

## Disclosure of wealth

*A core election pledge unredeemed*

ONE of the key pledges made by the BNP prior to the last election was that it would publish wealth statements of all public representatives in its efforts to combat corruption. The idea is a good one and would have been best had it been effected immediately upon assumption of power. Then we would have had an opportunity to see whether those in power have added any questionable amounts to their wealth during their tenure.

The rationale behind the idea remains as persuasive as ever. Publication of such information would go a long way towards reducing corruption in government and would also benefit the MPs and ministers who have kept their hands clean. It is not enough to be above reproach, one must be seen to be such, and publication of wealth information would help honest government functionaries demonstrate their integrity.

The current government's tenure has been marked by allegations of corruption being levelled against some senior cabinet ministers and lawmakers. Parliamentary standing committees have looked into the matter, but no report has ever been made public, and no charges have been brought against any senior figure.

With the changing of the guard following an election, a new incumbent would bring charges of corruption and malpractice against members of predecessor cabinet in a predictable alternating sequence. Publication of wealth information would help bring an end to this totally counter-productive cycle of accusation and acrimony which is never resolved while corruption ruled the roost.

Unless corruption at the very top is tackled, there will be no way to deinstitutionalise it. There is even a high court order that has been obtained directing political parties to reveal wealth information of candidates. This, too, we support, and we should mention that it is equally important for the opposition candidates as well.

Well, the ACC may have been formed, but what has been accomplished by this? The PM says that corruption cannot be removed overnight. This is true, but why the process should not have been started four and a half years ago? That said, now is as good a time to start as any.

## Neglected polytechnic institutes

*Ensure a quick turn-around*

THE state-run polytechnic institutes are facing a severe shortage of teachers, which is affecting the quality of education in an area deemed to be crucially important to industrial growth and national development. Statistics show that 28 out of the 38 polytechnics are running without a principal, 20 of them have no vice principal and 140 out of the 256 posts of instructors are lying vacant.

Twenty of the institutes are run under revenue budgets, while the rest are operated under different projects. The teachers have claimed that irregular promotion and recruitment, the absence of a gradation list and the indifference of the authorities concerned to the problems and needs of the polytechnic institutes are responsible for the acute shortage of teaching staff. However, the project status of nearly half the number of the institutes is a bit unsettling since the projects are left with a little more than a year before expiry.

Whatever may be the reason, technical education cannot be imparted smoothly under such circumstances. And we can ill-afford to be oblivious of its importance. Not long ago a famous economist observed that Bangladesh needed a string of well-equipped polytechnic institutes with an assured flow of mid-rung engineers who would form the building blocks in national progress. The observation could really provide us a guideline for beefing up technical education in the country. But the void in such a priority area is indeed surprising.

The technical education authorities must address the issue of shortage of teachers in earnest. They have to fill up the vacant posts as soon as possible. What they have to realise is that if the quality of technical education is made to suffer, a very important foundation of national development will have been weakened.

Headless institutions can only be the image of wobbly, directionless bodies. Let the government get a move on to streamline the chaotic technical education management situation.

# What is behind the energy crisis?



DR. ABDULLAH A. DEWAN

FOLLOWING a recent remark of the Finance Minister about fuel price hike, followed by other officials' "on again off again" price hike babble, unscrupulous traders, especially in the northern districts, resorted to the cartel-type behaviour of cutting supply and raising prices. The apprehensions about looming price hikes coupled with alleged hoarding resulted in panic buying, leading to a supply-demand imbalance and unpredictable price swings. This created a spectre of crisis and despair among the boro rice farmers and a countrywide perception of playing politics with fuel prices.

All recent published reports indicate that the daily average supply of 225 MW in the northern region is only half the 450 MW demand. The storage capacity at Baghabari is 32,174 tonnes against an annual demand for nearly 500,000 tonnes of diesel in the northern zones of the country.

The farmers in Kurigram switched to diesel-run irrigation pumps after hundreds of electric pumps were rendered useless for lack of power supply. Recently, more than 1,700 of those diesel-pumps in the district were facing diesel shortage or blackmarket price spikes. These examples, to the exclusion of numerous others, are cited to make a point that the fuel crisis did not just surface out of the blue, it is the result of lack of

leadership and understanding of the country's affairs.

