

A Realistic Picture

Now, at long last, here is at least a picture of our power situation. We had demanded of the government a white paper on the matter. General (retd) Nooruddin's outline yesterday of the present state and the immediate outlook does not mince words and should be greatly helpful in giving a realistic frame to our expectations. But this does in no way obviate the need of a white paper setting out all the facts of this most important aspect of our national being — a lifeline, so to say.

It is good, even brave, of the minister to flatly tell us not to expect any relief from the present straits till well into April. But the industrial and agricultural losses the power crisis is forcing upon the nation will keep taking a toll may be for the rest of the year and beyond.

The inconceivable dip that power took during the first half of the present month pushed the greater part of the population in Dhaka beyond the pale of civilised existence. Can General Nooruddin's brave words mean that this would continue for still another month and more? That is as asking too much of the people simply because the people haven't in them the capacity to take any more water starvation. We want to believe that measures are under way to relieve the water situation through setting up a battery of emergency generators. How we hope this to come true!

Today's power crisis is not the immediate result of just yesterday's foolishness. It is by now old hat that our installed capacity of electricity generation was not increased by even a megawatt during the five-year tenure of the earlier government. While the demand for power mounted outstripping the rate of population — for understandable reasons of rural electrification and continued influx of people to the urban areas — the generation capacity kept depreciating in very physical and inexorable terms, reaching the power position to today's breaking point. The energy minister's explanations add substantially to the list of unfortunate, inept and downright stupid failures of our earlier years. Not only Bakhrabad was prodigally exploited to end up mining sand rather than fuel. The on-hand vital jobs of building pipelines for reaching fuel to the turbines were not completed on schedule. The minister said the government is exerting to plug those gaps going into an emergency overdrive.

What held the government so long from sharing these with the people? What is holding them from issuing a white paper? In the meantime we would repeat our counsel that the distribution of both power and water be made strictly on the basis of shared austerity — and very visibly so. Moreover, it should continue past the end of the present crisis.

Insightful Letter

Candour was the theme of Carol Bellamy's letter published in last Wednesday's daily New York Post. In that epistolary communication with the American newspaper, the Executive Director of UNICEF described the waning of child labour from Bangladesh's garment industry as an example of practical agreement and partnership-building.

Indeed it was a practical one as the dismissal of 50,000 children from the industry and the placing of 4000 of them in 135 new school-rooms since the agreement in July 1995 between Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers & Exporters Association (BGMEA), UNICEF and ILO in July 1995 suggest.

Despite Bangladesh's commitment to the crusade against exploitation of child labour efforts to eradicate this poignant reality tend to end in whimper for a variety of socio-economic reasons. Apparently, the agreement, an outcome of US injunction on our garment exports that had anything to do with child labour made light of some of these constraints.

But at what price and for how long? Ms Bellamy's letter addressed these points with the insight of a native. There is no doubt that child labour in Bangladesh is not a simple issue and defies simplistic solutions. What is probably even closer to truth is that any attempt to fight child labour in a country like Bangladesh has to be a multi-pronged initiative for, there are actually several reasons why child labour has come to have Bangladesh as its haven as in some other South Asian countries.

The executive head of UNICEF was very correct in airing caution to the rich and developed countries about sanctions and boycotts on issues like this. Because injunction like the one imposed on the local garment industry invariably means a huge socio-economic dislocation. If not tackled in a holistic and comprehensive manner moves however desirable and sane will give rise to great many problems that may in the end appear defeating than rewarding. As expected the conditional injunction on our garment export brought along a few harsh realities which the authority is struggling to come to terms with.

We hope, the letter contributes to enhanced and more considerate approach of the economic powerhouses in matters related to sanctions against the developing countries.

Another Hero

Another father has apprehended his wayward son and surrendered him to police. The first such unprecedented action, of a father handing over his acid-throwing son to police custody, took place only last Thursday. Could, any one of these days, some father come to police with a bunch of terrorist sons in tow — and shame the political godfathers of campus terrorism?

The latter hero of a father, Mr. Abdus Sattar, a driver by profession, could catch his allegedly son only after setting out on a literal odyssey. He just tracked his fleeing son down — almost Australian aboriginal style. What remains both a mystery and a case of unusual courage is how could these fathers make their sons accompany them sheep-like to police which entails a high likelihood of stiff punishment ranging up to death. The two gentleman appear to be possessing great moral strength and this must also have lent them very commanding personalities. This, however, lands us into a quandary. All this must be true but how then their sons do slip into such base criminality? Will it be wrong to assume that moral rectitude of parents does not anymore create a healthful ambience enough pervasive to keep their progeny from evil's way?

