

Fresh drive in Iran to expel Afghan illegals

AFP, Tehran

Iran has launched a drastic plan that could send hundreds of thousands of illegal Afghan workers back to their home country in a bid to free up jobs for queues of domestic jobless, the official news agency IRNA reported yesterday.

"The plan will cover a three-month period, whereby about 800,000 illegal Afghan workers will be screened and dealt with," the ministry's general director of foreign nationals employment, Mohammad Hassan Salehi Maram, was quoted as saying.

"Currently, the number of Afghan residents in Iran is three million, out of whom about 1.3 million are working in various places," he said.

Temporary six-month work permits could be issued for foreign workers, including the Afghans, he explained, adding that the permits would only apply to three sectors of "brick-burning plants, construction and agriculture."

"After three months, the (tracking) plan will be repeated until no more illegal foreign nationals remain in the country," Salehi Maram added.

The interior ministry's figures

have put the number of registered Afghan nationals at more than one million — up 8.5 per cent from February.

According to interior ministry estimates, some 950,000 more are reported to be living in the country illegally.

But some unofficial reports said only a few thousand illegal Afghans have work permits.

The drive will see employers rewarded if they lay off unregistered workers and possibly jailed if they fail to do so.

"The employers who do not report their illegal Afghan workers will be fined and jailed," the student news agency ISNA quoted Salehi Maram as saying.

"On the other hand, if they are replaced with Iranian unemployment pensioners, the employers will be given loans and exempted from insurance fees for the new workers for four years," he added.

The move is to reinforce the constitution, which bans foreign nationals from being employed in Iran without work permits under the labour law.

Iran took in hundreds of thousands of Afghan refugees during the wars that have ravaged Afghanistan

over the past three decades and was a leading foe of the Taliban regime that was ousted by a US invasion in 2001.

But since President Hamid Karzai took office in Afghanistan on a mandate to bring stability and peace, Tehran has been actively encouraging Afghans to return home.

In February, Iran launched a three-month investigation aimed at reducing the number of Afghan illegals in the country.

Many Afghans in Iran work in the construction industry or housekeeping and janitorial, and tend to be paid less than their Iranian counterparts.

However, despite a grave youth unemployment problem, many educated Iranians believe they are above taking the types of jobs that Afghans are willing to accept.

In the current Iranian year, the unemployment rate was 10.2 per cent, showing a decrease compared to the preceding year's 11 per cent, according to the head of state statistics organisation, Mohammad Madadi.

He also put the unemployment rate for youth between the ages of 15 and 24 at 20.9 per cent.

12 wedding guests killed in India road accident

AFP, Lucknow

Twelve people on their way to attend a wedding ceremony were killed and another 42 injured when their bus overturned in northern India, police said yesterday.

Police said the driver was likely drunk at the wheel.

Eleven of the injured were in a critical condition. The bride and groom were not involved in the accident, police spokesman Surendra Srivastava said.

The accident took place late Sunday in holy Hindu town of Mathura, 400 kilometers (250 miles) from Lucknow, state capital of northern Uttar Pradesh state.

Indian top cop's son to die for murder

AFP, New Delhi

An Indian court yesterday sentenced the son of a former top policeman to death after convicting him for the 1996 rape and murder of a law student.

Santosh Kumar Singh, convicted 12 days ago by the Delhi High Court, was sentenced seven years after he was initially acquitted of raping and murdering Priyadarshini Mattoo at her Delhi home.

Priyadarshini's father, Chaman Lal Mattoo, hailed the sentence.

"I won't get my daughter back but certainly such a judgment is a benchmark for the women of this country. The soul of my daughter will now, I hope, rest in peace," Mattoo told the CNN-IBN news channel.

Singh assaulted Mattoo before strangling her with a wire and then smashed in her face with a motorcyclist helmet.

B.C. Wali, one of the lawyers representing the Mattoo family, said the turnaround of the case was a major victory.

