

# The gas utilization committee heading for a new debate

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THE National Gas Utilization Committee Chairman Azimuddin Ahmed reportedly (DS13 May 2002) has drawn his conclusion to recommend limited pipeline export of gas commensurate with his earlier contemptuous advocacy, "Gas export is no more an option, it's a compulsion". Supporting this contentious views, one loyal member, who shuttles between the two committees, went a step further to say", the total payment to the IOCs in the next 10 (ten) years will be five billion U.S dollar including payment to the Independent Power Producers (IPPs)." I have no idea who is responsible for such naiveté ; it is quite possible that this is their understanding. Some one should tell them a simple and even stark truth. And that truth is whatever is their stake, "gas cannot be exported to India at the pressure of United States." In any confrontation between the people and the pressure groups, the people are likely to win. Such unwarranted extension of the terms of reference of the committee simply exposes their inner motives. Besides the Production Sharing- Contract (PSC) for Block-12 (where Bibiyana gas field has been discovered), signed in 1995, has no provision for export of gas through pipeline. Instead, Article 14.6 of the PSC stipulates, "Contractor shall have the right to export natural gas in the form of LNG." Article 14.8 states, " Contractor has the options to sell contractor's share of natural gas in the domestic market to a third party, subject to Petrobangla's right of first refusal. "Article 14.9 further adds, "The parties agree to dedicate their proportionate share of natural gas and deliverability to domestic marketing opportunities, for which Petrobangla and contractor may enter into separate sales and purchase contracts with the buyer."As a conscientious citizen, I am simply at a loss to understand how the gas utilization committee is considering gas export prior to receiving the report of the gas reserve committee?

The more impelling issue, however, is the drift and distortions being created by some members in arriving at a consensus on the principles and guiding frameworks of this desk work, which can not be considered an original gas assessment. Apparently, both the committees are suffering from conjunctivitis syndrome. It took over 135 days to even consider the published USGS/Petrobangla Energy Assessment Report presented in February 2001. It is also a pity that some professionals' committee, as a last resort, helplessly falls back on the USGS study and considers the statistical mean of 32.5 trillion cubic feet (Tcf) as gas reserve! . This can at best be taken as a mere guideline for the country's gas potential to attract future exploration effort. In any case, even the USGS experts while making their presentation in February, 2001 did not claim the statistical numbers as reserves, rather they categorically mentioned them as resource (which is considered yet unknown). More importantly, the study focused on the country's undiscovered resource potential. To be, more specific, the objective of the USGS/Petrobangla study was to determine the undiscovered gas resources that might be found and recovered using advance technologies over a period of 30 years. The study provides a base upon which the nation's exploration activities may expand in future. Consequently, considering these compromised solutions proposed in the most recent Gas Assessment Committee meetings may not stand the test of time. There is also a fear that the energy sector institutional framework being governed by a small number of essentially anonymous men of power might usher in more chaotic situation with their arbitrary and ad hoc decisions. On a time-power scale of history, gas's reign in Bangladesh is relatively short and the proven reserves assessed by some internationally reputed professional organizations (during 1974-2001) is inadequate compared to the country's demand. Yet, some overenthusiastic mem-

bers of the Committees are very keen to project an inflated gas reserve figure and corresponding deflated domestic demand scenario perhaps to satisfy the Energy Ministry mughals, the international oil company (Unocal) and Tata Energy Research Institute (of India). Nevertheless, some motivated members are grappling with the wrong signals about proven gas reserves established earlier and are looking at these figures with an eye of suspicion. Thus, the committees are heading towards a new debate and new confusion.

The redeeming feature is that the men of gas in Bangladesh (not new converts) have perceptive insights into the involved nature and future of a modern social order. They are operating on a frontier of scientific and technological knowledge. Unfortunately, these knowledgeable professionals engaged in Petrobangla are not consulted -- rather they have become back benchers. On the other hand, the IOCs' motivation in Bangladesh has remained entangled with self-interest only. They do not appear to appreciate any check and balance in the system or in the market place -- ensured against any concentration of economic power that might threaten the public good. Therefore, to preclude arbitrary or capricious decisions in the gas sector proper political power needs to be exercised with caution and through the right institution. Government should exist for people rather than for men of government. In between there is however a catch. The cumulative ability of the people to understand and come to terms with the policy dictates of the government is heavily influenced by the bureaucratic tangles.

