

Night of National Trauma

Saturday's was possibly the largest black-out in the history of this nation. At a point of the night-long ordeal the whole country including the Bangabhaban was without one watt of electric power for one whole hour. And the different zones and areas experienced two to eight hours of black-out. In the capital city the luckiest ones had their power cut for nearly two hours. And these were few in number. For most the misery continued for three to six hours, for some extending even up to the Sunday morning.

This was as if the nation had passed out. And not for the first time in these past two years. This nation must resist recurrence of such fits or it is done for.

What ails our power situation, its generation and distribution? Political unresponsiveness to the power needs of the nation and its growth compounded by bad management rendered nearly anarchic by corruption riddling it through and through have combined to make a terminally ill patient of the Bangladesh power sector.

When the government at the outset confidently spoke of setting things right in two or six months or the next year, they simply talked through their hats without any understanding of the phenomenon whatsoever. One hopes wisdom is dawning on them and they will be able to come to grips with the situation before our appointment with the economic take-off gets all mangled and messed up.

We only wish the electricity people took all the right lessons from this costly tragedy so that any recurrence could be prevented or at least be tackled better than on Saturday night. How did it all go wrong? We wouldn't take the plea of a technical fault. All such is traceable to human error. We must learn from such error.

The power sector is passing through a crisis situation. Even the installed capacity falls short of the national need by more than 500 megawatt. And much of this installed capacity is in no dependably obliging form, breaking down every now and then. The engineers are trying to row to shore a thoroughly holed boat by every ingenious way. It is for the political authority to see that the boat doesn't sink.

Will this Saturday night national trauma be able to move the government to embark on some emergency work relieving the pressure on our electric system? This is the first necessity.

Railway Does it Again

Bangladesh Railway's privatised acre is expanding. After the pioneering experiment of handing Dhaka-Narayanganj branch line train operations over to a private sector enterprise, commercial operations of two more — Karnaphuli Express, running between Dhaka and Chittagong route and Balaka express, shuttling between Dhaka and Mymensingh — have been leased out to a private concern. According to the deal, railway authority will supply fuel of the train and appoint the guards. The lease holder will sell tickets and perform management work with its own staff. It is a laudable but cautious act of following through a step that was necessitated in the first place by the twin devils that have come to plague this public sector communication mode — ticketless travel and lack of service. This means short of free market the authorities are keen to try all other options to stem the rot in railway.

This, however, leaves one question unanswered. With operational responsibilities going to the private hands what will happen to those who had shouldered those in the public sector? Will the government continue to foot their bill? Then the whole purpose of privatisation would be lost. Because, after all, the prime purpose behind privatisation is to downsize the public sector behemoth and replace the chronic systems loss by a better value for people's money. Railway has to get rid of the extra flab it is suffering from.

One vital aspect that should not be allowed to go out of focus is lack of maintenance. This is a national problem. All government sector establishments are affected by this syndrome. And none makes a more compelling case of this than the Railways. Rampant corruption and authorities' indifference have played havoc with this transport system that for safety, eco-friendliness and mass capacity should have been a model of efficiency.

Do Something about It

Home Minister Rafiqul Islam informed the Parliament on Saturday that roads constitute about 10 per cent of the total land-area of Dhaka city which is 15 per cent below the world standard. The sprawl in the metropolis has been almost entirely devoid of new roads. There is hardly any space to either construct roads or expand the existing ones, so squeezed are we on all sides.

This structural limitation, however, is not unique to Dhaka city. Bangkok and Singapore being similarly hamstrung by space problems. So, they have gone for expressways, flyovers, underpasses and bypasses to ease off traffic loads and mitigate a veritable demographic disaster the like of which lurks over Dhaka's horizon though. Especially in Bangkok where one needed mendicant's patience to get by only in the eighties one today sees flyovers relieving the commutation pressures on the ground to a noticeable degree.

