

Can't Wait Any Longer

The fact that we are running a leader on the power situation for the second time in one week is itself a proof of the gravity of the matter. Indeed power situation has reached a position where we feel time has come for the government to act, decisively, immediately and perhaps ruthlessly. Almost every day press is screaming hoarse on the shortfall in power generation and the negative impact the huge and growing power shortage will have on the country's economy.

More than the failure to generate power it is the attitude of the Energy Ministry which strikes the most resonant chord of pessimism and anger. If there is any word to sum up its 20-month executive existence it is no doubt dilatoriness. It has been intolerably slow in pursuing any idea aimed so far at improving the power situation. Only two of the four contracts for barge-mounted power plants have been signed so far. That too after such a long lapse of time. Plants that were scheduled to be operational from late last year, we are told now, will go into production late this year. And nobody knows when the other two of the quartet, supposed to inject 400 mega watt to total generation, would be signed.

This awful syndrome has affected all initiatives and actions to refurbish the old transmission lines and the power generation plants. The plants at Raozan and Ghorashal have already gone out of production as has the barge mounted plant in Khulna. A few more, warned the press yesterday, would conk out soon.

What makes the case indefensibly reproachable for the Energy Ministry is that never in all these months it gave people the impression of an authority either on top of it or one willing to share the 'reality' with people. As if its own inefficiency in pushing the ailed deals to effective conclusion were not enough, it has kept people literally in the dark in the most unscrupulous manner. The whole thing has suffered doubly for an appalling lack of transparency. People do not know what the government is up to or what its plans are to tackle the situation.

We had suggested earlier, now we reiterate it again: For its own good and obligation to the people, government should come clean on the power situation, preferably with a white paper. Enough is enough. It must take stock of the situation even if that requires rolling of a few heads. On the sheer weight of non-performance though, it's time Mr Nooruddin Khan went.

Water Sharing

The Padma has been in a high flow condition throughout the month of January. Heavy rains in the upper catchment put it in a spate. During all the three ten-day cycles of January, we received more than double the quota of water stipulated for us in the Ganges water sharing treaty signed by India and Bangladesh on December 12, 1996. The availability of water in Bangladesh during the dry season of 1997, the first year of the historic accord's implementation, falling below expectations, this is a sea-change worth rejoicing in. Suffice it to say though it is a gift of nature and not any special favour done by India. There was excess water and so both sides shared the excess. Just as if there is any lack of it, both sides must share it equitably. It rained on average 63 mm in December, 1997 as compared with only 9mm in December, 1996.

If the dry season availability of water in the upper catchment drops at a future date, Bangladesh, to that extent, would be receiving reduced quantum of water. In the first place, therefore, we should not get the hopes high on the basis of what we are getting now as a freak of nature. Or be panicky or clamorous when the water level falls inside our territory downstream. This is not to say that we will keep mum over any drastic decline of water below the stipulated levels but to urge realism, responsibility and transparency in the handling of the matter by both sides so that doubts and distrust do not creep in.

The bottomline is that it is a water-sharing treaty envisaging an apportionment formula based on the lean season availability data of some 40 years. The hydrological parameters need to be constantly under observation, and if any aberration is detected it must be addressed promptly to avert lack of confidence in the treaty. The decision for scientific investigation that was made at the Joint Rivers Commission meeting in October last year to go into the drastic fall in the water level is yet to materialise. The Indian elections over, hopefully this will be taken up in earnest.

Heavenly Collaboration

The story elevates the mind. Ten out of 16 children kidnapped from different places in Bangladesh and smuggled out to India en route to UAE to be used as jockeys in camel races, are back in Dhaka — hale and hearty. This must have been a regular detective work to track them down and identify them. And look at the kiddies on yesterday's morning press. So small, so young! Add to this the tragedy of all of them forgetting Bangla and speaking smatterings of Hindi. And Topping it all, the whereabouts they are giving as to their origin are unreliable, there being a good chance of these being tutored ones by the kidnapping traffickers.

The more challenging job was the legal tangle. Why would the courts give the children — as also a mother from Pangsha sold to a Delhi buyer and her child — living in state custody, away to people certainly not their parents or guardians? All these challenges were beaten by a heavenly collaboration of Advocate Salma Ali of BNWL, Dhaka and Roma Devabrata of STOP, New Delhi. And the children and the woman, Rehana, were flown into Dhaka on Wednesday by British Airways, courtesy the two wonderful ladies.