"When I was the president of the country, I used to read 18 newspapers daily and used to ask the ministers concerned almost immediately to look into the relevant sector that went wrong. There is a serious crisis of fuel and power and the government is dubbing all these as media-projected." It doesn't take too much intelligence to decode who these remarks were directed to by former President Ershad.

Many suspect that the PM is not up to her job, depends too much on Kamal Siddiqui and Harris Chowdhury, and thus fails to keep herself fully abreast of the country's affairs except when her nemesis is calling street agitations and hartals. Getting advisors' briefings about the day's events and knowing some of those by reading newspapers are different things.

Anyway, both Khaleda and Hasina must realize by now that winning election and governing the country are not the same. Whichever party rules the country after the next election, oil supply and prices will be their Achilles' heel. It is imperative they both appreciate why I am drawing a glum picture of future oil prices and management of the economy of the country.

An increase in oil prices generally does not have much impact on the economy as a whole if users are convinced the increase is transitory. Economists contend that both demand and supply for oil are "inelastic".i.e. relatively insensi-

ble to price changes. As a result, a small change in either supply or demand will lead to relatively large price swings. Uncertainties about future supply-demand discrepancy results in unpredictable price changes that take a toll on the economy.

Market analysts and policy-makers infer that factors inducing uncertainty in future oil prices include political events abroad, prices of oil futures contracts and past episodes. Some estimates indicated that US invasion of Iraq added a "war premium" of \$5 to \$15 per barrel. Other events such as political violence in Venezuela lowering its oil production by 90 percent and internal strife and violence in Nigeria caused a production slack.

The supply-demand imbalance due to production disruptive events was further aggravated due to higher worldwide demand pressures. These include Tokyo Electric Power's shutting down 13 of its 17 nuclear reactors and unusually cold weather in the US. Inventories which were at their lowest level since 1975 failed to cushion the demand surge. Add to these China's inefficiency in energy utilization which is only 30 percent as efficient as the US. These factors worsened the already widespread uncertainty regarding the size of future price increases which caused some analysts to predict near-term crude oil prices to top \$75 to 100 per barrel.

The world consumes 83 million barrels of oil daily. Of that, the US alone consumes 20 million barrels daily. Here personal vehicles alone guzzle 65 billion gallons of gasoline and diesel fuel each year, and that number is projected to increase by 2.6 percent each year. The replacement rate of crude oil is less than the production rate. In 2004 the very best big oil company could replace only 89 percent of the oil that it produced. Then there is an escalating demand for oil from China and India in which China's demand is expected to grow at 7.5 percent and India's 5.5 percent compared to a 1 percent growth for the industrialized countries.

Fortunately, there are some hopeful signs of increased supply and lessening of demand pressure from future production of oil from tar sands and from shale. Canada, for instance, has the potential to produce between 50 to 60 billion barrels of crude from its tar sands.

The decreasing demand for gas-guzzling sports utility vehicles due to oil price spikes would siphon off some demand stress. China is shutting down antiquated plants and building 20 to 25 more efficient refineries whilst India is adding another 15 to 20. Once inventory replenishing is near its normal level and supply also resumes its normal pace, prices are expected to come down.

Unfortunately, many non economic factors may offset favorable supply and demand conditions thus contribute to oil price uncertainties. For example:

- Since a handful of the world's oil producers are concentrated in one

region they can act as a cartel to dictate the terms on world oil markets and manipulate prices.

- These producers, having no accountability, use oil revenues to increase military expenditures, and thus destabilize regional balance.
- They use oil revenues as a means to maintain their hold on power including yielding to terrorists' pressures and thus are constantly exposed to insecurity.
- For energy and national security, US military presence in the region is inevitable. This adds more tensions and a deepening rift between the pro-American oppressive regimes and the oppressed.
- China's increasing arms sales to some Middle Eastern countries hostile to the US and its allies to ensure its access to oil will also add to tensions in the region.

