

Unplanned interruptions in power supply is horrendous

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YEAR after year the summer in Bangladesh faces the same old electricity crisis. The state owned utilities offer clarifications and pledges to improve the situation within three to six months. By then winter comes and the matter dies down because of low demand. The vicious circle in BPDB and DESA do not want to curb theft and pilferage, let alone conduct reforms. Every year, the consumers who pay bills regularly say that it has reached an intolerable level. But the life goes on. The government changes. The minister changes. The chairman changes. But the bureaucracy remains as strong as ever. It follows the golden proverb: the king is dead, long live the king.

In fact, the fish (corruption) is big but the net (policies and their implementation) is very small. The blame is on the poorly maintained generation with the public sector. Indeed, the country's power generation plants have been unable to meet system demand. There was a genuine effort to improve the situation in the late 1990s but it has now been reversed! Consequently, there is no safety net either. Whereas the oil and gas or fuel wood crisis are fundamental and inherent in that they stem from natural limits on resource availability, the electricity crisis is more a matter of planning and management.

des is situated in Dhaka, said one insider in the power system, sarcastically. Though unethical, the DESA used to consume almost 52 per cent of the total electricity generated in the country, which has now reduced to around 40 per cent due to transfer of some of their franchise areas to the Rural Electrification Board (REB). Nevertheless, the importance of Dhaka has not reduced

found that BPDB, created in 1972 as a public sector enterprise, became unwieldy. Apparently, the World Bank came to the rescue. Before the situation became gangrenous, the government decided to unbundle a large part of the distribution component relating to greater Dhaka and give it to the newly created authority DESA as it was named as per prescription of the Bank. The amputa-

tion was done so hurriedly that all the vices of BPDB went along smoothly to DESA. BPDB survived through the operation but continued limping. Dhaka being Dhaka, the problems remained. In course of time political patronage to DESA continued when DESA's franking machine started to punch on wrong envelopes, the government became worried again. By then over half of the total electricity distribution in the country came within the grip of DESA. Frantic attempts were made in the 1990s to curb the monster, but to no success. This time the "wise" World Bank and the Asian Development Bank gave a new prescription to the power system in 1994 under the title "Power System Reforms in Bangladesh". The agenda was to unbundle and restructure the power sector in general and further unbundle BPDB and DESA and religiously protect the REB model (with system loss between 16 to 18 per cent, only in distribution activities) that continuously satisfies the desire of the development partners.

Despite various attempts in the past decades it has proved beyond doubt that vested interests counterattack the authority that acts as road block. The reason is simple. The stakes are large: pilferage of even 15 per cent of electricity produced diverts almost equivalent to US\$ 80 million into private hands, which resist any changes or reforms that would reduce their illegal gains

because we all live in this capital city. There is no sense of urgency for improving the system. Consequently, there is mounting disbelief about the authority's approach to reduce the power shortage. Nobody knows whom to believe. Credibility, in regard to the power industry in general and government in particular, is in short supply as electricity is.

This did not happen in one day. In late 1980s the power system loss became unbearable, over 40 per cent nationwide. The government

must be operated and managed by separate corporate entities after proper unbundling. The sole focus of BPDB should be electricity generation under a holding corporation concept (similar to Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation created in 1977) and corporatisation of distribution components under Companies Law. These will not only make a major departure in the BPDB's functioning, it will also become a significant achievement in light of the Government's Vision 2000.

The demand for electricity in Bangladesh is expected to grow at about 8 to 10 per cent per annum over the next one decade. The response to this increasing demand must include efforts to improve end-use efficiency and, more importantly, reduction of wastage and system loss. Otherwise, it would become almost impossible to meet the rising demand. Energy efficiency efforts are needed not just to ensure that the gap between demand and supply is minimised but also because of high cost of supplying energy.

As stated earlier, Bangladesh has been experiencing power shortages since the 1980s mainly because of generation capacity shortages and the inability of gas based plants to compensate adequately during the mid 1990s. The extent of such power shortages has been increasing in recent years because of the growing demand for electricity, coupled with inadequate additions in peak load plants. Except for the period 1997-2002, the new generation capacity as expected under the long-term generation expansion plan (the PSMP, 1995) of the public sector has not been implemented according to the schedule.

The resulting power shortages have caused planned and unplanned interruptions that have seriously affected the quality of power supply at the consumer end. The main impact of the power interruptions, both planned and unplanned, is on the country's economy resulting from the loss of output in the industrial sector. The lost output is as high as one (1) per cent of the GDP (GOB's Policy Statement on Power Sector Reforms, January 2000 page 1). At the individual industry level, these interruptions can lead to serious financial loss to the installations that do not have the benefit of standby generation facilities (popularly known as captive generation) in Bangladesh. In addition, installations where production costs become non-competitive because of self generation conditions could face closure of their business. Many small and medium scale industries fall into this category. The total captive generation in the country is reportedly around 600 megawatt, attached to individual industries connected to the national power grid. However, such stand by generating facilities remain idle when either grid power is available or during the off-peak hours.

