

DOWN TO EARTH

PDB produces more headache than electricity

By Khalilur Rahman

Erratic power supply, low voltage and irregular billing are three major problems faced by a vast majority of the electricity consumers.

The number of domestic, commercial and industrial consumers under the Power Development Board (PDB) is about 12 lakh in the country.

Despite ceaseless public complaints for quite a long time the situation has shown no sign of improvement. Rather the country's overall power supply system is heading towards a deep crisis in the absence of necessary measures to augment electricity production and through overhauling of transmission and distribution network. PDB sources told The Daily Star.

A survey conducted recently by The Daily Star correspondent in different areas of the city shows that the power supply continues to deteriorate at an alarming rate. Residents of Malibagh Bazar area reported that in every 24 hours they remain without power supply for 20 hours. This is going on for the last three months.

An examinee of Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) examination in East Kafrul complained that snapping of power supply was a regular phenomenon just at dusk. The disruption for the last one month has been causing sufferings to the people, particularly the students, the examinee added.

Over three lakh inhabitants of Ward number 74 in Badda under the Dhaka City Corporation have become the worst sufferers due to intermittent power failures. The supply is suspended almost everyday in most parts of Badda. The duration of suspension is too long, the residents complained. The problem has been acute in recent time.

The disruption in power supply has also become a regular phenomenon in the E bloc of Mirpur. The supply is usually resumed after two to three hours. Repeated complaints appear to have fallen on deaf ears, the residents resented.

Some inhabitants of Dardussalam in Mirpur have expressed their dissatisfaction at the low voltage that has been persisting in the locality for the last four months. A 100-watt electric bulb glows no more than a kerosene lantern, they said. Golarack, another locality in Mirpur, has also been facing low voltage problem for over a month. The household electrical appliances do not function properly due to low voltage. In many cases voltage fluctuations have caused considerable damage to television sets, refrigerators and other most commonly used gadgets, residents complained. Some inhabitants informed that the PDB repaired the supply line after public complaints at Golarack. But the improvement was short-lived. There are a few cases of widespread power failures, low voltage and fluctuations in the metropolises and in other parts of the country.

Many consumers also suffer from irregular electricity billing. There are cases when the subscribers do not get monthly bills for a long time. Then suddenly bills are sent showing a huge amount in arrears. The consumers who directly approach the concerned PDB office for monthly bills fall in their efforts, it is alleged. Allegations in respect to overbilling or faulty meters are also too many.

A PDB spokesman said that frequent disruptions in electricity supply was mainly due to a worn out transmission and distribution system and overloading of sub-stations. The sub-stations in many parts of the city and the transmission and distribution lines are 20 to 25 years old. In addition, a large number of transformers also remain overloaded. This has resulted in the irregular power supply to the city.

The PDB official further said that the production of electricity was falling short of requirements forcing the authority to take recourse to loadshedding. He emphasised the need for immediate rehabilitation of sub-stations and overhauling of transmission and distribution lines for smooth power supply.

With regard to irregularity in billing the PDB official admitted that the power meters given to the consumers by the Board were mostly 15 to 20 years old. Many such meters have lost their longevity. These also need immediate replacement for the sake of correct reading of power consumption. But acute resource constraints stand in the way of replacing old and defective meters, he added. This has encouraged a section of both unscrupulous PDB employees and the subscribers to exploit the opportunity and show less consumption in the name of making average bills in case of faulty meters, the official stated. The PDB official also mentioned that defective meters were also contributing substantially to the system loss.



Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev speaks with deputies on Thursday, the last day of an extraordinary session of the Congress of People's Deputies. — AFP photo

Kremlin rule ends

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implemented them by decree.

The restructuring plan was forged by Gorbachev and the leaders of 10 republics, including Russia's Boris Yeltsin, who emerged as his governing partner after leading resistance to the abortive coup.

After the takeover, central power and the Communist Party collapsed.

Gorbachev nodded and clapped after lawmakers gave their approval to the measures. Yeltsin, seated next to him in the Kremlin's Palace of Congress, smiled broadly.

Gromov sacked

Gorbachev today sacked Deputy Interior Minister Lieutenant General Boris Gromov — the latest in a string of dismissals after last month's failed hardline coup.

Gorbachev's decree said Gromov, a hero of the Afghan war, had been released from his post in connection with a move to another job, but did not say what this would be.

Gromov was one of the signatories of an article in the conservative newspaper *Sovietskaya Rossiya* a month before the coup, suggesting only the Armed Forces could protect the Soviet Union from chaos.

