

Fire at Gasfield

A literal inferno is now taking toll of an on-going gas drilling operation together with its facilities and the surrounding area of the Magurachhara tea garden. The Saturday night explosion at well number 14 when the drilling bits struck rocks 840 metres underground, set off a fire, the biggest in the country in 42 years. And it is lapping up the entire tea plantation area and defoliating the whole zone around. Forty-two years back a similar fire in the Haripur gas field took three months to go out. At the moment there is no knowing how this will be brought under control. And how many billions of taka will the cost of damage run up at the end.

The Kamalganj, Srimangal fire is a matter of accident — unforeseen results issuing from human manipulation of nature. It is not at all like cyclone and tidal bore visitations which we have grown familiar with and against which we cannot hold anything. But the present conflagration is a result of human activity and its reasons must be found if only to learn to prepare ourselves for such eventuality in future.

Gas and oil field fires are not unknown to man. Only fools and incompetent nincompoops would rule out such a possibility, even if remote, in a gas field, operational or at prospecting level. What then were the state of preparation at Magurachhara to face a fire? And, more importantly now, what are the arrangements at all our gas fields and drilling sites?

Some lapses are already being suspected and loudly. The Bangladesh half of experts who should keep the vigil over the operation there are reported to have been absent on the site at the time the sky caught fire with flames leaping 500 feet and fire lighting up areas miles away. We appreciate that not a minute was lost in naming a probe committee. And Petro-Bangla has tried to cool our frayed nerves by saying specialist firefighters and equipment are being flown in from Singapore and Houston. The gasfield fire has partially turned into a bush fire burning down not only tea plants but the whole green valley.

While we pray for an early end to the conflagration we would hope that this would give us a big lesson and we would learn it well enough not to let another such fire hurt us.

D-8 Forum

The 12-pt Istanbul Declaration that heralded on Sunday a new cooperation forum acronymed Developing-8 on the world map of sixty regional economic arrangements is resolutely wedded to accelerated integration with the global economy. Its baptism as a 'forum' is significant. The architects of the D-8 forum are seized of the fact that since external factors impact on the prospects of trade, investment and even technological cooperation among developing countries it is imperative that they evolve common perceptions and stances vis-a-vis the externalities facing them. They have set about carving a niche for cooperation on the basic realisation that post-detente international situation in tandem with the rapid globalisation of the world economic structure present both opportunities and challenges.

Their 'firm commitment to fostering global partnership in the world economy based on a constructive dialogue through a democratic and participatory process' is as much a resolve unto themselves as it is directed outwardly. The resolute ethical stance of the D-8 countries rings with an underlying universal message specially when it is elaborated through such picturesque phrases as "cooperation instead of exploitation, justice instead of double-standard, equality instead of discrimination and democracy instead of oppression." Such expressions do not conceivably relate to the conditions obtaining in the member-countries, although in their sociological microcosms aberrations may be there as matters of national policy concerns.

Endless opportunities spring from the D-8 area — trade, investment, technology-sharing, tourism and cultural contacts. The decisions for a mechanism for development, joint business councils, consultation bodies for macro-economic policy harmonisation and constructive partnership between the private and public sector are welcome.

We congratulate host Turkey and the colleague nations on their success in launching the D-8 forum and greatly appreciate their choice of Dhaka as the venue for the next summit. It is a double glory for Bangladesh because the first annual cultural festival would also be held here.

Strike a Balance

Bangladesh's elevation to the ODI cricketing status from her rock-bottom associate standing with the ICC after sloggling around for the most part of last two decades has done us immeasurably proud. It may have been an inevitability awaiting a redeeming announcement by the ICC authorities after Bangladesh team's well-merited thoroughly unblemished triumphant march to the ICC Trophy championship, yet the elation at being in the league with the nine foremost cricketing nations of the world is simply irrepressible.

We felicitate Bangladesh's coming of age in terms of eligibility to engage any of the Test-playing nations in one day internationals. But she has been put on a litmus test of a 'maximum two years' duration to improve enough for acquiring a Test-playing status or else she is stuck with the ODI status.

So, a delicate balance should be very carefully struck between the preparations set afoot to be in the reckoning for the ODIs and those that have to be undertaken to qualify for the Test-playing status. Whenever we played 60-over games our stamina showed signs of flagging and in two-or three-day matches our performances have been deplorably lacklustre in most cases.

The abridged version of the game being a highly popular half-way to fame cannot be overlooked, but the larger training and prowess-building test matches format must be concurrently addressed with all the seriousness it demands.

