

Gas Crisis

Crisis seems to have become the other name of our national life. With the crisis in power supply situation still unresolved, the country has been gripped by a new one. News of countrywide shortage in gas supply that we came to know at the beginning of the new year, turned into a crescendo of worry this weekend as many areas in the capital were cut off from the supply network. According to reports, some eighty points in the city are out of supply now. With gas being the lone fuel for domestic use, life has become a real ordeal for housewives, particularly in the holy month of Ramadan with its adjusted kitchen timings.

We do not know exactly what has led to this huge crisis. There has been a general attempt by the supplying authorities to blame the ongoing cold spell. According to them consumption of gas has gone up in winter but it has not been matched by increase in supply. That seems moonshine. If it is a typical winter syndrome then why did we not see it last season, for that matter any time in the past? They have also said that cold has caused gas pressure to go down adding to the crisis.

Neither natural adversity nor increased consumer demand is convincing enough an explanation for such a huge shortage. From the statistics that have emerged so far it appears that it is more a systemic problem or some serious defect in the transmission network than the flimsy causes that are being bandied about now. We do not find it acceptable either that just because one field has gone out of production there should be a countrywide dearth in supply. Any modern network system demands that if there is shortage in one area it will be offset by supply from other parts.

Under the circumstances it is not unlikely for people to doubt whether the authorities took any step at all to normalise the situation since the news that shortage in gas supply was seriously hampering production in power plants along with other industrial units first reached.

What annoys one most is the government nonchalance over the matter. As in the case of power crisis this time too the relevant ministry failed to inform the people beforehand about the impending crisis let alone mitigating it. Now that the city dwellers are bearing the brunt of it, we demand the Energy Ministry put us in the picture about the crisis immediately and do something urgently to find a way out.

Investibility Rating

The man who leads Global Corporate Finance of ANZ Investment Bank, Reinhold Heus, gave us a leap of the mind on Wednesday. He told a distinguished gathering in Dhaka that Bangladesh's improving risk: reward ratio of investment-worthiness puts her in league with neighbours like India and Pakistan. He has the benefit of a global view and keeps relevant statistics handy, some of which he cited to carry his point with the audience. Especially mind-lifting has been his bracketing us not merely with India and Pakistan but even with China and Australia in terms of country risk equivalence.

We must thank Heus for his fresh angle on our investment prospects and also for his advice to launch a pro-active propaganda campaign to get us a positive exposure abroad. Particularly in terms of the investment options available here with guarantee for 100 per cent equity participation and the repatriability of funds.

While the top financial world expert from the ANZ Investment Bank has put some balm on our aching vocal chord strained through harping on our incentives package, there are certain internalities we need badly to improve upon to be able to put our best face forward overseas.

Our negative connotations cannot simply change into the positive so long as we have threats of haral, cluttered procedures, decision-making at a dead slow pace, poor manpower yields, infrastructural unreliabilities and dysfunctional ports — all making for a package of veritable disincentives. We must learn to take care of potential foreign investors the moment they arrive at the ZIA as the essence of what we call the 'one-stop service'.

Now Spurious PhDs

There are on the faculty of the Chittagong University some nine fake PhDs. According to a news reported by a national daily there is there also a D.Sc., his lofty diploma coming from no university but some World Development Association in India.

Investigation already made into the academic antecedents of some of the nine has failed even to locate the universities awarding them the doctorate. The gallant nine have, however, kept on prospering academically, one riding upon a full professorship — the highest office of any university.

Every now and then stories of spurious students pursuing degrees with forged certificates come up in the press. Now teachers want to share in that glory. It's a long time since someone on the faculty of the JU English Department was proven a dangerous or hilarious fake. But he was a lone ranger. The CU seems to have the achievers in droves.

Anti-corruption people are already after two of these. And perhaps they will go after two others very soon. The CU will be well-advised to go into the question of whether it befits a university to fail to manage its own affairs and proceed against criminals in the garb of teachers and leave its personnel to the disciplining by the courts in matters academic.

But then universities have their problems. They do have politics and of a very low and mean order. Those that are teaching there on the strength of papers forged and faked, are perhaps thriving by manipulating the senate and syndicate and blackmailing the holders of position by the threat of withdrawing support.

The question that would now agitate the mind of the nation is, are the other universities immune from this dangerous defect? Teachers can be good or bad, somewhat more endowed or less, given wholly or partly to the calling. But they cannot be criminals. Faking with academic records goes against the very fundamentals of a university. And come to think of these characters teaching pupils.