Thank God, such traffic engineering aspects have started weighing with us lately and that the Home Minister sounded hopeful of 'overcoming' the traffic jam via flyovers and bypasses in 18 months' time or so. The DCC has built some underpasses already for pedestrian traffic but could consider having them on small scale for limited diversion of motorised traffic at extremely busy intersections. Basically we ought to go for flyovers wherever possible which can serve as by-passes as well.

Will the government come up with a thoroughbred time-bound traffic engineering plan for a definitive reduction in the nightmarish hardship the denizens daily face on the roads?

EURASIA is the world's axial super continent. Two of the world's three prosperity zones, West Europe and East Asia are located here. All the historical pretenders to global power originated in this continent. The world's most populous aspirants to regional hegemony, China and India, are also in Eurasia. After the United States six largest economies and military spenders are there, as are all but one of the world's nuclear powers. Eurasia accounts for 70 per cent of the world population, 60 per cent of the GNP and 75 per cent of its energy resources. Obviously any nation dominant over Eurasia can reach out for global control.

After the second world war both USA and Soviet Union competed for this dominance — US through NATO, its geopolitical bridgehead in Eurasia and Soviet Union being the core country of Eurasian lands. Through the ownership of the world's largest piece of real-estate spanning as many as ten time-zones as well as a measure of industrial advancement accomplished during the Soviet era.

While NATO helped entrench American political influence and military power on the Eurasian mainland and enhanced them further through NATO enlargement the Soviet disintegration left her with the prospect of further disintegration and decline in terms of Russian influence even in her 'near abroad' comprised of the former republics of the Union. Even internally, Russia with her multiple problems of polity, economy and military demoralisation as well as an acute identity crisis remains more of a 'political black hole' between a united European Community in the West and China, a burgeoning economic and military power and Japan, already an economic super-power in the East.

It is precisely this dwindling clout of Russia which has set in motion a process for the remaking of Eurasia which has no more been quite the same again after the cold war.

Russia has directly contributed not only to the breakup of USSR by seceding from the union but also to the fragmentation of Eurasia by perpetrating a collision course with the neighbours most of whom were her fellow republics within former Soviet Union. Instead of forging a common front with these entities as was envisaged in 1991 treaty creating CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) it quarreled virtually all making an inroad for the external forces possible in this volatile region.

It soured its relations with all the union's former republics, fought bitterly with Ukraine over Black Sea fleet and deprecated countries like Belarus which gravitated most towards her. Even within its own borders, Russia's central government incessantly duelled with Chechnya, Tartarstan, Ingushetia, Primorsky, North Caucasus Volga basin and Siberian republic which had wide ranging demands from autonomy to secession making much of Eurasia unstable.

With the spectre of further disintegration looming the clout of western powers and that of international organisations only tremendously grew in the region, but with a difference. This time the United States seems unable to retain its exclusive control over the process unlike in the aftermath of second world war when Eurasia was her sole domain alongside Soviet Union. Now the western allies like Germany, Japan and Turkey are likely to adopt independent policies and postures in the region.

The jockeying of western interests this time is likely to exacerbate tension between and within the countries of Eurasia. The West will also, for the first time, confront new challenges from China if not from Russia which would require much strengthening from its present predicaments to put up a challenge to western scheming at this juncture.

In the western periphery of Eurasia, France and Germany will, of course, continue to be the key players with whom the US will be required to share leadership in NATO as well as to accept Europe's increasing role in the reshaping of Eurasia. Without both these countries there will be no Europe and without Europe there will never be a cooperative trans-Eurasian system.

Both these countries, particularly Germany, have different objectives to gravitate toward. As the cultural and economic leader of an integrating Europe, a reunited Germany will demand more active role in Eurasia. She has assiduously built on its already good relationship with East European countries and former republics of USSR. German trade and investment in Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Ukraine and Belarus are comparable to those countries' total combined trade and investment with other European countries. Britain and the US have made determined efforts to increase their trade and influence to counter German dominance in this region. But by all indications three new NATO member-designate will be client of Germany rather than the US. Unlike in the past the Western influence in new Eurasia is going to be split one.

