

My poet of the green mango season

Yet when it is Boisakh in Bengal, Rabindranath is its poet. That is not just because the twenty-fifth of the month happens to be his birthday. That is because few poets, if any, witnessed, experienced, and lived the summer in their poetry and music like Rabindranath did in his. Indeed few Bengali poets cared to sing the song of summer as such, and the sixteen songs in *Gitan* devoted to the season were probably the most that any poet in Bengal has ever written about those scorching months.

MAHFUZUR RAHMAN

THE seasons of the year probably meant more to Rabindranath than to any other Bengali poet. Rabindranath wrote hundreds of songs of the rains, pouring or wind-driven or merely diaphanous, that call the *kadamba* to life; the autumn of the fragrant white and orange *siuli* sprawled on beds of grass, bathed in dew; the winter of the golden harvests and departing leaves; the spring of glorious blossoms and scented breeze; and the summer of the searing sun and the tempestuous *kalboisakhi*. The poet lived them all.

Was Rabindranath perhaps partial to any season? Hard to tell. The largest number of lyrics in his *Gitan* is devoted to *barsa*, the season of the rains. *Basanta*, spring, follows closely. *Sarat*, early autumn, is a distant third. There are only sixteen songs of *Grisma*, summer, out of almost three hundred on nature in *Gitan*. There are fewer songs of *Hemanta*, late autumn, and *Sit*, winter. Still, numbers do not prove preference. After all, this is what the poet says he wished for at the end of the journey of his life:

[Jeno] Chaiti ritur phule phate bhorte pari dala

--that I may fill my basket with the flowers and fruit of all six seasons. (Translation, here and later, with apologies to the poet, is mine.)

Life offered him an unending variety and he cherished it all. He wished nothing better than to be

able to stop at exactly the sam of the constant cycle of rhythm of the music of life -- *Jeno amar ganer sese thamte pari same ese*. Elsewhere in *Gitan*, the seasons are the celestial strings of *biswabina*, where each plays its part, and the bina can only be conceived as a whole.

Yet when it is *Boisakh* in Bengal, Rabindranath is its poet. That is not just because the twenty-fifth of the month happens to be his birthday. That is because few poets, if any, witnessed, experienced, and lived the summer in their poetry and music like Rabindranath did in his. Indeed few Bengali poets cared to sing the song of summer as such, and the sixteen songs in *Gitan* devoted to the season were probably the most that any poet in Bengal has ever written about those scorching months.

Who else would care to sing, for example:

Darun agni bane-re rhidaya trisay hane-re

Rajani nidrahin, dirgha dagdha din

Aram nahi je janere.

Susko kanansakhe kianto kapot dake

Koron katar gane re...?

(O! The terrible arrows of fire kill the soul with thirst! The sleepless night, the long, scorched day, know no respite! The dove on wilted forest boughs coos its tired, melancholy song...)

It is rarely that we find anyone singing the song of such suffering. But also who else other than Rabindranath would take it all in its

stride with such equanimity?

Bhay nahi, bhay nahi Gaganer royechi cahi

Jani jhanjhar bese dibe dekha tumiese

Ekada tapito prane-re.

(Fear not. I gaze into heaven/ I know you will, in your tempestuous cape/ Come into this scorched soul of mine.)

The equanimity is even more remarkable in the following lines where it comes close to willing submission to the cruel season:

Nai ras nai, darun dahan bela

Khelo khelo taba nirab bhairab khela...

Pran jadi karo morusama

Taba tai hok-he nirmam...

(No moisture, none. The sizzling day! Play your silent Bhairab act!...[Still] If you wish to turn my life into desert! Be it, O pitiless one! Let us, you and I, alone meet, in cruel union.)

The month that dominates the summer season in *Gitan* is of course *Boisakh*. The seven songs devoted especially to the month lay at the core of *Griswa*. The poet invokes *Boisakh* thus:

Eso, eso, eso he Boisakh

Tapas niswas baye mumursare dao uraye

Batsarer abarjana dur hoye jak.....

Muche jak glani, ghuce jak jaral

Agni snanesuci hok dhara.

