

DOWN TO EARTH

Gas billing system elevates consumers' woes

By Khalilur Rahman

Anomalies in gas billing are causing sufferings to a large section of the consumers in the Dhaka metropolitan area. The Titas Gas Transmission and Distribution Company Ltd, a subsidiary company of Petrobranga, follows a dual policy in preparing bills for the domestic consumers, a good number of customers complained to The Daily Star.

The Titas Gas Company, an enterprise in the public sector, has two categories of consumers, those having meters and those without meters in the metropolitan city. The company realises monthly bills at a flat rate from the meterless domestic consumers. The fixed rate for a single burner is Taka 115 and for a double burner Taka 195 per month. The customers having meters for their domestic gas supply lines are also generally required to pay on the basis of monthly flat rates similar to the meterless connections in the absence of bills prepared on meter readings. The subscribers with metered connections continue to pay monthly bills at flat rates till many of them suddenly receive fresh bills showing huge sums of money for gas consumption as recorded in the meters.

A senior government official said that he had always paid monthly gas bills at a flat rate in the absence of billing on the meter reading for his domestic connection. When a complaint is made to the Titas authorities about (fresh) bills they ask for payment after deducting the amount already paid at monthly flat rates, he added. "But it does not help me escape the penalty for having a meter. I have to pay an excess amount of about Taka 80 including Taka 20 as meter rent per month, shown in the fresh bill said to be prepared on meter reading. This is a gross discrimination and contrary to social justice. Why should a citizen with a metered connection pay an excess amount for gas consumption while another

customer enjoying the same benefit pays less? The official resented. He further said that he did not request for installing any meter in his domestic line. "Moreover I appealed to the authorities to take away the meter as I never saw anybody visiting my house for taking meter reading," he added.

Another gas subscriber in the city complained that since the installation of meter in his house in 1987 there was no reading recorded by the Titas staff. When he approached the company for taking record he was told that the management had a small number of meter readers. He was advised to take record himself and report to the company for preparing bills. There was acute shortage of equipment in addition to staff members at the disposal of the Titas gas for proper functioning of the meter system, he added. The subscriber also alleged that there were instances when the meter readings were used to pressurise a consumer. In his relatives' house a gas bill showing a huge amount of money was sent for payment several months ago. The Titas staff allegedly made a deal with the consumer to pay less in exchange of 'tips', the subscriber informed.

Some other subscribers also alleged that the meters installed in their respective premises were faulty. They have found the small disks in their meters moving even when the ovens remained off. The rotating disks were showing the consumption of gas though the burners were put off, the subscribers stated.

Against the backdrop of such experience the Titas gas authority is learnt to have stopped installing new meters. The company is also actively considering a scheme to phase out the meters gradually in view of the public complaints and operational costs, Titas sources said.

An official of the Titas Gas

Transmission said that the objective of installing meters was to check wastage of this vital energy. In our country most of the people do not behave responsibly and to save a matchstick many consumers keep their gas burners burning and in the process huge volume of fuel is simply wasted, he observed. But the official admitted that the plan to install gas meters was hastily carried out and proper arrangement for their smooth functioning was simply ignored.

The number of domestic consumers in the Titas gas system is over three lakhs. The commercial and industrial users are about 3,500 and 600 respectively in and outside the metropolis. About half a decade ago the government of ousted President HM Ershad decided to import gas meters. The meters were brought hurriedly even without maintaining requisite formalities. This was done to the benefit of a handful of favoured businessmen, sources told the Star. The number of metered connections is about 1,20,000.

Of late the Titas Gas authorities have launched a special drive to realise arrear gas bills from the defaulting domestic consumers in the metropolitan area. The company says that a huge amount of arrear gas bills of staff quarters of government, autonomous and private organisations remains unpaid. The amount in arrears is increasing at an alarming rate. The biggest defaulters are public sector enterprises. The Power Development Board (PDB) alone owes Titas gas about Taka 100 crore as gas bills. The Adamjee Jute Mills has an arrear of Taka four crore. Initial result of the special drive by Titas gas is encouraging, a company official said. But the realisation of arrear bills is not an easy job, he added.



