of age being immunized and 31 per cent being born with low birth weight. With a national average stunting rate at 37 per cent and acute malnutrition at 13 per cent, urgent action is needed. This year's celebration emphasizes the role that every member of society can play to raise awareness about breastfeeding — a natural and nurturing start to life for infants and mothers.

[The News – August 05, 2011]

Global Factors Fuelling Food Inflation

The National Price Monitoring Committee overlooked the food inflationary trend and noted that the food prices had shown an increase during July before the start of Ramazan. Secretary Finance Dr Waqar Masood observed that the food inflation appeared to be seasonal. The federal and provincial governments' officials also shifted the blame of food inflation on international factors. The food inflation is being fuelled by a combination of global trends in commodity prices and the supply/demand-driven factors largely beyond the control of national entities. The official also presented figures that international commodity prices had risen steadily during July 2010-July 2011 led by increase in prices of sugar that is 61.6 per cent, wheat 55.1 per cent, crude oil prices 54 per cent, edible oil: (palm oil 34.8 percent and soya bean oil 47.4 per cent), rice 27.8 per cent and tea 8.8 per cent. The review was held to determine the price trend of essential items and measures to stabilize them during Ramazan. The arrangements made by the provincial governments and Islamabad administration to control the prices of food items and ensuring smooth supply during Ramazan were also reviewed. The provincial officials informed about the measures being taken in their respective areas to control price hike and short supply in Ramazan.

PUNJAB: Punjab government informed that 308 Ramadan bazaars had been established, while Agriculture Marketing Department was providing potatoes, onions, dates, banana, lady finger, bitter gourd, squash, basin, gram pulse and rice at 33 fair price shops on wholesale prices.

SINDH: The Sindh government official said that a full-fledged department Supply and Price Department had been created and revived Bureau of Supply and Prices under its administrative control to monitor, evaluate, regulate and fix the prices of essential commodities by ensuring its smooth supply. Sindh Essential Commodities, Price control and Prevention of Profiteering and Hoarding Act 2010 and the Sindh Consumer Protection Act 2011 had been drafted to contain the prices at reasonable level in Sindh. The government also established weekly bachat bazaars.

KHYBER PAKHTUNKHWA: In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Special Price Magistrates had been activated under Food Stuff Ordinance 1975 to effectively check and control the prices of essential items and to ensure the prices in accordance with displayed price list. Itwar and Sasta bazaars had been established in Peshawar, Charsadha and Nowshera and local fairs were declared as Sasta bazaars.

BALUCHISTAN: In Balochistan, Sasta bazaars had been established in Quetta but due to insurgency, outreach extension had not been done. Section 144 of CrPC had been imposed during the Ramzan to stop smuggling of Livestock.

[Dawn - August 07, 2011]

Food Policies No More under Federal Control

With the devolution of the ministry of food and agriculture to the provinces, Pakistan has become perhaps the only country in the world with no federal control over food policies. The ministry's devolution has raised a number of questions. What will be the criteria for fixing the minimum support price for farm produce? Who will distribute urea? How will a wheat-producing province be persuaded to sell its produce to other provinces instead of exporting it at better prices? These are just some of the questions being raised. For instance, Gilgit-Baltistan owes Rs. 7 billion to Passco for supply of wheat over the past few years. After the adoption of 18th Amendment by parliament, the region will be depending on Punjab for wheat. Theoretically, if Punjab does not want to supply wheat to Gilgit-Baltistan, there is no immediate means of making it to do so. In the past, Punjab has tried to block the inter-provincial movement of wheat. It is also unclear who will be responsible for seed certification and dealing with quarantine and pest attack issues. Earlier, there were uniform quarantine rules at the state level to handle import of farm products in accordance with international standards and prevent import of substandard food and diseases. Most of the agriculture research institutes and laboratories are located in Punjab. The devolution will raise questions about creating new varieties of farm products in other provinces. Such issues can create food insecurity in certain parts of the country. Some experts say there was no constitutional need to devolve the ministry. Of the 39 functions of the ministry 33 were derived from the federal legislative list and six from the concurrent list. However, the parliament has ended up devolving all 39 functions. Some analysts allege that the move may have been instigated by the big farmers who are well represented in the National Assembly. The experts said a food security and research division was required to replace the ministry to fulfill constitutional obligations of food security, reduction of inter-provincial disparities and ensuring the role of rural people in national activities.