All of these are prime precursors to substantial oil price uncertainty. However, until oil prices stabilize in the global markets, the government in Bangladesh may consider the following options:

- Oil prices should not be artificially suppressed and some form of traffic congestion tax following that of London (where traffic congestion was reduced by nearly 20 percent) and Stockholm (currently on trial until July 2006) be imposed. Windfall benefits are reduction of greenhouse gases and gasoline savings.
- Selling diesel fuel to farmers at subsidized prices is defensible, but selling gasoline to private automobile owners and businesses at prices less than cost (subsidized by taxpayer money) is not. Most

people who pay taxes do not own and drive automobiles.

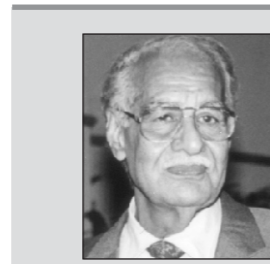
- Reacting to public pressure to hold down prices should be resisted as this would stop the economy adapting to a high oil price future.
- Government must let international price signals reshape the economic structure to minimise costs and maximise gains offered by oil scarcity and uncertainty.
- Allowing oil prices to rise and competitive pricing of other resources will economize on the use of oil.
- Price suppression is a form of price control which has adverse consequences as the country is experiencing now.

Supply and demand model predicts that price control will always culminate in hoarding, black market, and distorting allocations at the controlled price. So the experiences with diesel shortages and price uncertainties the farmers are coping with are simply a corroboration of that theory.

Many people think that Bangladesh is a free market economy. It is not. It is a mixed economy of the worst kind where bureaucracy gets involved everywhere and in everything. The outcomes are corruption, inefficiency, and waste. Bureaucracy is one of the primary reasons that many of the enterprises -- such as Biman, railway, telephone, and nationalized banks that ought to be privately owned but are run by the state -- are falling apart. The latest victim is the energy sector, the bloodline of an economy.

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# No beating about Bush



KULDEEP NAYAR

*writes from New Delhi*

WHEN Inder Kumar Gujral, then India's Prime Minister, met President Clinton in 1998 -- the first summit after many years--the former is believed to have remarked that America seemed to have forgotten that "there is a country called India." Clinton apologised for Washington's lapses. But he still took two years to visit India.

Even after the end of the cold war, Washington had not forgotten New Delhi's unequivocal rejection of military pacts against the Soviet Union. When assembling allies against Moscow at that time, Washington had said that those who were not with it were against it. India's retort was in the shape of non-aligned movement, stringing together some 100 countries to serve as a bulwark against war which New Delhi feared from the West.

Clinton's visit to India was America's first public admission of neglect. Washington wanted to take visible step towards conciliation with New Delhi. That the two were open, democratic societies did not need to be projected. It was known even during the cold war. What Clinton

wanted to convey was that America which rubbed India on the wrong side at one time was keen to make up with it. He was so solicitous for good relations with New Delhi that he did not visit Pakistan for more than a few hours. This was the time when New Delhi and Islamabad were hardly on speaking terms with each other.

Probably, America's equation with India would have exceeded all expectations if the latter had not exploded the bomb. New Delhi's "no" to the signing of non-proliferation treaty (NPT) despite Washington's pressure irritated Clinton. But nascent good relations went up in smoke when India exploded the bomb.

Clinton could not have done anything even if he wanted to repair the damage because Washington and its allies saw in the explosion a New Delhi which had dared them and upset their scheme of things. How could a country like India, yet struggling to overcome its backwardness, dare do so? This was the dominant feeling in the State Department and the Pentagon which provided nuts and bolts to the

policies anvil at the White House. Clinton's efforts and personal wiles came to naught. The two countries were back to square one: the cold war-type of relationship.

President George Bush has picked up the thread from where Clinton had left it off. The 9/11 attacks on America have changed both Bush and his country. They wanted support. Pakistan caved in no time and offered all help in less than 24 hours. Bush realised that the war against terrorism was hard and long. India, with a large non-Muslim population, fitted ideally into America's plans, which were essentially against radical Muslim countries. He decided to woo India. It was also a big market. America and other western countries were so saturated that they could not absorb their own goods. Washington also noted with appreciation the economic reforms which New Delhi had introduced on its own. India's huge technical manpower made it all the more attractive.