A restaurant near BDR auditorium at Peelkhana drawing water illegally from a public tap through a plastic pipe. — Star photo

Water transport strike continues, talks today

By Staff Correspondent

The government and the striking private motorised riverine transport owners held three-hour talks on the second day Thursday but failed to resolve the crisis.

Talks will resume today. The indefinite strike, demanding lowering of fuel prices to pre-Gulf war level, entered its sixth day Thursday.

Pleading fund constraint and donor's disapproval, Shipping Minister Keramat Ali said no fuel price cut was possible and urged them to withdraw the strike. But they said they could not operate at loss.

Shipping Secretary, Chairman of BIWTC and BIWTA were also at the talks held at the conference room of the Shipping Ministry.

Group Capt (Retd) Shamsul Haq, of Bangladesh Jute and Jute Goods Water Transport Association, M. Mahmud Rahman of Bangladesh Launch Owners' Association, Abul Kalam, Convener of the Diesel Price Reduction Materialisation Committee, Golam Mohiuddin, and Baduzzaman Vice-Presidents of Inland Water Transport (passenger carriers) Owners Association, Baduzzaman, represented the transport owners side.

Meanwhile, vessels of BIWTA and BIWTC started plying but sufferings of the people using river transport especially those in the country's southern region continued because the public sector transports were inadequate to the need. Government owned vessels started plying following withdrawal of barricades by the private following removal of barricades on different rivers by the transports on river routes Wednesday.

Strike at Ctg Port withdrawn

From Staff Correspondent CHITTAGONG, Aug 29: The employees of Chittagong Port resumed work from 8 pm on Thursday following an assurance of the State Minister for Environment and Forestry that their demands would be met soon.

About 7,000 employees had started work abstention from Wednesday to realise their 35-point demands which mainly includes removal of anomalies in salary and time scale benefits.

Secretary of Chittagong Port Authority M A Mannan told the Daily Star Thursday night that "normalcy was restored at the port after about two days of dislocation."

He also said that the employees started work following a fruitful meeting with the State Minister for Environment and Forestry, Fisheries and Livestock Abdullah Al-Noman at Port Rest House Thursday evening.

Earlier, the employees observed work abstention from 8 am to 7 pm Thursday after 12 hours' gap to discuss issues with the authorities.

On Thursday, 17 ships were anchored at the port but due to the work abstention, the cargo handling was largely hampered, sources said.

Rab's bail petition rejected

The bail petition of the former Leader of the Opposition in Parliament, ASM Abdur Rab was rejected Thursday by a Division Bench of the High Court Division, reports BSS.

The Court comprised Mr Justice Anwarul Huq Chowdhury and Mr Justice Muhammad Abdul Mannan.

Earlier the bail petition of the accused had been rejected by sessions Judge Md Forkanullah, the session Judge Court, Lakshmipur.

SSMC reopens Sept 4

By SSMCH Correspondent

Sir Salimullah Medical College will re-open on September 4 after closure of fifty days. The hostels will also re-open on September 2.

Trials of Anis, Amjad held illegal

A Division Bench of the High Court Division in separate judgements on Thursday held that the trials of former Foreign Minister Anisul Islam Mahmud and former Minister Sardar Amjad Hossain were illegal and without lawful authority, reports BSS.

The trials are pending in the special tribunal No 3 and 2 Dhaka. The Bench comprised Justice Tazle Hussain and Justice K M Hassan.

Rokonuddin Mahmood appeared for the petitioners while Deputy Attorney General Hasan Arif and Assistant Attorney General Obaidur Rahman Mostafa appeared for the state.

40 garment workers hurt in N'ganj clash

From Our Correspondent NARAYANGANJ, Aug 29: At least 40 workers of a garment factory were injured when they clashed with the people of factory owners over non-payment of arrears today.

Five of the injured were admitted to Narayanganj hospital. They are: Shirin Akhter (22), Jesmin Akhter (30), Humayun (30), Munir (25) and Anwar Hossain (25).

Khaleda, Hasina

From Page 1 Col. 5 Ironically, while the two protagonists of nine-year anti autocracy movement are staying in Rangpur, their common political antagonist — Ershad — is in gaol, far away from his hometown.