[Dawn - August 08, 2011]

A Question of Priorities

A number of recent reports have spoken of growing food insecurity in Pakistan and the fact that a majority of people simply do not have enough to eat. This should be a problem that draws far greater focus from political leaders given its gravity. Pakistan, as a country which grows enough wheat to feed its people, should not be confronted with so many starving citizens nor should it suffer from levels of hunger which match those of sub-Saharan Africa. The fact that this is happening is shameful. A report by the Islamabad-based Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI) reveals that 48.6 percent of the population suffers from food insecurity. The levels are worse at 67.7 percent in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas followed by Balochistan, where the rate is marginally lower. The SDPI links food insecurity with growing conflict, violence and militancy in the country. The level of despondency that exists here can be gauged from incidents of the kind recently reported in which eight young Pakistanis stuffed into a cramped container died at the Turkish border while trying to make it to Greece. They had paid agents large amounts from their savings and had even borrowed money so they could go overseas. Others before these young boys from Sialkot have followed a similar route. Others have tried to cling on to the wheels of airplanes headed overseas. This degree of desperation is unusual and indicates the plight of millions.

A recent report by Oxfam makes things even plainer. The survey states that Pakistan is one of 21 countries in the world where food insecurity has grown as a result of fluctuations and increases in prices. About 120 million people or two-thirds of the population spend 50 to 70 percent of their incomes on food. One can only imagine what is left to meet other urgent needs including healthcare and the education of children. Humanitarian agencies' fieldworkers report rising levels of malnutrition among men, women and children. The impact on women and children is

most severe. Levels of stunting and wasting among children is said to be growing. What is most disturbing about this situation is that official policies have, in many ways, directly created the crisis. The decision last year by a government that has consistently described itself as 'pro-people' to raise the wheat support price to Rs. 950 per 40 kg from the previous rate of Rs. 550 for the same amount has had a drastic effect and comes under terse criticism from international agencies such as the World Food Programme. While the government, including the prime minister himself, asserts that the price increase is intended to help the rural poor and prevent smuggling to neighboring countries notably Afghanistan, one can only wonder if the leadership considers this a reasonable step given the starvation it is causing. It is true some farmers have benefitted from the increase. But the millions who live off salaries, remittances or other fixed incomes in both rural and urban areas can simply not manage. To add to complications farmers growing sugar-cane or other crops are switching to wheat – creating the threat of a sugar shortage and further price rises in the future. It appears a key factor behind the steep increase is to collect rural votes – but the morality of this needs to be examined against the specter of mass hunger. We need to direct more attention towards the issue.

The matter is of course a humanitarian one; the knowledge that people die regularly simply because they cannot get enough to eat is horrific. It deserves far more media attention – going beyond the relatively isolated incidents of a family committing suicide or parents selling children. But the problem is also one of security. Links between poverty, militancy and deprivation have been well established. There is no coincidence in the fact that the worst problems lie in the most deprived areas – Fata and Balochistan. We cannot rid ourselves of terrorism till the key issue of the people is addressed and food for all ensured. While it is obviously Pakistan's own leaders who need to act in the interests of their people, and place the need to tackle starvation on a much higher priority, we also need more international attention directed towards the issue. The development of the people holds the key to the future and the escape from the growing violence we face. Beyond militancy, this comes also in the form of growing crime, frustrations unleashed in other ways and a growth in intolerance and desperation. There have been warnings already of a descent into anarchy if people cannot get enough food. The hunger of millions in an agrarian nation is a crisis. It is a much bigger one than the quibbling between political parties or even the power crisis. More and more international studies are highlighting the extent of a silent calamity, to which, even now, there appears to be indifference from the political leadership and a lack of readiness to bring in the changes in policy needed to curb food price inflation of around 18 percent seen over the past three years or create the opportunities to earn a livelihood that people everywhere so desperately need.

[The News - August 10, 2011]

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