

Death most unacceptable

Trigger-happy police, inept university administration

WE strongly condemn the reckless killing of Mosharraf Hossain Shamim, a student of Shahjalal University of Science and Technology (SUST) by police firing in Sylhet. Our condolences to the victim's family. It is basically inconceivable that to subdue some feuding students of SUST and Jalalabad Ragib-Rabeya Medical College Hospital the university authorities had summoned the police before trying harder for an amicable settlement of the impasse.

The skirmish between the students of the two institutes began following a trivial incident but because of inept handling of the situation by the authorities concerned it blew out of proportion. The police inexplicably at one stage opened fire on students, allegedly without seeking permission from a magistrate, while they were demonstrating on the Sylhet-Sunamganj Road on Friday. As many as seven SUST students received bullet wounds and among them Shamim later died. We are further perturbed to learn as well that the condition of two of the bullet-hit students is critical.

Two things are clearly evident from the tragic incident. One, complete failure of the university authorities to preempt a minor incident from developing into a catastrophe; and secondly, disrespect for human life on the part of the police. The propensity on the part of the men in uniform to pull the trigger at little or no provocation has numerous ominous manifestations for social order and democracy. It beats all rationale as to why the police cannot apply other acceptable methods to deal with commotion being used all over the world? Why and how they get away without having to face severe punishment after causing grievous injury or death to a citizen of the country needs to be answered by the relevant authorities?

We notice with grave concern that pent-up student grievances or mishandling of a minor situation by the administration results in eruption of student angst. We feel that serious thoughts ought to be given to this phenomenon and a suitable consultative mechanism should be put in place at the educational institutions.

Who answers for the culpable lapse?

Biman's irresponsibility touching new low

THE first thing that comes to mind about a scheduled Biman DC-10 flight being denied permission to land at New York's J F Kennedy Airport, with well over 200 passengers onboard, is a question: why the clearance to disembark at 'destination' was not obtained before take off from Dhaka in the first place? On its last leg of the trip, why was it for the Montreal Airport to pass on the message to the pilot that the aircraft has been debarred from landing in New York, whereupon it landed in Canadian soil (thanks for their courtesy) in a desperate situation compounded by fuel shortage? Without making absolutely sure from Dhaka that the flight was on, why was it operated to New York at all?

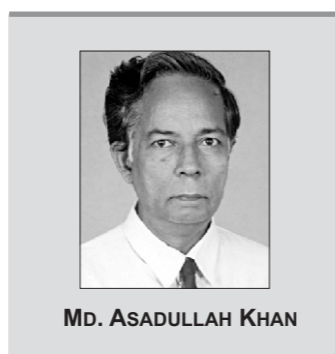
This is doubly reprehensible in the knowledge that the US Federal Aviation Authority (FAA) had expressed reservations about the obsolescence of DC-10 risking passenger safety and security. Earlier, Biman had been fined for rerouting its New York flight through Brussels without FAA permission. That itself reflected a degree of negligence on the part of the authority in Dhaka.

The deplorable state of mismanagement in Biman is manifestly reflected on the hardship the stranded Bangladeshi passengers, including a good number of foreign customers, were subjected to, let alone the high premium paid for flying them to their destinations through other airliners at great loss to the exchequer. Such blatant failure and senseless action on the part of Biman are also contributing to our already deteriorating image.

Major policy changes are required to revamp Biman's operations with a clear emphasis laid on passenger safety and security in the high-tech aviation business of today which is so fiercely competitive and demanding. We need a modernised fleet. In the immediate term, we go for a realistic selection of routes based on available fleet and other related logistical resources.

Government has to take some hard decisions for a complete overhaul of Biman's management, if it is to become a viable national flag carrier.

Alternative energy only way out of power crisis



MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

IT is worth recalling the planning process that supreme leaders of Soviet Union adopted after the Russian Revolution that went into making the country into a great superpower. Soon after the Russian revolution, the Soviet Union declared that education and electricity -- the two E's -- were the two eyes of the country.