(Come, *Boisakh!* Come! Come in the hermit's breath! Blow away the near dead! Let the refuse of the year be swept aside! Let disgrace be wiped away and decrepitude die! Let the shower of fire purify the

earth.) Still, the relentless heat of the *Boisakh* day can be much too much:

Cokshe amar trsna ago,

Trsna amar bokso jure

Ami bristibihin Boisakhi din,

Santape pran jay je pure...

(O the thirst in my eyes/O the thirst that spreads in my heart/O the rainless *Boisakhi* day/The heat burns my soul...)

The near-dominant theme of the *Boisakh* day is suffering but a magnificent variation of theme makes up the whole symphony of summer's music. The poet finds, for example, *Boisakher ei bhorer haoasemardu mondo... adho ghumer pranto chhoa bokulmolar gandha* Here comes this *Boisakh* dawn's gentle breeze... the scent of the garland of *bokul* from the edge of slumber. He writes of the sizzling mid-day when even birds stop singing and the heat parches the soul. But, finally, *Oi bujhi kalboisakhi/ sondhya-akas dey dhaki* here comes *kalboisakhi* eclipsing the evening sky; and *bosundharar tapo prane bipul pulak lage* -- the suffering soul of the earth fills with tremendous joy. Rabindranath's invocation of *kalboisakhi* is just as remarkable as his quietude towards the suffering that the season inflicts.

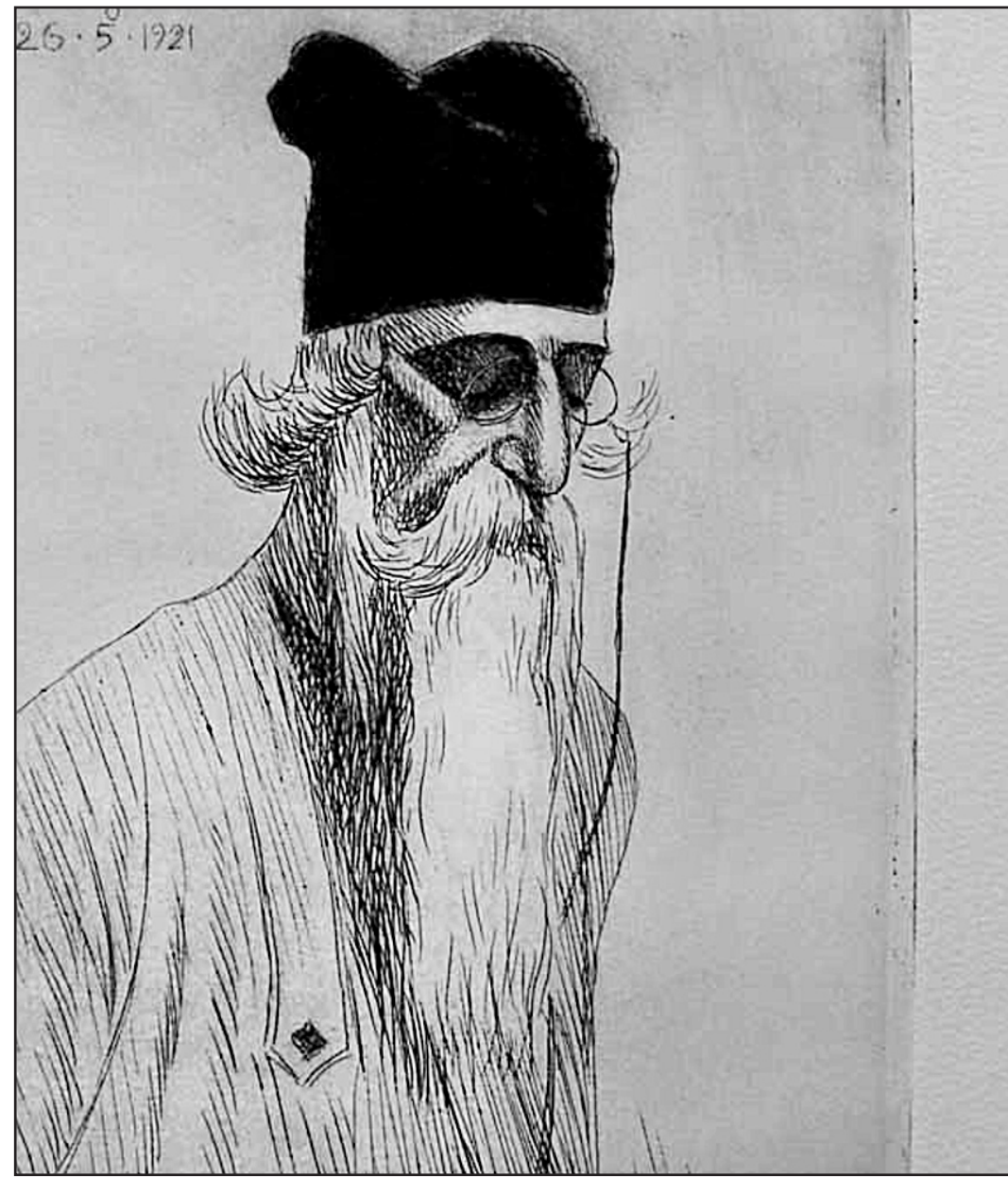
For the rest of us too, *kalboisakhi* is the epitome of *Boisakh*. Generations of Bengalis have witnessed it, and have by turn feared it and been fascinated by it. The sun has baked the rainless expanse of the paddy fields for days on end. The earth's suffering appears endless. So seems the pain of the human being trapped in unmitigated heat of *Boisakh*. Then one day, perhaps late in the shimmering afternoon, a tiny cloud appears low in the horizon. In no time it spreads and rolls and grows into enormous dark nimbus mass, obliterating the heavens. As if on cue, the wind sweeps down the paddy fields, flattens the young