To most of the people in Bangladesh, it has now become clear that they are not getting all the goods, services and rights they deserve. They perceive a sizable gap between society of scarcity and a society of abundance, between what is and what might be. And the

effort to close this gap, cheap and plentiful high production energy is necessary. Currently, we consume about a nine million tons oil equivalent of indigenous natural gas (and save almost Taka 8500 crore annually), while for only 3.3 million tons of imported oil the country spends Tk. 3100 crore per year. Together with an insignificant amount of water power at a rate equivalent to burning slightly over 84 kilogram of oil equivalent (kgoe), out of the total consumption of energy (240 kgoe), the country's total energy use is almost equal to two days consumption in the United States. Yet, some of our political bosses lose their sense of proportion to meet their own personal agenda and appear to conduct their actions to private interests and foreign government's interests.

Nevertheless, a facade of

Incidentally, Petrobangla purchased gas from Sangu gas field in 2000-2001 @ US\$ 2.9 per MCF). There are indications, on the other hand, that the chairman of the Gas Utilization Committee knows what he wants to do over the next week or so prior to submission of the report. He has begun by indicating that the draft made specific recommendations for export giving first preference to Pipeline export to India (The Financial Express, 13 May, 2002). Electricity export, according to him, is viable, but depends on the desire of India. I am quite surprised that the former bureaucrat- chairman Azimuddin Ahmed does not know that India is very keen to set up in Bangladesh about 1000 MW power plant in two stages (a proposal lying with the Power Development Board since

Petroleum Development / Hydrocarbon Unit. Both these reports are not specifically Reserve Estimates. Yet, the pseudo- professionals and vested interest groups try to use them as pressure tactics and public relations through free-loadings by the IOCs operating in Bangladesh. The HCU/NPD study also tried to provide updated knowledge of the reserve of the existing gas fields and also about the undiscovered resource potential of the country through computer simulation and not through any field investigation. They however, carried out a Reserve Estimate by arbitrarily enhancing the average recovery factor from 60 per cent to 70 percent without substantiating any scientific basis for upgradation.

Thus, we are being harassed by vested interests almost six days a week. The private enterprise system is threatened by the hostility and suspicion which has been generated against business. Consumer groups tell the government that they are being held hostage by business. Politicians capitalize on this to try to restore some gloss to their tarnished images by promising to protect the consumers. Some so-called investigative news media flits back and forth, giving us bits and pieces of sensationalism and shorthand about everything. We are emotionally bruised and disillusioned by crime, violence, the deterioration of our moral fabric, and rise in price of everything. We have almost been pressured to believing that there is something fundamentally wrong with us. There isn't. We are simply suffering from a state of mental confusion created by the politico-bureaucratic tangle. We need to take a moratorium on political over-reaction until we catch our breath and all the facts are in, so that we can understand what is happening and what our options are. The gas export issue, in my opinion, has not yet fully touched a common man because he has not derived any benefit out of domestic gas use (almost 96 per cent kitchens in the country cannot avail of the advantage of environment friendly natural gas).

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## Lest we forget

# Soldiers never die: A tribute to William Ouderland, Bir Pratik

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WE know things with varying degrees of certainty: sometimes we know much -- if not a little too much - and sometimes nothing at all. And to authenticate knowledge, especially when it is related to emotional or personal events, the degree of certainty seems to flicker only to the bafflement of the historians. That has been the case with the history of our liberation war.