Let this CU situation occasion a hunt for other such smart ones in the other universities. And when the count is complete, let these glorious lot be punished specially.

Not Far from the Fire

One of the allegations against the "Tiger" economies is that while economic fundamentals went more or less right, the political fundamentals went outright wrong implying that inappropriate political fundamentals could jeopardise economic fundamentals at any time.

THE recent financial turmoil in East Asia — allegedly, sinking it further into economic quicksand — tends to unveil the myth of the miracle. It all started with Thailand when the Baht dipped deeper in terms of losing its value to US dollar. With Japan rearing a recession, Thailand, Indonesia and South Korea are looking for a bailout from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Shaken by the surrogate of financial crisis in Asia, many forecasters who recently predicted a GDP growth rate of 6 per cent for South Korea and South East Asian countries for next year are suddenly projecting a zero or negative growth rate. The new conventional wisdom that sweeps tremendously the international financial arena is that the miracle so long espoused in the case of the 'Tigers' or 'Emerging Tigers' are myth. The reality is that these economies are poorly managed and gravely sick. Analysts reckon that "irrational exuberance" by foreign and domestic investors in East Asia, spurred by years of massive rate of economic growth, resulted in the implementation of unworthy projects, most of them being in stock markets and real state businesses.

It is an admitted fact that in today's global economic network, no country can keep itself isolated from the "boom" or "depression" taking place in some other countries, no matter at what distance the 'heavens' or the 'hells' are located. Financial market turbulence in one country triggers reactions in others and the ripples thereof tend to haunt everyone. Taking this premise for granted, one can easily imagine that the most damaging impacts of what happened in East Asian countries are scaring foreign investors to pull their money away from the places of the fire. We in Bangladesh, could perhaps feel less of the pains since not much of foreign financial assets have even been pouring into Bangladesh to flee during the exit spree. Speculative manipulations with respect to Taka is also not apprehensive as there is no credible foreign exchange market. However, Bangladesh's ability to attract foreign investment is likely to be adversely hit, from countries such as South Korea, Taiwan etc.

Are we then far from the fire that broke out in the financial markets in East Asia and thus immune from any foreseeable adversities? It would be a naive juxtaposition to assume that we carry a clean slate in our case when dirt is growing in other parts of the world. Economists posit that the current crisis in some of the Asian countries could affect our economy in two ways. First, the projected slowdown in world growth rate might hamper our exports. Forecasters have already started to revise world growth rate downwards which means we should also project low export earnings. Second, the massive devaluations of currencies in the crisis-ridden economies could turn them more competitive to thwart any competitive edge by Bangladesh export products. This means that Bangladesh is seemingly poised to face a relatively stiff competition from these economies than it hitherto

been. More so, foreign companies which vied to relocate companies through joint ventures in Bangladesh might find it worthwhile to give a second thought to such relocations in the wake of their devalued currencies and hence regaining competitive edge.

We are also not far from the fire given a very weak base of our financial sector. The banking sector in Bangladesh — nationalised or private — has not produced a level of efficiency and strength which can be considered friendly to modern-day business transactions. Historically speaking, rampant corruption, political high-handedness and "default culture" in the sector have broken the backbone of our financial sector. We hear a lot about banking reforms but not much seem to be on the table in terms of output. Given a fragile banking sector as it is now in Bangladesh, a doomsday might visit us sooner or later. The bitter experiences that some of our neighbouring Asian countries have provided us with very recently, drive home one important conclusion: the speed and scope of financial sector reform should not be underestimated.

It is nice to note that the present government took a number of positive steps to deal with bed debts and fraudulent activities in the realm of financial transactions. But recent reports on loan defaults and fraudulent activities by a particular business house and similar allegations against a number of "state sponsored entrepreneurs" do not seem to cause any concern among policy makers. Rather, general notion is that those misdoers are very much close to the power structure to feed and to be fed. It is in the interest of the economy that the government should proceed with legal actions fast against those playing foul with people's money.

Attention of readers can be drawn to another aspect. Bangladesh is expected to get large volume of investments in the energy sector. We should remember that inflow of foreign capital into this sector might worsen the balance of payments since most of the development of this sector is heavily dependent on imported materials — this could exert pressure on the overall balance of payments and actuate current account balance situation is the near future. One needs to guard against any adverse outcome from this sector.

