

Human development a touch better

Economic reform fails to contain unemployment

THE country's human development standing has improved slightly as it has been ranked fifth among the seven South Asian countries in a report released by a Pakistan-based regional research organisation. The UN human development report placed Bangladesh in the seventh position two years ago.

It is good news that we have done better than Pakistan and Nepal in areas like average life expectancy, female literacy and fertility rate. Obviously, these areas are going to have an impact on national development. But adult education remains a sore point as Bangladesh lags behind all other countries in this region.

The biggest challenge before the nation, however, is to reduce unemployment which has gone up despite the economic reforms carried out over the last decade. Joblessness increased by 3.3 percent a year throughout the nineties and has had a crippling effect on the economy. The economists have gone to the extent of saying that economic reforms even produced negative results in some cases as the country had to go by the dictates of the donor agencies. Maladies like reforms in wrong order, gender inequity, and absence of effective programmes for generating income have also been identified.

The large unskilled labour force has been marked as the main under-achiever. The report has found that 8.4 percent of the male labour force remains under-employed while this is true about a staggering 71.2 percent of the female workers. The economists have pointed out that a large chunk of the workforce is engaged in low productivity employment. They have also stressed the need for much greater commitment to employment generation. The income gap between the rich and the poor has widened further, which is a symptom of lopsided growth.

However, the success achieved by our farmers, who have doubled rice production in the last two decades, is a noteworthy development.

Now, the decision-makers have to take note of the failures, and the remedies suggested to overcome them, in order to attain the human development goals in all the sectors.

Bangladesh enters mining era

New initiatives a step forward

THE development of a new industry with the potential to employ thousands of people, increase our energy self-sufficiency, and reduce the country's dependence on imports is always to be applauded. It is therefore with great pleasure and pride that we receive the news that the country's first coal mining and granite production projects are in the final stages of completion and are set to come into operation by October this year.

The two new initiatives contribute greatly to the diversification of the economy and productively utilising our natural resources. In this day and age, especially with the MFA taking effect next year, which is expected to hurt the ready-made garment export industry, it is crucial that we continue to explore all options to diversify the economy and open up as many profitable new sectors as possible. The full utilisation of whatever natural resources we have under our control in order to advance development is simple common sense and sound economic policy.

The Barapukuria Coal Mine project will mainly supply power for the 250 megawatt Barapukuria Power Plant which will help alleviate the energy shortfall in the country. The Maddhyapara Hard Rock project will produce 1.6 million tonnes of granite a year that will go a long way to fulfilling our domestic needs of 3.4 million tonnes, thereby saving between an estimated \$38 million and \$58 million in foreign exchange reserves. Significantly, both projects are located in the underserved northern region of the country and are expected to have a positive effect on the depressed regional economy.

In today's competitive global economy, we must always be looking for opportunities to develop the nation's economy and move it forward. We cannot afford to rest on the considerable gains that we made through the nineties and the early years of this century. Bangladesh's entry into the mining era is long overdue, but an absolute necessity if we are to maintain our global competitiveness and not fall behind. These are the kinds of bold and far-reaching initiatives that the government needs to sponsor, and we applaud their efforts to get the initiatives off the ground and operational.

Riding a roller-coaster of crises



NURUDDIN MAHMUD KAMAL

We can hardly be optimistic about the solution of our energy problem for many reasons. Indeed, the people of Bangladesh are riding such a roller coaster of crises that we haven't taken time to catch our breaths and 'look at the big picture.' However, there may be no such thing as a crisis, to end crises. But, we can at least hope that the energy shortages for the past few years, both in electricity and natural gas, have opened our eyes to understand how connected everything is from the anklebone to the neck bone.

Yet it seems that the authorities do not take adequate care to handle the energy issues of the country. Those things apart, perhaps, it wouldn't be unjustified to mention that the next three to five years will be our greatest period of stress, before our drive toward reduced energy import can actually be materialised as we did in the 1980s. It will also be a testing period as to whether our recent experience has focused our attention on our real long-term problems or whether we are going to live from one summer shortage of gas supply to the next one. It also appears that nothing will move in a positive direction because at least one important individual in the energy domain would pretend that he is the king sitting with a magic crown on his head. His perception is that people will continue to listen to him without questioning about his ability and commitment. If this continues, we would be heading for a disaster.

It is now a public knowledge

that for the past about three years everything has been let loose in the energy sector. Pardon my statement. The general allegation is that the Ministry of Energy apparently has not made any serious effort to add a single Mcf of gas in the system. But the consumption of gas has already exceeded the demand forecast of many, contradicting even the thought-process of some intellectuals. For instance, Dr AKMA Quader, Professor, Department of Chemical

we'll overcome the vicious circle. But, it seems the government prefers to continue to make mistakes one after the other and doesn't try to correct itself. I shall try to explain in the following paras why I am saying so.