Bangladesh is different. Unfortunately for us, the trauma experienced during the liberation war and the hope and optimism exhibited during the initial years after liberation did not ignite us to rebuild it with meticulous planning and vision. In consequence, the country lurched from one crisis to another.

After 35 years, the dominant image is one of stereotypes. And that is why we turn a blind eye to both education and electricity. Leaving aside the education field that seems to be riddled with corruption and a steady erosion of quality, nothing seems to be working on the electricity front too.

If mistakes were made in the early 1980s, that was because of lack of experience and knowledge. If mistakes are made today, it is because of lack of integrity, commitment and competence. Undeniably true, the ills plaguing the power generation and distribution front are too many to be mentioned here and all these can be attributed to the rotten system of governance.

It needs hardly any emphasis that electricity is the driving force behind

Conventional sources of power available in the country continue to dry up with ever increasing exploitation. In such a critical situation, we have to look for alternative sources like wind and solar power for generation of electricity. At the moment wind power seems the most feasible and viable option in view of the availability of vast coastal areas of the country that offer bright prospect for harnessing power through setting up of windmills.

economic progress. There is hardly any sector or person that can do without electricity now. Only rain-fed farming can do without electricity, but even that farmer needs electricity for his home and shallow pump machine.

Even illiterate, desperately poor peasants will tell you if they could have only regular power supply, their lives would change. In the face of acute shortage of power that caused the power pumps run dry and household water supplies trickles the pent up resentment of the people burst into widespread protests, rallies and clashes with the law enforcers trying to hem them in.

From Kansat to Syedpur to Satkhira to Shanir Akhra, the whole country has now turned into a crisis zone with people crying for water and power. The situation came to such a pass because the country's power generation and transmission system remains very poor at almost all the places because the governments never undertook a timely project to upgrade either the generating plants or the transmission system.

Yet there are people in responsible positions in the government that do not support proposals for private-sector generation of electricity. People are inclined to believe that because of lack of coordination among the three vital organisations -- power sector, energy division and political masters -- the decision taken at a high-level emergency meeting convened by the Prime Minister in October 2005 to set up five independent power generation

plants in different places of the country, each having 50 MW capacity, got stalled.

As per the plan of the government, the private sector sponsors were expected to set up about 45 small power plants and the government would purchase electricity from these plants at a negotiated tariff. But questions arose about the selection process as the selectors were given discretionary power to qualify or disqualify a sponsor.

The government presented a comprehensive plan to the World Bank in this regard. Under the program, 900 MW of electricity was to be generated -- 200 MW through five to six barge-mounted and trailer-mounted plants, 500 MW through a rehabilitation program, and 200 MW through introducing an intensified load management system. Unhappily, government had to abandon the small power plant project following World Bank's objection regarding its implementation, at least on the issue of transparency.

The public perception of corruption being all pervasive among all the players involving power ministry bosses, politicians and bureaucrats perhaps is no exaggeration. As reports suggest, the power sector has been termed by the World Bank as one of the country's most corrupt sectors where different business lobbies with blessings from a section of officials and decision makers are striking raw deals at the cost of the nation. The administration and advisers looking after the power sector even when they repeatedly

failed to live up to people's expectation maintain privately that all power generation should be in the hands of the government.

As reports published in the newspapers indicate, 20 power projects planned by the previous AL government for implementation during 2001-2006 but subsequently stalled by the present alliance government that would have added 6,290 MW to the national grid by 2012 will now be revived.

With demand for power likely to shoot up to 9,000 MW in 2012 from 5,200 MW now, there has to be a bold initiative and transparent move to bring such ambitious project into fruition. The country is now reeling under a record load shedding of 2,000 MW that has triggered violent protests, clashes at Kansat (20 died in police firing) and lately at Shanir Akhra in the city.

With the country's projected power demand likely to shoot up to 17,000 MW by the year 2020 that means an increase in power generation of 950 MW per year with internal financing of Tk.33,710 crore, it is a colossal program hardly achievable with such a closed vision.

