

DOWN TO EARTH

Gas Bill Payment Complexities

By A S M Nurunnabi

Lately certain issues tend to ruffle gas consumers in the city greatly. In a recent announcement published in some newspapers, consumers were asked to make payment of arrears gas bills by a certain date on pain of disconnection of gas line.

It is common experience that even if you have made payment of gas bills through the prescribed banks, the payments are not regularly posted in the relevant gas accounts offices. A visit to the accounts offices normally confirms this irregularity. This is one aspect of the problem.

The published press announcement referred to above asks the consumers to leave the paid-up bill books at home of the consumers so that the checking teams may satisfy themselves about payment. It is reported that the checking teams resume their operations during office hours. During these hours, most male members of households remain outside with their own duties. And it is not normally expected that the housewives or domestic help will be aware of the bill payment position or the bill book. In such an eventuality, if the checking teams fail to find the paid-up bill book and disconnect the gas line, as threatened, the household concerned will be put into serious difficulties. The Gas Company has assured that if during the course of the day, evidence of payment can be produced, gas connection will be restored within the same day. This is idle consolation.

There seems to be no point in making door-to-door checking during hours when male members of families mostly remain out on their own business. Many housewives remain unaware of the payment position or the whereabouts of the bill book. There are few households which can afford employment of domestic help which lately suffered serious gap in credibility on account of recent crime incidents by domestic help in the city.

If the checking teams of the

Gas Company really mean business, without causing harassment to the consumers, some observers suggest that the checking teams should move out on their rounds after office hours when most male family members may stay home or during holidays. Can the concerned officials of the Gas Company do this to minimise suffering of the consumers in case of disconnection in spite of due payment?

There is another problem. The Gas Company announcement was published perhaps for a day or two in a limited number of newspapers only. Obviously readership of newspapers is not wide in the city on account of poor literacy level. As a result, publication of an announcement in a couple of dailies with limited readership leaves a large number of consumers ignorant of the threat of possible disconnection in spite of payment of gas bills regularly.

Instead of blanket announcement for a day or two in a couple of newspapers warning the consumers about consequences of non-payment of arrears of bills, it is felt that the defaulters because of limited coverage of print media are entitled to individual notices, so that necessary steps for payment may be taken on their part. After serving notices on defaulters, if arrears remain unpaid within a certain time limit, the Gas Company will be justified in effecting disconnection of gas line. The present practice followed by Gas Company therefore seems to be unfair. It seems to be a mere futile exercise on the part of the office staff to lighten their own burden involved in issuing individual notices where due.

There is another dimension to the problem of payment of gas bills. The Gas Company now always insists on the consumers holding joint bill books. This nullifies the prac-

tice followed previously when each consumer was given individual bill book. The present practice seriously inconveniences residents of old Dhaka in particular where several families live in their ancestral homes where each head of the family do not tend to cooperate in the matter of payment of gas bills through joint bill book. This creates problems. There may be some units in the household which may be regular in payment of bills, while other units may not be so. Under such circumstances, the main gas line may be liable to be disconnected for default of payment in respect of some other units. In this situation the consumers of the units making regular payment are made subject to unjustified harassment. Moreover, it is not easy to collect individual dues from each unit to make full payment against a joint bill book. In such a situation common sense suggests that instead of a joint bill book, individual bill books may be issued to each consumer in a unit of a household, as previously. In that case, if any default should arise in respect of any unit, the gas company will be justified in disconnecting it alone, instead of the main supply line. There are numerous complaints that the system of payment through joint bill book causes serious inconvenience for consumers holding such account books, and it is one of the causes of non-payment of gas dues in many cases.

Another problem lately faced by consumers is insufficiency of gas supply in some areas such as Jhugatola, Rayer Bazar, Dhanmandi etc. It is not clear whether this is due to faulty distribution or planned reduction in supply. This point needs to be clarified by the gas authority.

It is expected that the Gas Company will look into the issues raised above and take remedial steps.



Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga leaves parliament yesterday after making her government's first policy statement since coming to power in August. Kumaratunga announced that security forces and Tamil Tiger guerrillas will observe a cessation of hostilities from tomorrow. (Story on Page 9)

US terms Ghali's proposed UN force 'impractical'

UNITED NATIONS, Jan 6: US Ambassador to the United Nations Madeleine Albright has opposed a proposal by Secretary General Boutros Boutros Ghali to set up a UN force for rapid deployment in a crisis, reports AFP.

After studying Boutros Ghali's report on Thursday marking the 50th anniversary of the United Nations, Albright said the proposal seems to arrogate more power to the secretary general.

