

Gas Disaster

Accidents can occur, and we are quite willing to accept it. But the bursting of a major gas connection pipe is the result of negligence of a deeper kind, one that will affect us more and more as the city grows. Normally there is a master chart which shows the underground network of sewage pipes, drains, electrical cables, gas lines, water mains and what have you. Copies of such a master chart are available with all the bodies that provide services in a city. Do we have such a master chart? We seriously doubt. If we do, then whether or not it is shared at the working level to prevent such accidents from taking place?

What sort of information were the PWD crew working on? Could it be possible that the TV authorities themselves did not have any idea that such an important gas line passed through their compound? Was it wise to allow it in the first place?

More than the accident, what interests us is the whole urban planning and construction process. How is a site selected? Once that is done, how do contractors know what lies under the ground? Who are supposed to know it? Are they up to date with their data? Titas may know all about their lines, WASA about their drains, DESA about their cables, etc. But does each of them know about the other, and does anybody know it all?

Will we learn from this accident? Each time something like this happens we become aware how ad hoc, tenuous and fragile our planning and implementing process are.

We suggest that the government sets up an inter-ministerial body to take a detailed look at Dhaka and some other major cities, and create a comprehensive data bank about what is beneath the ground. We have written repeatedly about the lack of a unified authority to administer Dhaka and other cities. Disasters like that of Thursday are all products of that. There could be many others waiting to happen. Before they do, we urge the PM to examine this question seriously, personal factors notwithstanding.

Finally, we think the word "sabotage" or "conspiracy" is used too loosely by this government. Why make such on the spot remark? Someday when it will really happen, then people won't believe it. So, please be cautious with such words.

The Seed Words

Today is the seventh of March. The historic day on which the seeds of this nation's final battle for freedom and founding was cast. The turbulent time of the first quarter of '71 set a heroic tone to the socio-political ambience. All of East Bengal knew by now what their hearts desired.

The seventh of March oration by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, by now gifted with the honorific that would precede his name for the rest of history, redeemed his pledge uniquely. He indeed gave word to what every Bengalee worth his and her birth on the soil felt in the innards. Casting aside any vestige of equivocation, that pet ploy of the politicians, he declared the struggle was now on for liberation, it was for freedom. He stopped short of making a Unilateral Declaration of Independence. Advisedly. But the sign was given for the freedom struggle. And not in the Gandhian style. He enjoined upon all to build their homes into fortresses and be prepared with whatever they had. This was a call to develop and join the Liberation War.

We have not heard Demosthenes speak. The Gettysburg speech by Lincoln has been immortalised by the March of Americans towards progress that issued from that speech. There are millions of Bangalees all around the world. When Bangladesh, that issued from that speech, and the rest of this ancient people will march to world significance, the Seventh March Speech will become a treasure for all to cherish.

Task Force Recommendations

Last week's shocking show of chaos and disorder at a nationalised bank around its CBA elections once again reminded how imperative it has become for the government to review the trade union rules. The whole of Sonali Bank looked to be on some sort of an administrative sabbatical as employees, split in five unions, went about promoting the cause of their candidates making a mockery of bank rules and client service. By any stretch of imagination this is a punishable act and the administration failing to do that should be promptly put in the line of fire.

But to empower the public sector administrations in dealing with such flagrant demonstration of lawlessness, government has to revise the CBA laws. Already the task force formed in this connection has recommended a complete ban on trade union activities in the commercial banks. As a paper The Daily Star has long been pleading with the government think tank to ban trade unionism in the public sector institutions. It is nice to see government's own fact finding concluding its quest on the same note. It is evident trade union as a movement has long deviated from its original objective — to safeguard the interests of the employees. Today it has been reduced to a mere staircase of fortune for a few individuals and the arm twisting platform for the political parties.

We urge the government to get on with the recommendations in right earnest and do whatever needs to be done to remove the vice like grip of trade union tyranny on the economy. It can rest assured it has the moral support of the whole nation on this issue.

There is, however, no room for underestimating the complexity of the whole matter. In order to clip the wings of trade unions, the government has to get the mandate of all the political parties. Without a collective political will or a consensus among the political parties there is no way public sector can be exercised of the evil and disruptive spirit of trade unionism. Bitter but the truth is that the Frankenstein of trade unionism owes its life in this land to the political parties. It is from their bottle that the genie has come out and is sucking the life blood of the country. It is they who have to get it back in the bottle. Simple.

Rice: Market and Imperatives

The situation could further be worsened by the use of food as a political weapon to influence by rich countries. After all, rice price is the most important determinant of political stability in low income countries of Asia.