paddy, picks up strength, and lashes the hamlets, the mango tree, the palm, and the bamboo with barely credible fury. Here, a tree crashes to the ground. There, the thatched roof of a house is blown away. A deafening clap of thunder is soon heard. Finally, the rain comes. It comes in slanting, piercing, torrent. A lightning splits the sky. Soon it is a tumult of twisting trees, crashing branches and flying house fragments while the rain lashes and drenches them all with swirling, furious abandon.

In the din one can hear the distant voices of children in the mango groves. They shriek, more in joy than in fear, their voices muffled by roar of the storm. The fear is partly a frisson from a chance tree branch crashing down on them or the lightning striking. The joy is from the harvest of fruit that *kalboisakh* has shaken free from the mango trees in gigantic blasts -- the green mango. Soon the gathered ends of the children's little wet *lungis*, the frocks, the dhotis, all wet and clinging to the body, fill with the fruit. And they run home.

The *kalboisakhi* is the climactic and sudden end of a *Boisakh* day; the green mango is the embodiment of a slow progression of the seasons from the mango blossoms of spring to the luscious fruit of *Jaistha*. Rabindranath the poet wrote adoringly and longingly about the mango blossoms, especially when evoking spring, but never about the green mango. Which is a pity. The millions of mango trees of Bengal, laden with billions of green mangos waiting to ripen is as much a part of *Boisakh* as the scorching sun, the baked earth, the scorched heart, and the *kalboisakhi*. No Bengali worth his or her salt can afford to ignore it. The very thought of it is enough for him, and especially her, to salivate.

I digress -- perhaps a sign, like the progression of the season, of



the passage of life itself. Not for Rabindranath was Keats' "mellow fruitfulness," or the "maturing sun" conspiring to "fill all fruit with ripeness to the core." That would be too sensuous for him.

No matter. *Taba tai hok*. Let us not talk about the green mango but only of the season of it. Today, far

away from home, under my mind's mango tree, laden with green mango, I sit and celebrate the birth of the greatest poet of Bengal and her greatest son -- and see *Boisakh* as he saw it. And I sing:

He nutan
Dekha dik ar-bar janmera prothama subhakkhan...

Udayo digante sankha baje, mor citto majhe

Cira nutanere dilo dak

Pacise Boisakh

Mahfuzur Rahman, economist, lives in New York.

How to attract FDI

To be competitive in international markets, and to upgrade its potential in the foreign investors' eyes, Bangladesh needs to adopt urgent plans for the short run and the medium term. While indices as increase in the GDP per capita, share of exports in GDP and increasing the share of FDI in the services sector are medium term goals, the government should take initiatives to immediately develop those sectors directly under its control, such as the infrastructure, specifically port infrastructure and ICT.