This was the backdrop to the Bush initiative to do away with the sanctions imposed on India after the

bomb explosion. He said bluntly that America needed India's 300-million middle class for the goods it produced. He signed with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in last July an agreement to share nuclear technology for power. Hostile opinion in both countries slowed down Bush. He has now done it, whatever his difficulties with the US Congress.

Once again, the bomb came in the way as it did during the days of Clinton. America recognised India as a nuclear power but did not want to give it the status which the nuclear club members America, the UK, France, China and Russia enjoyed. The plea that India should not keep its fast breeder reactor (FBR) hidden from international nuclear safeguards was not the real reason. Nor was it the difference over the separation of civilian plants from the military ones. The argument that America would have to accord the same status to Pakistan some day too did not matter because of Dr A.Q. Khan's freelancing in the nuclear field. The main objective was to deny New Delhi a seat at the high table of

nuclear powers. The agreement at Delhi may or may not do so. But the de facto status will in due course turn into the de jure one.

The US Congress and the media may still be biased against India for a variety of reasons. They have not yet reconciled to China's progress. How can they do so in the case of India which is still a land of snake charmers for most of them? But we are growing at the rate of eight per cent annually. Our economy needs technology and foreign investment. So long as we can work out some deal with America in these fields, we need not bother whether Washington is happy with our identification of civilian and military nuclear plants.

True, energy is our greatest need. The visit of President Chirac from France last month has prepared the ground. Now America's green light to all such countries should give us nuclear reactors and fuel. One thing we should remember is that there is no free lunch. America will expect from us more access to our market. How far we can go will be our predicament.

Washington is not worried about the Left which has made little difference to the Manmohan Singh government's economic blueprint. America's worry is that India is not implementing economic reforms fast enough and in the way it wants. In spite of this, the two countries have developed confidence in each other.

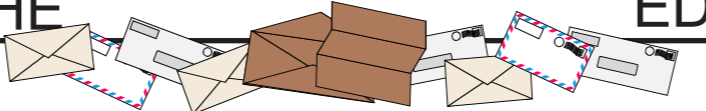
Bush's visit has shown that Washington is keen to span the distance with New Delhi at full speed and cover in a few months the ground that they did not for decades. India is reluctant to go that fast. People are generally indifferent to America. They may or may not like Bush, but they are not against the US. Even now, when they talk about America, they talk about its riches. They consider it a maharaja, the title with which they are familiar. The worry is that the pro-American lobby has become so blatant that it wants to push New Delhi into Washington's lap, not leaving even the fig-leaf of non-alignment to cover its tilt towards America.

Islamabad is always at the back of New Delhi's mind.

How can America be equally friendly with Pakistan? India sees the US tilt towards Pakistan. Bush's trip to Islamabad is viewed as yet another proof. It is comical to see both New Delhi and Islamabad vying with one another to be in Washington's good books. Bush's visit has only intensified the competition.

Kuldeep Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.

# TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR



Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

## Election

This letter intends to express my expectation from the media before this general election.

It is my belief that the media can perform the role of a strong catalyst to form the opinion against many ills and has the ability to move things; my small endeavour is based on this notion.

Before the election we all can foresee the movements of the candidates, transactions that might change hands and policies to be adopted to win over the voters and empower their positions. No doubt a bigger portion of the media would form alliance with their mentors as indirect media partner.

We as readers learned over the time how the media toe the line of their political, social and cultural agenda many a time more for the coterie's interest than the national interest.

Since this election is another crucial one towards our democratisation, any foul play or fallout will impair our hope and adversely affect our future.