The President of the break-away Soviet republic of Moldova issued decrees on Wednesday in a bid to end five decades of Soviet military presence and create a republican army.

The decrees were the latest moves by the non-communist leadership to break Moscow's hold on Moldova, which declared independence last week.

Moldova has one of the largest concentrations of Soviet troops of any Soviet republic, parliamentary speaker Alexandru Mosanu said. Moldova has always been a bridgehead for Soviet troops to move into eastern Europe in case of necessity.

In a separate decree, President Mircea Snegur said the Soviet government must unconditionally withdraw 20 interior Ministry armed units — known as Units 5447, and 5543 — from the republic.

A third decree announced the creation of Moldova's own armed forces.

China halts aid to Khmer Rouge

BEIJING, Sept 5: China announced today a halt to all assistance to the Khmer Rouge, ending more than 20 years of direct backing and providing a guarantee against Cambodia's former brutal rulers returning to power, reports AFP.

"We do not provide any assistance to any of the three resistance parties of Cambodia," the Foreign Ministry said. The Khmer Rouge is the military backbone of the resistance and Beijing has supplied most of its weapons.

Previously, Beijing said only military support was cut off. But the ministry said China stopped all assistance after the five permanent members of the U.N Security Council came up with a peace plan for Cambodia last year.

A visiting US foreign affairs expert, Representative Stephen Solarz, said Chinese officials told him that assistance would now be channelled through the Supreme National Council of Cambodia, which unites the resistance and the Phnom Penh government.

The Chinese decision was an "extraordinarily significant development," the head of the House of Representatives Asian and Pacific Affairs Sub-committee said.

"The termination of direct Chinese assistance to the Khmer Rouge will make it far more difficult for the Khmer Rouge to resume their efforts to win power on the battlefield in the future," Solarz told reporters.

The Democrat from New York said after talks with Foreign Minister Qian Qichen that China was "quite confident that a settlement is near" in Cambodia based on the UN-brokered peace plan.

The ministry said it hoped for an early resumption of the Paris International conference on Cambodia which broke down in 1989.

After Vietnam overthrew the Khmer Rouge and installed a client government in Phnom Penh in 1979, China became the main military supplier to the Khmer Rouge-dominated resistance.

Solarz also discounted reports that China and Vietnam, which are expected soon to normalize relations, would try to impose a communist solution on Cambodia instead of adhering to the UN plan.

"The plan which is likely to be agreed upon in the relatively near future...will in essence be based on the framework document put forward by the UN," he said.

But he cautioned that "it would be a serious mistake on the part of the international community to believe that the mere agreement on the plan necessarily guarantees its implementation."

The supreme National Council has ironed out almost all of its differences and final problems are expected to be resolved.

Noriega's trial gets under way

MIAMI (Florida), Sept 5: The trial of former Panamanian strongman Manuel Noriega got under way here yesterday with pretrial motions, as prosecutors dropped one charge of racketeering and a co-defendant pleaded guilty, reports AFP.

The long-awaited trial of Noriega, toppled by a US military invasion in December 1989 and charged here with drug trafficking, is expected to last six to eight months.

Defense lawyers will seek to prove that Noriega, in his suspected dealings with Colombian cocaine traffickers, acted with full consent and knowledge of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), hav-

ing described their client as the CIA's man in Panama.

Before pre-trial motions began Wednesday, US District Judge William Hoelvel agreed to a request by federal prosecutors that the charge of racketeering — one of 11 counts Noriega faces — be dropped. There was no explanation for the move.

The charge alleged that Noriega had forced Tony Alzupra, a drug pilot-turned-informant, to fly from Florida to Panama in 1984 to further a drug trafficking conspiracy.

Noriega now faces 10 counts of drug trafficking, for which he could be sentenced up to 140 years in jail.

The Midnight File

Moscow to reconsider ties with Havana

MOSCOW, Sept 5: The Soviet Union will reconsider relations with Cuba and certain other countries after the abortive coup and sweeping transformation of the government, Foreign Minister Boris D Pankin said Thursday, reports AP.

New cabinet in Singapore

SINGAPORE, Sept 5: Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong announced a new cabinet today with just one change, dropping a minister who failed to win reelection in last week's polls. Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew, the previous Prime Minister, his son Trade and Industry Minister Lee Hsien Loong, Deputy Prime Minister Ong Teng Cheong and Finance Minister Richard Hu all retained their posts, Goh's office said in a statement. The new cabinet is to be sworn in with Goh on Saturday, reports Reuters.