The children are regularly smuggled out and sold either as camel jockeys or as suppliers of live human organs. The inhumanity of it all is revolting and there seems to be no helping it. States, holding the power of life and death over their citizens, can indeed be so helpless! We don't take it. We don't believe it. There is a question of priorities and sectional interest here. Trafficking in children and women evidently come very low in the government list of jobs. Why? This must change.

Where Have All the Children Gone?

We, all of us, owe it to our children and grand children to find an answer here and now. Spiralling economic growth can neither be justified nor sustained if it rests on a bed-rock of wretchedness, misery and pre-nature death.

HOW does one measure development? Upward curve in Gross Domestic Product? Aggregate per capita income? Foreign exchange reserve? Export and import figures? Perhaps all those and more. Most fundamental, to my mind, is the health of a nation's people. The nutritional status of a country's voiceless children, women and the poor who are quite often left out of national reckoning, is a more reliable yardstick to measure development than all the production and trade figures that learned economists can devise. The predominant development discourse equates human well-being with money. The poor, have little money and the children, none at all. So, for the numerate professionals they are invisible. Whatever cannot be measured does not exist.

Not money, but people must be made the measure of all things if millions of children are not to disappear or grow up stunted and listless.

Take our own country Bangladesh. Child mortality per thousand live births stood at 117 in 1994. Foetal malnutrition results in low birth weight for as many as 40 per cent of the children who are born. Fully 56 per cent of all pre-school children are below the proper height and weight for their age. Malnutrition among children under 5 years of age is almost universal reaching about 94 per cent. Seven per cent suffers from wasting, 47 per cent from moderate and another 40 per cent from mild protein energy malnutrition. Eighty per cent of them suffer from iodine deficiency anaemia. Goiter, for example, can be prevented by adding iodine to common table salt. Trouble is too few of the poor can afford such expensive city salt, or indeed salt of any description. Some children are affected by cretinism or other mental/motor disorders. Thirty thousand children go

behind every year due to vitamin A deficiency. Everyday some six hundred children die from malnutrition. The disaster death toll is of the same scale as that from 1996 Tangail typhoon, but it is occurring day after day, every day of the year.

Death through shuffling away is not the stuff of headlines. But the results are as brutal as ethnic cleansing that we have witnessed in some parts of the world. A critical qualitative dimension of being alive is the expectation that life will improve for one's offspring. It is the dismal lack of it that is our shame.

Stripped of statistics and jargon what it means is that the vulnerable groups like children and women do not simply get enough food to eat. And what little they do eat is of poor nutritional quality. Eighty-three



Do! Dare!
A Z M Obaidullah Khan

per cent of the calories in average Bangladeshi diet come from cereals. It is seriously imbalanced with an extremely inadequate intake of fat, oil, fish or animal protein, fruits and vegetables. Within this pervasive environment the societal norm for intra-household food distribution discriminates against women and young children. Many not-so-poor households can prevent maternal and child malnutrition, if the resources they have are allocated optimally. That involves a behavioural change related to feeding practices within a household.

Improvement in the availability of nutritionally balanced food is a prerequisite for ameliorating the nutritional status of the malnourished. And that has to be reinforced by income-earning opportunities

of the land poor so that they can procure the food they need. Complementary to both are maternal and child health-care services, affirmative action for women's education and broad-based nutrition awareness.

As for availability, agricultural and crop diversification is on the cards in a rice-rice and rice-wheat production system. Short maturing and thermo-insensitive crops need to be developed for easy fit into the dominant production system. Varietal improvements of pulses and oil-seeds are called for, so also the availability of high-yielding vegetable seeds. Narrow farm-land dikes can be utilised for growing beans. Fish and rice farming, a common practice three decades ago, awaits revival. An integrated farming system that encompasses, crops livestock fisheries

and fruit trees needs to be promoted. Equally important for the vulnerable poor is equitable access to common property resources like water-bodies, fallow khashland, roadside trees, and village wood lots. With affirmative discrimination in favour of women.

