

## Hectic decisions on energy policy

Stop this last-minute haste before polls

THE Prime Minister has sent out a sudden directive to the Energy Ministry to resolve all pending issues before the end of this month. As a result, officials have been involved in a hectic round of non-stop deliberations, aimed at sorting out critical questions in the energy sector, within a very short period of time. We would like to counsel the Prime Minister against allowing pre-election exigencies from influencing her actions. We must also point out that the issues that are now being hastily 'resolved' by officials have been on the table long enough for the Prime Minister to have addressed them much earlier.

The directive to formulate a 50-year gas usage plan for domestic purposes had been made soon after US president Bill Clinton's visit last year. The committee entrusted with this task has not held a single meeting since then. It must be wondered how experts would be able to provide a vision for the next 50 years' gas usage in this country in a matter of mere days?

Many other critical issues in the energy sector have been crying out for attention. The prospect of foreign investment in marginal gas fields has been entrusted to a committee which has yet to come up with guidelines. BAPEX, the public body involved in several new projects, is still in the dark about such basic questions as the criteria to define which would be 'marginal' and which would be 'depleted' gas fields. Project proposals from foreign investors for compressed natural gas and natural gas liquid have been gathering dust. Virtually nothing has been done to develop a proposal to restructure Titas Gas, the largest gas distribution company that has run up huge debts, become unwieldy, poorly administered and held hostage by corrupt influences and political interests. The Magurchara case, dealing with the blow-out in 1997 in that gas field, has been left unresolved in spite of repeated calls to the government to settle the matter.

Directives to deal with these and other energy issues should have been made and their implementation ensured during the government's tenure. Given the time constraints, the Prime Minister's hurry to find solutions prior to the elections does not inspire confidence in her motives, nor in the final outcome. At best the energy ministry would come up with sketchy results and at worst, the end-product would be the subject of controversy and dissent.

We advise the Prime Minister to draw back from this helter-skelter tying up of loose ends. Let energy issues be given both the time and the attention they deserve, once the elections are over.

## Technical education for women

A fillip to empowerment

EMANCIPATION and empowerment of women in this country have been linked largely to their socio-economic disposition. Individual enhancement of women's position, on both quantitative and qualitative considerations, is a notion not quite ventured with in a social arrangement where their personal safety and security has not been fully ensured as yet. Increasing incidences of violence against women, including rape and acid throwing, point to a societal psyche that views them as an object liable to be tinkered with and subjugated. This is not to say, however, that there has not been any progress in empowering women. A commonplace example would be the two ladies dictating the course of our national politics over the last two decades now. Besides, women have come up from different sections of the society to take over leadership role in administrative and other responsible jobs. Yet, one must say, we haven't done enough and the reason, as said earlier, has been our collective failure to aptly define the goal as regards empowerment of women.

The concept of equal rights must be elevated from what it's been in our minds. Rights do not essentially refer to a condition of physical wellbeing. Now, in the context of the country's socio-economic needs, if we have to put accent on technical education, then women must get equal access to technically enrich themselves. Overall, whatever avenues may be created for enhancement, women should have equal access to it.

We are sure that is what the fisheries and livestock minister has meant when he said technical education of women is vital for their empowerment and economic emancipation. Let's hope, his effort wouldn't die out with delivery of the speech.

# The depleted uranium: A slow, silent killer



BRIG (RTD) M ABDUL HAFIZ

THE trail of the devastation left by the Depleted Uranium (DU) weapons the US and other western countries deployed in the gulf war failed to stir the emotions in the offending countries let alone the question arousing the conscience of the perpetrators of the crimes. Hundreds of thousands of Iraqis had already fallen victim to the deadly effects of DU munitions used in profusion during the gulf war. After the war thousands of Iraqis developed the symptoms of memory loss, headaches, muscle pain, abdominal pain, dizziness and respiratory problems. The incidence of cancer has increased rapidly and at abnormal rates. Leukaemia in children is especially rampant: it has shown a fourfold rise after the gulf war. The incidence of breast cancer among the women is around four times higher than it was before 1990. Abnormal births have drastically increased since the war. Many American and British veterans of Gulf War also developed syndromes that were euphemistically called the 'gulf war syndrome'. But the DU's primary victims were the people of Iraq where some 300 tonnes of uranium from the spent munitions lay scattered across the battlefields of the Gulf War. A confidential report prepared in 1991 by United King-

dom Atomic Energy Authority described the presence of DU in Iraq and Kuwait as a 'significant problem' which would cause 'tens of thousands of potential deaths.'