Although China is a new player for dominance over changed Eurasia, her possibilities are enormous. With Russia mired in continuing troubles at home the former republics of USSR like Kazakhstan and Kyrgistan look to China as economic role model. These two states, larger geographically than three Germanys and two Frances combined, but with only 20 millions unevenly distributed people are already target of a burgeoning China with its 1.23 bn population. A constantly declining Russia has allowed several newly independent states to slip into China's sphere of influence. In central Asian republics China's growing influence could mean a return of power to the communists but of Chinese version.

However both demographics and economics may determine China's real opening to Eurasia in Russia's Far East and Siberia. Huge Soviet-era enterprises in this region with only 24 million population and 60 per cent of Russia's resources are in deep decline. They are no more competitive; neither can they be modernised primarily because of Russia's waning central authority and poor economy. Also lies buried under this desolate area 80 per cent of the world's known coal reserve. China with her chronic energy shortage as well as strain on its resources has logical stake in those Russian wealth which are virtually useless to Russia at present. In fact, there is little that prevents China from gaining economic and political dominance in Russia's wild East.

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A Tour D'Horizon of Eurasia

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the face of a Chinese challenge. After all she is a powerful member of G-8 club and her economic might is only next to that of the United States. To counter Chinese influence in the region she has only to strengthen her military dramatically and take an independent and assertive posture in her Far East policy.

She seems to have partially done it by raising her defence budget to \$50bn, the third largest in the world. If Russia's Far Eastern regions gain more autonomy, Japan will have real opportunity to regain her four second world war, and will be able to dominate neighbouring Sakhalin islands. The US however stands to lose its influence in the Pacific if it permits an unfettered Japanese or Chinese build up in the political vacuum of Russian Far East. Alternatively it may as well strengthen Russian or Indian capability in the area to keep the Japanese or Chinese out.

In the coming century Turkey will be a significant player in the remaking of Eurasia — particularly in its south where in Turkic-habitated Central Asia as well as in Russian Federation's Volga basin, Tartarstan and Bashkiria she wields considerable influence. Turkey as the centre of Ottoman empire dominated till last century all these areas, the Balkans and as a matter of fact whole of South Eastern Europe. Now with her current economic success and linkage with the NATO she has a potential to integrate at least the newly independent central Asian states into a Pan-Turkic state. Turkey's new mission would however demand a jettisoning of her western political, social and cultural values and her ability to offer a clear alternative to the West. Nevertheless, Eurasia has traditionally and historically been the domain of Russia either during its Czarist

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others and culminated in its completion during the Hasina regime. It is a promise fulfilled a dream realised and success of a determined effort of a democratic governments of Sheikh Hasina. She has most successfully and most creditably finished the most difficult job. The 23rd June, 1998 will be the greatest and most memorable day not only in the life of Sheikh Hasina but the whole nation. Allah has granted her this rare opportunity to open a bridge dreamt by her father, the Father of the Nation.

Let's we forget I want to record for a posterity that Capt Mansur Ali, the great son of Sirajgonj, one of the leaders of the Liberation War, recognised the necessity to remove its communication gap and the urgency for shortening the journey time for the people of the regions. To facilitate the easy journey he introduced the ferry system between Bhupur in the east and Sirajgonj in the west and thus introduced a second but a shorter route between the regions.

We must not also fail to appreciate the contribution of another illustrious and talented man of Sirajgonj who also, as the Communication Minister of the Government, worked 'wholeheartedly' for the establishment of the bridge. He did the job of selecting the best suitable site for the bridge. He is Prof MA Matin, a great eye specialist and a former Deputy Prime Minister of Bangladesh. A versatile genius as he is, he, by his scholastic exposition of facts and figures, data and related materials, was able to convince the selection committee, donor agencies and the government that the present site was the shortest, less costly and the best possible one. His contribution to aid association with formulation stages of the project was tremendous. We are also indebted to him for his services for the establishment of many service-oriented institutions in Sirajgonj and northern area. It will be in the fitness of things to recognise his services generally and for the Bridge specially, by naming the Rly Station on the western part of the Bridge as 'MA Matin station'. He should be specially invited for the inaugural ceremony and honourably mentioned publicly for his contribution. This will also fulfil the desire of the Sirajgonjites to see their son honoured.