As for expanding access to food by the poor, more resources need to be devoted to the growth of job-opportunities in the hinterland, particularly in the rural off-farm sectors. Given short-term asset-transfer women can and do transform the lives of their off-spring. Experience with women's solidarity groups clearly illustrates the immense potential of their creativity. That creativity is waiting to be unleashed. What is required is micro-credit, skill-training and access to market. The government's Food-for-

Education is a welcome initiative for empowering the girl-children. The programme is definitely putting more food in the hands of the poor. Their children are attending schools in larger numbers and they may be staying at schools longer. A critical issue here, yet to be addressed, is the integration of the programme with income-generating opportunities for their parents.

Having said all that, I go back to the question I raised: where have all the children gone? We, all of us, owe it to our children and grand children to find an answer here and now. Spiralling economic growth can neither be justified nor sustained if it rests on a bed-rock of wretchedness, misery and premature death. As Dr Amartya Sen points out in his book, *Political Economy of Hunger*, many things that affect our lives, especially in poor countries, depends greatly on public support, e.g. availability of health services, access to education, having an epidemic-free surrounding, living in a safe and sound environment. The crucial role of public action is both in the sense of state activities in support of entitlement of different sections of the population and in the sense of people's own ability to demand attention and to secure a response from those in authority.

Let me end with a quote from Gajo Petrovic:

"We are not of necessity split into mutually opposed spheres that relate in an external interaction; consequently, the economic sphere is not even necessarily and ultimately the determining factor of history. On the contrary as long as human history remains determined by one of the spheres, we are still in the phase of prehistory, in the antechamber of history. True human history begins only when people begin to create and shape freely, themselves and their human world."

To the Editor...

Help!

Sir, The DS has a warped sense of humour. How many "AZs"? One Mr and other Ms — one Alif, other ex-BRA. I am having problems with my denture due to receding gums to paan (betel leaf).

Alif Zabr
Dhaka

The other echoes in the garden

Sir, I was delighted to read Ms Almas Zakuddin's article on 05 February 7 issue.

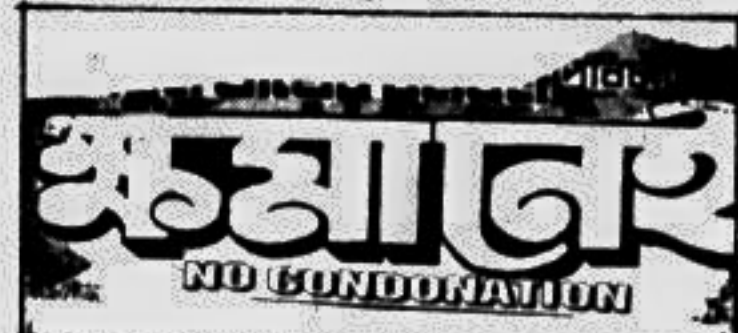
Having survived here all my adult life, may I venture to say to the returning immigrant that she has to have tremendous patience to make 'her people' listen to her. And while she tests her patience, a) she will be expected to do all the listening and not the other way round and b) take up reading Nirod Chowdhury which will do her a world of good and may give her an insight as to how our minds work!

Then all those obnoxious attacks by S M and Mrs Khan and the others may smell like rose water to her. However, let us hope that someday these people will have the guts to say 'sometimes, if we listen, we can almost hear the angels...'.

Ashfaq Choudhury
Road-37, House-8
Gulshan, Dhaka.

Khoma Nai...

Sir, English, like many countries in the subcontinent, is also used as a second language in our country. It is then understandable why it would be difficult for us to master the language the way the English do. And that fact becomes more apparent every time I see an advert of a Bengali cinema. It is not easy to get a complete translated meaning of a Bengali term, and we are all aware of that. But what amuses me is the fact that the people at the FDC are so good in completely mixing up the meaning all together and coming up with a com-



pletely new term. One of the best movie that is being shown right now, according to the papers, is called 'Khoma Nai'. And the English term that is written underneath is: No Condonation.

Condonation? What, pray tell FDC, is a "Condonation"? I went through my Oxford English Dictionary as well as the Thesaurus in Microsoft Word but can't find out its meaning.

Can the readers give us some more examples please? Why can't the FDC authorise a thousand mealy Taka to purchase a dictionary and correct the translations in the future?

