

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 aired 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 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 BNWLA, Dhaka and Roma Devabrat 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 shrivelling 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 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

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

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.

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 entitlements 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."

The government's Food-for-

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;
Or neither nor loving friends can hurt you;

Then, dear Mr President, hang tough.

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Do I Dare! AZM 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.

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and fruit trees needs to be promoted. Equally important for the vulnerable poor is equitable access to common property resources like water-bodies, fallow khasi land, 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-springs. 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-

of implementing the highway code.

Random unauthorised parking, blockade by vendors and vegetable sellers all along the highway further aggravated by frequent breakdowns 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 chocked at different places.

Tanvir 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 work 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 guard whose advice and influence during the 5th Parliament, split 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 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.

Whilst I do not claim to be a

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

Iskander Meah
Golshan North, Dhaka

Chika maro!



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

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.

Dr FH Choudhury
United Kingdom

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

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 Chowdhury" under the headings: "No, Mr. Choudhury, no!" in which it was 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 sub-continent was in turmoil, and 26 years later, cricket has acted as the medium of fellowship and fraternity that