With fossil fuel becoming scarcer and its price shooting up almost every month, the planners and decision makers must look for alternative source of power to keep already strained the economy running. And the answer is perhaps blowing in the wind.

It is now the world's fastest growing power source -- a high-tech challenge to the coal mines, oil rigs,

nuclear reactors, and hydro-electric dams. Experts say that wind could provide up to 12 percent of the earth's electricity within two decades. The idea of harnessing an energy supply as free as the wind generated enough megawatts of excitement to light up an entire new industry in the developed world.

After the onslaught of first Gulf War that shot the oil prices up and made supply uncertain, developed countries looked for new energy in the wind. Engineers used advanced technology to make wind turbines more efficient and cost effective than those of yesteryears. Today's models in the US are capable of meeting 10 percent of America's energy demand and within 30 years, newer versions could provide for a quarter of the US's power needs.

Reports have it that machines now operating in California, especially in areas of high wind, have brought the production cost of power to 4 cents per KW.

American technology in wind power dates back to 1900 when most of the electricity on US farms was provided by windmills. To meet an ever increasing demand due to increasing number of households as well as to safeguard the entrenched interest of the administration in oil business, these were replaced during the 1930s, when the Rural Electrification Administration wired the countryside.

But the technology staged a comeback when the oil embargoes and environmental concerns prodded the politicians to look for alternative sources. With trials one after another, California in particular became the nursery of advanced technology. Researchers, in the meantime brought about many innovations: they modified the contour of the blades, some for instance, thicker in the middle in order to provide more stability. Engineers put electronic sensors atop the towers that constantly monitor wind direction and turn the machine accordingly.

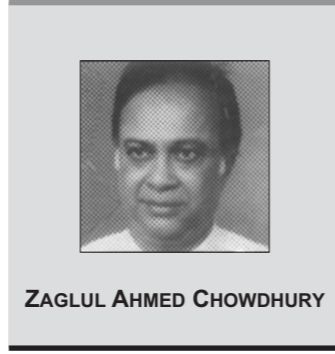
In the US or in other western countries it was not the failure of the technology, rather the vested interests that kept the technology away from the people. But the tremor caused in the developed world by the growing public concern over pollution through burning fossil fuels has increased the pressure for renewable energy like wind and solar power.

In their case it is the choice of technology, in our case it is the desperate need to opt for alternative source of power. At the moment that seems the most feasible and viable option in view of the availability of vast coastal areas of the country that offer bright prospect for harnessing power through setting up of windmills. Interestingly, India has switched over to second position achieving a production capacity of more than 3,000 MW through harnessing wind power.

Meanwhile, conventional sources of power, like gas, available in the country continue to dry up with ever increasing exploitation. In such a critical situation, we have to look for alternative sources like wind and solar power for generation of electricity so crucially needed to achieve poverty alleviation program and our other goals.

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Left resurgent in Indian state assembly elections



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

THE results of the state assembly elections in India have been by and large on expected lines without any major upsets, but not fully without elements of surprise. This surprise is in the form of the extent of success by the ruling Left Front in the West Bengal where it achieved spectacular success belying suggestions of a slide in its strong grip even though a win was a foregone conclusion. The front has won 235 of the 293 assembly seats -- more than two third majority in a stunning display of electoral success in the contemporary Indian history. The CPM-led leftists returned to power for the seventh time in an uninterrupted 28 years of rule with no such parallel. Indeed, the record is simply splendid and the communists' performance in the just concluded polls has eclipsed their earlier successes as they also wrested power in southern state Kerala. Besides, they have a say in the federal authority because the ruling Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government heavily depends on their support for

The outcome of the polls will benefit the leftists most as they will now have bigger clout in the federal UPA government as supporters from outside. Manmohan Singh's government will have to give more importance to the views of the leftists who often differ on several issues like government's stance on the Iran crisis and some economic matters.

remaining in power.