"The important thing is that the verdict of (lower) trial court was overturned by the High Court. That is the victory for us," Wali said.

The High Court said the earlier acquittal was "perverse" and had "shocked the conscience of the judiciary."



Most city streets look deserted on the third day of 14-party combine's blockade programme. The photo was taken from Shapla Chattar at Motijheel in the city yesterday.

PHOTO: STAR

Will he serve the Nation or his benefactors?

FROM PAGE 1
the people. This is all part of the job and also part of the people's right to know that strengthens democracy like nothing else does. Our politicians never understood it. We hope the President does.

In the spirit of that public scrutiny the first question that Prof. Iajuddin will have to answer is whether he will serve the nation or his benefactors? We admit the question is hard and even aggressive. But it is valid. The question is now ringing in the public mind and the faster he accepts it the better he will have a chance to chalk out his course of action. Please do not make the fatal mistake of brushing this aside by saying that such a question is not in the mind of Awami Leaguers. If our readers are any guide, then this question is very much in the air.

There is no running away from the fact that the BNP leaders and especially Khaleda Zia considered him more trustworthy as President than Badruddoza Chowdhury, BNP's founding secretary general and perhaps the closest colleague of the party's founder late President Ziaur Rahman. That, no doubt, is saying a lot. He also carries the baggage of his involvement in the Dhaka University teachers' politics which were always represented the pro-BNP panel.

Notwithstanding all this Prof. Iajuddin was and is our President and has now become the chief of the caretaker government. The future of our democracy is in his hands. He holds two most important offices — the head of state and the head of the government. This makes him the most powerful man in the country today. But alongside the power he enjoys, he has an enormous responsibility on his 76-year-old frail and heart-attack-recovered shoulders. It is an open question that how a man who, until the other day was under doctor's advice not to work more than a few hours a day, will handle the pressure of the most complex office in the country. Yet he has taken the plunge which we interpret as his courage and desire to move us forward in the right direction (Please don't prove us wrong).

Prof. Iajuddin will do well to recall the very philosophy behind the creation of the caretaker system. He should ask why a ruling party could not be trusted to hold free and fair elections. Simply because the

opposition feared that undue power and influence will be exerted by the incumbent on the state machinery and government structure, especially on the bureaucracy, police, other law enforcement bodies, with a view to affecting the outcome of the polls.

In practical terms, it means that to hold a free and fair election, a caretaker government has to create a level playing field between the party that just relinquished power and the one that was in opposition. To achieve that it has to take a whole range of measures to reduce the influence of the immediate past ruling party over the state machinery with all its paraphernalia and bring it to the level of the opposition. Therefore, one can say that by definition the caretaker government comes into effect to protect the rights of those who were out of power and curb the influence of those who held the reins of the government. It is on this particular aspect that Prof. Iajuddin's caretaker government has to give immediate and special attention.

In this regard, we would like to recall the actions of the last caretaker governments of justices Habibur Rahman and Latifur Rahman. Their first task was to gain the confidence of the opposition. For that purpose they took immediate measures to cleanse the administration and other government structures of questionable officials. They made hundreds of key transfers and opened up government radio and television for both sides. They also set up special bodies and committees to look into ways to dismantle the official setup left behind by the past governments. They took measures to recover illegal arms, round up criminals and hoodlums patronised by political parties, and many other measures to ensure a free and fair election.

We recall the most controversial decision of the last caretaker chief, justice Latifur Rahman, which was to transfer 13 government secretaries within hours of his taking oath even before he formed his council of advisers. The AL, then immediate past ruling party, reacted vehemently against it, to which Latifur Rahman paid no heed. That one particular move had a salutary effect in galvanising the opposition's confidence in the caretaker government.

