

Higher price for power Greater effort to collect arrears and reduce system loss needed

WE have no objection in paying higher price for power if that is justified. But we have all the objection in the world to subsidise inefficiency, corruption and down right thievery. As our report of yesterday clearly points out, power price has been increased nine times from October 1996 to November 2000 but practically nothing has been done to stop what is euphemistically called "system loss" which accounts for between 30-40 per cent of the total output. In addition the authorities have shown no interest in recovering money from unpaid bills or to improve the overall management which is responsible for the mess in the first place. The PDB's (Power Development Board) arrears have reached a staggering Tk 5,500 crore and it is increasing by Tk 100 crore every year.

There is one group of consumers who pay their power bills. There is another group that does not through bribing the officials. Then there is a third group that takes unauthorised power connection with the connivance of officials or sometimes without their knowledge. It is only the first group that pays any bills and all the rest take a free ride. Therefore when the government decides to enhance power rates it actually is putting more burden on the group that has been paying all along. As we have said earlier, we have no objection to pay higher price for power if it helps the economy. But without any effort to collect the arrears such a move will only mean the good customers will bear greater burden while the law breakers will continue to steal power as before. If that be the case more and more people will move into the category of non-payers as that will be seen as the smarter thing to do.

Therefore the decision to raise the price of power will be far more acceptable if simultaneous effort is made to undertake a thorough reform of our energy distribution system which will drastically reduce system loss, stop illegal connection and collect the money that is owed to the government. Not only in power but in every branch of our utilities -- water, gas, sewerage etc -- we suffer huge system loss. No accountability seems to exist in any of these organisations. We seem to rest at the mercy of those work in them. We saw nothing was done in this area during Khaleda Zia's and Sheikh Hasina's terms in office. Now that the BNP is back in power we expect that it will show some signs of having learnt something from their earlier experience. So far we see very little of that.

International call rate charges slashed

Good news, but emphasis should be on fuller access to technology

THE Telecom Board's recent soul-searching in the wake of the discovery or exposure of the Internet-based international calls business has had a positive fallout. It ended up deciding to cut the charges by almost one third for the calls made abroad by conventional modes. The Internet based calls, illegal by the country's legal regimen, cost people much less and a number of outfits had been providing such facilities denying revenue to the government. One hopes that the new charges will draw people to make calls through the legal method and help the government earn some more money. What the impact will be on the actual practice is but a speculation. More importantly, the matter doesn't take into account the economics of technology.

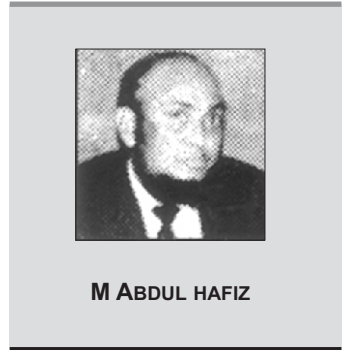
The government's decision has been primarily actuated by revenue earning considerations but the Internet phone calls were technological facility based. And they don't necessarily address the same issue.

On the positive side is the realization that the government has to be competitive if it's operating in the service sector. Till now the Telecom Board wasn't bothered about rates because it didn't have any accountability or transparency to weigh how it's affecting its operation. The Internet phone call users shook them up a bit and hence this decision to cut charges. But it also showed that the authorities weren't familiar with the nature or developments of the tech world. The government reacts rather than pro-acts. It wants technology to move at a bureaucratic pace, the opposite of what contemporary technology, especially net technology, is.

That means, it is fantastic to have charges reduced but consumers will seek the rates and convenience that the web world provided. If the reduced rates are higher than the Internet-based rates were, technology will soon bypass the restrictions and provide the service, legal or otherwise. So we shouldn't be surprised if a new netbased system of making calls emerge which the government will find out much later, as it did the last time.

The rate reduction is great news. It would also have been greater if the government had accepted the reality of the technology and moved into the Internet communication world to become part of it. That is the reality, that is the future. Restrictions won't work, embracing technology will.