Here is one such example of irregularity: On 8 Feb, 2004, an international tender notice appeared in the daily newspaper for engagement of contractor for drilling of two wells at Titas Gas Field, the largest producing field in the country. Bangladesh Gas

rig from abroad) it would cost between 6 and 8 crore Taka in foreign exchange. Nobody apparently knows where is the catch! Manpower can be hired from Bapex. In fact, the job can be contracted out to the national specialised organisation -- Bapex.

Just for information, the rental cost of a similar rig would be around US\$ 15,000 to 18,000 per day excluding the "mob and demob" cost. It takes about 70 to 90 days for drilling and testing an

CHRONICLE

It is time for us to insist on a thorough health check up of the Ministry of Energy and Petrobangla...The usual allegation is that in their unrestrained exuberance and pursuit of many goals, they have virtually created an energy famine over the past three years. They now have reached the point where they must do what a wise man calls "the hardest task in the world -- think" -- in order to continue pioneering and reversing famine into sufficiency once more, however without wasting scarce foreign exchange.

Engineering, BUET in the recent past has categorically distrusted the entire past Plan's gas demand projections including that of Petrobangla. Unfortunately, for him, his undue cautious forecasts have been overtaken by events. For example, Dr Quader's gas demand projections showed an average demand of 967 million cubic feet per day (MMcf) (Peak demand 1209 MMcf) by 2005 and 1369 MMcf (Peak demand) by 2010 (Ref: Azim Uddin Ahmed, former Secretary, Energy, CPD presentation, May 2000). This speaks of a poor appreciation on gas development of Bangladesh. Happily, the demand forecast made by Aziz Khan of Petrobangla (1330 MMcf by 2004) has been so correct. He deserves appreciation. But the government relies on the projections of intellectuals and theoreticians. If the authorities continue to do so, "only Allah can save the country from an energy crisis!" However, if we can deliberately make conservation and efficient energy use a national way of life, while we are increasing our supply through an effective and efficient means,

Field Company Ltd (BGFC), a subsidiary of Petrobangla (while Petrobangla itself is not yet a holding company) is currently operating 12 gas wells at Titas field and now intends to drill two more appraisal-cum-development wells in the same gas field. The tender document also indicates that there is a plan for drilling two more wells -- one at Habiganj and another at Narsingdi gas field, respectively. This piece of information would hopefully act as appetiser to a potential bidder. Using BGFC's own fund, the proposed drilling would be conducted soon. So, the lobbyists are very active now.

Visibly, there is no harm in calling a competitive bidding. But the question is: why should BGFC/Petrobangla look for an international contractor to drill two development (production) wells? Is there a shortage of drilling rigs either under Bapex or BGFC? Or are all the drilling rigs capable of drilling up to the desired depths are committed for drilling elsewhere? I understand, the answer to both the questions is clear and simple "No." Then, for whose interest the tender is

well within the knowledge of the government that at least two efficient deep drilling rigs are available in the country. One of the rigs IPS-Cardwell is owned by BGFC, while the owner of IDECO-1700 is Bapex. Bapex has recently carried out drilling of a well at Fenchuganj. Hopefully testing etc. would be accomplished by April/May, 2004, when the rig would be available for drilling elsewhere.

Earlier, based on an assumption (perhaps fed by foreign contractor or local vested interest) that IPS Cardwell rig was unable to drill, Petrobangla secured the services of a rented rig and crew from abroad during the late 1990s and early 2000. Huge foreign exchange was drained out on rental alone, while the IPS Cardwell rig was perhaps sitting idle. Meanwhile, Bapex and BGFC had jointly repaired and rehabilitated the IPS Cardwell rig. Some Taka 10 (ten) crore in foreign exchange was spent. This equipment is now capable of drilling five wells without any major expenditure on the rig. While, for mobilisation and demobilisation alone (for a hired

wasting scarce foreign exchange. The authorities in the energy domain in Bangladesh are so naive that they don't even realise what is printed in their name tag!