In a recent paper, "Demand-Supply Balance in the World Market: Implications for China's Food Security Strategy", Dr Mahabub Hossain of the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) and Jikun Huang of the Chinese Academy of Ag. Sciences attempt to present a succinct summary of the factors affecting demand and supply of rice in the world market. They also examined the prospects of sustaining food security through trade. Although the paper is basically addressed to Chinese current concerns, nevertheless one could also glean certain policy implications for other countries in Asia, including Bangladesh.

The demand for staple food grain is a function of, *inter alia*, four major factors viz, (i) the rate of population growth; (ii) the level and growth of per capita income; (c) urbanization and related changes in food habits and (d) the relative prices of substitute food crops. Rice, for example, is considered to be a "luxury" commodity at a very low level of income. At this income level, low cost sources of calories (e.g., coarse grains, cassava and sweet potato) tend to replace rice. At higher levels of income, rice tends to become an "inferior" goods. Further up the income ladder, a diversified diet of high-cost quality food with more proteins and vitamins (such as vegetables, fruits, fish etc.) tends to dominate to reduce per capita consumption of rice.

Judging the threshold level of income that seemingly swings the pendulum of rice consumption, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan and China could be said to have crossed the thresholds and landed on a decelerating phase of rice consumption. Malaysia and Thailand and China are facing the same experience while Indonesia is also to follow the suit. South Asia, on the other hand, is stuck in an income threshold where rice is still a luxury item of consumption. Mentionably, these countries account for 40 per cent of global rice consumption. However, given an increased income and alleviation of poverty, South Asian countries might soon experience a hike in rice demand. The global food projections to 2020 recently made by IFPRI posit that between 1990 and 2020, demand for cereal grains will rise by 27 per cent and that of rice by 60 per cent.

propelled mainly by an increased population. In poor regions of South and South East Asia, rice demand many double within the next forty years. But supply of rice may not be at par with emerging demand. First, in the wake of globalisation, protection of domestic producer's interest could be a difficult task and hence could adversely affect sustainability of rice farming. Second, the magic of increased productivity by technological breakthroughs seem to have reached its full potential, especially in irrigated and favourable rainfed condition. "Nearly 40 per cent of the rice lands are subjected to droughts, floods and poor drainage which have been bypassed by green revolution. Unless rice socialists succeed in developing appropriate high yielding varieties for these unfavourable environments, the growth in rice production will decelerate substantially in the near future." The competitive edge of rice farming is being further eroded by growing scarcity of agricultural inputs — land, labour, water — which results from growing urbanization and industrialization.

If the supply is short than demand, the obvious outcome is a rise in price. One could argue that rise in the marginal value products may provide incentive to farmers to positively respond through increased supply. But available statistics on supply response, especially for rice, tend to show small supply response. For example, a 10 per cent increase in price could lead to an increase in rice yield in the range of 0.4 to 1.8 per cent only. Again, this tiny response springs mainly from the use of fertiliser use and expansion of irrigation — the inputs which have been

growing expensive with the withdrawal of subsidies and other anti-farm policy changes. By and large, the future may intense a deceleration in rice demand — with accelerating income — but the deceleration in supply could even be steeper to cause a demand-supply imbalance in world rice market.

According to the authors, the traditional route to sustain food security in most Asian countries has been the strategy of self-sufficiency in the domestic production of staple grains. But food security can be maintained even without domestic self-sufficiency in production. Just take the examples of Singapore and Hong Kong. Both have very low domestic production but exist with a higher records of food security even compared to those on the brink of food-grain self-sufficiency. Malaysia imports 40 per cent of its total rice needs. Therefore, to feed the population well, a country does not need to produce well. For food security, food self-reliance is the key. "It requires a favourable export growth at the national level that permits deficit countries to import food from surplus countries that can produce at a lower cost and at the household level generate productive employment that provides adequate income to acquire the needed rice from the market." From this point of view, most of the East and South East Asian countries appear to be in a fortunately comfortable situation. Growing economic prosperity in these countries

raised the prices of land, labour and water to make rice production expensive — and readjust researches away from labour intensive rice production. Hossain and Huang threw a

dynamic angle of the issue submitting few pertinent questions. For example, what will happen if every country in Asia abandons domestic production of foodgrains to release resources for more productive opportunities and thus resort to import to meet food needs? There is an element of uncertainty in the world market adducible to thinness of the rice market. "Only 4 per cent of rice is traded in the world market compared to 20 per cent for wheat and 11 per cent for coarse grains. Variable natural conditions such as floods, droughts and typhoon cause shortages and surpluses to occur from year to year, which produce wide fluctuations in marketable surplus and import needs and make the world rice market highly volatile."

Interestingly, the size of international rice market is equivalent to only 13 per cent of rice needs in China, and 8 per cent of combined consumption of India and China. "If these countries decide to meet only 10 per cent of their rice needs through imports, the additional demand could swamp the world market. The volatility of the world market for rice was demonstrated by the surge in prices of quality rice during October 1993 to April 1994 in response to a 25 per cent reduction in production in Japan due to abnormal weather." In the backdrop of such uncertainty looming large on the rice market horizon and considering the political costs of a failure to feed the populations, "Asian countries may find it in the national interest to maintain a safe capacity of domestic production of staple food despite the additional economic cost of pursuing this policy."