Finally, one of the allegations against the "Tiger" economies is that while economic fundamentals went more or less right, the political fundamentals went outright wrong implying that inappropriate political fundamentals could jeopardise economic fundamentals at any time. As it seems to us, the macro economic fundamentals that Bangladesh experienced so far hinge on very weak political fundamentals. Unless political reforms accompany economic reforms, the house of the finely built macro fundamentals could be set on fire any time. Thus we are not far from fire, in fact, sitting very close to it. Let pragmatic economic policies and politics help us to escape any turmoil.



Beneath the Surface

by Abdul Bayes

Bangabandhu's Home Coming

Reminiscences of a Memorable Day

One can never forget that moment, of the morning of January 10, 1972, when at the Delhi Palam airport, the silver coloured British Comet aircraft carrying Bangabandhu came to a halt... the gun salutes boomed and suddenly one saw the tall and handsome figure of Bangabandhu standing at the door way, smiling and waving...

ON his release from captivity in Pakistan, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman arrived in New Delhi from London enroute to Dhaka, on the morning of January 10, 1972. It was by sheer coincidence, that Foreign Minister Abdus Samad Azad, who was holding the same post then as well, was on his first bilateral visit to New Delhi. We had, by then, working feverishly since the liberation of Dhaka on December 16, 1971, succeeded in setting up a proper Foreign Office in Dhaka where I was, among other assignments, performing the duties of the Chief of Protocol. I happened to be a member of Foreign Minister Abdus Samad Azad's delegation on that visit to New Delhi.

The eighth of January 1972 dawned as any other chilly New Delhi winter morning. We were at the New Delhi Foreign Office, and at the top of our agenda of the visit was discussions with the Indian authorities about ways and means for securing Bangabandhu's early release from Pakistan prison. Late that morning when we were having our talks with the Indian officials, Mani Dixit, then Director at the Indian Foreign Office who subsequently was Foreign Secretary, barged into the conference room. "Sheikh Mujib has been released", he said, all excited. The meeting broke up as we burst into spontaneous applause. An ordinary moment at once got indelibly imprinted in memory. We then learnt that Bangabandhu had left Pakistan in a special PIA aircraft for an undisclosed destination. It was another couple of hours before we were told that he had safely landed at the Heathrow Airport in London.

It was on our return to Ashok Hotel in New Delhi, where we were staying, that we learnt that Bangabandhu would be arriving in New Delhi enroute to Dhaka on the morning of January 10, 1972.

Foreign Minister Abdus Samad Azad and Mr. Humayun Rashid Chowdhury, the Speaker, who was the head of Bangladesh Mission in New Delhi at that time decided that the Foreign Minister's delegation should at once return home but that, wearing my Chief of Protocol's hat, I should stay back and along with Foreign Minister Abdus Samad Azad accompany Bangabandhu back to Dhaka.

An exciting assignment it was for the Chief of Protocol of a newly born country. Events moved very fast from that moment on and one's memory is full of the preparations that we set about making for the historic arrival of Bangabandhu in New Delhi.

It was late in the evening of January 9, 1972 that I was given an unexpected task. Bangabandhu, I was told, would be making a prepared statement at the airport on his arrival and it fell on me to draft it. Drafting statements is a part of a professional diplomat's life but then occasions such as this one come but rarely, if ever, in one's career. And then there was this extraordinary situation of writing a speech for someone, one had not worked for before. I had then only seen

tall and handsome figure of Bangabandhu standing at the door way, smiling and waving at the assembled crowd. And it was some crowd, comprising President V.V. Giri, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, almost the entire Indian Cabinet, the diplomatic corps and hundreds of pressmen and photographers. "Joy Bangla" said Bangabandhu and then there were slogans and tears, garlands and embraces and here the memory gives in to an emotion one had never in life experienced before.

Bangabandhu read out the speech and standing near him I could see the tears in his eyes as he finished. One then recalls that morning drive through lines of cheering crowds to the cantonment parade crowd where a large crowd had gathered to hear him speak and where they spoke, Madam Gandhi in Hindi and Bangabandhu, in Bengali.

