

Plight of Power Court

A meeting on Monday between power division officials of the energy ministry and magistrates entrusted with the responsibility of the country's power cases revealed an ugly truth: police and power officials are part of the scheme to keep the big defaulters beyond the reach of law. Their engineered indifference has led to a huge backlog of cases filed with the courts, thereby giving the defaulting industrialists leeway to keep up the foul play. Summons are not timely served and even the peshkars (court assistants) do their jobs according to their 'sweet will'.

Apart from systems loss, due to pilferage and illegal connection, defaulted bills have left the country's power sector in total disarray. Latest estimates put the amount of unrealised bills to the tune of Tk 20 billion. Repeated request from authorities to the defaulters for payment of accrued bills (the prime minister herself chimed in the other day) seems to have fallen on deaf ears. Law cannot take its course, either, for almost an in-built deterrent in the shape of collusion of crooked minds.

Dhaka Electric Supply Authority (DESA) and Power Development Board (PDB) have recently undertaken a crash programme to delink illegal connection to arrest the alarming rise of systems loss. It is indeed a praiseworthy step. However, they must feel that realisation of unpaid bills is equally important and effective functioning of the power court is a pre-condition for that. To get the power sector in order, both mechanisms must work simultaneously and effectively.

Monday's review meeting was a blessing in disguise, because with the sorry state of affairs at the power courts, highlighted were the areas that need immediate attention of the policy-planners. They know now where the loopholes in the system are and what impediments to eliminate. The next is to act and act fast. The culprits at both end must be identified and severely punished. Unless authorities play tough with the defaulters and their accomplices, mere recommendations will be nothing but another exercise in futility.

Workers' Day

ONCE an occasion of summer pomp, May Day was meant for the thronging of a May Queen, a bucolic western custom. That meaning was benumbed by one volatile event in a Chicago market last century and it became a day for all the world to observe in order to consecrate in the recess of human conscience the rights of the workers. This is now a day to take stock of how much has been achieved for the workers and to rededicate renewed efforts towards establishing their right to secured and decent life.

In the wake of workers' movement against exploitation and oppression, and for better pay and working condition, trade unions have developed to give the surge a shape and direction and establish workers' right. But of late, unfortunately in our country, it has receded in importance, for trade unions have exposed themselves to abused politics which, in the process, is going against them. Capitalism had developed a self-correcting mechanism through which the act of fulfilling many of the workers' aspirations became a part of capitalistic efficiency leading to more productivity per worker. But trade unionism, for most of the country's industrial establishments, has become an obsession. Most CBAs are groups hankering after power and money for the benefit of a coterie. Consequently, workers' interests go abegging. However, on the other hand, the release of the power of women's labour through their increased employment in both production and service sectors has been a wonderful event in Bangladesh. The process is expected to accomplish many things hitherto unachieved.

Both labour leaders and entrepreneurs should realise that the workers are in a kind of situation that is discouraging for overall development of the country. Things could improve if both undertook to strive towards a goal of shared prosperity. Give them a better deal and you will prosper.

Rangamati Suffering

DISTURBING news has come from the hill district of Rangamati. The Daily Star Correspondent who had been to the picturesque lake district reported Thursday about the poor health-care services in many of the remote hill areas. He has informed of a number of black patches with particular reference to the extremely inadequate number of qualified doctors and their appallingly short stay at places of work. The report says that only thirty-nine doctors work against a total of 114 posts, as a result 75 posts are lying vacant. This is a very very dismal healthcare prospect for the people of Rangamati. The situation is further aggravated by the fact that there is hardly any discipline and accountability of the doctors posted there so far their leave and permission for leaving the station are concerned. It is alleged that doctors do not stay for more than two months at their places of duty though they are initially posted for a period of two years. There are allegations also that doctors submit their joining report to the Civil Surgeon and then leave station without prior permission from the Hill District Council which is mandatory.

Reasons for these desperate actions of the doctors are ascribed to the absence of additional income sources and lack of adequate private practice facilities for them. The people of the district are so poor that they cannot afford to pay the doctor's fees and there are also no private clinics. Hence the doctors have hardly any interest to stay and work there. There are such serious allegations that some doctors collect their salaries 'without turning up at the spot.' These are total chaotic conditions verging on commitment of crime.

The doctors must not forget that they were educated with the tax money paid by these poor people to the national exchequer and they owe at least honest behaviour to these poor people. The ministry, on the other hand, should appoint required number of doctors immediately and bring them under official discipline. Anyone found negligent of duty must be dealt with according to the rules and laws of the land. We feel the Bangladesh Medical Association (BMA) has also an important part to play.

