

## Phulbari decision

Govt must follow set procedures in cancelling agreement

THIS is no commentary on the pros and cons of the Asian Energy coalmine project nor is it an attempt, overt or covert, being made to support the agreement that successive governments had reached with the expatriate exploration company. What we basically intend to do is to focus on the way the contract has been all but scrapped subject to what we understand to be the mere technicality of a cabinet nod. By a strange asphyxiation of governmental authority before a mounting pressure of agitation triggered by reckless firing on demonstrators, Rajshahi mayor Mizanur Rahman Minu was authorised to deal with an issue that centred the fate of a contract signed between sovereign Bangladesh government and Asia Energy.

The very choice of the mayor, and not the relevant authorities dealing the energy issues clearly indicates that political expediency dominated the decision process and not the legal niceties, nor public interest.

There must be a legal and official process invoking the relevant provisions in the agreement whereby it could be amended or even annulled. Many countries have amended and rescinded agreements with international parties but they had to go through the drill, a certain mutually agreed upon procedure to be doing so. In fact, the contract contained provisions offering options for safeguarding public interest and fulfilling their aspirations. And if there were any lacunae, as indeed there were, such could be attempted to be remedied through further negotiation. There is absolutely no question about accepting any anti-people agreement.

Throughout the sordid episode over the last few days, there appeared to be a total lack of government control over the events. Starting with the completely unjustified police firing to the setting on fire of Asia Energy offices, events looked as if there was no government in that area.

We seem to be completely oblivious of the international legal framework under which foreign investment takes place and the responsibilities and obligations of national government under it.

The way the government handled the Phulbari episode has greatly damaged Bangladesh's standing in the global financial scene and may even erode their confidence in any future agreements that our government signs.

## Police rigours

These must be eased up

POLICEMEN in general, particularly those in the lower ranks, have had long hours of duty, often stretching up to 14 hours under extremely pressured circumstances. During hartals and political agitation programmes it takes yet another dimension which entails risk to their lives. This harsh condition under which they are required to perform duties is already taking its toll. A most recent example is the death of a Lance Naik on duty during the last hartal by the 14 party opposition alliance. Prior to this incident two other police officers died due to stress leading to cardiac arrest in 2003 and 2004. The other effect of working under prevailing conditions is that the police while tackling widespread public agitation are not able to cope with a situation beyond a certain limited dimension and complexity. They are insufficiently trained in crowd control methods.

This is not to condone any excesses committed by them but to say that the authorities must make sure that their nerves do not go taut through overwork. We very much hope that sooner than later the government and the relevant ministry should take urgent measures in streamlining and rationalising the working conditions of the policemen and police women leading to a marked improvement in their overall working environment. A few months back we were told that several thousand additional police personnel were being recruited, but unless the anomalies in the service conditions are removed and rectified this could even end up complicating matters further.

Obviously, yet another cause for recently heightened stress for the police is the increased level of volatile political situation that often turns into mayhem and pitched battles between the police and public including picketers. Just as wrongful use of the police force must be shunned so also political violence should be curbed. Let every one be guided by sanity, reason, compassion and understanding, some of the key components of democratic practices anywhere in the world.

## Time to choose



ZAFAR SOBHAN

**A**MIDST the tragedy of the five killed and 300 injured in the BDR firing on protesters demonstrating against Asia Energy Corporation's open-pit coal-mining project at Phulbari on August 26, and the subsequent commotion that has seen Asia Energy staff houses and offices torched and looted in a frenzy of violence, it is important not to lose sight of one important truth:

Asia Energy is not responsible for the killings, and while the fury of the demonstrators is understandable, the killings should not be seen to somehow legitimize the demands of those who oppose the coal-mining project.

This needs to be said. When those who are opposed to the Asia Energy project demand that in the wake of the killings that Asia Energy's contract be cancelled and the company be expelled from the country, it needs to be said.