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PERSPECTIVES

by Brig (Rtd) M Abdul Hafiz

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To the Editor...

An appeal for national harmony

Sir, I am a humble citizen working for the country. I don't believe in big talks. My education has taught me to tell the right thing at the right moment for which I suffered a lot in my life.

On the occasion of the historic opening of the Bangabandhu Jamuna Bridge, I wish that the former president and the former Prime Minister were the speakers to say a few inspiring words to the nation. It could reflect the emerging spirit of a brave nation.

Patriotism knows no ill-feelings or bad taste in the civil society.

Feelings of an expatriate

Sir, We know that over the recent years, the world has been experiencing unbelievable development in the field of information technology. Physical separation among different parts of the world has been heavily compensated by the ongoing development of information technology. The Internet, as one of the mostly used information technology, has almost permeated everyday lives of people around the world. Even in Bangladesh over a couple of years, the advancement in the Internet technology (though comparing to that of the developed countries, the scale is smaller) is remarkable. However, it is unfortunate to say that we haven't yet been able to make this technology widely available at our university campuses.

There might be some sporadic developments in different

campuses but, as a whole the picture is not that optimistic. For example, I know (as an ex-BUET student and teacher) that BUET is providing its students with this technology — but the scope is very limited in nature and the system itself is incumbent with a bureaucratic procedure. However, it is needless (nowadays) to argue against the merit of installing this technology wide in our abodes of knowledge.

By doing this, we not only can enable our students to surf in the vast ocean of knowledge but also to plunge themselves into the threshold of recent communication technology. Though surprising but true, that a number of universities in India now are providing their students with free Internet access. Even if we cannot indulge ourselves in doing so due to a lot of prevailing constraints (we have); however, we can at least start it for a limited time period in a day at minimum possible charges with a reasonably wider scale, covering larger number of students. Substantial government subsidy will be a great incentive for the universities to do so.

Apparently my idea might evince all signs of absurdity. But if we think deeply, we can find some glimmer of hope. One of the possible options might be garnering some extra funds for this purpose from our heavily allocated Defence Budget. We also know that success associated with this issue is grappled with strong political will. Moreover, there are some people who goat over higher Defence Budget by amplifying the importance of safeguarding our independence and sovereignty.

But, I would like to ask some questions to those people who feel so threatened amid our nuke possessing neighbours.

First, how far should we go? And second, how far can we go? Given the current situation we have only one option to protect our country — go for nuclear bomb. Can we go for that? Or think sensibly! Perhaps, I should stop now before being identified as a 'judicious unpatriotic nerd'.

The nuclear club

Sir, Now that India and Pakistan has exhibited their nuclear prowess we now expect that a lasting friendship and mutual understanding will prevail between the two arch rivals.

China and the Soviet Union on one side, and the USA with their European allies were once sworn enemies with daggers drawn. President Reagan once described Soviet Union an evil empire. Now they walk hand in hand under the friendship banner of the nuclear club.

The idea of a nuclear deterrent is a big sham, for all it needs is a crazy despot to trigger a nuclear holocaust. The truth is, that you can only fire a gun when you have one to use, holds good.

It would be in the wider interest of the West not to penalise India and Pakistan with economic sanctions and other punitive measures. Or else technology will become an exportable commodity for a price.

We may then have a situation where only a handful of countries will be left for joining the non-nuclear club.

Hide and Seek

Sir, It is indeed laudable to have written in your editorial recently as "The BCL also has its armed cadres, as criminally prone as the goons in the opposite phalanges." Thank you for this clear-cut statement.

Just few days back our Prime Minister said, while speaking in the House, that the Awami League, as per its organisational structure, does not have any student front. What was the PM trying to imply by this? Did the PM want to mean that the Awami League is not involving students in politics?