THE introduction of direct election to the reserved seats for women members in the Union Parishads (UPs) should be seen as a laudable step forward. Such a process should also be reckoned as a milestone in the course of the marathon journey towards women's empowerment and development. We are told that a total of 13,402 women in rural areas got elected as UP members and some of them secured general seats through a face to face encounter with their male counterparts. Besides, 23 women returned as elected chairpersons by defeating male candidates. By and large, the recent UP election results seem to have shown that, given opportunities, the laggards could also become leaders. And on that score, the present government deserves appreciation for having initiated the epoch making event of drawing rural women into the decision making process.

In this connection, one needs to recollect the painful positions of the women population — constituting almost half of the total — in this part of the world. The South Asia is said to be the most deprived region of the world where women are reported to remain as the most disadvantaged vis a vis men. To consider the following statistics from Bangladesh today, where various indicators reveal that women are far behind men. Their literacy rate is only 38 per cent which is much lower compared to that of men (about 57 per cent). Life expectancy, however, is almost same (58 years) but excessive

mortality among women due to discrimination put sex ratio at 105 men for 100 women. There are so much of discriminations against women — at household and state levels — despite the constitutional mandate that women cannot be discriminated against in respect of employment or office of the State (Article 29). Female headed households earn 40 per cent less than male headed households. The participation of women in institutional development and decision making is minimal.

The above mentioned statistics are just the tip of the iceberg under which lies the den of discrimination against women. However, the sordid scenario applies not only to Bangladesh but also to the whole of South Asia region albeit with varying degrees of such discriminations. And this continues to happen in the wake of women in this region being at the pinnacle of power for many years. For example, Bangladesh got two consecutive prime ministers (PMs) and main leaders of opposition who are women. The leading opposition leader in India today is a lady in addition to the fact that another lady — late Indira Gandhi — ruled India for several years. Even a conservative state like Pakistan found a woman twice as PM and Sri Lanka is fortunate in having on board a woman PM and a woman president, in their respective countries, the

Let the Ladies Lit the Lamps

We can only hope that by holding a direct election to UPs for women the government would not pause, rather continue to pursue policies so that the elected women could really deliver the goods.

precarious conditions of women seem to suggest that having a female PM is just not enough to uplift them. Something more revolutionary needs to be done.

One of those dire needs stand out to be the involvement of women in every sphere of the decision making process, at household, social and state levels. The imperative is more mounting in the case of local government institutions which constitute the core of development.

placency that a historic move has been ushered by introducing direct election for women in local bodies could nip the whole holy motive in the bud thus paving ways for a return to the unfortunate origin.

The skepticism that elected women tend to face insurmountable problems in their day to day works was brought to the fore by the elected members themselves. Recently they came to air their grievances in a conference organised by the

rewriting the rules and obligations in clear terms.

But of crucial importance was the complaint lodged by one Shaheena Begum, chairperson of Sajatpur UP under Habiganj district. To quote her: "... in the UPs where the chairpersons are men, women members are not taken seriously. In such cases, the women members are left with no option but to go by the decisions of their male counterparts. The women members have to give in otherwise they would face vote of no-confidence by their male counterparts." Taken the allegation seriously, one would only find that women representatives in the UP would find it more arduous to implement their mandates from constituencies than their male counterparts do.

Among the various problems cited by the elected women representatives, the most important ones were: (a) chauvinistic attitudes of male members in UPs; (b) lack of specificity in existing rules of business relating to UPs and (c) lack of co-operation from rank and file of the administration. While PM Sheikh Hasina is probably right in saying that the direct election would 'revolutionise' the country's local body system and institutions, she or her government could be equally wrong in not paying proper heed to the demands raised by the participants in that conference. At least four steps need to

be taken immediately. First, revising the existing rules of business that support a male dominated structure. Second, bringing about changes in attitudes, structures, policies, laws and practices in order to remove obstacles to achievement of human dignity and equality in society including the family, the community and the state. Third, ensuring equal rights of women as men in all spheres of development including access to intermediary skills, resources and opportunities and finally, establishing and transforming state structures and practices to enhance gender equality and improve the status of women.

The last factor (the state structures and practices) appear to be inimical to the enhancement of gender equality. Only a firm political commitment on the part of the government could create a situation whereby existing structural bottlenecks to the cause of women could be removed. We can only hope that by holding a direct election to UPs for women the government would not pause, rather continue to pursue policies so that the elected women could really deliver the goods for which they have been elected. This would call for institutional arrangements best suited to the cause of women. The ladies with the lamps should be taken seriously 'by their male counterparts as well as by the government. The good beginnings should not meet with bad ends. Let the ladies lit their lamps.