Masroor Ahmed Deepak
Dhaka

Telefun

Sir, The other day, I went to Banani to attend a Rotary Club meeting. During the meeting, I needed to call my house at the city centre.

First I tried with the T&T phone. It was not working. Then a Rotarian's daughter was delighted to help me out with

her new mobile phone. She could not get number.

Another Rotarian volunteered with his mobile and failed. Then I saw a brand new set, on the table, in front of the DGN who happened to be a billionaire. He was only glad to help me out with his phone — "It can connect me anywhere in the world," he proudly claimed. I requested him to connect me with my home number. He tried and failed and felt a bit embarrassed.

I gave up and went back to my seat.

A fellow Rotarian sitting behind me with a mobile in his hand whispered into my ears: "I wish I could help you but I can't dial from inside the room. I have to go out in the open."

I politely asked him: "What do you do during rains? Do you take an umbrella, open it in the rain and dial your desired number?" He felt very awkward. I could not contact my home number.

Incidentally, all these mobiles were obtained from Grameen, which does not change for in-coming calls. A good incentive for the prospective client, no doubt.

I asked my 'billionaire Rotarian friend: "Is the charge worth the irritation?"

O J Shams
Elephant Road, Dhaka-1205

What a facility!

Sir, We, the Dhaka University students, are spurned from many modern facilities. Hand-written question papers, for example are often supplied to us in examinations halls. In this process, we suffer.

Maen Uddin Sabuj
416, Zia Hall, Dhaka University.

Dubbing is not always dumb

Sir, Dr Sabrina Rashid appears to be too concerned about the 'lost charms' of English serials which have been dubbed in Bangla or Hindi. Therefore, citing her own examples she has proposed dubbing of those serials in English (?) only. Would she be able to read the writings that appear on the screen of subtitled serials without missing several words or sentences? And by the time she manages to read the words how much of the scenes would she be missing is a trillion wonder.

She may not have watched some of the Iranian movies which have been dubbed in Bangla but in no way have lost their 'charms' nor the effect. Surely all this is done with the full consent of the film-makers and with their total cooperation. True, at times when we begin to think of the movies which have originally been made in English and watched them in that language but later by watching the same in Bangla or Hindi version, we feel a little different. But that's all in the mind and a momentum effect.

I request Dr Sabrina to watch the Hindi (dubbed) version of "Gandhi" and express her views honestly. She may also take pains in watching the cartoon serials, *Robin Hood*, *Tipu Sultan*, *Sindbad*, *Werewolf*, *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*, etc., with a free mind believing those were not originally made in English or Hindi.

Mujibul Haque
Dhanmandi, Dhaka.

"Sons and daughters"

Sir, I thank Dr Sabrina Rashid for her opinion *Sons and daughters*.

In fact, it is a reality of our society that there are many parents who fail to welcome the birth of daughters. They seem to take the childbirth as a matter devoid of filial love and affection and they think that sons are more useful and beneficial. Such notion about childbirth was prevalent in many periods of history prior to the advent of Islam among the pagan Arabs. The Quran vehemently condemns such attitude towards female child — and says: "When news is brought to one of them of the birth of a female child, his face darkens and he is filled with inward grief." (16:58).

Mahmud
Dhaka University, Dhaka.

Toll collection in disguise

Sir, We have been hearing a lot about forceful toll collection by different armed goons at various places. This is happening more with the shop owners/keepers. By the way, this toll-collection menace is one of the many sharply risen crimes committed by professional and organised criminals. However, it is really a shame if such acts are committed by the law protectors. I mean police, even to the minimal! The Chittagong



Road at Kanchpur is the new highway-rancher junction!

According to some regular passengers, the police personnel deputised there have been involved in toll collection, particularly few days before Eid. The law enforcers at the area intentionally blocks vehicles as if for traffic violation and thus finally do with it in exchange of lot of money. Sufferers and passengers bound for the route call it 'Eid bonus in disguise'. Because of this great number of vehicles get stranded for long hours causing terrible inconvenience to passengers. The worst part is that most of the time it gets dark that again paves the way for hijackers and dacoits to do with the rest! It's like being sandwiched between two dead ends!

I draw the attention of the Home Minister!