Baker to meet Palestinians

AMMAN, Sept 5: US Secretary of State James Baker will meet soon with Palestinians in Arab East Jerusalem to underscore Washington's contention that the area is part of the Israeli-occupied territories, a senior Jordanian official said today. Baker confirmed Wednesday that he is planning another mission to the Middle East to lay the groundwork for a regional peace conference tentatively scheduled for October, reports AFP.

Five executed in China

BEIJING, Sept 5: Five people convicted of the 'heinous crime of corruption' were executed on Thursday, the Beijing Evening News reported. Among them was Guan Zhicheng, formerly the Communist Party branch secretary at the Beijing Iron and Steel Co, subsidiary of one of the nation's largest state-run enterprises, reports AP.

30 feared drowned in India

NEW DELHI, Sept 5: At least 30 people were feared drowned after a flash flood washed over a group of picnickers in northern India, the Press Trust of India (PTI) said today. About 50 people were having a picnic on Wednesday on the banks of the Bithaur river near the city of Varanasi in Uttar Pradesh state when the river swollen by recent rains, overflowed, reports Reuters.

Indemnity Repeal Bill

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turnout in the balloting, she said.

Our staff correspondent adds: Sheikh Hasina Thursday called upon the government to purchase jute directly from the growers through the setting up of purchase centres and announce a realistic, welfare-oriented jute policy to benefit farmers in the country.

In a statement issued last night, Hasina also demanded fixation of jute price at Taka 500 per maund and said that it would be possible by creating international market for Bangladesh jute, proper state management and innovation of new technology regarding jute growth in the country.

The opposition leader alleged that the jute growers were now gripped by poverty and frustration because they were being deprived of just prices for their products.

Quoting newspaper reports, the Opposition leader said that the farmers were setting fire to their jute and being compelled to sell the same to the brokers at lower prices.

Hasina accused the ruling party of breaking its pre-election commitments that jute price would be fixed at Taka 500 a maund and steps would be taken to buy jute from the growers.

She further alleged that the ruling BNP had bowed to the donor countries and agencies through withdrawing subsidy on fertilizer.

The BNP like the autocratic government of Ershad increased the prices of agricultural equipment by-passing parliament, she said and demanded immediate withdrawal of increase in prices of agricultural materials. She urged distribution of those among the cultivators at a subsidised rate.

Coastal embankments vital to ensure harvest

From Mostafa Kamal Majumder

COX'S BAZAR, Sept 5: Farmers of the coastal areas of Cox's Bazar and Chittagong feel that the repair and maintenance of coastal embankments should continue till November when 'Aman' harvest will be completed.

The food-for-work emergency rehabilitation programme that started in May has made cultivation of transplanted 'Aman' on about 70,000 acres of land in Cox's Bazar and about 91,000 acres in Chittagong possible by protecting those from saline water through repair of embankments.

The programme taken up at the instance of the World Food Programme provides for the use of gunny bags to protect the repaired embankments from erosion caused by waves from the Bay of Bengal.

But if repair and maintenance work is stopped by the middle of this month nobody can guarantee that the embankments will hold against sudden spring tide, or strong waves that might come from the bay any time there is deep depression or cyclone.

Engineers of the Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB) which implemented the emergency rehabilitation programme say the repaired embankments are not strong enough to withstand cyclone-induced tidal surge like the one of April 29 night. October and November is the second cyclone season in Bangladesh.

The repaired embankment in Kutubdia has a topwidth of eight feet in place of the original topwidth of 14 feet. Similarly the height of the embankment varies from 18 to 20 feet above the mean sea level as against the height of 22 to 24 feet of the original embankment. Moreover, as the repair work was carried out under unfavourable working condition of the rainy season, the required slope of five feet for each feet of height could not be maintained on the sea-side of the embankment.

Similarly, the embankments in Chittagong district have been repaired on a temporary basis. If maintenance is not ensured, the entire operation may turn out to be meaningless if breaches develop in embankment, damaging the standing Aman paddy which is promising a good harvest.

Meanwhile, some unscrupulous shrimp growers have started cutting the repaired embankments, especially in Moheshkhali upazila, to allow flow of saline water to and from their farms. Such cuts might develop into big breaches letting sea water to flood crop fields any time.

A BWDB source told this correspondent that so far nine cases have been filed against shrimp growers for cutting embankments. Another 25 cases may be started soon.

The source, however, said that cutting of the embankment is needed at two points of the Moheshkhali north-east polder where flow of water from hillocks sometimes cause water logging. At those points people are permitted to cut embankments after submitting a security deposit of taka 10,000 each so that urgent repair can be taken up any time it appears necessary. Seven persons have been given such permission so far.