We then drove in a motorcade to Rashtrapati Bhavan, the Indian President's House. There Bangabandhu took the decision that instead of traveling via Calcutta where a public meeting was being arranged in his honour, he would travel direct to Dhaka where "my people are waiting for me". It was also decided that he would continue his journey to Dhaka in the British Comet and not change into a smaller aircraft provided by the Indian authorities, by which it was thought, the landing at the much bombed Dhaka airport with all its gaping craters, would be safer. Bangabandhu felt that he should make a separate trip to Calcutta to thank the "people of that area" for their help and support to the millions of our refugees and do so not by just "dropping in on my way home". He also thought that it would be proper to show his appreciation of the British gesture of offering him an aircraft by

Frankly Speaking...

by Faruq Choudhury



traveling in it to Dhaka and not "abandon" it midway for fear of a few craters, which "the pilot should be able to negotiate". I remember the moment, when as we sat face to face

at the aircraft taking off from New Delhi, he enquired of Foreign Minister Abdus Samad Azad as to who I was. While introducing me the Foreign Minister mentioned that I had drafted his airport speech. "Why, he spoke my mind" said Bangabandhu with a warm smile. Aware as I was, of the historic aspect of the journey, I held out my diary opening it at the page of January 10, and asked for his autograph. "With pleasure" said Bangabandhu and wrote his name on the page of my diary in big bold letters.

It was an unforgettable journey in which besides the Foreign Minister and myself, Dr. Kamal Hussain and Mr. Ataus Samad, then a young and keen journalist, were among his companions.

A lot of time during the journey was spent in Foreign Minister Abdus Samad Azad briefing Bangabandhu on the developments that had taken place during the time he was in captivity in Pakistan. But I recall a couple of decisions that Bangabandhu took during that trip. Banga-

OPINION

Politics and Poll

Alif Zabr

The news report on the public opinion poll of thousand persons on the political environment prevailing in the country, confirms what the media analysts have been telling the nation all along.

The public are a pessimistic of the prevailing political culture: b) fed up with the politicians' ethical codes; c) critical of the myopic leadership; and d) disillusioned with the poor performance of the two major political parties.

In fact, the vast majority have a negative image of the parties under the two leaders, who are engaged in a tug of war tearing the country apart, to keep their respective parties intact. The question is: how the politicians will react to this poll, backed with scientifically acceptable data? It is presumed that the political conscience is so blunted, and the ego so inflated (growth rate 10 per cent p.a.), that the politicians of today are insensitive and polarised to the feelings of the general mass; to the extent that they cannot react to reality, being busy with their own make-believe world (akash kusum). Nine out of 10 persons cannot explain clearly micro and macro economics, and Bengali and/or Bangladeshi nationalism.

How the politicians have been spoiled? By the citizens and the voters. We get the leaders we deserve, otherwise we would have thrown them out. The people have to be more critical with the leadership stances, and do away with imaginary and passionate faith in various cults and isms, which do not produce goods and services quickly enough to be noticeable.

We got our freedom, but are today held captive by the mossy politicians depending blindly on the old style of politics, forgetting that the public consciousness has changed tremendously, even amongst the adult illiterates and the semi-literate. In the rural areas, there is more awareness of what is happening in Dhaka, thanks to the penetration of the NGO activities. The metropolis continues to act in the old mould of colonial centralization. Here is a critical question: the force of leadership should be centripetal or centrifugal? (It would take too much space to elaborate on this concept.)

The powerful civil service is still defying political leadership to release the winds of change to push the country forward, by resisting all feeble attempts at administrative reforms and separation of the judiciary. The privatisation programme of the state-owned industries is still being resisted in spite of Awami League's change of stance from socialism to free-market philosophy. Another question: do the politicians in power depend too much on the bureaucrats? How much elbow room the politicians have to face internal confrontations?

It is also strange to note that a high percentage of the MPs could be loan defaulters; and the core bodies of the political parties have a large percentage of new migratory politicians from the other professions, replacing the professional politicians. It is moving to note that the latter cannot move themselves, others, and the country! Are we supposed to be saddled with such negative, live but immovable properties from decade to decade? Sitting, standing, or moving — what is our average output? How to get rid of the systems loss syndrome? We are good at negative teamwork, confidentially speaking!

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The last question: the leaders have to be in tune with the masses, or the masses have to bow submissively in the court of the mighty? The Diana cult produced the 'Peoples Princess'. Perhaps we are going to invent 'Neta Democracy'!

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The implementation of the new pay scale is not clear. The district and Thana Accounts Officers say that the government employees would be paid the basic drawn in Jan. '97 as the bonus till Jan '99. What a fallacy!

There is another vital question. What will be the bonus for employees who may join service with these two years? Since such employees were not in job in Jan. '97, they should be deprived of any bonus till Jan. '99 be paid bonus that equals to their basic drawn in the preceding month, obviously, based on the 5th Pay Scale! Then if junior employees are given bonus based on the 5th Pay Scale, how would the senior ones be deprived of and paid a lower amount of bonus?