Why not a Budget for Industrial Growth?

As a school student in the early 1950s, I had very little idea of what is the national budget. Obviously, I failed to understand why the then Finance Minister of Pakistan, Mr. Chowdhury Mohammed Ali was called the financial wizard for preparing a surplus budget. Till today, I fail to understand the wizardry involved in budgeting. How can the budget of a poor developing country end up having more income than expenditure unless it is full of accounting fictions? Therefore we do not hear of financial wizards these days.

The desired priority to industrial sector, although suffering from stagnation, had been ignored. There is no mention of how fiscal devices can assist in the process of rejuvenating the sector.

Linkages to ready-made garment industries by setting up hundreds of factories devoted to spinning, weaving and finishing of textile. How can we do it if there are new taxes to deal with?

In fact it is not only textile which is affected by taxes. If we mean business and decide to act through the budget for industrial growth, then the entire tax structure including value added tax (VAT) should have been thoroughly analysed for the purpose of redesigning the tax system which would induce and

not retard industrial growth. In broad outline, such measures would include no increase or if possible, reduction of import duties, surcharge and VAT on imported machinery and equipment destined for priority industries such as garment, textile, leather and other export oriented industries.

milks and several other processed foods made locally must pay heavy taxes on (among others) imported packing materials; while canned fruit juice from Bhutan or milk powder from New Zealand hardly pay any taxes. It is surprising but true that we have consistently failed to promote agriculture and irrigation machinery and equipment industries since imported irrigation pumps, tractors, power tillers etc. cost less because of their tax-free status; while steel and other metals going into the domestic manufac-

lowed to enjoy a lower rate of taxes than cement imported in bags, their 3 million tons of cement imported every year can keep three jute mills of 10,000 ton capacity each working round the year.

I think the time has also come to ban the import of reconditioned cars and make the beginning of an automobile industry in Bangladesh by lowering the taxes on import of cars under completely knocked down condition (CKD) with provision of progressive manufacture of components locally so that eventually 100 per cent domestic manufacture of cars is feasible within a stipulated period of time. In particular, domestic manufacture of trucks and buses should be encouraged in view of transit trade within the South Asian Growth Quadrangle as well as opening of the Jamuna Bridge — expanding the demand for transport vehicles.

The imposition of 20 per cent supplementary duty on reconditioned cars was not appropriate since highly price sensitive demand for those cars may decline by more than 20 per cent — defeating the very purpose of the additional tax to earn more revenue. At the same time, it would in no way assist development of the automobile industry in the country.

turing of such agricultural machinery and equipment suffer from relatively higher tax burden.

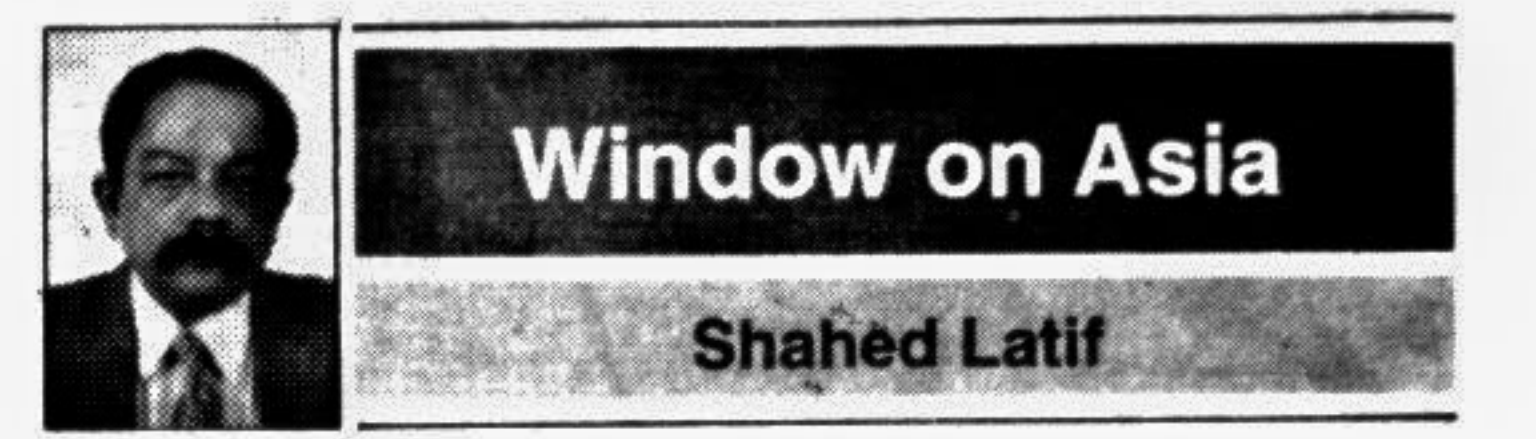
Why the budget did not remove such fiscal anomalies? Obviously, the desired priority to industrial sector, although suffering from stagnation, had been ignored. There is no mention of how fiscal devices can assist in the process of rejuvenating the sector. Not only that, there can be highly innovative fiscal devices to promote industrial growth. For example, if bulk import of cement is al-