Albright criticised the proposal to set up a UN rapid deployment force as impractical. "Each situation is different and we are afraid that if there were such a force, it would never be tailored quite right and also that it would not be in use all the time," Albright said.

Boutros Ghali said in his report that troop commitments from member countries provided no guarantees that forces will be available for a specific operation.

He said the rapid deployment force should be placed under UN command and urged member countries to give serious thought to the idea.

Stressing that unity of command is an important principle for successful

peace-keeping operations, the UN chief alluded to the Somalia fiasco, saying that governments who provide troops should not give direct orders to their contingents on operational matters.

Albright said Boutros Ghali was a little off the mark in assessing blame.

"We have to guard against saying 'everytime there is a success it is due to the UN and everytime there is a failure it is due to the member states,'" she added.

"We have to look very carefully at the suggestions made by the secretary general. We don't think that his approach is the only one to take," Albright added.

Boutros Ghali later said he was "astounded" at Albright's comments, stating that he had distributed the proposal just an hour earlier at a Security Council meeting and that the reaction at that time had been positive.

The secretary general stressed that he wrote his report "for reflection and discussion," adding that "nothing can be done without the agreement" of the 15-member Security Council.

SAARC-ASEAN businessmen's confce in Mar

A convening committee of SAARC-ASEAN Businessmen's Forum has been formed to establish closer links and strengthen existing ties between businessmen in South and South East Asian countries, reports UNB.

A grand conference of the forum will be held in the last week of March at Sonargaon Hotel in the city, said a forum press release yesterday.

The convening committee will include members representing the seven SAARC and the six ASEAN countries.

Pakistan industrialist Capt S H Ather, Malaysian businessman R Gunasingam and SM Mansur Ali of Bangladesh have been made chairman, vice-chairman and secretary general respectively of the committee, the press release added.

Banani Chowdhury dead

Banani Chowdhury, the first Bengali Muslim film actress, died at the Holy Family Hospital in the city Thursday night.

She was 73, reports BSS. Her namaz-e-janaza was held at the Baitul Mukarram National Mosque after the Juma prayers and later, she was buried at the Banani graveyard.

Her Qul Khwani will be held at 38, Ramkrishna Mission Road in the city on Monday after the Asr prayers.

Banani Chowdhury alias Anwara Nahar Chowdhury began her film career in the mid 40's and acted in many films in Calcutta and in the then east Pakistan.

She hailed from Jessore but had settled in Calcutta.

She is survived by two sons.

Abducted girl rescued

By Staff Correspondent

A minor girl, who was abducted along with her younger brother from Kamalapur Railway Station, was rescued by police from Jamalpur yesterday.

The homeless children, Nazma (5) and her three-month-old brother Ratan, were kidnapped on December 15 last reportedly by one Mannan and his wife Julekha, Railway Police said.

Police recovered Ratan and arrested Julekha from a house at Juriatuli in Dhaka. The next day Mannan was arrested from his village home at Gaibandha on January 4.

On information provided by Mannan and Julekha, the Railway Police recovered Nazma from the house of another wife of Mannan at Gudashimla under Jamalpur sadar thana.

In their confessional statements Mannan and Julekha admitted that they had abducted Ratan for housemaid Julekha's employers — a childless couple.

Hurd

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rorism in Kashmir must stop. This leads nowhere except to misery and killing," said Hurd, who is on a four-day visit to India. He flies to Pakistan on Saturday.

Hurd said India should begin an election process in Kashmir, has been under federal rule since then. India has said it wants elections this year, but fears a boycott by most Muslim voters.

Earlier Friday, the foreign secretary met government ministers to discuss Kashmir and trade between India and Britain.

During the three wars that India and Pakistan have fought, Kashmir was divided between them, with India holding about two-thirds of the former kingdom.

Street battles resume in Mogadishu

MOGADISHU, Jan 6: Warring sub-clans resumed street battles in south Mogadishu early today despite a ceasefire, with witnesses reporting six multiamen and three civilians killed, reports AFP.

The fighting in the Bermuda district between the Abgal and Murusade factions of the powerful Hawiye clan broke out at 4:30 am (0130) GMT after a day with only sporadic shooting in the evening following the coming into ef-

fect of the ceasefire at 6:00 am Thursday.

It was not immediately clear what sparked the battles. The district was calm after dawn today, and representatives of the two sub-clans said a joint ceasefire committee would meet to discuss the fighting and its root causes.

That parley was now expected to bring together the two principals — self-styled president Ali Mahdi Mohamed, and Abgal who controls north Mogadishu, and Murusade leader Mohamed Qanyere Afrah, who broke with Ali Mahdi last year and switched allegiance to General Mohamed Farah Aidid, who controls most of south Mogadishu.