When the company's offices and project materials are ransacked and those associated with the company (referred to by the rioters as the company's "collaborators") must fear for their lives, it needs to be said.

When the government announces that it has agreed to cancel its deal with Asia Energy and expel the company from Bangladesh in response to the agitation, it needs to be said.

**Industrialization does not come without its costs. It can mean pollution. It can mean urban squalor. It can mean relocation of communities through the power of eminent domain. It can mean unsightly power plants and factories. And it also means getting gas and coal out from under the ground and using them, even selling them, instead of just sitting on them and doing nothing.**

In the aftermath of the shooting and the subsequent agitation, it certainly seems as though the government had little option but to accede to the demands of the local population of Phulbari, who overwhelmingly oppose the project. It is hard to see how Asia Energy can possibly continue to do business in Bangladesh after such a catastrophe.

But whether one thinks it is a good or bad thing that Asia Energy will almost certainly have to pack up and leave the country after having spent some \$24 million, it should be acknowledged that this is happening in response to an incident for which the company is not to blame.

Now, I am not an expert on coal-mining, and I really don't have the authority to state whether the contact between Asia Energy and the government was fair or not, or whether open-pit mining if preferable to shaft mining, etc. but one thing is worth pointing out:

As a nation, we are going to have to come to terms with the idea of these kinds of massive industrial projects if we want Bangladesh to become a middle-income nation and full member (rather than the associate member we are today) of the modern global community.

Now, it could be that the specific details of the Asia Energy deal were suspect and exploitative, but

I think that it is fair to say that the bulk of the objection to the project comes from people who would object to any coal-mining project of this kind and that no industrial project of this scale would meet with their approval.

There are concerns about the environmental impact. There are concerns about the resettlement of the displaced. There are concerns about how the profits are to be split. And, of course, in Bangladesh, there are also concerns about the integrity of our own officials, and whether we can trust them to act in the national interest when negotiating on our behalf.

These are all legitimate concerns. But the question is: are these concerns that any company can address to the satisfaction of those opposed to massive industrial and infrastructure projects and inherently suspicious of big multi-national companies.

The sense I get is that most of the opposition to large-scale industrial and infrastructure projects is on ideological grounds.

This is a hard choice facing the country. But if we want to move forward, then it is a choice that we are going to have to make.

Keeping the government and foreign investors honest and attempting to ensure that Bangladesh secures the best possible deal is fine, but opposing the entire process of industrial devel-

opment due to opposition to trans-national capitalism is counter-productive, and this is where the country is right now.

Like I said, I don't know much about whether it was a good deal or not, but I do know the following:

I do know that the northern region of Bangladesh is chronically impoverished and underdeveloped and that a project of this scale would help transform the entire economy of the region.

I do know that Asia Energy's plans included the building of a \$40 million coal shipment terminal in Khulna, the dredging and upgrading of Mongla port so that it could handle the annual export of eight million tons of coal, and the upgrading of the rail connection between the mine and the port that would transform the nation's western rail corridor.

Now, Asia Energy are not doing any of this because they are nice guys. They are doing it in their own interest because these developments will help facilitate the smooth distribution of coal that is necessary for them to earn a good return on their investment. This is capitalism. But the point is that these developments would have also been of immense benefit to the nation as a whole.

Bangladesh can either fund this kind of infrastructure development on our own (sure) or we can partner with big multi-national companies and have

them foot the bill. The latter sounds like a pretty sensible approach to me.

As a nation, we need to overcome our innate distrust of this kind of industrial and infrastructure development if we are to ever get anywhere.

Look, it is easy to rile up locals who will bear the brunt of development. It is easy to find eighty-year old farmers who would rather die than leave their ancestral homes. It is even easier when the company behind the proposed project is that greatest of evils, a multi-national corporation, and fronted by people with white skin.

My concern is that we are creating a situation where no foreign direct investment is ever going to be possible in Bangladesh.