lowed to enjoy a lower rate of taxes than cement imported in bags, their 3 million tons of cement imported every year can keep three jute mills of 10,000 ton capacity each working round the year.

revenue for two reasons: (i) the lower cost of handsets due to low level of taxes would boost up the demand for handsets which may not be able to match the negative revenue impact; (ii) however, the users will be paying VAT at 15 per cent of the cost of air time they are using which should far outweigh the initial revenue loss and such gains would accrue on a continuing basis. The revenue impact of taxation have many aspects including price elasticity of demand as well as long run influence on growth of the economy and if it is in the negative, then the immediate revenue gain regardless of its dimension should be judged with great caution.

In the ultimate analysis, all tax measures need to be investigated on the basis of their impact on an economy wide basis. Foremost, however, is to take into account the consequences on industrial growth; without which we are doomed.

Let us accept that we are passing through a grave crisis on the industrial front. This ought to be recognised. Only then we can initiate the necessary budgetary plan. There is still time. It is never too late.



Window on Asia Shahaed Latif

Manikganj-3 By-election : Significance and Other Assumptions

by Muhammad Quamrul Islam

Let Manikganj-3 by-election prove a turning point in our electoral history, thereby ensuring democratic management of people's welfare.

THE striking feature of the scheduled June 30 by-election to Manikganj-3 seat of the Jatiya Sangsad is the participation by BNP, which boycotted two by-elections in Thakurgaon and Habiganj, under the seventh parliament. Of the various reasons adduced by BNP for boycott, there was allegation of partisan role by the Chief Election Commissioner and their reluctance to accept the defeat of Barrister Moudud Ahmed in the by-election to Laximpur-2 seat of Jatiya Sangsad on September 5, 1996. Earlier, Barrister Moudud Ahmed joined BNP after embracing defeat as Jatiya Party leader in the general election on June 12, 1996, at Noakhali-5 seat, by a margin of about 11 thousand five hundred votes.

Till date, there has been a lot of debate as to why Barrister Moudud Ahmed, former leader of JP and now of BNP, could not return in the by-election, from the seat vacated by BNP chairperson Begum Khaleda Zia, who won by a big margin. Those who do not find fault in political maneuvering, perhaps take politics as a game only, and thus spoke of non-political reasons in favour of Barrister Moudud Ahmed while sympathizing with him in his defeat and accusing the Election Commission for all that was not in his favour. To say that Barrister Moudud was former Prime Minister and Vice-President under Ershad regime, and worked for that constituency, do not carry any message for the voters, most of whom are suffering the pangs of poverty and view election as a means to change their lot. Logically, the voters might not have been inclined to vote for Moudud. Further, it is fallacious to think that the seat vacated by BNP chairperson could be won by any person on BNP ticket, without any consideration of his past antecedents.

It seems that BNP leadership have found out the rights and wrongs of the boycott and decided to contest in Manikganj-3 "for the sake of democracy and following EC's assurance of fairness." Of course, other reasons may be attributed for this decision, i.e., Manikganj-3 is a traditional stronghold of BNP and there was tremendous pressure from the local level leaders on top to participate in the election. This is also manifested in the nomination of BNP candidate: Abdul Wahab, who is the vice-president of Manikganj unit of BNP, will contest the by polls. A comparative electoral position is depicted below:

Manikganj-3 in 1991

Winner	Received
Nizamuddin Khan (BNP)	63,963
Nearest — Mahfizul Islam Khan Kamal (AL)	29,068
Manikganj-3	
Winner—Nizamuddin Khan (BNP)	64,672

Nearest — Col (ret'd) Abdul Malek (JP) 41,385

Now, by polls will be held on June 30 next, as the seat has fallen vacant following the death of Nizamuddin Khan on April 8 last. BNP has nominated a local level leader this time, unlike the usual go for a big shot, as practised by the leading political parties. Surely, it opens up a new path to electoral fight, providing scope to local political leaders.