In the event of a free trade for rice, high income food deficit countries could overcome the scarcity by paying a higher price but it is the poor in low income countries who would bear the brunt of a shortage. The situation could further be worsened by the use of food as a political weapon to influence by rich countries. It seems that governments of these poor countries will have to have their fingers felt in the domestic rice market through various ways and means. After all, rice price is the most important determinant of political and power stability in low income countries of Asia. A full liberalization of the market for rice might not sound nice, at least is that gloomy situation.

Beneath the Surface

by Abdul Bayes



locks of the jail, we shall free Sheikh Mujib). The tidal wave that hit East Pakistan is followed by another upheaval in the shape of general elections of 1970 where the Awami League under the leadership of Sheikh Mujib won 167 out of 169 seats in the National Assembly, an absolute majority. Gen Yahya Khan failed to call upon Bangabandhu to form the Government. Under the guise of negotiations he prepared for a massive military strike on the night of 25 March 1971.

The people of Bangladesh heeded the call of Bangabandhu, who had unified the Bangalee nation like never before. Each contributed to the War of Liberation. Along with the armed forces, who rose in revolt against the occupation army of Pakistan, they fought all over Bangladesh. The youth joined in thousands and formed the Mukti Bahini. After nine months of warfare Bangladesh emerged as a sovereign, independent state.

On 10 January Bangabandhu returned to his independent country from Pakistan jail and immediately took the reins of power. He set to work to repair the colossal damages left by a murderous war, which left 3 million dead, 200,000 women raped and the infrastructure in ruins. Such was the magic of his

Time to Count Your Blessings

When someone tells you there is no gas in Dhaka city because of an accident, I don't think it is unusual to worry. I mean, I am not asking people to suddenly discover they have a civic sense or anything boring like that, heaven forbid that we should become real citizens in any way. But this gas thing could affect — damage, maim or kill — you and I.

Coming Home ...

Almas Zakiuddin



anyone know. A few thousand, a lakh, a million...? "Everyone. Lots of people. Who knows how many," says this guy, somewhat shortly. We are no longer at the hotel, but at a friend's home in Gulshan. Their son is getting married this week and they have this afternoon lost their gas supply — two unrelated events no doubt, but taken together with a house full of guests, they could conceivably raise blood pressure levels and encourage the use of strong language. "What the blazes do they think they are doing!" exclaims the hostess, shaking her head angrily. "I wonder aloud, has anyone

been hurt in the accident. "I know who I would like to hurt!" the hostess replies. She bangs dishes around the place, trying to heat dinner for her guests in a tiny microwave, and stating her opinion of the Titas Gas Company and all its employees in somewhat more colourful terms than can be safely reproduced for public consumption. "This is all I needed!" she continues, lamenting her predicament which, come to think of it, is pretty tough and pretty widespread. I mean, there are lots and lots of people around Dhaka who have been terribly inconvenienced by the sudden stoppage of gas. There could be old people, people with

babies, people whose livelihood has been affected. I mean, the impact must be enormous. "Not really. It's not all that bad. People manage, somehow," says this guy in a reasonable, calm voice, talking down to me in the kind of tone one people use when they address mentally challenged individuals. "I'm not stupid, I mutter under my breath, glaring at him. "Listen, they had no power at Chittagong Medical Hospital for 10 hours today! The power failed and the only generator, can you believe this, was out of order. We're talking about a hospital with seriously ill people! So what are you complaining about here, this is only a gas stoppage. Not a real disaster in any sense at all!" grunts this other guy, in a harsh, bitter voice. "What if the gas leak blows, are they planning an evacuation. "How long have you been here," asks another guy, casually. "I don't reply. I have been here long enough to know the score, if that's what you want to know. The score is, don't ask questions, don't complain, don't compare, don't be so stupid, this is Dhaka. Take it or leave it. I have been here long enough to know that the hostess in Gulshan who is stressed out would probably have taken the gas stoppage in her household completely differently under normal circumstances — if she did not have a wedding on her hands, the event would have been regarded as just another of the many minor inconveniences which make life in Dhaka so unique. Indeed, she is the kind of person who would probably tell someone like me to stop complaining and count my blessings. Like this guy tells me when I tell him how I am doing in my new place. "I'm in my new, brand new apartment. Supposed to be in perfect running order when I move in. I am about to take a shower when the faucet bursts, flies into the air, lands in the WC. Hot water scalds my nose,

To the Editor...