Beneath the Surface

by Abdul Bayes

ment of rural areas where most of the down trodden women live. Thus, the induction of women through elections into the decision making process should go down as an important step. However, while appreciating the electoral outcome and the processes enshrined therein, one should never be oblivious of the fact that direct elections to such posts go to fulfil only the necessary condition while the sufficient condition to be ensured is the dire need of making the environment for the women representatives to work safe and sound. The com-

Bangladesh Jatiya Mohila Samity. In that conference — held in the sprawling International Trade Fair ground of Sher-e-Bangla Nagar — the proud and receptive representatives of the people at the grassroots level alleged about 'chauvinistic attitudes' of their male counterparts on the local bodies. They were also critical of the lack of specificity in the laws related to their domain of activities and of the ambiguities rooted in the realm of their roles and responsibilities. Faced with 'male chauvinism', many of them pleaded for

POWER CRISIS

A Tale of Bureaucratic Hassles and Misleading Information

Factories, businesses and farmers have been hard-hit by the crisis. All want proper electricity supply and none want to know why the situation has reached this stage. They regularly paid taxes and electricity bills, and were thus entitled to proper service.

THAT our memory is short and we consistently fail to learn from our past mistakes has been proved on many earlier occasions and once again during the current electricity crisis. This is an ancient tale of bureaucratic hassles with politicians either being misled or themselves bungling the system just to carry on for the moment. The need of the hour is quick and tough decisions. The current crisis, affecting a 15 per cent of the 120 million population, can be blamed on many factors, primarily, according to experts, on the lack of maintenance, obsolete equipment, theft, old leaking transmission lines and last but not the least, improper guidance to the government for a permanent solution to the sector's woes. The daily demand for electricity in Bangladesh is about 2,450 megawatts and generation is only 2130 megawatts. Their peak hour demands going up even further, the following statistics from Bangladesh today, where various indicators reveal that women are far behind men. Their literacy rate is only 38 per cent which is much lower compared to that of men (about 57 per cent). Life expectancy, however, is almost same (58 years) but excessive

Canada or the United States." When asked why the breakers had not been changed or maintained, one engineer said that the Siddhirganj station was constructed in 1959 and has ever since been using the "Oil Circuit Breaker" whereas countries in other parts of the world use the "Gas Circuit Breaker." "I cannot say why they have never been changed, but as for maintenance, it was not possible due to power shortages and governments decided to keep them running under a full load to avoid public anger," he said, adding that no one wanted to venture upon any serious maintenance project thereby risking public anger.

As I was writing this piece, I came to know that while a barge-mounted power station with a capacity of generating 110 megawatt electricity was brought in by the NEPC Consortium Ltd. for anchoring at Haripur, near the port town of Narayanganj a court case was being filed by another foreign company which failed to do its job but nonetheless refused to give up the land that was allocated to them for the NEPC station. Why stick to the land when it has failed to deliver? While one groped for an answer, the two giants were fighting the case in the court.

Next, according to a reliable official source, the state-owned Petrobangla suddenly told NEPC that they would not get any gas and instead would have to import oil to run the station. Help was sought and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina intervened. Consequently NEPC got the needed gas.

Another expert with the government said a 90 mw station set up in Haripur, near Siddhirganj, with Japanese assistance more than a decade ago should have been directly connected to Dhaka's crucial Ulun sub-station, but instead the then government was advised by 'local experts' that its supply be put through the 'mother station at Siddhirganj' in the 1980s.

Had the supply been direct, the situation would have never taken such a terrible and unbearable turn. (Congrats to PM Sheikh Hasina for doing the right thing. Ulun was connected to Haripur bringing relief to Dhakaites.)

Some said that the 210 megawatt Raozan plant near

the southeastern port city of Chittagong set up in 1994 was a waste because it had excess generation and could not always supply to the national grid. "A good way of dealing with the situation is to install small power stations on the basis of the need of an individual area... like 42 generators with 10 megawatt capacity in seven

under a government's maintenance plan 15 sub-stations have already been repaired so far. The issue has taken a political angle, with the opposition screaming at Sheikh Hasina for failing to deal with the situation, and sources said she has been putting maximum energy during the past days asking relevant officials what had gone



In Fool's Paradise

by Nadeem Qadir

districts or industrial areas," an expert wrote in a local daily.