If so, then who are the persons in BCL? Our PM always likes to say that "terrorists do not have any (political) grouping." We will not have a solution to terrorism as long as it is said like that. Someone has to start by admitting one's fault with all-out sincerity and begin the process of getting rid of terrorism.

The hypocrisy and deceit in international nuclear policy, that what is good for me is bad for you, does not have relevance, since the sudden emergence of India and Pakistan with their first generation nuclear bombs having mass destructive power. The battle cry from both the borders is being heard far and wide.

An Anxious Observer
Chittagong

OPINION

Bangabandhu Bridge — an Overview

One who knows

Bangabandhu Bridge at Jamuna, now a dream-turned-reality is going to be opened formally on 23rd June, 1998. It will be a red-letter day for the nation and culmination of a dream for the millions. Rightly called the "life-line" between the two regions of the country hitherto almost completely separated from each other, the Bridge will act as main inter-regional connecting point for rail, road, bus, electricity and what not. Being separated by the mighty Jamuna river, the two regions developed unequally economically and industrially. Due to geographical location, the east being comparatively favourably situated in every respect, naturally had opportunity to develop and dominate in every field. The northern region could not pace up with the east. There was very little communication and inter-marriages between the people of the regions. This naturally gave rise to misunderstanding and mistrust between the two regions and also helped grow different life-style and social culture. There was a disparity in all spheres of administration and developmental activities. The north suffered from a sense of deprivation.

Bangabandhu Bridge, by inter connecting the regions will now usher in a new era of expectation, opening up equal opportunities to develop for all. It will be a harbinger of fraternity and trust against hatred and mistrust; sense of aspiration and cooperation in place of frustration and separatism, equal opportunity instead of unequal competition.

North Bengal, not quite unjustifiably, felt like being neglected and smarted under the agony of unjust treatment and helplessness. The panacea for all these known but surely overlooked national diseases by our leaders, lay in an economic union and easy movement of people between the regions. This is why the Bridge was the dream of millions, leaders and common people alike. Right from Bangabandhu to the day of foundation stone laying ceremonies by HM Ershad, Begum Zia and Sheikh Hasina, many great leaders, advisers, specialists and economic experts have played their parts in the formulation and fulfilment of the dream. Due credits should be given to the leaders including HM Ershad, Begum Khaleida Zia and Sheikh Hasina's governments. It was started by some, nourished and developed by

others and culminated in its completion during the Hasina regime. It is a promise fulfilled a dream realised and success of a determined effort of a democratic governments of Sheikh Hasina. She has most successfully and most creditably finished the most difficult job. The 23rd June, 1998 will be the greatest and most memorable day not only in the life of Sheikh Hasina but the whole nation. Allah has granted her this rare opportunity to open a bridge dreamt by her father, the Father of the Nation.

Let's we forget I want to record for a posterity that Capt Mansur Ali, the great son of Sirajgonj, one of the leaders of the Liberation War, recognised the necessity to remove its communication gap and the urgency for shortening the journey time for the people of the regions. To facilitate the easy journey he introduced the ferry system between Bhupur in the east and Sirajgonj in the west and thus introduced a second but a shorter route between the regions.

We must not also fail to appreciate the contribution of another illustrious and talented man of Sirajgonj who also, as the Communication Minister of the Government, worked 'wholeheartedly' for the establishment of the bridge. He did the job of selecting the best suitable site for the bridge. He is Prof MA Matin, a great eye specialist and a former Deputy Prime Minister of Bangladesh. A versatile genius as he is, he, by his scholastic exposition of facts and figures, data and related materials, was able to convince the selection committee, donor agencies and the government that the present site was the shortest, less costly and the best possible one. His contribution to aid association with formulation stages of the project was tremendous. We are also indebted to him for his services for the establishment of many service-oriented institutions in Sirajgonj and northern area. It will be in the fitness of things to recognise his services generally and for the Bridge specially, by naming the Rly Station on the western part of the Bridge as 'MA Matin station'. He should be specially invited for the inaugural ceremony and honourably mentioned publicly for his contribution. This will also fulfil the desire of the Sirajgonjites to see their son honoured.