Prof. Iajuddin now has to take similar and dramatic measures to

gain confidence of the opposition. The need for him to take such actions is far more important than it was for the other two chief advisers as there was no controversy about their assuming the office. We think Prof. Iajuddin lost a grand opportunity in his first address to the nation on Sunday in making an imprint of his leadership on the public mind. He should have tried to distance himself from the immediate past government but instead he read out a speech that seemed to have been drafted in the old mould. A different speech could have created an early sense of confidence in the public mind, as in ours.

It is not only that President and the chief adviser has to be neutral. He has also to be very visibly seen to be neutral. We are acutely aware that it is a near impossible task given Bangladesh's divisive and confrontational politics. But he has to try and try it hard. At least he has to be seen to be trying hard. It is on Prof. Iajuddin gaining that crucial credibility that much of his capacity to deliver a free and fair election will depend.

With all the doubts and questions as expressed above we still repose our faith in, what we have earlier called, "Our last hope". For President Iajuddin failing to deliver a free and fair election is not an option. He has to rise up to the occasion. He has to gain that vital moral high ground that will cast aside all the doubts and questions that come from his BNP links and his not having so independent a profile, and the way he came to occupy the key post of the caretaker government. We believe it can be done.

The most difficult but critical task he faces now is choosing his council of advisers. Here lies his first test. Yes, he will take suggestions from all political parties but he should choose only those who are beholden to neither side of the political divide and will genuinely help him to deliver a free and fair election. People of the highest integrity, honesty and strength of character should form his council of advisers, especially because of his frail health he will require the most competent group around. If his advisers consist of a mix of politically committed people then they will pull his government in one direction or another, making his goal of a neutral administration almost impossible. Political parties should help him by not suggesting party

activists or supporters but people who enjoy general public trust, confidence and respect.

It is our hope that given the fact that he is teacher (in our culture a teacher is still a highly respected person and is expected to embody many moral qualities), given his age, given that he cannot really aspire for anything higher than what circumstances have awarded him with, given that the nation needs him to be at his moral, ethical and administrative best and given that his integrity of character and courage of person have never come under such public focus as of now, he will rise up to the occasion and create a history that will make us proud of him.

The choice is his. He can choose to serve his benefactors and be thrown into the dustbin of history or to serve the nation and be its hero. We hope and pray that he will choose what befits a teacher.

Woman held for sacrificing 11-yr-old boy

REUTERS, RANCHI, India

Police arrested a 70-year-old woman yesterday over allegations that she sacrificed an 11-year-old boy to appease the gods and reap a better harvest, a senior police officer said.

Barti Devi was arrested at her house in the impoverished state of Bihar after villagers spotted the chopped head and hands of a missing boy in a nearby field. Director-General of Police Abhay Upadhyaya told Reuters by telephone.

The boy, Golu Kashuaha, had been missing since October 23 in a village about 40 km south of Patna.

Police said their investigations showed he had been kidnapped by Devi's family, who are also related to the boy.

He was taken to a temple where his head was shaved and he was then sacrificed in a nearby field, police said.

"The boy's body parts were strewn across the field and the killers have confessed they were convinced the sacrifice would ensure a good harvest," Upadhyaya added.

Police are now searching for the rest of Devi's family which has fled the area, he added.

In rural India, dozens of young boys and girls are sacrificed each year by superstitious villagers who think a human sacrifice can help them grow better crops, bring prosperity or ward off evil, police say.

St. Louis named most dangerous US city

AP, St. Louis

A surge in violence made St. Louis the most dangerous city in the US, leading a trend of violent crimes rising much faster in the Midwest than in the rest of nation, according to an annual list.

The city has long fared poorly in the rankings of the safest and most dangerous American cities compiled by Morgan Quitno Press. Violent crime surged nearly 20 per cent in St. Louis from 2004 to last year, when the rate of such crimes rose most dramatically in the Midwest, according to FBI figures released in June.

"It's just sad the way this city is," resident Sam Dawson said. "On the news you hear killings, someone's been shot."

The ranking, being released yesterday, came as the city was still celebrating Friday's World Series victory at the new Busch Stadium. St. Louis has been spending millions of dollars on urban renewal even as the crime rate climbs.