The brother with arms Sir, The US's continuing role as Big Brother in international affairs may be considered not very helpful in maintaining the image of the United Nations as the ultimate arbiter in solving international problems. The US has already given enough pointers in this direction, particularly in its stand-off with Iraq where the other big powers are made to look subservient to the will of the US. Even the significant success of the UN Secretary-General in achieving the accord with Iraq which has headed off the impending armed conflict with Iraq, which, in other words, has highlighted the positive aspect of the UN's role, seems to be in the process of being belittled by the Big Brother attitude of the US. Russia and China, other permanent members of the UN

have been made to appear small in the light of the bellicose utterances of the US, following the achieved accord with Iraq. In this perspective, the big question before the world country is whether such attitude on the part of the US helps in promoting the image of the UN as the ultimate trouble-shooter for international problems. A S M Nurunabi 29 Dhanmondi, R/A, Rd 1, Dhaka. No standard? Sir, This refers to two advertisements released by Ddt. of Agriculture. Emphasis on merits and demerits of phosphoric fertilisers DAP and SSP which were published in two vernacular dailies on 17th January. It is mentioned that out of 400 samples of SSP which were chemically tested nutrient contents (P2O5) were between 4 to 8 per cent instead of 16 per cent. Another lot of 240 samples revealed low standard, adulterated and almost no nutrient content. If this the case, then how our farmers would get desirable yield. This year abnormal low yield of aman paddy is resulted from using such 'no standard' SSP. It is high time the government takes strict measures against the importers for bringing such low grade SSP in order to save the farming community. M A Jall 372/B, Khilgaon, Dhaka. A seat to sit on Sir, Among the various public transports within Dhaka city, tempo is probably the best. Many people who can't avail themselves of bus because of huge crowd and can't afford el-

Bangladesh—Bangabandhu

by Arshad-uz Zaman

As a nation we owe it to ourselves and the world to create a monument worthy of a great nation at the spot from where Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had given the clarion call to his people to go to battle to win freedom.



March 1971. Suhrawardy Uddyan is overflowing with a determined crowd, who have come to listen to their beloved leader Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who in his hands holds the destiny of a 100 million people. The message comes loud and clear. It is a call to arms. "Turn every homestead into a fortress, fight with every weapon you have", and then comes the 'piece de resistance'. "Struggle this time is the struggle for emancipation. Struggle this time is for independence." Sheikh Mujib had delivered the greatest speech of his long political career. He had given a clear target to his people. He had completed his mission. This took nearly two decades to attain fruition. From the language movement of 1952, to the astounding victory in the elections of 1954, Martial Law of Field Marshal Ayub Khan, led inevitably to the charter of 6-point demand of 1966, meaning autonomy for the Bangalees. Then comes the trumped up charges against Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, better known as the Agartala Conspiracy case of 1968. This leads to an unprecedented mass uprising as the entire land reverberates with sound of 'Jeter tala bhangbo, Sheikh Mujibke arbo, (we shall break open the

locks of the jail, we shall free Sheikh Mujib). The tidal wave that hit East Pakistan is followed by another upheaval in the shape of general elections of 1970 where the Awami League under the leadership of Sheikh Mujib won 167 out of 169 seats in the National Assembly, an absolute majority. Gen Yahya Khan failed to call upon Bangabandhu to form the Government. Under the guise of negotiations he prepared for a massive military strike on the night of 25 March 1971. The people of Bangladesh heeded the call of Bangabandhu, who had unified the Bangalee nation like never before. Each contributed to the War of Liberation. Along with the armed forces, who rose in revolt against the occupation army of Pakistan, they fought all over Bangladesh. The youth joined in thousands and formed the Mukti Bahini. After nine months of warfare Bangladesh emerged as a sovereign, independent state. On 10 January Bangabandhu returned to his independent country from Pakistan jail and immediately took the reins of power. He set to work to repair the colossal damages left by a murderous war, which left 3 million dead, 200,000 women raped and the infrastructure in ruins. Such was the magic of his name that recognition from all over the world poured in. He set the ship of state on a firm course. In the late night of 15 August 1975 Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the Father of the Nation, the creator of a sovereign state for the Bangalees, was brutally murdered by some disgruntled officers of the army. He, along with his whole family of wife, two sons and their newly married wives, another 10 year old son and close relations, were all gunned down. The Bangalee nation has lived with this shame for twenty-one years. Every effort has been made all these years to erase his memory. Sheikh Mujib lies buried in his ancestral home in Tungipara, a remote corner of Bangladesh. "The people trusted entirely Sheikh Mujib's leadership and in his final speech on 7 March 1971, he gave a call for independence. He had united his people, step by step, through a long period of struggle and sacrifice and finally launched them in the battlefield. As a nation we owe it to ourselves and the world to create a monument worthy of a great nation at the spot from where Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had given the clarion call to his people to go to battle to win freedom.