Col (ret'd) Abdul Malek, a Jatiya Party leader, joined the Awami League last month. He has been named the Awami League candidate in the ensuing Manikganj by polls. He was a former Mayor of Dhaka city, on JP blessings, and contested the last mayoral election for Dhaka city against AL candidate Hanif, who won. Now, the stage is different; Hanif and Malek both bear the standard of Awami League. It is reported that Col (ret'd) Malek has got the nomination of AL by passing longstanding Awami political aspirants, as they lacked in finance and so called influence. It is a fact that he was the nearest rival in the last general election, but as a JP candidate, JP also has fielded a candidate. It is queer to observe that what BNP did in the nomination for Laximpur-2 by polls, Awami League has done almost the same for ensuing Manikganj-3 by polls!

However, the date of polling is approaching fast and hopefully the Election Commission, which is a constitutional body, is ready to hold election, without any fear or favour. Over here, it would be worthwhile to take a glimpse of Magura-2 by-election, which triggered the last prolonged political stalemate. Magura by-election was held on March 20, 1994, wherein BNP candidate came out victorious. AL and other opposition parties alleged wide scale rigging by the ruling party in that by-election. In the election, 1991, Md. Asaduzzaman of AL won the Magura-2 seat, defeating the nearest rival Major General (ret'd) Md. Majed Haq of BNP, by over 28 thousand votes. This was a plus point, which gave credence to the allegation of AL on their defeat in the by polls in the same constituency. But, was that all?

Why the then Chief Election Commissioner Justice Abdur Rauf could not come up to the expectation of the people clarifying facts and figures of the Magura-2 by-election, and settle the dispute among the political parties, is still shrouded in mist. Mr. Abu Hena, the present Chief Election Commissioner, has access to the previous files. He has, no doubts gone through the same, to fix up his strategy in the ensuing Manikganj-3 by polls.

It is to be ensured that nothing of the type of Magura debacle befall again; for the people get apprehensive, seeing the repetitive politics of the parties.

One relevant question emerges as to why the ruling party is bent upon winning a seat, which was occupied by the opposition earlier. Might be, it's for a feeling in a section of ruling party leadership to show increasing popularity of the government. Whatever, it is now the turn of AL Government to take lessons from Magura-2 and help, as a ruling party, the Election Commission, to hold free, fair and neutral election.

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This is a facilitating point, left by preceding Chief Election Commissioner Justice Sadeque, and enacted thereafter, under the present Chief Election Commissioner Abu Hena. But, the issuance of ID cards for voters, which was started by Justice Sadeque, after completion of voters' registration, is still in the hanging. Its necessity was highlighted in a recent meet of Commonwealth Chief Election Officers of Asia and the Indian Ocean in Dhaka. So, the matter is known to all concerned and it is up to the Election Commission to provide ID cards to the voters. Till it is done, the Election commission will have to seek agreements of the parties on the voters list and procedure of casting votes, to avoid any allegation afterwards.

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OPINION

CEC

M D Hossain

It is about your editorial and Mr S R Shahaed's letter (DS 20-05-97) on the behaviour of CEC. In Mr Shahaed's opinion Barrister Moudud Ahmed is a turnedcoat politician, well, all that can be said about it is that most of our politicians are. But what Mr Shahaed (and the authors of some other previously published articles in the DS immediately after the by-election) seemed to imply that since Mr Moudud is a turnedcoat his opponent is justified in winning the election by adopting any means. And there lies the real problem. Where is a turnedcoat or not that should not really matter. Should it? Voters of the constituency should decide freely whether they want Mr Moudud as their MP. And the function of the CEC is to ensure that the voters should be able to cast their votes without fear, intimidation or hindrance. And the question we succeed in asking : did the CEC succeed in doing so? If not, then he must explain why he failed in his duty.

Now some words about the Raipur-Lakimpur constituency from where Mr Moudud contested the by election and lost. The seat was vacated by Begum Khaleda Zia who won the seat by a large margin in the 12th June 1996 general election. I visited the place before and after the election and talked to many people irrespective of their party allegiance — among them were relatives, friends and acquaintances. Before the election, the impression I got was that it was an unequal contest between the BNP candidate and the AL candidate and it was almost certain that the BNP candidate would win the election. But it did not happen that way — AL candidate won and a controversy began. BNP lodged complaints with the CEC and the CEC gave interviews with the TV but failed to dispel the lingering doubt about his impartiality and fairness in the conduct of the election.