Well, perhaps not no foreign investment. But the events of the past few years show that it will always be a simple task to create opposition to foreign investment from certain parts of the world.

Essentially, the message we are sending to prospective foreign investors is that no white people or Indians need apply.

Of course, this leaves the door open for investment from China and the Middle East. Coincidence? Perhaps not. But it should be borne in mind that creating an environment that only tolerates foreign investment from these quarters will ultimately serve the interests of those in Bangladesh who are closely tied to these nations and not necessarily the interests of the Bangladeshi people.

As with the Tata deal, one senses that the real problem with the Asia Energy deal is not so much the specifics of the deal as it is the identity of the company behind it. As with the issue of exporting gas to India, it is abundantly clear that it is not the merits of any particular deal but the

politics that will ultimately rule the day.

This kind of thinking is why Bangladesh remains stuck stubbornly in a vicious cycle of chronic under-development.

Now, some people don't mind this. They have a romantic vision of Bangladesh as a rural paradise of contented farmers plowing their fields and potters and weavers tenderly fashioning their handicrafts by the light of a hurricane lamp, and view the entire concept of industrial development as some kind of neo-colonialist imposition.

But these are yesterday's men and women, pining after a rural idyll that never was and that cannot be in today's world. Bangladesh cannot return to the days of a subsistence agricultural economy and hope to survive in the modern world. It is industrialize and modernize or forever remain second-class citizens of the world.

In any event, most Bangladeshis want development. If Bangladesh was such a great way of life, we wouldn't have had tens of millions who have abandoned the land to try their luck in Dhaka and other urban centers over the years. Most people understand that the old way of life is dying and want the opportunities that come along with modernization.

Industrialization does not come without its costs. It can mean pollution. It can mean urban squalor. It can mean relocation of communities through the power of eminent domain. It can mean unsightly power plants and factories. And it also means getting gas and coal out from under the ground and using them, even selling them, instead of just sitting on them and doing nothing.

Zafar Sobhan is Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.

## Let us go against the stream



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

**G**IVE it a name if you will, but we need to go against the stream. In 1989, people did that in Czechoslovakia, which ended the communist rule. They called it the Velvet Revolution. Estonians sang in defiance of Soviet occupation in the same year, which became known as the Singing Revolution. The Carnation Revolution was a left-leaning revolution in Portugal, which ushered in a liberal democracy in 1974. It works every time people go against the stream. Pick a name for it as you like. Let us have a revolution.

We need to have a mass upheaval, a cataclysmic popular protest on the tsunami scale. It is no longer enough to have strikes and demonstrations. No more hunger strikes or barricades on the road. No more silent protests, negotiations, waiting for the elections to change the government.

We need to march on the houses, offices, pleasure pads, and bank accounts. We need to take the country back from them.

We need Phulbari, Kansat and Shonir Akhra on a national scale, not small pockets of isolated incidents but chain reaction of popular resistance. We need to find all of them no matter what is their party orientation, family pedigree, academic degree, religious denomination, or anything else. Thieves, goons, hoarders, black marketers, syndicates, godfathers, musclemen, middle-men, liars, cheaters, everything corrupt, rotten and decadent, we need to find and finish them.

By all means, it is time for change. This country belongs to the people and people must take it back. Yes, we must make it clear that we are sick and tired of them. We must make it clear that when pushed people swell like waters and inundate the plains. We need

## CROSS TALK

**Trust me. The demos have to go crazy if they want to save democracy. They need to get angry and ruthless. They need to get tough and unforgiving. Nobody should be able to plunder this country and get away with it. Nobody should be able to disgrace the people and get away with it. Go after them. Hunt them down. Take away everything from them, everything ill-gotten, everything acquired by questionable means.**

to have a revolution to show that homes, cars, diamonds, and jewels can be washed away.

By God, they have turned this country into a seedy place where all things can be bought and sold. Character, wisdom, knowledge, purity, honour, everything is negotiable. You can buy the judge; you can buy the lawyer, banker, journalist, policemen, doctors, engineers and, of course, the politicians. If we talk about the oldest trade on earth, there is a brothel in each of their souls.