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TWO CRISES

Power Supply of the Country and Water Supply of the Capital

Right now, regardless of the conspiracy theory propounded by the former PM, there is a serious power shortage. And that is due to one simple reason — there is just not enough natural gas to keep all the generation running. Instead of power crisis, the present situation should rightfully be termed as the gas crisis.

According to a newspaper report, the former Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia declared in a public meeting she addressed at Feni on 26 February last, that there is no problem in the power sector and the load-shedding that is taking place is due to the machinations of the government with a view to justifying import of electricity from India. She reiterated the same in another meeting at Keshabpur in Jessor on 7 March. Now we can expect other leaders of the opposition to take up the cue and spread the message.

It was a very shrewd pre-emptive stroke on the part of Begum Zia. The best way to escape the blame for one's own lapses is to accuse the other party with all possible vehemence. It was surely to be expected that the opposition will try to make political capital out of the misery of the people due to massive load-shedding that is now taking place. But one may think she was some what hasty with her offensive on this count. A few more weeks would see the crisis deepen. Longer hours in the dark, increasing summer heat, more crops withering for lack of irrigation and all other heightened aggravations due to power shortage would have made the populace more responsive to any such attack on the government of the day. Some more delay in launching such a tirade would have had another advantage — as time passes, the people are less likely to connect the current crisis with the past failures i.e. establish the cause and effect relationship.

During the eight months of its rule, the present government surely has made many mistakes. But in all fairness, it can not be held guilty as charged by the former PM. There is a serious power shortage, and the responsibility for it lies totally and fully at the door of the government she led for five years.

Let us look at the facts on the ground. The installed electricity generation capacity is just adequate — with proper maintenance — to meet the current needs of the country. However, if the generation capacity is not increased soon and distribution systems upgraded, it will be meaningless to promote new investment local or foreign, or to plan the extension of the area

under irrigation : not much was done in this sector during the days of the last government. And one should keep it in mind that the lead time between project planning and commissioning in this sector is three to four years under the best of circumstances.

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Inadequate supply of gas has reduced generation of power by more than 500 megawatts (MWs). Some plants like Rauzan have been shut down and some others are operating below capacity.

The recent crisis in the supply of urea fertiliser is also directly attributable to gas shortage. RUCFO and CUFL plants had to be closed down for want of feedstock. Government had to fork out Taka 600 crore or so worth of precious foreign exchange for import of urea to meet the shortfall. Higher import price also meant huge subsidy from the exchequer.

2

That a serious gas shortage is looming ahead was known or at least should have been known more than five years back to all concerned government agencies — Petrobangla, Power Board, BCIC and their controlling Ministries and Ministers. The solution was

simple and that was also known to them.

It was the Bakhrabad Gas Field that was primarily dedicated for supply to the fertilizer factories and power plants, among other uses, in the Chittagong region by the Bakhrabad-Chittagong pipeline. Quite some time ago, it was detected that recoverable quantity of gas in Bakhrabad field is much less than originally estimated and unless the supply is augmented from other sources, a serious shortfall in supply is bound to occur.

How to augment the supply was also known. The solution is a eight or ten inch pipeline from Ashuganj to Bakhrabad covering a distance of about 40 miles or so. And it was required to be completed before the crisis actually hits with all its dire consequences.

As projects go, it was a rather simple one within the competence of our own technical experts who had already implemented comparable projects without any foreign expertise. It would have taken perhaps six months or so and the project cost would be somewhat in the range of Tk 150 crore. Given the critical nature of the project and urgency of the situ-

Bakhrabad pipeline is progressing fast. But it will still be three months or so before gas actually flows through this pipeline. Meanwhile, there will be more load shedding and more closed factories, and less water for irrigation.

However, if more production wells are developed and pipelines upgraded something that should have been done long ago — another gas crisis is bound to occur within a year or

3

Among all the ministers in Bangladesh, past and present, Mr Saifur Rahman (perhaps the longest serving Finance Minister of this country) has always

wanted of water. But we failed to utilize eight hundred crore taka provided by the donors for the water supply project. The donors stipulated a condition that water-billing has to be handed over to the private sector. But that could not be done on account of political opposition.

Water shortage for meeting the day to day necessities of the citizens of Dhaka began to be felt quite a few years back. The situation gradually exacerbated with the increasing population and lowering of the sub-soil water level. It became absolutely evident that the needs of Dhaka city cannot be met by pumping out water from below the ground. This led to the formulation of the Saidabad water supply project aimed at pumping up river water and supplying the same through an upgraded distribution system after purification in a treatment plant to be set up in Saidabad.