M. Aziz Khan, chairman of the first private sector power generating company — Khulna Power Co. Ltd. — after carefully examining the situation found that system loss or leaks in power lines, theft and fund constraints to increase production capacity were the main obstacles to improving the state of affairs in the energy sector, or which the country's economy depended heavily.

Khan believes power generation could be increased in a very short time, but governments have been made to believe that large generation units like 450 megawatts were the only solution, requiring at least five years to put into operation as well as huge funds. In fact, he said, the power sector needs to be decentralised into smaller 20 to 50 mw units costing between 10 and 25 million dollars, which would bring both foreign investment and help solve the problem. "Implementation period of small power plants is one year and thus can be put into operation before the next peak season," Khan said, belying government officials' comments that it would take at least several years to overcome the situation.

Small units, he said, would also be flexible to the local demand curve and could be put on and off easily, while losses in transmission and distribution could also be "eliminated." "We need picking plants or short time stations to cope with the peak hour demands or for keeping stable supply," one DESA engineer said.

A senior PDB official said

wrong after she had given corrective measures last year.

She ordered officials to set up small power plants to supply electricity to specific areas as an immediate step.

"Tell me what else has to be done. What steps will ensure power supply at the earliest... We will take quick decisions on your advice," she was quoted as telling power officials by newspapers.

Sheikh Hasina said the private sector should increase its role in power generation to

meet the rising demand for electricity, but it may be noted that for that to happen the entrepreneurs need to have a direct access to her to avoid obstacles created by different government people involved in the process.

As far as I know there are people sitting with cash to invest in the sector, but many have shied away even after Bangladesh opened the sector to both foreign and domestic private investors more than four years ago, thanks to the intricate cobwebs of our bureaucracy.

Entrepreneurs pointed out PDB as a major obstacle as they kept time by holding out to papers or asking for new information at every stage, when one was entitled to believe the process had reached its final stage. The investors and entrepreneurs also want a proper policy guideline for the private sector, including "friendly" response from the finance ministry and banks, specially the nationalised ones. Khulna Power Company's Khan has asked the government to make a three billion taka "infrastructure fund loan" through the state-run Sonali Bank which "would be repaid directly by the

government's power purchasing authorities — the PDB and the Rural Electrification Board.

"These funds will be available only to companies' quoting rates in Bangladesh Taka currency as the US dollar appreciates on an average of 10 per cent against the Taka annually, whereas Bangladesh interest rates are usually five per cent higher than the United States interest rates," he said. Taka, he added should be allowed a five per cent higher pricing in the procurement process.

The Prime Minister, who also holds the energy portfolio, recently ordered a crash programme to tackle the electricity shortage, saying, "Economic progress cannot be ensured without increased power supply."

Indeed so. Factories, businesses and farmers have been hard-hit by the crisis, with all wanting proper electricity supply and none wanting to know why the situation has reached this stage. I mention this as many said they regularly paid taxes and electricity bills, and were thus entitled to proper service.

Hiring and firing are no solutions to this nagging old problem. If the Prime Minister feels the situation is serious, she should take emergency measures by-passing normal procedural matters and then explain to the nation in details what she has done, where all the money went and who were the beneficiaries — absolute transparency. Let there be "light."

May Day, Fair Wages and Islamic Perspective

by Abu Imran

MAY 1. The day is observed the world over in a befitting manner to commemorate the great sacrifices made by some good meaning persons to protect the interest of working class. This happened in Chicago in 1886 when they protested the extended working hours to which they were then subjected to most inhumanly. After that some kind of regulation was brought in to make the lives of working people a bit less painful. Prior to that the employer-employee relationship was no better than that of the master-slave. So, May Day and its observance reminds us, once again, of the rights of workers as well as dignity of labour.

living by honest labour and never to beg.

There may not be any problem in self-employment, but some problem may arise when people work for others as employees. In this case, often the fair wage even become a bone of contention. The employers want to give less on the one hand, and extract most of the other. The exploitation is rampant mostly in under-developed and developing countries particularly because the jobs there are too few while the number of incumbents too many. The workers out of need are obliged to accept less or under paid jobs since they think that it is better than nothing. Then again there is discrimination between male and female. This gives rise to clash of interest and an unhealthy relationship between the employer and the employee. To counter this, employees form trade unions, CBAs (collective bargaining agents) to protect the minimum rights of the employees. Sometimes, however, the employees' organisations misuse their strength by dictating rather unreasonable terms to the employers. All these happens because of absence of justice in the affairs of life mundane.

