

Too Little Too Late

We wish our mood were upbeat, if not effusively celebrative about the recent announcement of an energy policy. It has come too late with too little, and all that in a key area of national development endeavour.

The procrastination has been inexplicable because this elected government stood vociferously committed to gifting the nation with an energy policy since it came to power. And, especially after 1992, with the constitution of the formulation committee, hopes were raised that the policy void would be filled in sooner than later.

We suspect that many more opportunities than are represented by the MOUs that have been signed with the foreign companies slipped through our fingers as we had no clear-cut energy policy document in place. For instance, at the Euromoney conference foreign investors evinced a keen interest in our energy sector but were put off when confronted with lack of answers to many of their questions.

Then, the policy package in the shape it has been presented does not strike one as comprehensive enough. Although quite rightly private foreign investment has been given priority for reasons of the astronomical funding needed to develop the energy sector, principles of tariff fixation, based on a combination of social and profitability considerations, should have been precisely determined in the document. The policy outlines have been seemingly too broad, including that on environment, so that in negotiating instruments with the foreign private companies each case would have to be weighed very carefully according to its merit.

The energy policy is to discourage gas supply to any new export-oriented fertiliser factory because of the dwindling hydrocarbon reserves. We are hoping that this will not affect the expansion programmes of the existing gas-based fertiliser units. While appreciating a prudent use of whatever amount of gas we have, there should be hardly any need to be miserly with it if we can guarantee a full exploitation of our potential hydrocarbon reserves synchronising it with the development of alternative sources of energy.

Manipulated Prices

Tax reduction or waiver on various essentials in the last budget has failed to register any positive effect on the price indices even after three months of its passage. This is for second year in a row that duty rebates on goods have not yielded any corresponding benefit to the consumers. In the 1994-95 budget tax reduction between five and 75 per cent was effected on various goods. The 1995-96 budget has also seen such duty reduction or even exemption. But defying the rules of the market, prices in most cases have gone up.

Now this is a vicious game and there is perhaps no easy solution to the problem. The government's fiscal measures are rendered fruitless by the manipulators of market. In a sellers' market this is bound to happen. Instead of the producers of primary goods deriving any benefit, it is the socially insensitive among the businessmen who are making the most of the fiscal measures. On top, they are even speculating and hoarding. As for the industrial or finished products, manufacturers and traders are competing for a hefty slice of profit ignoring the consumers' interest in the process. It is time the market situation changed in favour of the consumers.

It is maintained by some people that instead of taking advantage of the generous budget for achieving a competitive edge, the local manufacturers are trying to establish their monopolistic hold on the market. But from the side of the industrialists it has been argued that they needed a level-ground with the foreign manufacturers in terms of tariffs.

The basic question relates to the buying capacity of the common man, and the dishonest traders are not restrained and manufacturers exposed to fair competition, our industries and productive sector will never come of age.

Storm in Tea Cup

Our tea output during the January-July period suffered a severe setback from drought that had continued until may of the current year. The production was down by more than one-fifth of the output recorded in the corresponding period of last year. What with the rainfall in recent months, the total production of this most popular beverage item in Bangladesh at the year-end will be still quite low compared with the last year's output.

There are likely to be several implications of such a drastic deficit in tea production, not the least of which are a decline in its export and an irregular supply to the local market. In the first eventuality — the export going down, that is — tea garden-owners and traders will face a loss in earnings. They may have a natural tendency to make up for their reduced earnings through sales at dearer prices in the domestic market. Basically though, the supply to the market is likely to be erratic, at it is. The dilemma will be that we could not possibly suddenly emerge as an importer of tea.

The government has received a timely warning about the unfolding tea scenario. It has to keep a constant tab on tea prices and develop a contingency plan, well in time, to beef up supply, when required.

In the nearly four years old bloody war in Bosnia winding down? This is a question, unbelievable though it may sound that is uppermost in the minds of the people throughout the world.

In sheer barbarism and ferocity of combat, where civilian population have reaped the bitter harvest of war the world has not witnessed anything like this right in the heart of Europe.