We need a revolution to tear down those brothels, those temples of greed where money is worshipped like a god. We need to find those who have stolen from us, deceived and deprived us, those who have used public office for private gains. We need to find those who have taken bribes, commissions, margins, percentages, those who have taken us for granted and misused our trust.

It may sound like I am being an instigator. But what I am doing is asking for a final solution. I am asking for things to be expedited to bring forward the disaster that is going to happen. I am asking to face large scale death and devastation instead of incremental murder and violence leading to the same tragedy anyway. Let us have it with a bang, not with a whimper. Let us have a final showdown instead of these daily skirmishes.

The revolution must come sooner than later, and people must become their own vigilantes. We have to enter every house that looks suspicious. It's time to reconcile the books, match income with expenditure, words with actions, and means with ends. It's time to ask questions, it's time to have accountability. We must find those who are guilty and deal with them.

It's time to draw the line between vice and virtue, right and

wrong, profound and profane. Believe me, it is time to deal extreme with extreme. A judge gave death sentence to an innocent man. Can you believe it? Then verdicts came dime a dozen, four

in less than a month, in the hurry to acquit a dictator. But the trial of the killers of a national hero keeps shuffling for three decades. Don't rely on anybody, and especially avoid the so-called educated folks. These are shady people behind the enlightened face. It is time for the common men to do the uncommon thing. After all, it is their country. They should take it back.

Trust me. The demos have to go crazy if they want to save democracy. They need to get angry and ruthless. They need to get tough and unforgiving. Nobody should be able to plunder this country and get away with it. Nobody should be able to disgrace the people and get away with it. Go after them. Hunt them down. Take away everything from them, everything ill-gotten, everything acquired by questionable means.

Time is ripe for a revolution now, because freedom of men starts with their refusal to submit. It has been proven many times in history. The French Revolution, the Russian Revolution, the American Revolution and then myriads of revolts by unassuming

men who refused to accept subjugation, exploitation, and discrimination. We need to have a revolution to shake up the tree, which can come if we go against the stream.

Every revolution needs a symbol like the patriots of the French Revolution had a bonnet rouge, or red cap of liberty. The Chestnut Revolution in Ukraine was named after the trees lining the capital Kiev's main thoroughfare. When the Syrians were forced to withdraw from Lebanon, it was called the Cedar Revolution after the cedar tree which is a national icon. The underground opposition threatened to have a revolution in Kyrgyzstan where more than 60 different species of tulip are found. They wanted to call it the Tulip Revolution.

We need a revolution to start with a fresh dawn. Call it the Lotus Revolution, the Sunflower Revolution, even the Royal Bengal Tiger Revolution. My choice is the national flower, the Shapla which is a great symbol. It is quite a shade-tolerant flower, which can grow even in scant light, much like our people who have been kept in the dark for too long. Let us have a revolution, because right now the only way to the light is to go against the stream.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

## The message is loud and clear

**Let there be no illusions in the minds of the Awami League leaders and their allies that the US government, or for that matter any western power, is interested in, or is in a position to help this country overcome the mess created by us just prior to the election 2007. The only way they can possibly achieve their goal of ensuring a free and fair election is by uniting all the pro-liberation, secular, and democratic forces under one umbrella, and starting a large-scale mass movement.**

CAPT. HUSAIN IMAM

**T**HE US government officials are very important to us. We value what they say and think about us. To be frank, we consider them our "godfathers." Why should we not? After all, with the fall of the Soviet Union, they are now the only super-power on earth. They have the biggest economy, the largest military arsenal and the oldest democracy. By contrast, we are one of the poorest countries in the world. Our economy largely depends on their aid. We go hungry when they stop their aid.

No wonder they exercise a lot of influence in our economic, social and political life, as they do over most of the third world countries.