I went home again after the election and again talked to the people of all shade of opinions. From these talks what emerged is that there were apparently large scale intimidation of voters, especially female voters; rickshaw pullers were systematically threatened, their tyres were cut or deflated; roads were barricaded and even ditches were dug on the road and throughout the whole night before the election day, thousands of crackers/bombs were exploded. CEC visited the con-

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.

Careful, BTV! Sir, Can anyone say what has happened to BTV? Every now and then the English News is broadcast with innumerable mistakes.

The newscasters often say, "the programme was participated by" whereas it should be "participated in" (since participate is an intransitive verb) so and so. Then again, I heard someone pronounce insinua as 'insinia' and volunteer corps as 'volunteer korpis' (which means a dead body).

By the way, can anyone say, is 'flourishment' correct English? The other day, I heard a newscaster using the word. Shouldn't it be 'flourishing'?

Lulu Ahmed Dhanmondi, Dhaka

"Coffee is Costly" Sir, I refer to the letter titled Coffee is Costly written by Mr M Zahidul Haque printed in The Daily Star on June 15. He wrote: "According to a latest scientific report, coffee has been found very effective against heart disease." He also gave a brief history of drinking practice of coffee around the world. As far as I know, through scanning the letter columns of the newspapers, Mr Haque works in an agricultural institute. Since coffee has its fountainhead in agriculture, the letter writer (as an agriculturist) must be knowing about it more than what the average people do. Fine and appreciable!

But my question is: "Why didn't Mr Haque mention the source of the latest report; did he find the information in any scientific/medical journal?" If so, then he should have specified the source (or the name of the scientist, who brought this to light). For commoner's knowledge has it that coffee contains 'Caffeine' which is hazardous to human health.

teachers have some demands. Now their monthly salary is only Tk. 500. They want it to be at least Tk 2,000. Some of them complain that they do not get their salary properly in time. Words fail to describe this kind of behaviour of the authority engaged in this programme.

Though in the meantime the prime minister has already visited Gopalganj to see the progress, yet I think she was not properly informed about the real situation. I have come to know that the total amount of money sanctioned by the prime minister for the implementation of the programme has not yet been properly distributed. There is a great discrimination in distributing the money. Is the money being used in any other way?

Mitu 705, Janata Road Gopalganj

Bangladesh and the changing world

Sir, The wind of change is blowing all over the world. Today the world is completely changed, modified and renovated — politically, economically and militarily. But the differences between the rich and the poor, "haves" and "have nots" are getting wider day by day.

Time and tide wait for none. In the present-day world wherever, whatever and whenever anything happens, any comedy or tragedy takes place the people of the whole world are directly or indirectly impressed or perturbed. Charity begins at home. As far as our country is concerned, we ought to solve all our domestic problems with broad mindedness, honesty and sincerity and to tackle our foreign policy matters meticulously with great care commensurate with the requirements of the people, wishes of the people and welfare of the people.

We may be a small country but we are destined to play an important role in world affairs, especially in the South-east Asia. Bangladesh is not only the balance of power among the SAARC countries but she is a span between the West and China and also a bridge between

South Asia and South-east Asia.

We are stepping into the 21st century. Let us prepare plans and programmes to meet our future requirements and challenges for the next 100 years with sagacity and courage for the welfare of our 120 million people and the prosperity of our beloved motherland.

OH Kabir 6, hare street, Wari, Dhaka-1203

Outrageous!

Sir, As I was going through the copy of The Daily Star of 27th May, 1997, I was shocked and stunned to read about a child girl foured by four persons of age gang-raped by four persons at a slum in Dhaka. There was also a news of a 15-year-old girl being raped, as she was going to school. God what has gone wrong with us? Are we fit to call ourselves civilised? We demand the law enforcing officials to carry on stringent operations to trace out these pervers and straight away hang them, for if by any negligence or any loopholes they are allowed be free, it will only encourage those criminals to soon lay a hand on some other child.

God only knows who the next child would be! Rather unfortunately, the existing laws are not severe enough to tackle the nefarious crimes nor it has much impact to infuse any real fear on the criminals. In my opinion, the strict Islamic law should be enforced for tackling murder, rape and snatching and nefarious crimes. And the government should seriously consider to introduce the Sharia hanging for murder, flogging to death for rape and abducting of hands for snatching/thefts. No matter how barbaric it may appear to one, for that matter, violation of child and women is equally painful!

Let our innocent children and womanfolk live in peace and with dignity, otherwise all that brag about repression on women will not be justified. We demand immediate hanging of the rapists.

Khawaja Viqar Moynuddin, Paurana Pallan, Dhaka