Dishonesty the power sector policy

FROM PAGE 1

The BNP-led government's dismal performance in the power sector is not surprising. The BNP in its previous term (1991-96) had ignored the power sector; made crooked power deals and left the country for an inevitable electricity crisis.

According to the data of Power Development Board (PDB), the demand for power in Bangladesh in 1990 was 1,509 MW while the generation was 2,100 MW. But this surplus situation did not last long. In 1996, when BNP completed its first term and left power, the demand went up to 2,200 MW and supply down to 1,900 MW (maximum) — leaving a deficit of 300 MW.

When the AL government left power in June 2001, the country was generating 3,033 MW power against a demand of around 3,394 MW. But this situation nosedived in the last five years of BNP rule. In 2006, the country's power generation hovered around 3,300 MW at the maximum, and sometimes dipped to 2,700 MW. But the demand has soared up to 5,200 MW.

The power sector's top administration also underwent severe volatility. The PDB chairman has been replaced eight times and the power ministry secretary on as many occasions.

All of this volatility originated from the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) that intervened in each and every decision of the power ministry or the PDB. It was no secret that two subsequent state ministers for power were in loggerhead with the PMO and the power secretary, who is reportedly a nominee of the "alternative powerhouse" and serving the interests of certain quarters.

In contrast, during the AL regime, both the power secretary and PDB chairman enjoyed absolute confidence of the prime minister. At that time the PMO and a powerful secretary-level committee were seen assisting the power ministry and the PDB in coordination with other authorities in implementing the projects.

The demand-supply disparity widened mainly because the government, despite its failure to implement new power projects, doubled the rural power supply network. This massive expansion of network has financially benefited only the electricity pole suppliers — who are basically some political bigwigs, and the ruling party lawmakers aimed at taking political leverage of bringing power distribution lines to their constituencies.

Between 1977 and 2001, the Rural Electrification Board (REB) expanded its network covering 15 million people under 3 million meters. Between 2002 and 2006,

this network has been expanded to 6 million meters covering 30 million people. The demand for power under REB shot up from 800 plus MW to 2,000 MW in the last five years. But the rural network receives about 600 MW now.

HONESTY VS DISHONESTY

There were instances of corruption during the AL regime, but all were outside the private power projects and mainly in supplier's credit schemes. One instance of corruption in private power deals involved the land development for the Meghnaghat power project. But all other private power schemes were clean. There was no re-tendering, no formal complaint. All the schemes undertaken by the AL government came into operations by 2003.

In contrast, the BNP government failed severely in private power. A glaring example is the third Mymensingh 70 MW Rural Power Company Ltd (RPCL) project. The RPCL, owned by the Pali Bidyut Samities (rural electricity cooperatives) and REB, is not a typical private company. This project costs \$120 million — which is three times costlier than any other project of its size.

This manifests massive corruption by some high-ups who inflated the project cost. The huge cost will ultimately be passed on to the poor rural consumers. The project is one year behind schedule and there is no sign that it will be launched soon.

The second private project is the 450 MW (revised 490 MW) Meghnaghat-2 with the Bon Consortium consisting of the alliance government's favourite Orion and Belhassa group along with German company Steag. The Bon consortium signed agreement on October 12, 2006 and is likely to start operation in 2008. But many doubt if the much-favoured consortium would at all be able to get funds for the project.

The Orion-Belhassa was given the contract in blatant violation of rules and regulations. The original bid was led by Japanese Nisso Eiwi. Soon after getting selected using Nisso's qualification as the lead bidder, Orion brought in Steag and placed it as the lead bidder. It is like recruitment of one person on the basis of another person's interview. This has been possible because the Orion group is known to be close to the 'alternative powerhouse'.

The government was also busy bending rules to award the Meghnaghat-3 450 MW power project to an inexperienced and unknown consortium named Cadogan-Manning on the basis of unsolicited negotiation till this month.