Four key states -- West Bengal, Assam, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and small Pondicherry went to polls, outcome of which was a matter of great interest and curiosity not only in India, but outside as well because of manifold reasons. The voting was seen as a test of the popularity of the major national and also the regional parties which generally call shots in their respective states. West Bengal saw the dominance of the leftists soaring further and their coming back to power in the Kerala after five years while Tamil Nadu dethroned charismatic Jayaram Jayalalitha. Assam gave a fractured verdict with the ruling Congress capturing most seats, but failing to win an absolute majority and the Congress retaining power in the Pondicherry.

Clearly, the leftists are the major beneficiary of these polls while the Congress headed by Sonia Gandhi has mixed fortunes. It lost power in Kerala along with its allies and fared badly in West Bengal, where, however, it is no more a force to reckon with and finished a distant third provoking state party chief federal defence minister Pranab Mukherjee to quit the party post taking the responsibility of poor showing. But the Congress has enough reasons to

rejoice as it is a key ally of the DMK-led alliance in Tamil Nadu that won the polls and it maintained its strong grip in Pondicherry. Additionally, party chief Sonia Gandhi was re-elected in a federal parliament (Lokshaba) by-election with a record margin that underscored her growing popularity. She resigned the membership of the Rai Bariely constituency in the Uttar Pradesh state in the wake of a controversy centering holding of more than one office of profits.

Undoubtedly, Sonia's victory by more than four lakh votes is a shot in arms for her and the Congress. Another aspect of her election is her son Rahul Gandhi's increasing visibility in party activities. Already a member of parliament from the nearby Amethi seat, Rahul worked hard in the by-election and the outcome is also seen as a measure of success for him as well as his sister Priyanka Bhadra, who too was involved in the campaign as a part of her peripheral role in politics. Sonia herself praised both for her big victory, which indicates that Rahul is likely to perform key party role in future.

Two southern states, Tamil Nadu and Kerala never returns an incumbent government to power and this tradition has further been reinforced

by the outcome this time. In the former, the AIDMK-led alliance headed by Jayaram Jayalalitha lost power while the DMK-led combine has staged a come back and its leader K. Karunanidhi is the new chief minister. His alliance has achieved an absolute majority in the assembly. However, the Tamil Nadu polls had generated some interest since certain forecasts said this might be the time that a government retains power since Jayalalitha was seen by many as close to creating a history. She herself was boastful about her government's performance and felt a new phase would herald in the state. But it did not happen and the state stuck to its practice of changing government through every election. Jayalalitha's alliance lost without giving a stiff resistance. Clearly, two south Indian states fell to anti-incumbency factors. The Congress has not fallen in this pattern in Assam, where although it has not won decisively, but poised to form government again. The party considers this as a success.

But it is the West Bengal which has amazingly withstood anti-establishment factors -- something almost unseen these days in India. On the contrary, it has increased its tally and the opposition strength in

the legislature touched the lowest ebb. Main opposition Mamma Banerjee's "Trinamul Congress" is the worst hit winning only 29 seats whereas she was giving an impression of a "silent ballot revolution" in her favour. Once known as a "stormy petrel" of state politics, her own future in the wake of the outcome now hangs in the balance. Mamta had earlier complained about "malparactices" in the voting and the independent election commission this time took unprecedented stringent measures in West Bengal to ensure free and fair voting. Mamta and her party may have to smart in political wilderness at least for some time.

The main Congress is a third force here, but in the last federal parliament it showed improvement and many thought this would be reflected in state polls. But the party cut a sorry figure. About the position of opposition in West Bengal, aging and veteran communist leader Jyoti Basu commented that ruling front would like to see a strong opposition, but the polls could not create one. He is the architect of leftists' success in the state while his able successor Buddhadev Bhattacharya bore the brunt of campaigning this time and can justifiably be credited for the massive victory.

However, the big mandate notwithstanding, the front secured 50 percent of the popular votes, which means it still has 50 percent outside its support base. This is not something that front chairman Biman Bose relishes and stresses further improvement of the government performance in the future. Many seats came their way because of

sharp division in the opposition votes. The leftists have not been that able to solve myriad problems of the state, but shown honesty in purpose highlighted by a largely corruption-free administration, an efficient "Panchayat" system in the rural areas and of late willingness for rapid industrialisation along with development of agriculture.