The splintering of Yugoslavia following the removal of the iron hand of Tito, led to a lop-sided situation where the majority Serbs outgunned and outnumbered the minority Croats and Muslims. The focal centre for the civil war became Bosnia, where the Serbs rained death and destruction and offered a new word to the world's lexicon: ethnic cleansing meaning extermination of the Muslims from their native Bosnian soil.

There has never been a shred of doubt that it is the Serbs who have been the big bully and the aggressor. The world has hummed and hawed passed resolutions at the Security Council condemning Serbia; mediators from big powers have presented one peace plan after another; but to no avail. UN credibility never sank so low. NATO has been relied upon

to bring the Serbs to their senses. In the past NATO air strikes on a few occasions against Serb positions in the hills surrounding Sarajevo, the beautiful capital of Bosnia, have produced a temporary lull in the murderous exploits of the Serbs. These air strikes were not followed through and thus failed to achieve its real target of silencing forever the unauthorized Serb guns.

Serb fortunes met their first reverse last month. In a lightning move Franjo Tudjman, the President of Croatia, expelled Serbs from Krajina, belonging to Croatia but occupied by Serbia. Turgman was assisted by Aliya Izetbegovitch, the President of Bosnia. For the first time since the beginning of the civil war, the world witnessed Serbian refugees seeking shelter to Serb held areas. The world remained passive spectators.

The latest phase of the civil war began with the fir-

Bosnia — Pax Americana?

Arshad-uz Zaman writes from Istanbul

In the long search for peace it has always been evident that sole superpower US held the key. The European Union has made noises, its members sniped at each other and have played politics of 19th century vintage. The Islamic world has been traumatized by the events in Bosnia

ing of rockets by the Serbs from their safe positions in the hills of Sarajevo. The rocket which flattened the market place killed 37 civilians and wounded more than a hundred. The world witnessed once again a market place red with blood and writhing and mutilated bodies.

It is this spark that has brought about a qualitative change in the Bosnian drama. NATO warplanes have started pounding Serbian gun emplacements around Sarajevo in a systematic manner. This time the target is not silencing the guns but to remove them and if possible eliminate them. More important, the target appears to be, if necessary, imposing a peace settlement on the recalcitrant Serbs.

In the long search for peace it has always been evident that sole superpower US held the key. The European Union has made noises, its members sniped

at each other and have played politics of 19th century vintage. The Islamic world has been traumatized by the events in Bosnia like no other event in the recent past. In their collective thinking the West has emerged as those playing politics with human lives and practicing double standard.

It is finally the US Peace Plan, which has been presented by Assistant Secretary of State Richard Holbrooke, which appears to bring a ray of hope. The three parties, the Serbs, Croats and Muslims are due to meet in Geneva shortly. The Peace Plan makes the splintering of Yugoslavia official. Bosnia Herzegovina inhabited by the three communities is due to be divided among Serbs on the one hand and Muslims and the Croats on the other. The last two is due to form a federation. The success or otherwise of this new dispensation will depend on its working. According to the

plan, Serbs will get 49% of Bosnian territory and the Muslims-Croats 51%. Thus Serbs will have more than what they had in the past although they have been bargaining for much more. The Muslims of Bosnia, who have borne the brunt of the battle and have energetically campaigned to retain the Unity of Bosnia—Herzegovina will see their country divided and will inherit a tiny piece. The US appears to have put her full weight behind this settlement.

If Bosnia has become a household name in the Islamic world, in Turkey it has a deep and personal impact. Islam reached Bosnia in the fifteenth century, ten years after the conquest of Istanbul by Fatih Sultan Mehmet in 1453. The Great Ottoman Sultan Suleyman the Magnificent turned Bosnia into a beautiful country of mosques, bridges and remarkable architectural wonders.

There are more than three million Bosnians living in Turkey today. In spite of the war, visitors from Turkey, starting with President Demirel, have gone to Sarajevo and Bosnian leaders came to Turkey on almost a weekly basis.