To overcome this dilemma, the government should pay bonus based on the new pay scale and that should equal the basic pay of the immediate preceding month. It may be mentioned here that, in the first phase of implementation of the new pay scale, the basic pay increases at the rate of only 12-20% which exactly conforms to the price-hike.

MAS Molla
Member, BAAS
BCSIR Laboratories
(BAAS Office), Dhaka

Sherpur, Kishoreganj there was heavy attack causing considerable damages. Last not least gradual depletion of soil due to continuous uses of unbalanced chemical fertilizers without applying organic manures, fake, spurious adulterated and sub-standard fertilizer are the major reasons for low yield.

For the last few years, I have been trying to draw the attention of agricultural experts to save the soil from depletion but my appeal went in vain. But now the nation shall have to face its consequences through import of rice procession of which has already been started.

MA Jalil
372/B Khilgaon, Dhaka

New pay scale bonus
Sir, We know that the 5th National Pay Scale will be implemented in three phases as suggested by the secretariat committee. The first phase of implementation begins with the payment of December '97 and the arrears due from July to November would be paid soon after (or is it being paid before?). The Muslim Festival Eid-ul-Fitr will be observed in Bangladesh on 29-31 January '98. The Eid-ul-Fitr bonus will be given in January before the monthly salary. Logically the bonus payable in January, '98 will be equal to the drawn basic



January 10, 1972: Bangabandhu on return to Dhaka, at Race Course (now Suhrawardy Uddyan) ground prior to addressing the huge crowd, with Tajuddin Ahmed (then prime minister) on his right. — PID file photo

Bangabandhu from a distance and had heard some of his speeches including his inspiring address of 7th of March 1971, but had never really met or talked to him. Writing a speech for someone that I did not know seemed like an impossible task. But as I sat in my hotel room, with pen in hand and in the silence of the night recalled his speech of 7th of March, 1971 addressing the vast multitude, I felt a strange familiarity with him, that guided, as it were, my pen that slowly found expression.

This is a journey from darkness to light, from captivity to freedom, from desolation to hope. I am at last going back to "Sonar Bangla", the land of my dreams, after a period of nine months. In these nine months my people have traversed centuries. When I was taken away from my people they wept, when I was held in captivity they fought and now when I go back to them they are victorious. I go back to the sunshine of their million victorious smiles. I go back now to a free, independent and sovereign Bangladesh. I go back to join my people in the tremendous tasks that now lie ahead in turning our victory into the road of peace, progress and prosperity. I go back not with any hatred in my heart for anyone but with the satisfaction that truth has at last triumphed over falsehood, sanity over insanity, courage over cowardice, justice over injustice and good over evil.

One can never forget that moment, of the morning of January 10, 1972, when at the Delhi Palam airport, the silver coloured British Comet aircraft carrying Bangabandhu came to a noisy halt. The engines stopped and then there was a piercing silence. It was ten minutes past eight in the morning by the watch. The aircraft door opened and the gangway put in position. Then the gun salutes boomed and suddenly one saw the

bandhu wondered as to how the national flag which then had the map of Bangladesh inscribed on it could be changed. He was happy to be told that Mr. Tajuddin Ahmed, the Acting Prime Minister had already initiated discussions in that regard. And the national anthem? The tune was not exactly stirring, said Bangabandhu, but then thousands had died with the refrain of that song in their ears and it should never be changed. And what type of Government should Bangladesh ultimately have? Why, it should be of the parliamentary type in a democratic Bangladesh, said Bangabandhu.

It was unfortunate for the nation that Bangabandhu, on his return, was made to step into a short-sighted politico-bureaucratic situation. This like the proverbial quicksand sucked him in, hardly leaving him the time for constructive nation-building. The intolerance of politicians, the machinations of self-seeking uniformed and civil bureaucrats, the inefficiency of planners and the corruption, infighting and wrangling in a post-war scenario stymied Bangabandhu beyond measure which had negative influence on many of his decisions. Again his secular and intensely nationalistic outlook incurred the wrath of many quarters, some of whom, though themselves at loggerheads, were sceptical of Bangabandhu's actions. Yet one has seen him on so many occasions among world statesmen, confident, strong and decisive, successfully creating, against so many odds, a niche for his war-ravaged country, in the comity of nations. However, inspite of the crowd around him at home, he so often seemed utterly lonely. And then the cowardly act of a few murderers cut short his life, so tragically. But even in his death, this man among men, remains undefeated. As one who led Bangladesh to freedom and independence, Sheikh Mujib shall forever remain invincible.