Two close aides of the deposed President, former Prime Minister Mizanur Rahman Chowdhury and ex-Deputy Prime Minister Shah Moazzem Hossain — contesting the bye-elections from Rangpur-5 and Rangpur-6 respectively, rented a house at the New Cross Road in the town to try their luck, far away from their own places.

Khaleda likely to address UNGA session

Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia is likely to address the 46th session of the UN General Assembly (UNGA) on October 2, Foreign Ministry officials said Thursday, reports UNB.

The session is due to begin at the UN headquarters in New York on September 17.

Begum Zia will be the fourth head of the government of Bangladesh to address the UNGA.

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman addressed the 29th session of the General Assembly on September 25, 1974.

Late President Ziaur Rahman made a speech at its 11th special session on August 20, 1980.

Deposed President HM Ershad also spoke at the special sessions of the world body in 1982 and 1988.

Diplomatic sources here indicated that the forthcoming UNGA session would be featured by a series of exciting debate on a number of global and regional issues in the backdrop of the changed global political and economic scenario.

Candidates for JS polls to state fund sources in 7 days

Every candidate contesting the election to Jatiya Sangsad shall be required to submit a statement to the Returning Officer concerned within seven days next following the last day for withdrawal of candidature in the prescribed form of the probable sources of fund to meet his election expenses, an Election Commission Secretariat press release said in Dhaka Thursday, reports BSS.

The statement will be made under Section 44A of The Representation of The People Order 1972, according to the press release.

Each contesting candidate under the law, shall also be required to attach with the statement in the prescribed form of his assets, liabilities, annual income and expenditure and, if he is an income tax assessee, a copy of the income tax return last submitted by him.

A copy of the statement and other papers, attached with the statement are to be sent to the Election Commission also by the contesting candidate under registered post at the time of their submission to the Returning Officer.

This provision of law shall also be applicable to the contesting candidates for by-election to the 11 vacant seats of Jatiya Sangsad scheduled to be held on September 11.

The election expenses of a contesting candidate in Jatiya Sangsad election, excluding the personal expenditure incurred by such candidate, shall not exceed Taka three lakh. The personal expenditure of a candidate in connection with his election has been limited to Taka five thousand.

Any candidate who violates the above provision of law in connection with his election expenditure, shall be punishable with rigorous imprisonment for a term which may extend to seven years and shall not be less than two years and also with fine, the press release added.

Life term to BCU worker for murder

CHITTAGONG, Aug 29: An activist of Bangladesh Chhatra Union has been convicted in absentia to life term in jail for murdering a Shibir worker in Chittagong, reports UNB.

Additional Sessions Judge Rafiqul Islam delivered the judgement Wednesday against Anar Barua, an activist of the CPB student wing.

According to prosecution story, Mahfuzul Haque, an activist of Islami Chhatra Shibir, was seriously injured during an armed clash with Bangladesh Chhatra Union at Rowzarhat in Rangunia thana on January 27, 1986.

Mahfuz succumbed to his injuries at Chittagong Medical College Hospital the following day.

Police, after investigation, chargedheeted Barua and six other. The Judge, after examining witnesses and records, punished Barua, hiding since the incident.

Six others were acquitted.

Jute

From Page 1 Col. 5 Bangladesh Jute Corporation has incurred a loss of Taka 1100 crore, Bangladesh Jute Mills Association — Taka 214 crore and Bangladesh Jute Mills Corporation Taka 1400 crore. As a result all these three organisations have lost their borrowing capacity from banks.

The Bangladesh Jute Association (BJA) blamed the previous government for its wrong policy which forced it to stockpile a huge quantity of jute thus blocking its cash. The Association used to handle 85 per cent of the total raw jute.

A total of about 10 lakh bales of jute were left over, and are being carried over for years together.

Public sector

From Page 1 Col. 4 Diesel price. "We can't allow our precious, imported diesel to cross the border by reducing its price," he added.

The transport owners have been mounting pressure on the government to restore the diesel price to the pre-Gulf war level.

Diesel price was last year raised by 105 per cent at one go in the wake of Gulf crisis triggered by August 2 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait.