MD. GHULAM MURTAZA

FOREIGN direct investment (FDI) is increasingly becoming a preferred form of capital flow to developing countries in recent years. In the context of the heavy debt burden plaguing these countries, FDI promises to be the bright ray of hope for harnessing capital flows without the pangs of capital repayment with interest. Feldstein and Razin (2000) and Sodka (2001) note that the gains to host countries can result in transfer of capital and technology, competition in the domestic input market, employee learning and contribution to tax revenues in the host country

National policies and incentives

Bangladesh has adopted a number of policies and provided generous incentives to attract FDI. These include tax holiday for 5 to 7 years, full repatriation of profit and dividend by the foreign companies, and so on. Bangladesh is also a signatory of the Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency (MIGA) insuring investors against political risk.

According to a recent UNCTAD report: on World Investment: foreign affiliates of some 64,000 transnational corporations (TNCs) generate 53 million jobs; FDI is the largest source of external finance for developing countries; one-third of global trade is intra-firm trade.

However, recent trends in global FDI flows indicate that despite the best tax reliefs and other incentives compared to neighbouring countries, a country's FDI potential may still be low.

Economic determinants of FDI

FDI can be resource-oriented or market-oriented. The resource-oriented determinants include availability of raw materials, low-cost skilled/unskilled labour and technology-created or innovation-created assets. Market-oriented determinants generally refer to the market size and marketability of the field products for which FDI is sought.

Why foreign firms

look abroad

Caves (1981) argues that plants in different countries under common control of an MNE tend to have lower costs than if they operate under different managements due to some peculiar characteristic of the MNE which may be in the form of a special skill (technology, know-how) or special skill in marketing a product. This characteristic enables it to overcome the costs it is put up with, which are not faced by the local firm, such as unfamiliarity with the environment (including language, culture, etc.), sources of raw materials, etc. Once a company has decided to look abroad, it tries to make information available on issues such as the general political atmosphere, administrative practices such as tariffs, import quotas, etc., government assurances regarding remittance of profits and repatriation of capital, existence of investment guarantee agreement, and so on.

FDI Potential Index

UNCTAD constructed a FDI Potential Index, using a set of structural variables to assess the potential for countries to attract FDI. According to its index, Bangladesh is an under-performer when it comes to attracting FDI.

The Inward FDI Potential Index captures factors such as the rate of GDP growth over the previous 10 years, the share of exports in GDP, the average number of telephone lines and mobile telephones per 1,000 inhabitants, commercial energy use per capita, the share of R&D spending in GDP, the availability of high-level skills, country risk, etc.

FDI situation in Bangladesh

According to an UNCTAD report, FDI to Bangladesh averaged \$7 million annually from 1990-1996, but increased to an annual average of \$196.8 million from 1997-2000, primarily due to foreign investment in Bangladesh's energy sector. However, after declining to \$52 million in the next two years, FDI jumped to \$120 million in 2003.

Bangladesh has very often sent trade delegations abroad to explore

trade opportunities as well as high-light opportunities for investing in Bangladesh to the foreign would-be investors. A number of foreign business delegations have visited Bangladesh to explore trade and investment opportunities, including from India, France, Turkey, Malaysia, Taiwan, China, and Korea.

View from the other side

How do foreigners see investment prospects in Bangladesh? A survey of reports on the issue including a recent Investment Climate Statement on Bangladesh by the Bureau of Economic and Business Affairs of the US Government found that foreigners often find that ministries request unnecessary licenses and permissions. Added to these difficulties are such problems as corruption, labour militancy, poor infrastructure, inconsistent respect for contract sanctity, and policy instability and to a lesser extent, from Bangladesh's image as an impoverished and undeveloped country subject to frequent and devastating natural disasters.

Imperatives for Bangladesh

To be competitive in international markets, and to upgrade its potential in the foreign investors' eyes, Bangladesh needs to adopt urgent plans for the short run and the medium term. While indices as increase in the GDP per capita, share of exports in GDP and increasing the share of FDI in the services sector are medium term goals, the government should take initiatives to immediately develop those sectors directly under its control, such as the infrastructure, specifically port infrastructure and ICT.