Islam has recognised the rights of all — both employees and employers. It has already fixed not only the minimum wages but also modest wages. It asks all the employers (masters) to treat their workers as their brothers and give them food, cloth and the kind of living they live. It also asks the masters to pay off their labourers before their sweat is dried. By this, the immediate need of the employees is fully recognised and the question of resorting to dilly tactics, in matters of payment by the employees, has been discarded. But what do we normally see? The observance of May Day in a befitting manner by holding seminars, symposia and declaring public holiday has become a routine affair. But has this changed the lot of the working class people? It has, of course, by and large for the people in the West. But in the underdeveloped and developing

countries its status is nothing beyond slogans and rhetoric. The wages are just low, the working atmosphere simply unsatisfactory, service conditions undesirable, whimsical hire and fire, exploitations, existence of child labour and the like, putting it can't be said that there has no improvement been made. But the improvement is so small that its apparent impact is almost negligible. Some positive steps nevertheless is worth recalling. Government is the largest employer now. The present government soon after coming to power, considered to enhance the pay of its employees. It did so in phases. But its effects however was off-set by exorbitant price-bikes, putting the consumers into untold miseries. The remedy therefore lies in allowing fair wages and, at the same time, checking of price hike of goods and services. Unfortunately this task has become very difficult for the government.

Seeking a solution therefore we may also look at the Islamic consideration of fair wages which inter alia asks the employer to treat his employee as his brother. Now if the former sends an expenditure of around one lac in a month on family cuisine, he is supposed to think the same for his employee. Even if he doesn't or cannot do so and allows a harsh 90 per cent less wages, that too makes nearly Tk 10,000 as the minimum wages. Whatever, the Islamic consideration strikes a balance between expenses and earning — indeed a welcome proposition. And further, the employees are asked to give their honest labour which is nothing short of accomplishment of the assigned job in highly desirable manner. Thus the rights of employers too have been secured leaving little or no scope for tussle or hitch that might create rift between the employers and employees. Let this year's 'May Day' drive us to fair wages also in the Islamic consideration of the theme in the over all interest and harmony of all — the employees and the employers, the main actors in the production and distribution process.

To the Editor...

Justice denied

Sir, We were deeply moved by the articles on Shazneen. What a terrible waste of an innocent, young life. It is impossible to accept the mindless brutality of the crime.

Added to this is our frustration and anger at the tampering with the course of justice. Why arrange for one of the prime accused to be incarcerated in the comfort of a hospital cabin? How is our system of justice allowing such matters to drift in this blatant manner?

Finally, we want to state in no uncertain terms, that Shazneen was an innocent child. No act, however vile, can "defile" her. When will we learn to acknowledge that it is only the perpetrators of such crimes who are the criminals? Shazneen remains exactly the child she was. Nothing can change that.

Shamima Khan Banani, Dhaka.

"Urdu in 'hostile' Bangladesh"

Sir, It was really shocking to read the article Urdu in 'Hostile' Bangladesh" by Hasan Abidi published in Star Litera-

ture on April 24, 99.

Almost 28 years have passed since we have achieved our independence, operating the Fakhristan, but the above mentioned article doesn't give one the impression.

We don't have any hatred or grievance against Urdu language. But when we see someone praising that particular language prefer to term 16th December '71 as the day of 'tragic fall of Dhaka' and 21st February, the historical language movement simply as a "language riot"; as a Banglaee, as a citizen of sovereign Bangladesh we don't have any other option left but to protest.

May I advice, Mr Hasan Abidi, if he doesn't know Bangla (I believe he doesn't), he should go through a recent publication of Asiatic Society "The History of Bangladesh" Vol II and clear all his confusion. And I am sure after going through it he won't dare to term 16th December, our Victory Day as the "tragic fall of Dhaka" and 21st February as a day of "language riot."

Tanvir Farook Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology, Dr M A Rashid Hall, Dhaka

Illegal use of cable network

Sir, During the recent Pepsi Cup Cricket match, we saw some adverts on Poribar Shastho Clinic, run by an NGO on television during commercial breaks. It looked like the adverts were superimposed by the local cable operator on the actual adverts of the sponsors of the match.

This particular NGO, which is most probably funded by the American government, should have realised that this kind of advertising on television is illegal. They should not do this any more.

Sarwar A Jalil 33, Haridas Lane Rambarazsar, Rajshat

A man of substance

Sir, A report from New Delhi said that three women (Sonia, an au pair, Jayalita, a film star, and Mayabati, a school teacher) formed a trio to pull down Vajpayee. It is indeed a credit for Vajpayee who needed three women to pull him down.

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