The woes of a frontline state



M ABDULL HAFIZ

IT was also Pakistan's war. As 'front line' state, a staging post and supplier of vital intelligence information Pakistan substantially participated in the war also by providing logistic support and permission to overfly her airspace to US-led operation in Afghanistan. It dutifully complied with the US requirements --tightening noose around the Taliban, beating down the domestic dissent (Newsweek opinion poll found the sympathy of 87% of Pakistani lying with the Taliban), purging military of its religious hard-liners and keeping the sole Taliban envoy in Islamabad under leash. Yet when an easy victory in the war overwhelmed the 'international coalition' with a mix of surprise and glee and was celebrated by Afghanistan's neighbours including India, the mood in Islamabad was that of a gloom.

Because the Northern Alliance to whom Kabul fell is not only hostile to Pakistan it is strongly supported by India, the latter's archival. The heterogeneous minority ethnic groups were cobbled together by Russia to form the disparate alliance to fight back the Taliban and maintain a buffer between Afghanistan and her central Asian 'protectorates', Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, lest they would be infected by Taliban's militant Islam. Before the start of the current conflict the alliance was an entity only on paper in spite of massive patronisation it enjoyed also from Iran and India

who for their own reasons opposed the Taliban. What had however been obvious from the alliance's structure, composition and support bases was its anti-Pakistan thrust. Indeed, Pakistan also heavily invested in dislodging Rabbani government which is recognised by Northern Alliance to ensure a friendly government in Kabul for her strategic and growing commercial interest.

As Pakistan sided with the US-

askance if it could be possible without US' acquiescence.

Now with the collapse of Taliban, the arrival of British special forces and US Marines right within Afghanistan and offer of willing support from all quarters US' dependence on Pakistan is considerably reduced. The circumstances under which the US desperately sought Pakistan's support are rapidly changing in US' favour. As it is, the US has extended its tentacles to

shouldering Pakistan as evident from Mr. Bush's rejection of General Musharraf's expectation that the American actions in Afghanistan would be 'brief and targeted'. Colin Powell announced even before the fall of Kabul that Islamabad would not be allowed a veto in the formation of a future government in Afghanistan. Now Pakistan is almost no factor in Afghan issue and her desperation can be seen from her attempt now to come to an under-

Hindukush where a Great Game was enacted between the two imperial powers during the most part of nineteenth century. The game was over with the signing of Anglo-Russian agreement in 1907 giving a neutral status to Afghanistan. That equation was scuttled by Sardar Daud's Moscow-backed overthrow of monarchy in 1973. As a result the Great Game was again revived with the US replacing Britain as one of the players, and Russia

have carried out all manner of shady deals with the Taliban. Before she failed to secure the apprehension of Laden in the wake of bombing of her embassies in East Africa the US came close to recognising the Taliban in return of favours to an American oil company, Unocal, then in fierce competition with other foreign firms over a proposed pipeline from Turkmenistan to Pakistan. Why not? After all, she in persuasion of her interests comfortably put up with Saudis and Arab Sheikhs who are not much different from Taliban in their social and cultural norms. Even now there is report of a deal between King Zahir Shah (only if his becoming a titular head of an interim government in Afghanistan is a possibility) and the US about the grant of bases in Badkshshan for her China-watching. Never before had the Americans attempted to penetrate so deep into central Asia!

At the same time, Russian President lost no time in seizing the opportunity presented by Taliban's debacle. He rushed from Shanghai APEC conference to Dushanbe to meet both Tajik president and Borhanuddin Rabbani to finalize Russian game plan in the region. His asset is the loyalty of Northern Alliance. In the meantime India is working in tandem towards achieving the same objective. These are two countries first to dispatch their envoy to Kabul.

This ensuing clash of interest is an inevitability which is again likely to bring countries like Pakistan into focus. Moreover the Taliban who were more of a movement and not a nation have not ceased to exist. Who can guarantee that they will not come out of their hibernation in the mountains with greater fury and ingenuity? Seen in that light the requirements of the US and Pakistan for each other in some shape and at a future time cannot summarily be ruled out.

Brig (Retd) Hafiz is former DG of BISS.