Japan, DPRK making secret contacts to arrange talks

SEOUL, Jan 6: North Korea and Japan are making secret contacts to try to arrange talks on normalising relations, news reports in Seoul said today, reports Reuter.

State radio and the domestic Yonhap news agency quoted a high-ranking official of the Japanese Foreign Ministry as saying on Thursday, diplomats from the two sides were making contact.

The official said the two sides were making telephone contacts but did not reveal the place of the contacts," the radio said.

Trade fair opens today

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India, Pakistan, Iran, Thailand, Greece, Hong Kong, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, the Republic of Korea, Australia, Germany, Vietnam and the United Arab Emirates.

Addressing a press conference in the city yesterday, Mohammad Hossain Malik, Minister (press) of the Pakistan High Commission in Dhaka, said that 29 public and private firms from his country would put on display their products. Sixteen firms from India are likely to take part in the fair.

The foreign firms are expected to display electric and electronic goods, industrial and agricultural machinery, house hold items, handicraft, textile equipment, carpets, surgical equipment and other goods.

The local firms will, among others, put on display ready-

Ijtema begins today

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akheri munaqat (concluding prayer) arrived at Tongi.

In separate messages on the eve of the Biswa Ijtema, President Abdur Rahman Biswas, Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia and Awami League chief Sheikh Hasina wished the success of the Ijtema.

A six-square-kilometre mammoth pandal has been erected on the bank of the river Turag to accommodate the devotees from home and abroad. Other facilities like water, gas, electricity and sanitation have also been completed.

Tongi poura authorities, Islamic Foundation, Red Crescent Society and Hamdard Laboratories have set up temporary hospitals for emergency treatment.

A tin-shed structure in the north-west part of the main venue has been kept reserved for foreign participants. There are three sections — for Arabs, non-Arabs and people of the Sub-Continent.

Another pandal has been set up to accommodate the religious leaders and local VIPs. Two podiums have been erected for delivering sermons and offering the akheri munaqat.

Bangladesh Railway has arranged special train services from January 6 to 10 to help

the devotees participate in the Ijtema.

Bangladesh Army and Navy have constructed some floating bridges on the river Turag for the devotees coming from the other side of the river.

Bangladesh Road Transport Authorities and the Private Bus Owners Associations have also arranged special bus and minibus services.

In his message President Abdur Rahman Biswas hoped that the congregation of millions of Muslims from home and abroad would strengthen the fraternity among themselves.

The Biswa Ijtema is being held once more in Bangladesh renewing the pledge of unity, solidarity and fraternity among the Muslim world," he said.

Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia urged the devotees to take fresh vow to build a strong, prosperous and self-reliant Muslim Ummah. "It is possible to ensure overall welfare of mankind by following the path of Almighty Allah and ideals and teachings of Hazrat Mohammad (SM)," she said.

Awami League president Sheikh Hasina congratulated the devotees and urged them to be imbued with the ideals of the Prophet for establishing a society free from exploitation, injustice, falsehood, corruption, favouritism and adultery.



The US Postal Service unveiled a new postage stamp commemorating actress Marilyn Monroe during a ceremony at Planet Hollywood in New York on Thursday. — AFP photo

Anti-US rally in Pakistan ahead of Perry's visit

RAWALPINDI, Pakistan Jan 6: Thousands of people attended an anti-US rally convened by the Jamaat-i-Islami party here today ahead of next week's official visit by US Defence Secretary William Perry, reports AFP.

Perry is to arrive here Tuesday on a three-day visit for talks with Pakistan leaders. The visit is the first in a decade by a US Defence Secretary to Washington's former Cold War ally.

Terming his mission a "conspiracy" aimed at pressuring Pakistan to abandon its nuclear programme, the Jamaat Chief Senator Qazi Hussain Ahmed also lashed out at Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto for her "failure" to safeguard national interests.

Predicting that 1995 would be the year of "Islamic revolution" which would also witness the "end of Bhutto rule," he said the nation would not let her government barter away the country's vital interests like, freeing Kashmir, from Indian rule and developing its nuclear deterrent.

He claimed Perry was coming here to compel Pakistan into signing the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) to establish what he called an "India-Israel hegemony" against the Muslim world.

He claimed that Washington was "worried" the 21st century would give rise to promotion of an Islamic identity against western culture.

Arjun for Rao's removal

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the next elections" to Parliament due in mid 1996.

"I am not interested in challenging (Rao's) leadership," he added.

Arjun Singh had been the de facto number two in the government, his resignation fuelled a fresh bout of dissidence in the Congress after it was defeated in elections in two key states last month.