But the problem is that their past history does not suggest that they are very trustworthy. They do not always mean what they say or say what they mean. People say, if you have a friend like America you don't need an enemy. You cannot blame them if you look at America's track record. Events in Iraq and Afghanistan are glaring examples of America's unpredictable nature. During the Iran-Iraq war, Saddam Hossain was America's best friend but now he

is their worst enemy. It is the same with the al-Qaeda. Osama bin Laden, once an ally, is now the most hated enemy.

The US administration's declared policy, especially after the 9/11 incident, is to wage a war against terrorism, more appropriately Islamic terrorism, be it in their own land or anywhere else in the world. Another declared policy of the US (at least outwardly) is to help other countries establish democracy. But their handling of these issues in some countries in the Middle East, or in Pakistan or Bangladesh does not always reflect this policy.

The US government's best friend in the Middle East is Saudi Arabia which is ruled by a monarch and which is alleged to be the mastermind behind the spreading of Islamic fundamentalism, if not Islamic terrorism, in many countries including Bangladesh. The US attacked Iraq which was probably the only secular state in the Middle East having at least a semblance of a democratic set up.

General Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan, a military dictator who has been ruling the country after sending into exile the elected president, has been, and still is, a good ally of the Bush administration. Now let us consider the case of Bangladesh. When the people of this country were fighting the liberation war of 1971 against the occupying Pakistan army, the US government sided with the military junta of Pakistan and helped them with arms and ammunition. But that did not help Pakistan

retain control over its eastern wing.

In only about nine months' time the then East Pakistan emerged as an independent state, known as Bangladesh, under the able leadership of its undisputed leader Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. In about three years' time Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the father of the nation, along with his close political associates and family members, was brutally killed in a military coup, paving the way for military, or quasi-military rule, for years to come. Many a quarter at home and abroad point to the CIA as being behind these killings.

And now, when the future of democracy is in grave danger, mainly because of the total mismanagement, rampant corruption, utter disregard for democratic norms by the ruling class, and the unprecedented rise of Islamic militancy, let us see what the US government officials have

to say.

Richard Boucher, the American Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs, at a news conference in Dhaka prior to his departure from Bangladesh earlier this month is reported to have said that they do not have enough proof confirming Jamaat's connection with the Islamic militants.

But many of the Islamic militants who have so far been arrested and interrogated by the police following the August 17 bomb blast and for subsequent attacks on courts and other government premises, killing several persons including two judges, openly confessed their alleged links with Jamaat.

A report, run by the Washington Post in its August 2 issue stated: "While the United States dithers, a growing Islamic fundamentalist movement linked to al-Qaeda and the Pakistan intelligence agency is steadily

converting the strategically located nation, Bangladesh, into a new regional hub for terrorist operations that reach into India and Southeast Asia."

Boucher is also reported to have clarified, in that conference, his government's position regarding the January 2007 general election in Bangladesh, which has, for various reasons, become the focal point of attention for people at home and abroad: "Bangladesh has had three successful elections in the past and I hope that the next one would be successful too."

He is also reported to have said that the United States was interested in the workings of the electoral process in Bangladesh, but not in its outcome. The message is loud and clear. Reform or no reform, fair or unfair, they will be happy as long as the election is held on time and the constitutional process is continued.

No wonder Begum Khaleda Zia, in a public rally organized by

her party at Bashkhali last Tuesday, emphatically declared that it did not matter whether the Awami League-led opposition parties agreed or disagreed, the election would be held on time, and under the same chief of the caretaker government, as per the existing provision of the constitution.

Let there be no illusions in the minds of the Awami League leaders and their allies that the US government, or for that matter any western power, is interested in, or is in a position to help this country overcome the mess created by us just prior to the election 2007.

The only way they can possibly achieve their goal of ensuring a free and fair election is by uniting all the pro-liberation, secular, and democratic forces under one umbrella, and starting a large-scale mass movement.

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