A Worried Citizen
Dhaka

Agony on the highway

Sir, Further work is being undertaken to improve the traffic of Dhaka-Chittagong Highway which is probably the most important and busy road link in the country. With the construction of major bridges and existing fast lanes, the density of vehicles is still on the rise. But in spite of all resource utilisation, planning and aspiration, the main purpose i.e. minimising travel time, safe and comfortable journey cannot be ensured because of lack

of implementing the highway code.

Random unauthorised parking, blockade by vendors and vegetable, sellers all along the highway further aggravated by frequent breakdown of unfit old vehicles add misery to the journey. Any one who has travelled recently on this highway would agree with me for their agony on being checked at different places.

Tanzila Choudhury
Comilla Cantonment
Comilla

Democracy (Killing) Day

Sir, The government party observed Democracy Killing Day across the country through rallies, seminars and symposiums on 15.2.98.

So far we remember, AL then in 1996 made all-out effort to establish voting right of the people (as claimed by AL). They succeeded in introducing new provision for caretaker government in the Constitution, and compelled the then BNP government to step down and made way for compulsory election on 15.2.98.

I don't really get the point. Will anybody help? Nur Hossain
151, Bangshal Road, Dhaka-1100

It's time, BNP

Sir, In war as well as in political confrontation, the General or the Leader must be wise enough to wait out options and leave a line of retreat open. Rigidity in war game always invites disaster.

Unfortunately, the BNP has learned nothing from its past mistakes. Again through wrong steps, it is finding itself into a corner from where there will be no space for manoeuvre. While stifling out the democratic spirit of some young members, the top leadership is suffering from a black-out. The old guards whose advice and influence during the 5th Parliament, spelt disaster for the party are having upper hand.

This is a sad spectacle from a party which had in the past, after a dreadful period, revived the democratic process and restored multi-party politics in the country. BNP leaders fail to see that Awami League wants to keep them outside the Parliament and for which they are creating provocations. To counter that, BNP should unconditionally join the Parliament and fight back both inside and outside the House. Let the present government remove the bally bridge or change a name here and there or switch off microphone inside the House. Persecution under SPA of BNP members must be taken with good grace and all these will add strength to their cause and popular sympathy will be with them. After all the whole nation is watching the proceedings live on the television.

In order to return to power with popular mandate, BNP must keep the democratic process alive and for which returning to the Parliament is a must. Once in power they are free to remove bally bridges or change some names as if the previous government had taught them. Nobody will mind these.

To face the next election, BNP should utilise this period to consolidate the party structure and prepare the manifesto.

Art Buchwald's COLUMN

What If....

If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you;
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
But make allowance for their doubting too;
And if Linda Tripp's tape machine under her bra had failed to work;
And if Monica Lewinsky had been assigned as an intern to our embassy in South Korea instead of the White House;
And if Kenneth Starr had announced that sex scandals had nothing to do with Whitewater;
And if the definition of what constituted a sexual act had nothing to do with oral sex;
And if the president had not bought Monica a sweatshirt at the Black Dog on Martha's Vineyard;
And if Mr Clinton apologized to Paula Jones and presented her with a check for US\$700,000;
And if Vernon Jordan had not acted as a headhunter for Monica Lewinsky;
And if the FBI had not tried to talk Monica into recanting her story;
And if Gennifer Flowers had not come back to haunt Mr Clinton and force him to admit that he did have an affair with her;
And if the press had not been bored with a balanced budget and wanted something to lift the country out of its winter doldrums;
And if Janet Reno had said to Starr, "You're barking up the wrong tree, buster";
And if somebody, anybody, in the White House had said, "Mr President, what you're doing could look bad on Ted Koppel's show";
And if Kathleen Willey, a White House aide, had not come out of the Oval Office looking disheveled, with her lipstick smudged, flustered, happy and joyful (according to Linda Tripp);
And if the Secret Service had said, "No White House interns can go into the Oval Office without a written O K from Mrs Clinton";
And if all these "ifs" had taken place, the country would now be talking only about the Winter Olympics;
And if you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue;
Or walk with kings — nor lose the common touch;
If neither nor loving friends can hurt you;
Then, dear Mr President, hang tough;
By arrangement with Los Angeles Times Syndicate and UNB

They must stop relying on *hark-tals*. For God's sake BNP, go back to the Parliament and that's where you belong.