What media can do or I wish from them -

- Focus on our optimism.
- Help defuse tension and fear.
- Help reduce the bipartisan divisions and focus on uniting them under common agenda and goals, no matter who they choose to vote.
- Accept the reality and adopt a strategy that can be implemented without a big push or shake up for change.
- Objectively analyse and outline the strategy of the contending parties.
- Educate people on true sense of democratic practices and help set a common objective for them.
- This objective should reflect the general aspiration, like ability of the candidate, clearly outlined policies, fare play. Educate people to maintain vigilance against wrongdoing.
- Clear the ambiguity in the campaign declarations.
- Emphasise institutional capacity building and discourage or even boycott the excessive exploitation of the political parties in the name of rights etc in the media.
- Partnering with the electronic

media, interviews, debates can be arranged to present the cases from the perspectives of future policy makers and the beneficiaries, in clear and objective manners.

Forge a strong alliance among all editors at least for the sake of election.

Forge unity with professional or pressure groups to create a conducive election environment.

The main objective is to help the voters to decide what could be good for them and good for the nation.

**MM Haque**  
Jeddah, K.S.A

## Three-member probe committee

Yet another fire in a textile factory and yet another story of injustice done to the working class and all we do about it is create a three-member probe committee to look into it. Who are these people who formed the committee? Three government officials? Or three genuinely honest human beings who are really concerned about the victims? What happened to the committee that was

formed after hundreds of garment workers were buried alive when a building collapsed last year? Where is their report?

I would really love to read one of these reports; and see what they actually say. I would want to see one sentence at least where they find the owner of the building responsible for the deaths of all these innocent human beings. Since the owner is not a resident of the US, it's pretty much guaranteed that he'll never have to suffer the consequences of his action. Best we could do was apprehend a low paid employee whose primary responsibility is to show up at work at 11 in the morning and have his 5 cups of tea during the day while dozing there. When are the authorities going to divert their attention from looting the country dry and actually do something for the people who elected them for the positions they're currently at?

I guess throughout my letter I have only asked questions but given no answers and honestly speaking I don't have much clue about how to

tackle these problems. All I can think of is punishing these criminals. It's unrealistic and unimaginable; but so are the things that they have gotten away with and it's high time we put an end to it.

**Sabik Enayet**  
New York

## Why no coverage for opposition leader?

It was a good day for parliamentary democracy in Bangladesh to have the leader of the house and the opposition leader facing each other. I was dismayed to see that BTV, which is the national television network, did not allow the country to listen to the opposition leader's speech. It was a dark cloud on what could have been a bright day. This is a gross violation of our right to information and I think someone should file a lawsuit against them. Do we, the people of the nation, not have the right to hear our leaders speak?

The government must have instructed BTV to censor the oppo-

sition leader. How could this government talk about democracy and censor on such vital issues? Today, not only people in Bangladesh but people all over the world watch ntv and ATN Bangla.

I urge people of good conscience to give it a thought and speak out.

**Rubel Ahsan**

USA

## Philippines scene

The Philippines, a democratically ruled country, is facing military problems. The country has also been facing insurgency in Mindanao province for a long period of time, but this appears to have been overshadowed.

Joseph Estrada, the former president who was a film star, came to power with a landslide public vote. During the election, he campaigned against reckless corruption.

Lately, we noticed that Mr. Estrada also got involved with huge corruption and disorder. In the next election, he was also toppled from power and Ms. Gloria became

president. After that the opposition created a lot of anarchy as we came to learn from the international media.

Recently, with the assistance of the opposition a group of military officers tried to topple the government.

Chief Superintendent Marcelino Franco, who was sacked Friday as head of an elite paramilitary police unit, and three of his men were "placed under restrictive custody. On the other hand, the government also held five left-wing legislators in the Philippines, wanted over an alleged coup attempt.

We hope the people of the Philippines will be able to overcome the present crisis.

**MAH Nazim**

University of Dhaka

## The role of opposition leader

Refer to the letter entitled "The role of opposition leader" published in The Daily Star on 10 February 06. The remarks our opposition leader

made in the long march really drew my attention. It was not a leader like speech. The tone was commanding. She never surveys the political situation in her speech. Sometimes she stands in her own light. In democracy tolerance is very important. Aggressive remarks only make the relations with the ruling party strained. They make good headlines in the newspapers but are very damaging for democracy. We, the general people, want to see the opposition and the ruling party working side-by-side, shoulder-to-shoulder to change the fate of Bangladesh.

**I. A. Chowdhury**  
Bramley, Leeds, UK