Recently, a large number of Turkish intellectuals visited Sarajevo. A programme has been launched by the Turkish authorities in collaboration with a private TV channel to bring widows and orphans from Bosnia to Turkey. The first batch of a hundred young widows and tiny children has just arrived in Ankara. Narrating this experience of 27 hour journey by road, the commentator stated, "The most moving experience of this trip was that tiny children would eat a bit of food and hide the rest although they were very hungry. They had learnt during the war that there was no certainty about the next meal". This group came from Srebrenica, which was conquered by the Serbs recently. They had taken away 10,000 able bodied young men, killed 3000 and the mass graves have since been found. This latest batch of refugees was composed of young widows and orphans. The commentator said, "We have to look after them. They are the future of Bosnia".

Making the Public Service Commission More Effective

If we opt for a merit-based promotion system, which we should, then we need not be too much bothered about the precise determination of inter-service seniority of officers. This task, bereft of the finer considerations and criteria of seniority, can easily be handled by the Establishment Division and the relevant line ministry.

THE importance of the Public Service Commission in the smooth functioning of the state machinery hardly needs to be overemphasized. However, it does not seem that all is well with this organization. Also, the attention it is presently receiving from higher quarters in the government does not appear to match the high prestige accorded to it by the makers of our Constitution. The only time that members of the public are made aware of this organization is when its Chairman presents its annual report to the President of the Republic formally. But for those who have had to deal with this organization closely, it is yet another government outfit where nothing seems to move, and if at all, rather slowly and inefficiently.

Let us start with the PSC annual report. I have often wondered what happens to this hardbound report of around 200 pages after it is formally submitted to the highest constitutional personage of the country. Is there any formal system by which the report is examined and acted upon? Or is it simply a motion that has to be undergone because of what is provided in the law? I tend to support the latter hypothesis since there is no evidence to support the other: even if there is an examination somewhere, it is of a very cursory nature. The report itself is indeed a bland one, full of trivialities, without any sharp focus on the real problems faced and with no solutions suggested on substantive matters. Of course, the question of self-criticism does not arise. After all, it is not in the Bengali

tradition so why expect it from the PSC out of the blue? The situation, of course, need not be as moribund as it is today. Surely the PSC can take the initiative to hold a one-day structured workshop involving some of the most relevant policy makers to discuss the annual report and other pressing issues faced by the PSC, after its formal presentation to the President. The PSC can then take up the recommendations emerging from this workshop at the appropriate level for decision and follow-up. Of course, protocol will not allow inspection of the PSC by any official. But certainly nobody would object if the President accompanied by his Secretary were to visit this organization, say once every three months to hold "informal" but substantive discussions with the Chairman and members of the PSC, and then pass on his recommendations to the PM for consideration and action. Another problem-solving approach would be to lobby functionaries who matter, but this will depend on the informal links that the Chairman and members of the PSC will be able to develop with the bureaucracy. Aloofness, formal correspondence or high status conferred by the Constitution alone will not accomplish the task. In other words, innocuous ways and means are available to activate the PSC and sort out some of its outstanding problems which are mentioned year after year in the annual reports. It is sim-

ply the initiative of the PSC leadership, which is now needed. It is also high time for the government to reconsider the functions presently being discharged by the PSC. Its main responsibility, of course, is to conduct the public competitive examinations for recruiting officers for the various services of the Republic. However, in addition, it advises the government on recruitment and service rules, disciplinary cases and inter-service seniority of officers. Let us face the

through the public competitive examinations. Indeed, if we opt for a merit-based promotion system, which we should, then we need not be too much bothered about the precise determination of inter-service seniority of officers. This task, bereft of the finer considerations and criteria of seniority, can easily be handled by the Establishment Division and the relevant line ministry. In disciplinary cases, involvement of the PSC not only delays the process but often complicates matters through lightening of the

guidelines and principles. The PSC should be allowed to intervene and set things right in this way, delay may be minimized and at the same time, a degree of quality control is also ensured.