The national level main opposition party Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is not a force as such in any of the states that went to polls and it had little stakes. However, extreme poor showing by its nominee in the by-election against Sonia Gandhi will certainly embarrass the party. Uttar Pradesh is a stronghold of not Congress, but of BJP, whose candidate secured votes far less than required to save the deposits!

The outcome of the polls will benefit the leftists most as it will now have bigger clout in the federal UPA government as supporters from outside. Manmohan Singh's government has to give more importance to the views of the leftists as they often differ on several issues like government's stance on the Iran crisis and some economic matters. The BJP will analyse the results which show no decline in the popularity of the centre-ruling Congress and its allies. Last but not the least, the results will make Mamta Banerjee sit up and wonder what's really going wrong with her! The fall out of the state assembly elections will surely have manifold ramifications in India.

Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury is Foreign Editor of BSS.

Removing the spoilers

DR. M. ASHRAF ALI

THE on-going anarchy and restlessness in the country points to the fact that there is something wrong with the administrative system in practice. The poor supply of utilities, abnormally rising prices of consumer items, fall in food production, and worsening law and order situation naturally lead one to think the country is passing through difficult times. Needless to mention this has not occurred in a day. This is a legacy of the past reaching its nadir.

At present, the population of the country is about 150 million which is nearly half of US population. But the US has a land area which is nearly 200 times larger than Bangladesh, with enormous resources. The viability of Bangladesh to survive as a functional economy appears bleak considering the scant resources and an unusually large population.

However, this was not to be the fate of the country. It should be agreed that the shortage of resources has not been the only cause of failure to achieve the desired economic development. To my mind, the lack of able leadership has been also a cause. It must be mentioned that it is not a recent phenomenon. In the past, also, the

country was deprived of able and visionary leadership which led to the failure of spreading education, health measures, agricultural breakthrough and other sectors of development. The cumulative bad effect of all these has now cropped up.

We have had parliamentary democracy for nearly 20 years. It was hoped that this system would bring us the desired fruit of development. Instead, our democratically elected leaders have failed us miserably.

The level of talent, wisdom, patriotism and dedication expected of the politicians was not forthcoming. Many of them could get elected only due to criminalization of politics and use black money and muscle power. The country becomes a hostage in such hands while they plunder and misuse public funds and property. The situation that we are in at present proves that the country has been led white due to their corruption. When such people obtain position as most of them fail to perform their duties efficiently, and as a result the innocent ordinary people suffer.

The present depressing situation prevailing in the country casts doubt over whether parliamentary democracy will be at all viable for

us. The success of democracy depends on the existence of an educated citizenry so that they are conscious to realize their demands and ask for accountability from the elected representatives.

But with nearly 90 million illiterates who are understandably incapable of participating in the election process, it cannot be expected that democracy will function properly. These poor people are so gullible that whatever the candidates tell them they believe without question and are easily befooled.

Under these circumstances, perhaps now is the time to think about an alternative to save ourselves from the present predicament. Some specialists have opined that if our two large political parties fail to come to an agreement about the suggested political reforms and take the path of confrontation, a third power may crop up.

The question is who will be this third power? Perhaps they have the army in mind. But if the army does not venture (and, anyway, we have already been down that path with no success), then who?

In my mind, a national government consisting of eminent and dedicated educationists, not very large in number, may be formed. Recently a civil society consisting of such people has been formed.

These people have professed that they will educate and raise the consciousness of the voters so that they vote for honest and qualified candidates in the election. But there is a snag. It may be difficult for them to go to every village of the country to do the needful.

It may be mentioned here that immediately after independence, there were proposals to institute a national government, but they went unheeded. Perhaps it would have produced better results.

Now that the system has failed miserably to deliver the goods, the idea of a national government may again be mooted.