It took more than two decades for us to recognise the contribution of Taraman Bibi or William Ouderland. The gallantry awards given to these two were memorable exceptions for a country that somehow fails to credit those who deserve. Last year, at the height of the Padua episode, the then opposition party promised to honour the slain BDR men with the highest gallantry awards of Bir Pratik. Luckily, common sense prevailed, and the dignity of the award remained intact. The same, however, cannot be said about the BDR chief who led the attack from and was removed from his post prior to a bilateral meeting with India.

In fact, we are living in a world where common sense is becoming very uncommon. And so is uncommon man. Mr. William Ouderland was an uncommon man. He died last year on May 18 at the age of 84. He was awarded with the country's second highest gallantry award -- Bir Pratik -- in 1993. Because of his ailing health, he could not come to Bangladesh and receive the award in person. He was presented with the award by Major General Mannaf, the then High Commissioner for Bangladesh in Australia on July 26, 1993. After receiving the award, Mr. Ouderland told The Canberra Times, "There is only one award in Bangladesh higher than the Bir Pratik and I am pleased not to be receiving it, given that it is only awarded posthumously." On his first death anniversary this quip of his reminds us of a man who loved life. He was a man who wanted to make his surroundings beautiful. This perhaps is a conjecture on my part. However, while watching the video of the funeral service, my apprehension has been proved to be true. Ouderland's daughter and his friends highlighted this rare quality in the brief yet delightfully decent

funeral service. It was nice to see the coffin wrapped in the red and green flag of Bangladesh and the expatriate Bangladeshis singing the national anthem. The high commissioner of Bangladesh briefed the meeting of Mr. Ouderland's valiant, albeit risky, role in the liberation war of Bangladesh.

William Ouderland was born in December 1917 in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. He joined the Dutch national service in 1936 and was a member of the signal corps when



Germany attacked the Netherlands. He was taken a prisoner but managed to escape from the POW camp and got involved in a guerilla war. After the war, he left army and joined private service. In 1964, he moved to Australia. He was posted to Bangladesh during the eventful days of the late 60's and the 70's. He retired to Perth in 1978 after leaving Bangladesh. He always considered himself as an 'honorary citizen' of Bangladesh and thought of it as his second home.

Technology has made the past present and the present a food for the future. Looking at the flower-covered coffin in the video of the memorial service, I wondered why Ouderland risked his life to help the freedom loving people of Bangladesh. His official assignments as the managing director of the Bata Shoe factory hardly encouraged getting involved in local politics. Ouderland did; he was an

exceptional man. As a Second World War veteran, he knew the difference between the suppressor and the suppressed. In 1971 when the Pakistani junta wrought havoc on the Bangladeshi people, he readily decided to inform the international community about the massacre. He took photographs of the carnage and gave it to the international press. In addition, he imparted his knowledge on guerilla warfare and trained the freedom fighters at Sector 1 and 2 of Tongi. His clandestine operation went unsuspected because of the high post he held. He even took advantage of his access to the Pakistani administration and the military officials to elicit information and then pass it onto the freedom fighters. It was probably a deja vu for Mr. Ouderland who used the same tactics in his dealing with the Germans while fighting for the Dutch.

The citation of the Bir Pratik award recognised the moral and physical support of Mr. Ouderland that he extended "without regard to his personal safety and above and beyond the call of his duty." This, from what we have learnt, is a true assessment of Mr. Ouderland Bir Pratik. We came to know of Mr. Ouderland because of some relentless efforts of some historians and researchers. One hopes that they will be able to authenticate personal story and find niche in history for those who deserve.

Mr. Ouderland was an exceptional man. We remember him on his first anniversary. We remember him as a friend of our country. We remember him as a champion of humanity. And while remembering him, we become handcuffed to history. Because, the war of liberation was an extraordinary event which made many ordinary people to rise to the occasion and become extraordinary. Recognising Mr. Ouderland's contribution has been a positive step towards setting things right. Our only hope would be that serious researchers and students of history would continue their efforts in finding people like Taraman and Ouderland. Only they can authenticate history, not those who think of history as story to lure votes. Is that a tall request on a day like this when an old soldier died but not before leaving a legacy?