The PSC at present consists of one chairman and eight members. If one looks at their professional background, it will be seen that there is now a conspicuous bias in favour of teachers. Whatever may have been the reason behind this trend, it needs to be corrected so that other professions are also adequately represented. A more fundamental issue facing the PSC is the composition of the annual intake for the so-called generalist and functional services of the Republic. The intake is still heavily biased in favour of humanities and social science graduates. I am not arguing that they should be in any way excluded from entering these services. I am only advocating that the PCS, through the syllabus of the BCS competitive examinations (for both compulsory and optional subjects) facilitate greater participation of science, engineering, medicine and agriculture graduates in these examinations. At the same time, greater emphasis should also be placed on both written and spoken English, in addition to Bengali. This kind of a shift in emphasis will bring about at least two benefits. Firstly, it will greatly facilitate the inroad of scientific and technical knowledge into

the generalist and functional services, a matter whose importance and hardly be over-emphasized towards the closing years of the 20th century. In fact, a hunch shared by many is that those in generalist and functional services with science and technical background generally perform better. Indeed, it is sheer rubbish to suggest that if doctors become police officers or engineers turn into diplomats or agriculturists join BCS (Admin), the world will fall apart. On the contrary, such cross fertilization can be extremely beneficial if only we know how to make use of officers with special scientific and technical knowledge. It has also been observed that during training, recruits with science and technical background easily pick up economics, public administration and other social science subjects. Secondly, such emphasis in the PSC syllabus will send out the right kind of signals to the society in general, and in particular aspirants for, and institutions imparting, higher education.

Finally, it is a matter of great shame that the PSC does not as yet have its own office building, despite its long existence. Even the required land has not been allotted. This also does not speak well of the ability of the PSC leadership. However, the moot point is that PSC is a core organization of the state, which should be lean but effective and allowed to single-mindedly pursue a clear vision and objective. And towards that end, it should be adequately equipped in every possible way.

Making Government Work

by Analyst

reality. The main function of the PSC is itself one hell of a job. Then there are these complex additional loads of work to be handled by a limited number of qualified personnel. One need not be a public administration expert to suggest that such a condition only leads to red tape, delay, poor quality of work, scope for corruption and ultimately a bad name for the organization. At a time when downsizing of government is the general theme, it would be counterproductive to even suggest the idea of expanding the size of the PSC to handle the additional work. So the only workable solution for the PSC would be to give up the advisory functions enumerated above and concentrate on the recruitment of officers

punishment suggested from below. Now that administrative tribunals are in place, the more sensible approach would be to further strengthen these rather than lengthen the trial process in disciplinary cases through involvement of the PSC. This would indeed be a better guarantee against excesses committed in the disposal of disciplinary cases by the Investigating Officer. In the matter of service and recruitment rules, the PSC should be concerned with formulating general guidelines and principles in the light of its experience and research, rather than examine and vet these case by case. However, where there are complaints of gross violation or deviation from these

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

BCS examination

Sir, The regular oral test conducted by Bangladesh Public Service Commission (BPSC) for selecting the deserving candidates in the government services has created severe frustration and doubt among the candidates preparing for the same. The viva voce is held out of 200 marks. Written test is held in eight subjects (of these five are compulsory and remaining three subjects are optional). Hence total marks is 1000, of which 20 per cent marks are set aside for the oral test for the candidates who qualify the written test.

Government has every right to take any steps to excuse of national interest. Actually some of the steps go against the fate of the general masses. Today a portion of the educated people have shown distrust about the existing system of selecting the right candidate by the BPSC for government jobs, specially in the cadre services. A candidate's luck is floated in the hands of the viva-board of BPSC. He is supposed that a candidate's merit and efficiency is not accurately judged allocating as much as 200 marks for this test. We think it is not a scientific as well as reasonable to allocate 20 per cent marks only for the oral test. Impartial

judgement to the right candidate is not practised.

We do not think that members of the viva-boards do have fully impartial view on selection. The usual case is that we can never get totally impartial, honest and patriotic members in the board. We do not complain against any individual in BPSC. Our main disappointment arises out of the existing distribution of marks. Government can exhibit its proper positive reaction through abolishing the on-going system and revise it in favour of all candidates in the most scholarly way so that it is proved advantageous to the general people.

Lastly, we do propose the marks in oral test to be constrained to 5 per cent of the total marks. We wish the concerned authority of the government would pay attention, consider the proposal thoroughly and take proper steps towards realising the demand.

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Md Khalid Mahfuj
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Election monitoring

by FEMA

Sir, The news about a citizens initiative to promote free and fair elections in Bangladesh brings hope to us amidst present political im-

passe. The monitoring of elections in Bangladesh while is not new, but in the present context is important and can contribute in building confidence in the electoral process which has started to erode after the Magura by-elections. So far my knowledge is concerned, I have seen that Study and Research Group of MSS has monitored many elections and reported their findings very objectively contributing to improvement in the election process. In the recent by-election in Bfahmanbaria they reported of massive intimidation of voters and rigging, calling the attention of the Election Commission to review the matter.