The project proposal was approved and financing lined up in the late eighties is even before BNP government came in power. World Bank agreed to provide major part of the cost; France was the other donor.

World Bank financing had, — conditionalities none of which can be said to be unreasonable — attached to it. The major one was the introduction of billing by private sector in two zones. It would be an experiment to see if 'system loss' which runs at more than 50 per cent, can be reduced by such an arrangement. There were also other conditions in respect of reorganizing the WASA Board and revamping its management.

Five years of BNP rule passed and the government could not gather the political courage to fulfil the conditions. According to some reports, another reason for the lack of any progress was the bickering among the top people within the government in the matter of selection of contractors and consultants — a situation which has become quite normal in the recent years. The result — every

thing was on hold and the donors effectively withdrew from the scene. For the citizens of Dhaka, it is an unmitigated disaster. There is just no other way of worsening water crisis in the coming years.

The present government took fresh initiatives to review the project, and successfully renegotiated with the donors. But even if everything progresses satisfactorily, it will be at least four years before water from the Saidabad project reaches Dhaka citizens. What will happen in the intervening period just defies imagination. Meanwhile, as in the case of gas power shortage, the opposition will surely try to persuade the people of the failure or conspiracy or both on the part of the government to make the people suffer.

And, according to some reports, things are not progressing satisfactorily again due to present government's delay in fulfilling the conditionalities. One can only hope that this government will have more political courage and commitment to welfare of people of Dhaka than the last one.

4

It is not at all surprising that BNP leaders are so loud and vehement in blaming their successor government for the misery of the people due to load-shedding. Surely, they would do the same when water shortage in Dhaka will soon become acute. It may be unfair, but it is the nature of the game of Bangladeshi politics.

But what is surprising is total failure of the government to put across their case before the people. Is it due to misplaced magnanimity or chivalry towards defeated opponents or complacency? One wonders! But the likeliest explanation for this strange behaviour is sheer ignorance and incompetence.

The occasions by the opposition are bound to become more and more strident and will increasingly fall on the receptive ease of the citizens as the both electricity and water crises worsens. Any defiance put up at that time by the government will have very little credibility. The charges must be true, most of the ordinary citizens would argue, otherwise why has the government kept silent all this time?

Another Voice

Kazi Fazlur Rahman

been the maverick. He shuns cliche-ridden orations and jargon-filled political platitudes. His choice of words on style of delivery may occasionally cause some raised eyebrows but he almost always displays the courage of his conviction and does not shrink from speaking the truth — increasingly a rare quality among his tribe — even if the same upsets his party faithful.

He displayed this penchant for telling the truth — albeit unpalatable — in an interview he granted to a local Bengali newspaper (The Bhoror Kagoj) which was published on April 16 and 27, 1996.

The following quotation (in translation) from that interview is relevant in the context of the current power crisis in the country and the water crisis in Dhaka :

"We could not introduce the necessary legal reforms. There had been no reform worth mentioning in the electricity telecommunication and administration sectors. People of Dhaka are wailing aloud for

Turkish Political Model at Islamabad

by K Gajendra Singh

The National Security Council was first put in the Turkish Constitution after the 1960 coup to give an institutionalised voice to the Armed Forces, and was approved in a referendum. It was not introduced through a decree. It was the NSC which had asked PM Demirel to resign in 1971.

The Turkish Armed Forces are rooted in a mixture of Ottoman Army traditions when, as now, it formed an autonomous elite, modernised and westernised by French and German staff officers and forged into a nationalist fighting force. During the War of Independence by Turkey's founder Kemal Ataturk, to uphold secularism and guard against any tilt either to the left or the right, Ataturk had ensured that the military men gave up their uniform before joining civilian duties. And since the early 1950s when Turkey joined NATO, it has been influenced by its practices and US influence. When the Armed Forces first intervened in the 1960s, a few days after Jawaharlal Nehru's visit to Turkey, the ruling party had divided the country into hostile camps and curtailed freedom. (Still, Nehru had insisted and met Ataturk's able successor Ismet Inonu, then in the opposition). Following the coup Prime Minister Adnan Menderes and two of his colleagues, originally based on the British colonial pattern and modified by 50 years of experience is not so different. In practice his position has been even more decisive and certainly arbitrary. A proposal to create such a Council by Pakistani President Gen Zia ul Haq in the 80s was opposed and dropped by a few of the defence delegations from Pakistan who came to study the Turkish NSC model. It appears that the current Constitutional coup was initially opposed by even the caretaker Prime Minister and others. The posting of a retired general as the new Pakistani Ambassador in Ankara would help understand the working of the Turkish NSC.