Yet the danger of DU evoked no reaction from the Western circles which kept turning it down. The Pentagon, despite mounting evidences to the contrary, continued to insist that the DU was only 'very, very mildly radioactive.' But there are indications that the US military establishment did have some clue about the lethal nature of DU. An US

training in the sands of Saudi Arabia. The Pentagon could not but be aware of the resultant concentration of the DU and its potential dangers.

The choice of DU for use in munitions manufacturing was made primarily for its effectiveness and economy. But at no stage the users could have been ignorant about its inherent danger both for the civilians and combatants. Because the US Army Armaments, Munitions and Chemical Command itself states: "When a DU penetrator impacts a target surface, a large portion of the

Albright even administered the Europeans not to be 'excessively nervous and hysterical about DU.' The west woke up only after its own soldiers started dying of the complications believed to have originated from the exposure to the DU. It was only after the complaints of the European government that the eyebrows were raised in the west as to the dangers of the use of DU munitions. Last year soon after the Balkan wars the Italian soldiers started developing 'mysterious illness' while seven of them already

extremely harmful effects of the DU piling up in the gulf region. More than 100 places only in Kosovo are littered with DU particles. Kouchener forced the NATO to urgently address the issue but it seemed worried only about the health of its soldiers stationed in the region and not the local people. Only in early January last signs were put up by the UN and NATO warning civilians also to exercise caution while approaching areas in Kosovo where DU were dropped. NATO has, of late, admitted to dropping of 12

on 4 January last. On that day European Commission President Romano Prodi became the most important European leader to demand an investigation into the claims that the DU used in the NATO munitions had caused death or illness among Balkan peacekeepers. The German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder said that it was not 'right' to use such munitions.

The pressures are being built up even in the United States against the use of DU by the Gulf and Balkan wars Veterans. But there is little likelihood that Pentagon and arms manufacturers would take it in right spirit. The Pentagon, the EU and the UN have all set up Commissions to investigate the risks posed by the DU but at the same time the efforts are afoot to whitewash the investigations. In the US where the public opinion carries considerable weightage a number of scientists and academics have already joined the campaign to justify the use of DU. According to the UN half a million Iraqi children have died as a direct result of decade long sanctions. When asked about the cruelty, former US secretary of state Ms Madeleine Albright memorably replied "It is a price worth paying". With this state of cynicism prevailing in some quarters of US administration and elsewhere it is not surprising that a virtually invisible killing agent like DU has so far been disregarded by the US authorities as well as NATO. But perhaps the tide has turned now when it will be increasingly difficult to ignore the protests against DU munitions. The development and use of DU weapons, however, is yet another example of how the nuclear industry in the west works together with military industrial complex to support its military ventures around the world regardless of the consequences.

## PERSPECTIVES

President Kostunica of Yugoslavia has characterised the use of Depleted Uranium (DU) weapons as a crime against humanity. He wants the International War Crime Tribunal in the Hague also to look expeditiously into this matter and apportion blame. After the disaster caused by DU weapons both in the Gulf and Balkans, countries like Russia had repeatedly warned NATO about the dangers of using DU.

Navy instruction manual noted that the teams recovering Tomahawk missiles during the test rounds must have radiological protective gadgets. The DU munitions developed by the Pentagon during the late 70s was, in fact, a radioactive byproduct of the enrichment process used in producing atomic bomb and nuclear fuel rods. The material was provided free of cost to weapon manufacturers by nuclear arms industries. During the Gulf War the armour piercing rounds made of depleted uranium were used in a big way. The Tomahawk missiles which went into action from the very first day of operation desert storm were all tipped with DU. The US Army reported that a total of 14000 DU tank rounds were used during the course of Gulf War while another 7000 rounds were fired during the

Kinetic energy is dissipated as heat. The heat of the impact causes the DU to oxidise or burn momentarily. This results in smokes which contains a high concentration of DU particles. These uranium particles can be ingested or inhaled and are highly toxic". Even before the gulf war the armament experts in US had warned that the combat conditions with the new weaponry will lead to the uncontrolled release of DU-aerosol. They also warned that the DU exposures to soldiers on the battle field could be significant with potential "radiological and toxicological effects".

The US administration, however, did not care and tended to give clean chit to the use of DU. The scientists close to the Pentagon are at pains to prove it innocuous. The former US secretary of state Ms Madeleine

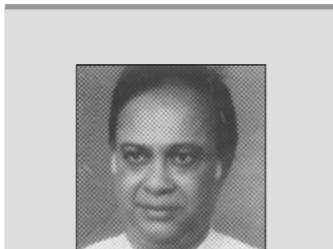
died of cancer. French and Portuguese peacekeepers in the Balkans were also diagnosed with cancer. As a result, the Norwegian soldiers refused to sign contract to go to Balkans for peacekeeping duties. A group of Belgian soldiers sued their government for the health problems caused to them by service in the Balkans. Five Belgian soldiers who served in Bosnia and Croatia died of cancer.