Arjun Singh reiterated his criticism of Rao, saying the 73-year-old prime minister had stifled democracy in the ruling party.

He also demanded a judicial investigation into Gandhi's assassination for which Sri Lankan Tamil Tiger guerrillas

have been blamed, saying the full truth was not yet out.

Gandhi's killing by a suicide bomber at an election rally in southern India "is causing grave dismay not only among party members but also among a large section of the people of this country," Arjun Singh said.

"After three-and-a-half years, we are no nearer to the truth," he said.

Arjun Singh declined to say if he doubted the official version that the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was responsible. But he added, "everything has not come out."

The LTTE, which is fighting for an independent homeland in Sri Lanka, has repeatedly denied its involvement in the killing of Gandhi.

The Midnight File

Russia to complete N-plant in Iran

TEHRAN, Jan 6: Russian Atomic Energy Minister Viktor Mikhailov is in Iran to sign a contract to complete a nuclear power station left unfinished by Germany after the Islamic revolution, the news agency IRNA said today. Mikhailov arrived late Thursday and was greeted by the head of Iran's atomic energy organisation, Reza Amrollahi, the official agency said. The two countries are to sign an agreement in "two or three days" on finishing the Buser Power Plant in southern Iran, reports AFP.

Lankan troops kill 3 Tigers

COLOMBO, Jan 6: Tamil guerrillas lost three men while six security personnel were wounded in a gun-battle in the northeast, several hours before President Chandrika Kumaratunga signed a truce accord, officials said today. Government troops on Thursday attacked a group of Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) guerrillas in north-east Wel Ova but had to overcome stiff resistance initially before forcing the rebels to flee, officials said, reports AFP.

Iran's air chief, 11 others killed in plane crash

TEHRAN, Jan 6: Iran's air force chief, his deputy and four other senior officers were among 12 people killed when their plane crashed in central Iran, officials said today, reports AFP.

General Mansour Sattari, his deputy General Ardeshir, and four other officers were killed along with six crewmen when their plane crashed late Thursday trying to return to Isfahan airport following "technical difficulties," they said.

The plane had taken off for Tehran, they added. General Mansour Sattari, who was 46 and had trained in Iran and the United States, was considered the architect of the reconstruction and modernisation of the air force which was badly damaged in the 1980-1988 war with Iraq.

The official agency IRNA said Sattari was on a "mission" but gave no details. It said the plane was a "Jet Star Type."

France to open mission in Baghdad

PARIS, Jan 6: France, eager to help end Iraq's international isolation, will soon open a diplomatic mission in Baghdad, Foreign Minister Alain Juppe announced Friday after meeting Iraq's deputy Prime Minister, reports AP.

The visit by Tariq Aziz, Baghdad's most experienced diplomat, was the first official foray by an Iraqi leader since the end of the Gulf War to Paris, London or Washington, which coordinated the coalition that routed Iraq.

Juppe, addressing reporters after a 90-minute private meeting, said France would open "very soon" an interest section in Baghdad, based at the Romanian Embassy.

Aziz welcomed the decision, saying it would improve communications between the two countries.

Iraq was forced to close its embassy in Paris during the Gulf War, but opened an interest section in 1993 at the Moroccan Embassy.

France, though a leading troop contributor to the Gulf War coalition against Iraq, has been a champion of Baghdad since it began complying with UN resolutions aimed at taming Saddam Hussein.

Dhaka urges

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imbalance between Bangladesh and India.

Earlier, Morshed Khan met Pranab Mukherjee, Union Minister for Commerce, at the VIP lounge of Netaji Indoor Stadium. He urged Mukherjee for tariff concession on Bangladeshi jute-goods and jamdani products. Pranab Mukherjee's response was very positive in this regard.

Farooq Sobhan, High Commissioner of Bangladesh to India and Jahangir Saadat, deputy high commissioner in Calcutta were present during the press briefing and the meetings.

Later, M Morshed Khan met P Chidambaram MP in Hotel Oberoi grand and exchanged views on mutual interest.

Victim

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until his death today.

Earlier, Abdul Khaleque's son filed a case against the surgeons for criminal negligence.

Several organisations held protest rallies here and demanded punishment to the persons responsible.

Police Week

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meeting of the police cooperative society and get together of the policemen with the retired officers.

On the same day, Home Minister Abdul Matin Chowdhury will address senior police officers at Rajarbagh Police Telecom Auditorium.

Traffic control

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SAARC Fountain intersection recently it found that not less than 10,315 vehicles, both motorised and non-motorised, passed through that road intersection from 7:45 am to 8:45 am.

According to Highway and Soil Engineering, a widely recognised book, if the number of vehicles crosses 8,000 in such a case, traffic would go beyond control.

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