PERSPECTIVES

Ensuing clash of interest is an inevitability which is again likely to bring countries like Pakistan into focus. Moreover the Taliban who were more of a movement and not a nation have not ceased to exist. Who can guarantee that they will not come out of their hibernation in the mountains with greater fury and ingenuity? Seen in that light the requirements of the US and Pakistan for each other in some shape and at a future time cannot summarily be ruled out.

led coalition in its war against the Taliban, right from the beginning Pakistan's anxiety centered round a post-Taliban set-up in Kabul in which she almost openly demanded a central role. It was, in fact, one of the premises -- at least for public consumption -- on which Musharraf extended cooperation to the Americans who also appeared to have expansively supported the Pakistani viewpoints on a future dispensation in Afghanistan. The coalition leaders visiting Pakistan in the wake of attack on Afghanistan endorsed Pakistani demand of Northern Alliance not entering Kabul before a multiethnic broad-based government is agreed upon. Only days before the fall of Kabul in a joint press briefing with President Bush after talks at New York's Waldorf Astoria, President Musharraf sounded upbeat about the fact that the US President agreed with Pakistan's position that the Northern Alliance should not be inside Kabul. In spite of these endorsements and assurances how Kabul fell in the hand of Northern Alliance remains ambivalent. Many Pakistanis look

Uzbekistan and Tajikistan whose patron Russia allowed them to grant bases for US-led operation. Moreover, Northern Alliance has inserted itself in a position from where it will seek to dictate the terms and formation of an interim government. In the meantime Pakistan's idea of including 'moderate Taliban' on behalf of majority Pushtuns in a future government is still-born and brushed aside by Northern Alliance. Obviously the prevailing feeling in Islamabad is that the US has let it down at least on this particular issue of next government in Afghanistan.

In a future dispensation it is not just the question of only ensuring ethnic representation, the bigger issue will be to accommodate the interests of big powers, particularly the US and Russia in this strategic corridor of Asia. In this milieu Pakistan's predicament will be compounded as it can already be deduced from the attitude of both the US and Russia that they would no more allow Pakistan to establish its sphere of influence in Afghanistan.

The US has been publicly cold-

standing with Northern Alliance.

It is a lost debate whether Pakistan deftly played her cards before 13 November, the day Kabul fell, when she had some levers with her crucial support or was it at all worth supporting the coalition. The question is irrelevant as Pakistan was not given much of a choice by the world's sole superpower in choosing between falling in like behind a hectoring Washington in the worst of its mood or perish as a pariah state. However the war in Afghanistan has not been without its windfall for Pakistan. During the Gulf War Hosni Mubarak got \$9bn of Egypt's debt written off in exchange of his support for international coalition against Iraq. The aid package so far received by Pakistan amounts to a little over \$ 1bn for her cooperation in axing the Taliban. Washington could not have expected a cheaper bargain! After the Taliban have been ditched in Afghanistan it may now be the turn of Pakistan to be dumped.

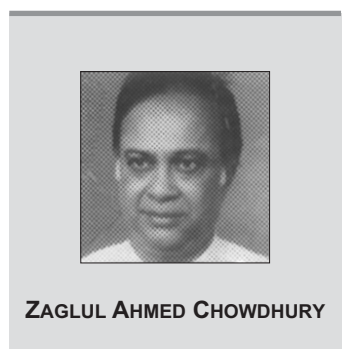
Nevertheless, nothing can be said conclusively in this regard in a highly fluid situation that prevails in the region and particularly in

remaining a constant factor for the control of Eurasia's heartland.

As a part of the game during the eighties the Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) and CIA funded and recruited almost one hundred thousand fanatic Mujahideen from 40 Muslim countries to fight on behalf of the US which however abandoned them in 1989 after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. While the conglomerate of ethnic minorities in the country's north held sway over Afghanistan till 1996 the others, mainly the country's Pushtun majority, through a strange metamorphosis in the mosques and madrasas of adjoining Pakistan, turned into Taliban. The intrepid bands of these warriors of faith swept through the country bringing 90 per cent of it under their control in two years and created their own myth of invincibility. The US was not particularly bothered about the phenomenon except for its anti-'infidel' orientation at a later stage.

Notwithstanding their Jihadi image perhaps under the influence of Arab Mujahideens led by Osama bin Laden, the US was learnt to

Will emergency in Nepal help contain Maoist insurgency ?



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

AS expected, the armed forces of Nepal have gone all out to contain the "Maoist" insurgency following declaration of a state of emergency in the Himalayan kingdom. The emergency in the country, whose main problem is now the threats posed by the radical leftists, has not come as a total surprise. However, the timing of this took many unawares as a ceasefire was in force between the government and the ultras since July, this year, and hopes had arisen on the prospects of a negotiated solution of the vexed insurgency. But rather unexpectedly the radicals known as "Maoists" ended the four-month long ceasefire by a series of attacks on the government troops and police and killing many. So much so has been the sudden intensity in their activities that prime minister Sher Bahadur Dubea met king Gyanendra and discussed the need for urgent measures to contain the situation which has been compounded by daring attacks on the army barracks as well. Undoubtedly, the Maoists took the government by surprise by hardening their stance.