Bernard Kouchener, the UN administrator of Kosovo brought up the issue of the dangers that DU posed to the region. In the mid-1990s the US combat aircraft used limited amounts of DU munitions against former Yugoslavia. But in 1999 during the war over Kosovo NATO resorted to blanket bombing of Yugoslavia using the DU weapons despite documented evidence of

tonnes of DU in Kosovo alone. In all an estimated 31,000 DU shells were dropped over Yugoslavia.

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# Washington-Moscow relations: Tensions mount over diplomats' expulsion



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

in the economic arena. The communists in the Russian federation are desperately seeking to make their presence felt in the affairs of once most important communist nation, now a pluralistic society under president Vladimir Putin, who follows the policies of his mentor former president Yeltsin, the first leader of democratic Russia.

There is no rivalries as such between the United States and the Russian federation in the manner it existed during the time when US and communist Soviet Union were

The issue of military superiority between the two was the bone of contention between the two along with the divergent political systems and this irritating relationship was often compounded by accusations of espionage by one against the other. The latest such development occurred during the height of the cold war when former president Ronald Reagan ordered some 80 Soviet diplomats out of the country. Moscow had also retaliated and all these were seen as nothing unusual at that time when the ties between

intelligence agency KGB since 1985 and its Russian successor SVR paid Hanseen a total of 1.4 million dollars in cash deposited in a Russian bank for the services he rendered during the 16 years. This has been one of the most sensational cases surrounding espionage in the United States and made the administration sit up thinking how an important counter-intelligence official could carry out the spying for such a long period without coming into doubt till his arrest due to a minor fault that led to the unearthing of his activities.

has long been regarded by Washington as a sort of enemy nation. Tehran and Moscow agreed a week ago to enhance defence cooperation and the United States looked askance at such a new turn in the ties between a country known as Islamic fundamentalist to the US and the former communist nation. Washington, on its part, decided to have talks with leaders of separatist Chechen rebels which evidently irked Russia, trying to crush the rebels with all might under its disposal.

impact of the new American administration. Bush made no bone of the fact that he preferred closer ties with Taiwan compared to what pursued by his predecessor Bill Clinton. Japan is a close ally of the US and Mori's talks with Bush covered both Russia and China factors. It is assumed that the present issue of Russian and American diplomats must have figured prominently in the discussions that president Bush had with two the Asian leaders.

Both Washington and Moscow have their own reasons for the current actions centering espionage. Bush administration cannot afford to be seen soft to Russia particularly after the Hanseen affair and also deals with Iran by Moscow on defence matters. Likewise, Moscow which is no longer a superpower would not like to be considered as lame duck in face of American expulsion of its diplomats no matter that the cold era has ended and Russian federation is now a democratic country. President Putin especially cannot possibly turn a blind eye to American attitude towards Chechen issue since he won presidency from prime minister-ship mainly on his tough operations in the Chechen crisis.

The Washington-Moscow actions surrounding the "spying" issue has added a new element of tension in the global situation and it is possible that both sides may follow it up by further expulsion of diplomats or new unfriendly measures. However, it is likely that both would not go too far because qualitative change is there compared to the earlier cold war era situation, and arguably, both will stop at a certain stage.

## MATTERS AROUND US

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the principal actors of the world scenario by virtue of both being super powers. The sea-change that has taken place since the end of the bi-polar political milieu has given way to co-operation between Washington and Moscow, both of which are now democratic. However, every nation has its own priority on several issues and maintains the same not seeing eye to eye on many international matters. However, seldom, in fact never since the end of the cold war, the two countries got themselves embroiled in any such bilateral disputes as may injure the yet wobbly relations between the two former rivals.

But is has happened and in a manner which is simply reminiscent of their rivalries of the years earlier.

the two were charged with animosity, mistrust and rivalries.

On March 22, Washington ordered mass expulsion of Russian diplomats for espionage. The development came almost as an expected corollary to the case of Robert Hanseen, the FBI agent, recently arrested on suspicion of spying for Moscow. Hanseen, a counter-intelligence officer for 27 years of FBI service, had nearly unlimited access to the state secrets and is accused to having seriously compromised American national security for as long as more than 15 years without any iota of doubt. He was arrested last month after allegedly leaving classified information in a Virginia park for his Russian handlers. It is alleged that the Soviet

The expulsion of the Russian diplomats numbering more than 50 from the United States and the subsequent tit-for-tat action by Moscow by ordering immediately four American diplomats out as a first step in a series, brought into sharp focus the trend of worsening ties between the two nations. Moscow says Washington is gripped with "spy mania".