Sudden interruptions of power supply under unplanned outages cause a significant level of momentary loss, which dominates the cost figures associated with such outages. This is mainly because the consumers are not prepared for such interruptions, particularly the industrial sector, which depends heavily on the continuity of electricity supply. While the consumers can adjust their usage patterns to minimise the adverse impacts of planned outages, they cannot do so in the cases of unplanned outages. In fact, unplanned outages are always costlier to the consumers than planned outages. Moreover, advanced industries such as semiconductor industry require not only continuous electricity supply but also high quality supply where the voltage and frequency of supply are properly maintained. Although reliable estimates are not available, but various manufactures association indicate that production could be about 10 per cent higher if power supply were available. Losses due to planned and unplanned supply outages has been estimated by a World Bank Study Team as US\$ 1 billion in one decade in Bangladesh (Energy Strategy Note: The World Bank, 1998).

and possession. All men are not chauvinistic pigs but many men in this subcontinent cannot fathom, comprehend or contemplate the anguish and depth of despair that women routinely endure. Men may only empathize superficially and condescendingly but will never quite feel the pain, indignity, outrage and denigration.

In order to safeguard the marriageable women from the curse of widespread and insatiable demand for dowry, a zero tolerance policy must necessarily be initiated. One

The scourge of dowry

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RECENT press reports in local and international media have aptly highlighted the protest of an Indian bride, Nisha Sharma, a 21-year old Computer Engineering student, against dowry. The capricious, inflated and instant dowry demand right at the wedding ceremony by the avaricious family of the bridegroom was quite abhorrent. The originally haggled, negotiated and settled offering of two TV sets, two home theatres, two refrigerators, one item each for the groom and the brother, the family patriarch, added to the apogee prize and luxury gift of a new car apparently was not enough for the groom's obscenely materialistic clan. The groom's family made an unexpected, bonus claim. They demanded \$25,000/- in local currency as ready cash payment. This sudden and exorbitant demand caused a raucous verbal imbroglio followed by a physical brawl between the two antagonistic sides.

The bride, customarily bashful and quiet and acting prim and proper, could not take it any longer. She called the police on her cell phone, had the bridegroom and some of his overly aggressive and excessively greedy relatives arrested and thrown in the slammer. She became an instantaneous celebrity.

Andy Warhol, the pop American artist and icon, famous for creating iconoclastic images of President Kennedy, Marilyn Monroe and Campbell soup can, once commented that everyone in the world eventually will enjoy fifteen minutes of fame. You may attribute the media attention, feminist hullabaloo, adoration of the hoi polloi as the Warhol 15-minute fame syndrome for Nisha. But the fact is dowry, oppression and torture and even insidious, brutal murder for dowry has become an all too familiar feature in this country and neighboring India.

Women suffer from inhuman repression for dowry, iniquitous acid barns inflicted on them by unsuccessful suitors or as easy, perverse and atrocious act to get even in family conflicts. An alarming number of them are subjected to gang rapes, often followed by murder. In the past, we related these repugnant evil acts against women taking place in New Delhi or elsewhere in India. These have crept into our society with misogynist ferocity and wrath. In the absence of political will, inaction by law enforcing agencies, general blasé attitude of the male dominated society and, worse yet, indifference and negligence by the authorities, these heinous crimes against women does not seem to be abating anytime soon unless stern and strident, swift and exemplary punishment is meted out to the perpetrators.

There are stern laws to deal with the ugly and obscene offense of seeking and snatching dowry. But these are seldom implemented. Even if someone is rarely prosecuted, it is so uncommon and the whole process is so convoluted and

prolonged that the deterrent aspect is totally lost. As far as law enforcement is concerned, with all the murder and mayhem, other high profile crimes, dowry is ascribed a low priority and is in the lower end of

ation and degradation, dishonor and insult associated with the phenomenon of dowry. It says in the shrill and piercing tone that women are mere objects of disdain and derision, items of exploitation, expropriation

Let the women, who, in most instances, are a lot more compassionate, understanding, empathetic and caring about the trials, tribulations, travails and troubles of fellow women take care of the situation. Let them teach the male perpetrators a lesson they will never forget.

the totem pole of justice, prevention and redress.

The scourge of dowry, as a social crime against humanity, or more appropriately, against 'womenity', is merely one notch below that of acid burning. Women are shown no respect and given no respite. They become a means of get-rich-quick scheme of the groom and his family. It is probable and quite possible that in this society, a veritable brawny bastion of male domination, men probably do not quite get it. Most males do not understand the humil-

and possession. All men are not chauvinistic pigs but many men in this subcontinent cannot fathom, comprehend or contemplate the anguish and depth of despair that women routinely endure. Men may only empathize superficially and condescendingly but will never quite feel the pain, indignity, outrage and denigration.

In order to safeguard the marriageable women from the curse of widespread and insatiable demand for dowry, a zero tolerance policy must necessarily be initiated. One



'I SAY LET'S USE MINE--WE'RE ALREADY HALFWAY THERE!'

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