Developing infrastructure

Chittagong port handles nearly 85 percent of the country's exports and imports. Besides, Bangladesh is located at the centre of the South Asia Regional Economic Co-operation (SASEC) countries, having borders with India and Myanmar and with close proximity with land-locked countries -- Nepal and Bhutan. Problems like outdated machinery, inadequate storage

space, etc. make it one of the costliest ports in Asia. The port is heavily congested and ship turnaround time needs 4 to 5 days compared to 1 to 2 days in Singapore and Bangkok. Container handling costs around \$600 as against \$150 to \$300 in neighbouring ports.

Under government initiative four gantry cranes were commissioned at the port on January 30, 2006 to make cargo handling more efficient. But due to absence of skilled operators they are being used up to only a third of their capacity. Additionally, the Government may opt for leasing of equipment for port handling and leasing of floating crafts from the private sector.

Similarly, Bangladesh Railway too is incapable of carrying and delivering the container cargoes efficiently and timely due to poor capacity, and lack of operational efficiency. Bangladesh Railway currently accounts for less than 15 percent of container trans-shipment in the Dhaka-Chittagong Economic Corridor (DCEC), which provides potential sub-regional linkages to northeastern states of India as well as Nepal and Bhutan.

Road infrastructure: although there has been a rapid expansion of road network, there is hardly any significant trans-shipment through road transport because it cannot handle container lorries due to capacity constraint.

Information and Communication Technology (ICT): the country is at an emerging stage and lacks behind other Asian countries in comparison. However, a mentionable initiative is that the government has taken up programs to train fresh graduates in ICT subjects for six months to one year as interneers in different IT organizations/companies for acquiring practical experience and on-hands training.

In conclusion, it may be asserted that to attract FDI in a significantly large way it is important for Bangladesh to look beyond offering lucrative incentive packages and inculcate the criterion leading to increasing its FDI potential, as analysed above, within a short time.

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Fuel price: Why not face reality today?

With fuel price already exceeding \$74 per barrel (crude oil), \$85 per barrel (HSD) and liable to go to \$100 with the likely dislocation in countries like Iran and Nigeria, economists, politicians, government bureaucracy and end users should face the reality of fuel price adjustment. China and India are consuming oil at an unprecedented level in order to cope with their economic growth. This has resulted in an unbalanced supply/demand situation world wide, specially affecting the Asian economy and smaller countries in general.

MONIRUL ISLAM

FUEL price adjustment in line with international price is a reality. For any country, it is important to take appropriate steps to avoid short and long-term financial strain on the economy. There has been no public reaction against measures to reflect the true cost of fuel procurement (with domestic price being regulated by market forces), except, it seems, in Bangladesh. The question of subsidies from government is never an issue with either the public or petroleum operators in developing and highly developed country which follow either capitalistic or socialist economy.

Even India has followed an adjustment policy for fuel prices in the domestic market, linking to the international price through careful regulatory control, currency adjustment, rational duty structure, and keeping a realistic border price, all after consultation at the highest policy making levels.

This was done about three years back in India for gradual recovery of the losses incurred by the state oil companies due to the rising trend in international fuel price.

Similarly, BPC should have been increasing fuel prices through gradual adjustment in line with economic growth (i.e. GDP and consumer buying capacity).

In addition, Pakistan and Sri Lanka have followed the same principle to maintain equitable border price with that of India, being a neighbouring country.

Bangladesh is surrounded by an open border with India and therefore the border price in Bangladesh for fuel products should not be less than the border price in India, in order to discourage the smuggling/barter trade being practiced for fuel by the Bangladeshi traders at the border.

The ideal prescription for Bangladesh fuel pricing should have been adopted back in 2002 when there was a proposal to deregulate the price of fuel, or to adjust the administered price (linked with Import Parity Price) in line with the international price, devaluation of

currencies, and above all, "devising a price mechanism" to reflect the procurement cost, rational duty structure, and reducing operating cost of the state oil companies.

The other factor was to take the opportunity cost when the international fuel prices were going upward from a bench mark of \$32 per barrel for HSD, \$42 per barrel for MS, \$30 per barrel for kerosene, \$40 per barrel for JP1, \$16 per barrel for FO and \$25 per barrel for crude oil.

The exchange rate at that time was Tk 60 to the dollar and therefore the government ought to have taken steps to implement the price mechanism duly adopted in the gazette but that was kept in abeyance in anticipation of falling price of fuel in the international market.