If election is monitored by non-partisan, independent and credible persons, certainly the upcoming polls can be free and fair. Neutral people from all sectors of the society should join FEMA and make it a broad-based nationwide network like NEMFREL of Philippines and POLL-WATCH of Thailand.

Md Musa
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Who takes care!

Sir, Bangladesh Railway Authority, a new body for restructuring the railway has been constituted recently. This body will ensure more commercialisation, improved services, cost effectiveness and overall efficiency. Everyone knows that Bangladesh Railway (BR) has failed to attract passengers due to poor services coupled with increased competition from inter-district coach services. The new step towards modernization will ul-

timately fail as a part of BR personnel is involved in serious corruption.

Anyone who has experienced a journey by 'Tista' or 'Ekata', he would certainly give up the idea of travelling again by the same if alternative source prevails.

The man in the counter is found playing tricks with the travellers. He usually informs that ticket has finished. If someone is not familiar with his filthy tricks he might leave the counter disappointed. But experienced travellers will ask the counter-man to 'manage' tickets. The man smoothly manages and provided as many tickets as anyone needs in exchange of bribes. The compartments are found almost empty though the counter-man issued someone the last ticket. This is a reality and is occurring every now and then. We the general passengers have become their prey.

The service rendered by the BR during journey is more horrible and disappointing. The attendants are not found timely. The seats are kept dirty and the attendants never take care of these. Some of the windows are found broken and some are without glass. If asked, the authority's representative remains pale and often replies that they would be repaired very soon. The same condition prevails year after year. There are a lot of cases like this. Passengers without ticket are somehow 'managed'. The train will be stopped anywhere near before Kamalapur station so that the illegal passengers could be escaped by getting down of the train. Illegal passen-

gers are found in each station. They carry heavy bags of rice, potato and even bicycle with them. All these are done in cooperation with the attendants.

BR provides some junk foods at some excessive price. Again the quality of food is not at all satisfactory. The coolies will disturb you in the 'Ferry-ghat'. They may demand a too high payment if they find the passenger with heavy luggages. However, they are ill-motivated. Sometimes they seem to try to earn a lot by creating a inconvenient situation in the 'ghat'.

These are some of the real situations we face regularly. Railway Authority might not be able to take care of all these if their personnel are found dishonest. Railway is not the only mode of transport. Its monopoly does not exist anymore. So it is time to consider all aspects of prosperity as well as decline. Anyway, we wish success to the fresh initiative by constituting Railway Authority. Godspeed to the honest-drive of RA.

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Loud-speaker menace

Sir, As youngsters in the early sixties, I remember, we had insurmountable difficulties (much to our annoyance!) in obtaining permission for using a loud-speaker, even to celebrate any joyful event. Yes, in those days it was necessary to obtain permission from the concerned government office (was it 'publicity department'?) to use a loud-

speaker. Understandably, people in the helm of power in those days felt that there was a need to keep the people's tongue down and least heard, which was perhaps an evil political design. Restrictive and down perhaps the voice was, but was it least heard, as was thought by the Chair? To the contrary, it was more eloquent than most talks, resulting in a continual stir and series of events which culminated in the birth of a country — Bangladesh.

Now, over the past three decades, what have we made of this tool — the loud-speaker? It speaks very loudly indeed, and what indiscriminately! One wakes up in the morning (if one was lucky to have succeeded in falling asleep the previous night) with loud-speakers announcing about a dozen impending lotteries, promoting sales by a shopping complex (there is no dearth of it in any neighbourhood), cheap imported music and songs, and many other "disappearing" tones! What a horrifying nuisance one has to live in the midst of!

Our major problem may be summarized in just one word — "pollution" — the problem of population and the problem of noise and environmental pollution.

We are aware of the country's efforts to curb population problem. But are we doing anything to stem noise pollution — a menace growing at a fast pace, and under the very nose (or is it ears?) of the authorities?

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