Several factors are behind the developments while definitely the Robert Hanseen issue has prompted the new Bush administration in America to adopt a hardline stance towards Moscow. Their relations have become increasingly strained in recent weeks after Russia announced its intention to boost military cooperation with Iran, which

The deterioration of the relationship over the expulsions of diplomats by both countries is taking place when two Asian leaders are in Washington for talks with the new American administration. Japanese prime minister Yoshiro Mori held talks with president Bush and Chinese vice premier Qia Qichen also met the new American president. Their talks covered different issues of bilateral and international concerns. The Chinese vice-premier is campaigning against Washington's planned sale of advanced Aegi battle management system to Taiwan, which Beijing considers as a renegade province. Russian president Putin paid a visit to China some time ago and discussed possible

# TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

## Middle East crisis

The Middle East crisis is intensifying all the time. Every day, fresh violence is playing havoc with the lives of both Palestinians and Israelis. The situation began to deteriorate after Ariel Sharon came to power. But the world body, especially the U.S.A seems to be quite indifferent towards such sheer terrorism. The new American administration's biased approach has made the problem more critical. In the last six months, hundreds of people have died and most of them are Palestinians. But the Americans and the Israelis are branding the Palestinians' struggle for freedom as terrorism and are trying to restore their so-called "peace" by killing unarmed Palestinians.

**Khaled Iqbal**  
Moulvibazar

## Taliban atrocity

I refer to the letter "Taliban atrocity" by Robert Kader (March 23). I fully agree with the writer's views. Since taking over power, the Taliban government has taken many steps which have little or no relation with the teachings of Islam and consequently they have done much disservice to the image of Islam. Islam

strongly advises Muslims to be tolerant to people of other religions. It is true that Islam forbids idol worship as it is a kind of manifestation of polytheism, but this has nothing to do with demolishing the statues of another religion.

**Mahmudul Hasan**  
Leicester, UK

## Plight of Paharika Express

Passengers on the Paharika express train which runs between Chittagong and Sylhet, experience number of problems. There are shortages of water. The doors of the compartments are broken as well as the doors of the toilets. There are intrusions by beggars and hawkers. There is also unspeakable congestion or jam in the compartments due to the issuance of standing tickets.

In the light of these problems, I request the authorities concerned to take positive and prompt steps to solve these problems and also to look into the possibility of private management as in other routes.

**Md Sadeque Hussin**  
North Patenga, Chittagong

## Foot and Mouth disease

## PHOTORIAL

Readers are invited to send in exclusive pictures, colour or black and white, of editorial value, with all relevant information including date, place and significance of subject matter. Pictures received will not be returned.

### Deplorable condition of roads



STAR PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

Garbage and dirty water are dispersed on the main road of Karwan Bazar in front of the fish market. This sends out a stench and pollutes the entire area. The unhygienic and uncivilised practice is a common sight on other roads and sidewalks in the city. People who dump garbage have no civic sense and the DCC does not discharge its responsibility to keep the city clean. City dwellers want a change!

I read with interest "Foot and Mouth Disease and our response" by Dr A R Choudhury (25 March). As a scientist working with the disease in Bangladesh, I would like to reply to the article as it seems that Dr Choudhury is not aware of the current situation of Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD) in the country.

FMD is in fact constantly present in Bangladesh and has been here for many years. It occurs all over the country and at all times of the year. There are often surges of the disease towards the end of the rainy season. Due to the widespread nature of FMD, control and eradication by slaughter is not feasible. In most cases the infection is allowed to run its course and most animals recover after some time. Vaccination is used to prevent the disease occurring in individual animals but coverage is not high enough to really reduce the losses at the national level. Control and eradication of FMD is a very difficult task in a country with open borders and high livestock densities. It would require millions of vaccinations for several years and strict inspection of livestock at border posts.

The strain of virus currently affecting Europe, Pan-Asian Type O, was first seen in 1990 in India and entered Bangladesh shortly afterwards. It is still regularly isolated

from Rajshahi and Dhaka districts. So there is no fear of a disaster from it as it has been here for over a decade and Bangladesh is habituated to its presence.

**Dr Bijon Kumar Sii**  
Principal Scientific Officer and Principal Investigator, FMD Animal Health Research Division, Savar

## BTV news

It seems that BTV likes to take people by surprise. Recently, the 10 pm English news has been shifted to 10.30 pm. Then on March 17, another surprise awaited us. People were waiting anxiously for news of the three foreigners who were abducted on February 16 and rescued on March 17. Such an important news item should have been headline news on BTV news but it was not. A news item of such grave importance failed to attract the attention of the BTV authorities.

The producers must give due importance to peoples' sentiments and air news and other programmes with these considerations, not to please other quarters as has become the present trend.

**Nur Jahan**  
Chittagong