The government missed this opportunity and is now having to go through this present problem of needing to adjust prices drastically, whereas the adjustment would have been more prudent and acceptable if done on a quarterly basis.

This is because in developing countries like Bangladesh, the narrow time-window for changing prices at Import Parity Price (IPP) levels may provide scope for manipulation -- both at secondary levels as well as at tertiary distributors/retailers levels, leaving the consumers at the mercy of the former.

Exchange Rate Fluctuation (ERF) factor also needs to be considered by creating an ERF Pool to absorb the fluctuations in the dollar exchange rate. Incorporating the above concepts, the suggested pricing formula for administrated downstream petroleum operation could be as follows:

Retails/Consumer Price = IPP+CDVAT+OMC+STC+NDA+ERF (Note: OMC = Oil Company Margin, DM = Dealer's Margin, NDA = National Debt Amortization, STC = Secondary Transportation Cost, ERF = Exchange Rate Fluctuation Pool). The National Debt Amortization will help BPC to recover its losses of Tk 5,500 crores so far over a period of 10 years through this process of amortization.

The above formulation prescribed for fuel pricing is the ideal price mechanism system that the government can follow until the petroleum sector deregulation take

place. In fact, the proposed price mechanism was targeted for BPC and its subsidiary public companies to operate on a more efficient basis and recover or reduce financial losses currently sustained by the public sector. The deregulated price will further open up privatization downstream under the energy regulated commission which is now inactive.

With fuel price already exceeding \$74 per barrel (crude oil), \$85 per barrel (HSD) and liable to go to \$100 with the likely dislocation in countries like Iran and Nigeria, economists, politicians, government bureaucracy and end users should face the reality of fuel price adjustment.

China and India are consuming oil at an unprecedented level in order to cope with their economic growth. This has resulted in an unbalanced supply/demand situation world wide, specially affecting the Asian economy and smaller countries in general.

Do we think that Bangladesh can afford to go without fuel import for agriculture, transport, and other vital sectors due to the constraints that they are facing with foreign exchange component for fuel oil procurement, fund support from banking institution, and above all BPC's financial losses?

The government should now take a very pragmatic long-term perspective to face the reality of price enhancement. The price of diesel and kerosene should be adjusted equally to maintain the import parity with that of border price for domestic pricing of these two products, which constitute about 80% of the fuel consumption of the country.

Other fuels like JP 1 and furnace oil come to 9%, MS and octane are 10% of total fuel consumption, and lubricants and others are 1%. So the effect of raising octane and MS prices to offset the loss sustained through diesel and kerosene would be negligible to the extent that there exists Tk 20 per litre cost differential arising out of present procurement of diesel and kerosene from international market.

One suggestion is to replace import of octane by CNG, with a long-term perspective together with innovative technology to improve

the octane number and discourage export of naphtha as a distress cargo at the spot market.

The other solution that is most vital is to cover up the procurement loss of diesel and kerosene at three stages of prices adjustment. The immediate step to build up 35% of the loss in the procurement with the IPP.

The second phase is to compensate 50% with the budget for the year 2006-07 through allocation of rational duty structure to absorb the loss plus adjustment with price with international procurement. The last phase of adjustment should be done in December 2006 when the irrigation season will start. This will give a breather to the consumers to absorb the price shocks over the phasing out period.

The automobile segment of small medium, and large fleet should be banned for import for one or two year to accommodate the economy in other sectors. However, the import of CNG operated auto-rickshaw should be encouraged to operate in all the major cities through liberal import policy.

The dependence on diesel, octane, and petrol should be minimized with regulatory enforcement. As an energy substitute, the policy should be to target alternate energy like renewable energy. CNG-based industry, coal-based power plant in north Bengal, gas-based power generation to be augmented in the next three years without going through bureaucratic channels in the private sector.

Diesel-powered irrigation should be replaced at a gradual pace (through use of gas) and thereby we can save foreign exchange and sustain financial saving with long-term perspective for the country's energy security.

In light of the reality of the international situation and our affordable adjustment with budgetary target, we need to move beyond the controversy over fuel price adjustment, and face the situation with a strong political will to avoid a financial and economical catastrophe. This is for the greater interest of the country and is likely to receive the support of the citizens.

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