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Food security still a far cry

RULING Awami League did little to fulfill its much trumpeted election promise of achieving national food security though its 2nd straight term in power ends after three months. In the election manifesto in 2008, AL promised to ensure people's rights to vote and food as preconditions for poverty alleviation. Before the controversial 2014 election, the ruling AL in its manifesto announced that it achieved self-sufficiency in food production while promising nutritious food to 85 per cent people by 2021. In the manifesto AL also promised to ensure by 2021 that each citizen consumed at least 2,122 kcal per day, being the minimum energy requirement of a healthy person, as per a local media report. But different studies released last year revealed that even now one third of the Bangladesh population cannot afford enough food. But according to food minister Quamrul Islam there is no food deficiency in the country as it was producing surplus food grains. But the International Food Policy Research Institute says that about 28 million people cannot buy enough rice to fill their stomachs. A study, jointly conducted by Brac University and Leveraging Agriculture for Nutrition in South Asia, released last year revealed that one third of the country's people were food deprived as they consume less than 1,800 kcal per day. The World Food Programme said in a report released in October 2016 that one fourth of the country's 160 million people were food insecure and hungry. Ruling policy makers are erroneously equating food security with food production--but this correlation is fallacious. Nutritionists attributed Bangladesh's widespread micronutrient deficiencies, especially among children and their moms, to lack of availability and access to non-cereal nutrient-rich foods. That's why Bangladesh's one in every three, or 36 per cent children suffer from stunting. While 50 percent children were born stunted in 2004, 36 percent now is still a very high figure as many Asian countries like Sri Lanka have only 11 percent stunting. Also mistakes in procurement of rice led the government to buy sun boiled rice when our people are accustomed to par boiled rice--due to this half the supplies at OMS outlets after the floods remain unsold. Bedeviled by rampant corruption, the government's OMS programme and other social safety net mechanisms came under severe criticism from the media and the human rights groups in recent years. Government dealers opened fire on people protesting misappropriation of rice for sale at discount price. Sacks of subsidized rice were intermittently discovered stacked in private warehouses in many districts. But the perpetrators were not punished. The government must do more to control corruption in food procurement and distribution, especially after disasters like floods, or more of the poor will sink into food insecurity.