Asked if BWDB could design embankments in a way that the demand for saline water of shrimp growers be fulfilled without disturbing the structure itself, the source replied in the affirmative saying additional investment was required for the purpose.

Coins to oust notes

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der. Australia is likely to mint the five-taka and ten-taka coins.

The value of the metal used to mint the coins will be less than the intrinsic value of the coins to prevent use of the metal for other purposes.

In view of the higher cost of paper notes, Bangladesh Bank is also planning to replace the five-taka and ten-taka notes with coins in near future, said a competent source.

The Security Printing Press is now occupied with the printing of notes of smaller denominations and as such the five hundred taka notes are not yet printed in it.

The last consignment of five hundred taka notes arrived in the country recently.

An official of the Security Printing Press told The Daily Star that the press will start printing five hundred taka notes from next year. With the withdrawal of one-taka paper notes from circulation, pressure on the Printing Press will be reduced, the source said.

The Security Printing Press, besides printing paper notes, now prints passports. The press is working in full capacity, according to a source.

Bangladesh has no facility for minting coins and as such they will be minted abroad.

The Bangladesh Security Printing Press was established at a cost of Taka 132 crore.

Over 450 people are employed in the press and all of them have residential facilities within the well-protected compound.

Single platform

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after the achievement of the front organised for ousting the autocratic Ershad regime.

The Five-Party left alliance and components of the Eight-Party alliance other than the Awami League were formerly components of the 15-party alliance, split on question of joining the 1988 controversial parliament election.

At that time the five-party left alliance ceded to a new platform in protest against the Awami League's decision to join the election.

Preliminary discussions on forming the front are now going on while the two sides have decided to finalise a document announcing a common programme.

But the CPB, NAP, Ganotantrik Party, Samyabadi Dal and Gano Azadi League who used to work with the Awami League said that the front would not be treated as a left front rather it would be a front of democratic and patriotic progressive forces.

But the Five-Party leaders told The Daily Star that the alliance has raised an objection that the avoidance of the 'left' as a prefix to the name of the front may create an identity problem. Because they opined that this platform will appear as an alternative to the Awami League and the BNP and the religion-based Jamaat-e-Islami.

They said that the BNP and the Awami League had got the identity of patriotic and democratic forces. So the front of the left parties should have a separate identity.

However, the two sides had decided to remain silent on the question of 'communist internationalism' but agreed to go for highlighting national issues.

When contacted, Five-Party alliance leader Khalequzzaman Bhuiyan told The Daily Star that there was no problem to floating the front with a clear objective to raise the confidence of the people in socialism. He said that the necessary documents of the Five-Party alliance to be placed before the other socialist parties would be prepared soon.

Meanwhile, CPB leader Mujahidul Islam Selim when contacted said that the central committee of the CPB had taken a decision in this regard. He said that the party decided to initiate movement on the basis of the minimum demands of the people.

He, however, said that the primary objective of the front would not be construction of socialism, which, he said, would take a long time. He said that through a democratic and patriotic front of left parties, it would struggle not only to influence the country's politics but also to initiate a process to occupy the statecraft. He said that the programme of the front would determine its character.

Selim said that the BNP has no scope to join the front and the Awami League as well as no intention to form a front as the party has its own character.

Insiders said that the two sides would sit together on September 9 while both the sides would prepare their respective proposals for the programmes.

Nasim alleges harassment of AL workers

From Our Correspondent

RANGPUR, Sept 5: Awami League leader Mohammad Nasim, MP, today demanded transfer of the Home Ministry from the Prime Minister to the Acting President.

Alleging harassment of AL workers and intimidation of voters by the ruling party men, he said there would be law and order situation during the by-elections if the ruling party chief retained the charge of the Home Ministry.

Nasim addressing a press conference here, also accused the Jatiya Party of harassing his party workers and said both the JP and BNP were violating election rules.

Jamaat

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In a statement it said the loans plan so far given were "inadequate" and also did not reach the affected people due to corruption. Adequate interest-free loans for house-building and for salt and shrimp cultivation should be given to them, it said.

In another statement, the Jamaat Working Committee also expressed concern at the increasing price of fertilizer.

The price of fertilizer should be reduced, even through subsidy, to encourage the farmers to increase production, it said.

Jhenidah

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JHENIDAH, Sept 5: Five activists of Chhatra Maitree were arrested today from Chaklapara in connection with Wednesday's clashes in the town.

Police said Mannan, Kamrul, Masum, Madhu and Ripon were arrested.

In fresh violence today, the house of local Maitree President Mohammad Farooq was ransacked.

Today's incident was in a sequel to yesterday's clashes between Maitree and Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal (JCD) activists.