The proposed national government may run the country until desired development is achieved and then the country may return to full parliamentary democracy. The people in the political circle may think that this will be a retrograde step, but if we intend to salvage the country there seems little other alternative.

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Asean reinvents itself again

BUNN NAGARA *The Star (Malaysia)*

FOR historians and other analysts of Asean, the organisation seldom fails to amaze. After weathering bouts of lethargy and criticism, it bounces back with a new purpose and renewed vigour.

And when changing regional or global conditions seem to overwhelm it or mark it as redundant, it reinvents itself in a way that remains characteristically Asean. This happened again five days ago.

On Tuesday, the first Asean Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) was held in Kuala Lumpur. This was the first in an annual series, with Singapore hosting the event next year.

Although not much was given away about the purpose and modalities at this inaugural event, which is typically Asean, some features of the annual series are evident. First, its focus is on security, albeit in the contemporary sense of covering all its aspects: remaining secure from unconventional dangers like piracy, terrorism, contagious disease, illegal migration and cross-border crime as much as from conventional military threats.

Next, it is an annual series in its own right, not hitching a ride on Asean summits as when foreign ministers and economic ministers meet "on the sidelines" as "post-

ministerial" affairs. Thirdly, with the first two meetings hosted by Malaysia and Singapore, a sense of the old Asean prevails.

However, this does not mean that the newer members are somehow less relevant to the proceedings. As in other Asean gatherings, all 10 members enjoy full and equal prerogatives as participants.

This brings into focus the one outstanding feature of Tuesday's meeting which news reports seem most concerned about: the absence of Myanmar. What was the real reason that it was not represented, how did that impact on the meeting, and what difference did it make anyway?

As host, Malaysian defence minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak only said that Myanmar had been invited but declined to attend, citing pressing domestic issues. The hope was then expressed that it can attend next time.

But the international media tends to blow such incidental outcomes out of proportion, infusing them with a life of their own. Myanmar had not been made to feel less welcome, much less the ADMM being designed to keep it away.

For those conversant with recent Asean activity, the ADMM is the logical next step after the 2003 Bali Concord II and the Vientiane Action Program of 2004. A prime purpose is the creation of the Asean

Security Community (ASC), of which the ADMM is one initial step.

More than just a feel-good measure wrapped in homespun platitudes, the ASC is a very real, serious and important proposition with clearly defined means and ends. And typically Asean, its benefits are shared collectively as surely as it requires membership contribution by participation to be made jointly.

Najib described the ASC's purpose as enhancing transparency and openness among members, as part of a larger confidence-building measure (CBM).

More broadly, the ASC represents a long overdue effort by Asean to revive the Asean Regional Forum (ARF), of which Asean forms the core but had played only a minimalist role. The ARF is a vast entity encompassing East Asia as well as parts of South Asia, the South Pacific and North America besides Russia and the EU, and so has long needed Asean's leadership position within it to vindicate itself.

This is also why the ADMM, like the ASC, has to be an inclusive process that cannot leave out any member country, however small or seemingly insignificant. If, however, Myanmar's absence had been intended as a boycott to snub Asean for pressing for change in the country, the gesture would have been even less significant.

The ARF is the primary security

body for the Asia-Pacific region, which nobody disputes. Now the ADMM has begun to serve as a pillar of the ASC, which acts as a key instrument of the ARF, without diluting Asean's own interests and concerns.

Some media commentary has touched on the prospective projects that might result, such as Asean-wide extradition treaties, joint military exercises or even an Asean peacekeeping force. Only the first seems likely for now, and the ADMM would count itself usefully productive if it could just keep the focus on workable security arrangements every year.

Again typically Asean, the first ADMM was said to have been designed for better intra-regional understanding for improving dialogue and cooperation. The Asean way hardly seems to change from one generation to the next.

Despite four decades of working together as Asean, and much longer in living together as individual nations, member countries still know too little of one another to make for a seamless and cohesive region. The ADMM is a start, but absenteeism will not help.

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