Meeting the demand of the transport owners will cost the government about Tk 200 crore, according to official estimates. Related story on Page 6.

The Midnight File

British food credits for USSR

KENNEBUNKPORT, Aug 29: The United States and Great Britain announced plans Thursday to extend additional food credits to the disintegrating Soviet Union and to make a hurry-up 'lifeline' study of possible Soviet needs for food. We cannot dictate the ending of what's happening in the Soviet Union, but neither are we mere spectators," British Prime Minister said, reports AP.

US envoy praises Pak initiative

ISLAMABAD, Aug 29: Outgoing US Ambassador Robert B Oakley expressed optimism in an interview published Wednesday that a Pakistani initiative for a nuclear-free South Asia could end the deadlock between the two countries on the issue. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's June 6 proposal "offers a way out" not only from the US-Pakistani dispute over the nuclear issue but from the dangers confronting South Asia, Oakley told the daily The News on the eve of his departure, reports AP.

Indo-Pak fighting ends, says India

NEW DELHI, Aug 29: The Indian Defence Ministry reported today that fighting which erupted four days ago between its troops and Pakistani soldiers along the Kashmir frontier had ended. Fighting has ended between our and Pakistani soldiers in Kashmir, an army spokesman attached to the ministry said amid reports that tension still prevailed in the disputed state's Poonch border sector, reports AFP.

Farooq

From Page 1 Col. 8 Dhaka. "If you are a Bengali, you must respect the Sheikh", a BSS report quoted Farooq as saying. But on the AL demand for scrapping the Indemnity Ordinance which blocked the trial of killers of Mujib, a UNB report quoted Farooq as saying: "The Indemnity Bill is the birth certificate of others. Who will try whom? Both the governments of the Jatiya Party and the BNP will lose their legitimacy if the bill is passed in Parliament.

Both the agencies said Farooq demanded that opponents of the 12th Constitution Amendment Bill be given equal opportunity in the electronic media and the government-owned newspapers to express views in favour of 'no' votes in the upcoming referendum.

Farooq urged people to reject the bill and criticized the political parties for passing it which, he said, would snatch the right of franchise. He did not elaborate.

Mahananda bridge

From Page 1 Col. 8 The project will be started by the end of this year and is expected to be completed within two years.

When completed the bridge will connect the Shibganj and Bholahat upazilas with the district headquarters.

Communication Minister Oil Ahmed, Whip of the Jatiya Sangsad Shahjahan Miah, Mayor of Rajshahi City Corporation Mizanur Rahman Minu and Chinese Ambassador to Bangladesh Chen Songlu were present on the occasion.

The first Bangladesh-China friendship bridge was constructed in Dhaka over the river Buriganga and the second in Shambhuganj over the Old Brahmaputra on Mymensingh-Kishoreganj highway.

Hasina

From Page 1 Col. 7 cluding Rangpur. She also called for ensuring fair price of agricultural products, including minimum price of jute at Tk 500.

Hasina flayed Jatiya Party candidates Mizanur Rahman Chowdhury and Shah Moazzem Hossain contesting from Rangpur-5 and Rangpur-6 respectively. "These hired people, being rejected in their own areas came here only to bluff you."

Referring to Awami League-sponsored Indemnity Ordinance (repeal) Bill, she urged the ruling party MPs to support it for eliminating bloodshed and treachery from politics once for all.

Supreme Soviet

From Page 1 Col. 8 Wednesday of Boris Pankin, former Ambassador to Czechoslovakia, as new Soviet Foreign Minister.

Pankin took the lead among Soviet diplomats in condemning the coup bid. A Soviet embassy spokesman in London said Wednesday that Zamyatin's recall was "usual diplomatic practice" and could be connected with British Prime Minister John Major's visit to the Soviet Union on Sunday.

Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, outraged over KGB support for the failed hardline coup, today sacked two senior security officials, including the personnel Director, Tass news agency said.

The official announcement followed Gorbachev's decision on Wednesday to dissolve the KGB's ruling collegium — essentially the board of directors of the once-feared cloak-and-dagger security police.

Tass said two separate presidential decrees ordered the sacking of Genya Agayev as First Deputy KGB Chairman and the removal of personnel