After a relative lull in the last few months, the ultra leftists in Nepal are once again in the news. It is not only for attacks on the security forces but

also through other programmes that they are attracting attention. The imposition of the emergency by the King on Monday has come into immediate effect and a new situation is prevailing in the country hit by the extreme left insurgency since 1996. The Maoists who are waging a war for dismantling the monarchy and establishing a "Republic" have announced formation of a 37-member Central United Revolutionary People's Council as their central

attached importance to the need for a solution of the problem through dialogue instead of use of force and, consequently, an improved climate developed for talks. However, this evaporated much earlier than many had expected. Maoist party chairman Puspha Kamal Dahal better known as "Parachand" had warned that the ceasefire could become "meaningless" unless the talks made some headway.

However, he had stopped short

of saying that the truce had been withdrawn. Now it appears amply clear that the rebels are paying no heed to any ceasefire as they have not only resumed the insurgency in full swing but also stepped it up with all-out determination. Nearly 300 persons including policemen, soldiers and the rebels have been killed in the sudden upsurge of the radicals in last few days. The attackers indulged in such daring onslaughts like destroying equipment in airports outside capital and attacking army cantonments. The Maoists, in addition to taking on the security forces, are also targeting other things to create fresh terror. They blew up one helicopter and damaged two others belonging to a private company at Surkhet airport, some 460 km southwest of Kathmandu.

Evidently, the tourism industry of the picturesque country is also the victim of the insurgency. Apparently, they want to cripple the government in all fronts and force it to accept

the main demands of the insurgents and in the process the talks were proving infructuous. It is in this stage the warning from "Parachand" came and subsequently the attacks on the troops and the police began to occur.

Indeed, it is an unfortunate setback to the possibility of a settlement of the problem through talks despite the fact that the road to a successful completion of the negotiations was rocky and full of complexities. The Maoists might have thought that this is the right moment to press ahead with their demand since Nepal is still reeling under the gruesome massacre of ten members of the royal family including King Birendra and crown prince Dipendra in June this year. The crown prince is said to have killed the royal family members in a fit of anger and then turned the gun on himself. The sequence of events remains shrouded in controversy and the official version of the incidents is often taken with a large

degree of scepticism at home and abroad. Then in July chief minister Koirala had to resign and the ruling Nepali Congress was in doldrums on the issue of choosing a new leader. When the outgoing prime minister supported his nephew but many others opted for Dubea who finally won the race. The ruling party is believed to be not much in good shape and the main opposition leader Communist party's Madhav Kumar Nepal is sparing no opportu-

ty. Nepal has also requested the Indian government to remain alert against infiltration of the ultras into the territories of West Bengal like Shioguri following the army offensive against the radicals.

The Nepalese Consul General in Kolkata met chief minister of the West Bengal state in this regard. This underlines the seriousness of the matter. Because of the emergency and military offensive, the Maoists are likely to be on the defensive but not in disarray or on total run as they were definitely bracing for such government measures as a sequel of their own activities. The coming days in Nepal may witness more bloody encounters between the two sides amidst fears that the radical leftists' insurgency in the country could be a long-drawn affair with little scope for a resolution in sight either through armed means or discussions unless the situation takes unexpected turns. The troops have killed nearly 100 ultras after the imposition of the emergency. On the other hand, the radicals launched daring attacks in the heart of the capital when they bombed the "Coca Cola" unit, giving signals that they too would not let it go as one sided affair. Kathmandu government has sought help from Indian government for aerial bombing of the hideouts of the ultras and it is possible that New Delhi may provide with helicopters for the purpose. All these underlines the seriousness of the situation. Evidently, the radicals may be on the run to an extent but are unlikely to be wiped out easily. It remains to be seen if the government succeeds in containing the insurgency, which, indeed, is a difficult task.

Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury is Senior Special Correspondent of BSS.