The agenda of the Council meetings is based on the proposals from the Prime Minister and the CGS and the position of the Pak Chief of Army Staff, originally based on the British colonial pattern and modified by 50 years of experience is not so different. In practice his position has been even more decisive and certainly arbitrary. A proposal to create such a Council by Pakistani President Gen Zia ul Haq in the 80s was opposed and dropped by a few of the defence delegations from Pakistan who came to study the Turkish NSC model. It appears that the current Constitutional coup was initially opposed by even the caretaker Prime Minister and others. The posting of a retired general as the new Pakistani Ambassador in Ankara would help understand the working of the Turkish NSC.

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bakan had to endure this yearly annual cleansing by the Army, which dismissed nearly 80 officers with religious tendencies and proclivities. First Demirel and then Turgut Ozal made sure that the requirements of the Armed Forces are met and their well-being is sustained through OYAK industries and other measures. Since 1960 coup, when the first ever civilian President Celal Bayar was ousted, in recent years only President Demirel and his predecessor Turgut Ozal (1989 to 1993) were not former Armed Forces Commanders. Thus establishing civilian ascendancy, Turgut Ozal, the first one to do so, did not accept the Army's nomination of the CGS, who later on resigned because of differences with Ozal's policy on the 1991 Gulf War. Ataturk himself was followed by his able successor, Ismet Inonu, who insistently played by the democratic rules and contributed enormously in establishing the roots of democracy in Turkey. Pakistani Army might like to emulate the Turkish Army by having one of its own members elected as the President after Erdogan. And of course there is the story of Erdogan Beg and Gen Ayub Khan.

Pakistanis may vehemently deny it but the Indian (Hindu — the word comes from river Indus = Sindhu) influence over it is undeniable. Converts from Hindu castes continue to marry among themselves. With an aggressive Punjabi (nearly 60 per cent of Pak population) per-

sonality, they believe they can do anything better than the Indian Hindu even in having a democracy. In 1976 Bhutto had crowed over democracy in Pakistan, after Indira Gandhi had imposed the Emergency. But while Indira's democratic instincts, apart from other reasons, made her go to the polls in 1977 (which she lost), Bhutto's feudal instincts of deciding what is good for the riya and his hanging. This is an important consideration in Pak's endeavour to bring back democracy again and again, notwithstanding the fact that the movement for Pakistan and certainly the leadership of Pakistan is not based on grassroots. The feudal landlords, bureaucrats, army officers oligarchy remains the ruling elite. Perhaps Nawaz Sharif is one of the few to break from this mould, notwithstanding his initial propping by Zia ul Haq. It is unlikely that a Laloo Yadav, Mayawati, Bansi Lal, or a Deve Gowda or Lal Bahadur Shastri can rise to the higher ranks of the ruling committee in Pakistan. And certainly religion is an important determining factor.

So what Laghari has done is to regularise the existing power equation in Pakistan, based on Islamic ethos, its fight for Pakistan originally abetted by the British and consequential evolution of politics based on feudal and army interests. Democracy has never been taken to the very grassroots as in India or even in Turkey. While Turkey

and Pakistan have close political relations based on reciprocal support on Kashmir and Cyprus, Turkish political leaders have no illusions about the quality of democracy in Pakistan. Turkish CGS General I H Karadai, the first Turkish CGS to visit India a year ago, came back vastly impressed by the civilian and military institutions and the harmonious relationship between them. During the last 50 years, the three periods of military rule in Turkey, direct and indirect, have amounted to a few years only, time required to restore peace, get a new Constitution framed and put to referendum. In Pakistan the military has ruled directly for half the time since its independence and normally has an important say in the formation and dismissal of the govt of Pakistan in recent years. The Turks are moving away from military influence. The election of the last two civilian Presidents and letting a religious party lead the coalition govt, which goes against the secular grain of the Armed Forces, are concrete developments in that direction, whereas Pakistan President's arbitrary decree formalises the *de facto* say of the Armed Forces in the running of the country, in the fond hope that an arbitrary sword of Democles might become a partner. While institutionalising the role of the Armed Forces might tame the runaway corruption of the politicians (in India the Judiciary has rightly taken up that role) it might also freeze the existing oligarchy with the havenots never ever having a chance of finding a say in decision making.

Mandira

The writer is a retired Indian Ambassador to Turkey.

To the Editor...

Bad News

Sir, READ THE LABEL. Preliminary reports may have identified a Potential Carcinogen: Methyl chloro iso thiazolone, a preservative found in shampoos, conditions and lotions.

Source: Environment and Molecular Mutagenesis.

Dr Rumi Tabrez Hyder
22