Iskander Meah
Golshan North, Dhaka

Chika maro!



Sir, The BTV telecast a drama on the eve of the Eid-ul-fitre which was written by Humayun Ahmed.

Through this drama he spread a virus in the all social allays: *chika maro*!

My two little cousins are always singing this song *chika maro* in front of their respected teacher. Even my foreign friends are always singing this song *chika maro-re*. What's going on, anyway?

I think nobody has any right to introduce anything like that which may put adverse impact on the society.

Mostafa Sohel
Banani, Dhaka-1213

Wage anomalies

Sir, It is heartening to learn that the government has decided to settle all the cases pertaining to pay and allowances anomalies by the relevant Cabinet Committee. A circular recently issued by the Ministry of Finance in this connection has asked the administrative Ministries to send an abstract based on logic of the case(s).

Mr. Choudhury responds...

Sir, I respond to a couple of letters that have been published in the DS recently (one by 'A Citizen' and the other by 'Akku Choudhury' under the headings "No, Mr. Choudhury, no!" in which it has been stated that I had said in a banquet speech: "Bangladesh was born because of a war between India and Pakistan".

This I suppose is not the first time... and nor will it be the last... of an instance where facts have been misrepresented, distorted and taken out of context for reasons best known to those who I presume have nothing better or more constructive to do.

The essence of what I had said was that in 1971 the subcontinent was in turmoil, and 26 years later, cricket has acted as the medium of fellowship and fraternity that has brought India, Pakistan and Bangladesh together through their participation in the Coca-Cola Independence Cup to celebrate Bangladesh's Silver Jubilee of independence. I maintain and stand by this.

In 1971, I was 10 years old and in Chittagong studying at St. Patrick's School and whether Mr. Akku Choudhury 'gives a damn' or not on this point is really of no consequence to me, but it does demonstrate to me vividly the intellectual depth of the writer.

Whilst I do not claim to be a

for consideration by the committee.

It may be mentioned here that anomalies in the pay-scales of principal, professors and associated professors of Bangladesh Agricultural Institute (BAI), Dhaka have been existing since long. The Ministry of Agriculture has also been doing the needful for removing these anomalies. We sincerely hope that this time all the anomalies will be removed and genuine pay-scales will be given to the principal, professors and associate professors of BAI and other government agri-colleges.

M Zahidul Haque
BAI, Sher-e-Bangla Nagar, Dhaka-1207

UN's last call?

Sir, The UN Secretary General starts his breathtaking mission to the Iraqi Capital Baghdad today and will meet with President Saddam Hussein at the weekend seeking a last chance for diplomacy. There is a reasonable chance of success of his mission if he is able to secure clear access to suspect sites for the UNSCOM. The security council has been unanimous on this although not on the use of force.

This is the UN's last call for diplomacy and the world body wants to give it a fair chance.

America, however, still maintains that nothing short of full compliance with the UN resolutions for unrestricted access to weapon sites will be acceptable to it and the force, will/will not be applied on the final decision taken by the US following Kofi Annan's visit to Baghdad. The military build-up still goes ahead, stealth fighters are on the way and some UN humanitarian staff have been withdrawn.

Dr FH Choudhury
United Kingdom

master of history. I think I have a fair knowledge of Bangladesh's history and politics — what transpired during the 1952-1971 period, the atrocities committed by the Pakistani army and their associates, the inspirational courage and acts of heroism of our freedom fighters.

As with many other fellow citizens of this country, particularly the young generation, who did not have the privilege of taking part in the glorious struggle for freedom and liberation during the 1952-1971 period, I believe in Bangladesh, I am deeply committed to Bangladesh. I believe in the people of Bangladesh and I draw inspiration and motivation from the supreme sacrifice of our freedom fighters.

It is because of this belief and commitment, Mr. A Citizen and Mr. Akku Choudhury, that I have in my own modest way contributed in the setting up of the Muktijuddha Jadughar at Segunbagicha.

Thanks are thus due to you for your generous — though ironic — invitation to visit this institution and museum with which I am proud to be associated!

Saber H. Choudhury MP
Deputy Minister, Ministry of Shipping & President, Bangladesh Cricket Board