MATTERS AROUND US

Because of the emergency and military offensive, the Maoists are likely to be on the defensive but not in disarray or on total run as they were definitely bracing for such government measures as a sequel of their own activities. The coming days in Nepal may witness more bloody encounters between the two sides...

OPINION

Responsibilities of the present government

ARJUMAND WOHRHA

BANGLADESH very badly needs good leadership. For long this country has experienced varieties of disaster, starting from natural to man made ones. The leaders in this country could not bring any positive changes in the life of the common people. The leaders always cared for their own pockets and as a result the common people always suffered. In each and every sector there is corruption and the whole system is affected as such. However, there are lots of things that the present government should endeavour for. A few are listed below:

The people in our country are always suppressed by the ones who have (illegal) weapons in their

hands. Security for all must prevail. People should feel that they are the citizens of an independent country and that freedom exists here. Women should be able to walk around with full sense of security and no muggers should be spared.

Lawbreakers should be given exemplary punishment so that criminal offences don't recur. The government should not compromise with law and order. The key to peace and order in this country is nothing but maintaining law and order. Smuggling in and sale of arms must be checked and those already with the criminals seized.

An empty mind is a devil's workshop. Many of the youths in our country don't have work, as a result they indulge in illicit and illegal activities. The government should

create jobs for the unemployed. And we should not look down upon any sort of work, rather work to be honest and happy.

Smuggled drugs and locally produced alcohol are sold almost openly in this country. Many of the youths are already drug addicts and their lives are thus destroyed. This must be stopped, and there should be restrictions on sale these items.

Corruption in the government offices must be contained, and the common people should feel no difficulty in getting their jobs done by the government servants.

Dhaka has turned into the city of garbage. The government should try to make Dhaka a clean city. For that good disposal system for garbage should be taken up, where the garbage can be recycled and used

at least as manure for the crop fields.

All the broken roads should be repaired, rather not the new roads remade. It is a very common practice here, that the roads which are broken are hardly taken care of, but the roads which are already good are remade for no good reason. Money is not used for the right purpose.

The government should try to eliminate the traffic jam problem. It is a matter of huge discomfort for the common people. Due to traffic jam, so much time is killed and people cannot make full utilisation of it. Constructing flyovers or reconstructing the roads or whatever should be immediately started to ease the traffic jam problem in the city. The roads for the rickshaws

should be separate or there should be separate lanes on the same road to be strictly followed. Slow moving rickshaws cause the engine driven transports to move slowly and the use of the automobiles is not exploited to their full potentials.

Dhaka has become a suffocated city, where breathing is difficult on the roads. The two-stroke three-wheeler should be totally eliminated from the roads for the extreme air pollution it causes, or some different adoptive measures should be taken to eliminate the pollution it generates. A fund had been donated by the Canadian Government few years back to filter the poisonous gas that it belches out, but God knows where the fund went into finally. But problems of pollution should be resolved immediately

without any delay.

The government should eliminate (in deeds, not words) the use of polythene bags from the country. It is highly hazardous to health and creates severe environmental pollution. The government should give the polythene bag manufacturers enough incentives to shift their business from polythene bags to say, paper bags. Necessary subsidies to the polythene bag manufacturers should be given so that it is eliminated from the country forever. Retailers and wholesalers should submit their stock to the government and take paper/jute bags instead.

The slum dwellers should be given attention too. They live in very unhygienic condition and too much distress. Their sufferings should be alleviated also with a view to com-

bating crime.

Every activity in Bangladesh is centralized in Dhaka. This should not be the practice. The government should decentralize its works, and then we can expect people not to migrate to the capital city. Since industrialization is the key to development of Bangladesh, the government should set up industries in remote areas where people will find job and need not venture to travel to the capital city for livelihood

And, among other things, to meet the need of nutrition of the nation fruit bearing trees should be planted at every place, so that people can get more fresh fruits at low cost. The soil of our country is very fertile. If we can grow fruit bearing trees everywhere in the country then we can have enough for the people here,

and also surplus for export. In many other countries, for instance, in England we can see apple trees in every street. Only a healthy mind can reside in a healthy body. With hunger in the stomach we cannot expect people to act normal, and study and work and maintain sanity.

Apart from these few above initiatives that need to be taken there are million more things that deserve consideration. Positive changes need to be initiated and brought to practice today. The leaders in our country have wasted enough time; we cannot afford to let them waste more time. Immediate actions should be taken to resolve problems.