Besides, the government has

signed two costly skid-mount power schemes, one with GBB in Bogra for a 20 MW plant and the other with Ornate in Fenchuganj for a 50 MW plant. The GBB is run by leader of the 'alternative powerhouse' and the Ornate by son of a powerful minister of Sylhet region. These contracts will make the PDB bleed as per unit power costs are between Tk 2.80 and Tk 3.

In public sector, the government awarded the 80 MW Tongi power project to a novice Chinese company Harbin that failed to work. It awarded another 90 MW power project to the same company which might start operation in 2008. All these schemes were re-tendered after specific complaints came against the government siding with Harbin.

The government has killed a mature bid for a 450 MW power project due to narrow political rivalry while a number of power projects simply fell flat because the government was trying to award them to incompetent, yet favoured, companies.

In contrast, there had been very little allegation against any of the projects undertaken during the AL regime. The AL government's worst corruption-plagued project was the Barapukuria 250 MW, implementation of which did not start before March 2001. The alliance government could have suspended it, but it did not. The reason is — the local agent of this project implementing company is Hosaf, an old beneficiary of BNP.

Within 100 days of its assuming power, the alliance government had published a white paper on the corruption of the immediate past AL government. The list of allegations included the land deal of the Meghnaghat project, Bholu 20 MW project (which was being awarded to Harbin), Khulna 210 MW project under a Chinese supplier's credit, Sylhet 150 MW CC plant (supplier's credit), Bheramara 450 MW CC plant (supplier's credit) and 210 MW Siddirganj project under Russian supplier's credit. Consequently, it suspended all power project related activities.

LOAD-SHEDDING DATA MANIPULATION

The alliance government's dishonesty in power sector was also evident in the manipulation of the official figure of daily power load-shedding. According to PDB data, in 2003 the country generated 3,428 MW of electricity against a demand of 3,947 MW — leaving a deficit of over 500 MW. The PDB says the electricity demand is growing at the rate of 10 per cent.

After 2003, the government started showing a false official power demand figure so that the level of

load-shedding does not look as appalling as it is. On October 8, 2006, when the official power generation came down to 2,800 MW, the government said the demand was 4,200 MW. But according to data compiled from Desa, Desco, REB and PDB, the peak demand now is over 5,200 MW and according to the government's Power System Master Plan — it is close to 5,900 MW.

TONGI PROJECT: A PRIME CASE OF CORRUPTION

The first bid on Tongi project was floated in 2000 under the AL regime. It drew a \$31 million offer from Malaysian company TNB. The bid was good, but when a deputy secretary insisted on getting Tk 10 lakh as bribe, the company refused to pay and lodged a formal complaint with the government. This tender later fell flat — thanks to the corrupt bureaucrat.

After the alliance government came to power, the second tender was floated in early 2002, but it fell flat under pressure from lobbies. Then there was a silent third tender in which Harbin was picked up with a financial offer of Tk 360 crore — which is much higher than the first TNB offer. According to sources, the 'alternative powerhouse' forced the PDB to pick Harbin's bid.

The company was supposed to install and commission the plant in 2004 — but brought it in test operation in May 2005 and started commercial operation in September.

On the other hand, the Tongi plant turned out to be a grossly flawed project. The highly unreliable plant tripped for nearly 90 times between May 2005 and October 2006.

Internal investigations revealed literally hundreds of flaws in the machinery and substandard equipment. The investigators accused a number of PDB high officials of helping Harbin get away with bad machinery. Till date nobody has been punished.

Initially, perceiving the Tongi plant deal was a great success. But sources said the young leader of the 'alternative powerhouse' of the government intervened in all power projects in the pipeline and started awarding projects on the basis of the political affiliation of the contractors or their ability to offer 'commissions'.



PHOTO: PID

Chiefs of three services meet President and Chief Adviser of the caretaker government Iajuddin Ahmed at Bangabhaban in the city yesterday.