This reminds me of a story. The famous creator of Sherlock Holmes, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, once hailed a taxi in Paris, threw his suitcase and got in after it. Before he could say a word, the driver asked, "Where to, Mr. Conan Doyle?" The surprised author said, "You recognised me?" "No" the driver replied, "I have never seen you or your picture." "Then how do you know that I am Conan Doyle?" "Well," the driver said, "I read in the paper that you are vacationing in the South, I notice you arrived on a train from Marseilles; you have a tan that come from spending a week or more in the sun; from the ink spot on your middle finger I deduce you are a writer; and the cut of your cloth is English. Putting all these together, I felt surely you must be Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the author of great Sherlock Holmes". Conan Doyle was amazed: "From the way you recognised me from all these small observations, you yourself are the equal to Sherlock Holmes." "There is one more thing," said the driver. "What's that?" Conan Doyle asked. "Your name is printed on your suitcase."

Related to our energy problems, as a nation we had to have the situation boldly spelled out for us before we believed what various clues told us was inevitable. Now in retrospect, we see clearly what we might have deduced sooner. We must see the name inscribed on our suitcase soon enough -- hopefully soon enough -- to think and plan and act to avoid more serious consequences. Our greatest danger is complacency. Once the headlines and the gas lines disappeared, there will be a growing tendency to believe that we do not have an energy problem -- that the name on the suitcase is somebody else's.

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Congress must re-focus campaign: BJP on the defensive



PRAFUL BIDWAI
writes from New Delhi

THE BJP claims it has raised India's global stature to wholly unprecedented heights. This is its greatest foreign policy achievement. The strongest proof it offers is India's close, exclusive, but equal and dignified, "strategic partnership" with the United States.

If the world's sole Superpower wants to "partner" India, India must have arrived!

This claim is dubious. The US's first action after the NDA came to power was to impose sanctions and get the Security Council to condemn the Pokhran-II tests. It took years of servile right-wing policies and a Silicon Valley boom led by Indian-born entrepreneurs to woo America. After 9/11, the US was happy consorting with Pakistan in its "war on terrorism".

Now, Washington has blown a hole through the "partnership" myth by designating Pakistan a "major non-NATO ally" (MNNA). Secretary of State Colin Powell didn't even give Indian leaders an inkling of the

US's intention while in New Delhi two days before the announcement.

He surely knew India would have accepted the move if only told about it in advance. But Mr Powell took India for granted!

This disdain contrasts sharply with Washington's attitude towards Britain. Before making Argentina an MNNA, the US consulted Britain, which had gone to war with Argentina.

responsible governance.

The BJP is on the defensive. It has little to offer. This time, it's asking for votes not for a larger purpose, but because it craves power.

Mr Advani's *rathyatra* is getting an embarrassingly poor response. Mr Vajpayee's meetings in Bhopal and Amravati weren't well-attended. But thousands flock to hear Ms Sonia Gandhi.

It'll be extremely difficult for the

there's a 4 percent swing against the BJP, it would win 12 seats and the Congress 14. With an 8 percent swing, the BJP's score would fall to 8 (Congress, 18). But since 1999, there has been a 10 percent-plus anti-BJP swing in all local elections.

The 2002 Assembly elections, held amidst exceptional polarisation following the pogrom, allowed the BJP to offset these losses. That won't happen today.

However, can the Congress lead a winning coalition? It has played its cards reasonably well so far. It's campaigning far more energetically than in 1999.

The Congress cannot be accused of arrogantly shunning coalitions. It has gone out of its way to build them. Its alliances in Maharashtra, Bihar, Tamil Nadu, Andhra and Jharkhand will pay it good dividends.

The Congress doesn't have a big

festo shows a major weakness. It's strong on pluralism and secularism. It rightly emphasises unemployment, rural development and women's empowerment.

Especially noteworthy is the Employment Guarantee promise: at least 100 days of work per rural household on public programmes every year at the minimum wage. It promises higher public spending on health and education.

However, the document legitimises the BJP's claimed economic "achievements". It promises 8-to-10 percent GDP growth and "selective" privatisation -- as if these were magic remedies. It fails to counter BJP's campaign that India has "progressed" more under its 5 years than under the Congress' 5 years.

To win urban upper-middle class support, the Congress also praises neoliberal policies. It says the middle class is its "proud creation".

This strategy is mistaken. The Congress must project a clear left-of-centre profile as the party of the poor. It paid dearly for doing the opposite during the Narasimha Rao period. The party's recent revival was premised upon a leftward turn and appeal among the poor. It's futile to invest heavily in an upper-middle class that's sold on the BJP.

The Congress must correct this bias and focus its campaign on the working people.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.

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THE BJP's future in Uttar Pradesh is clouded. Mr Kalyan Singh's re-induction hasn't made a difference, beyond the 2 percent Lodh vote. Between the 1999 Lok Sabha and 2002 Assembly elections, the BJP's vote-share fell by 8 percentage-points. This puts it behind the BSP's 23 and the SP's 25.4 percent.

Mr Rahul Gandhi's candidature will further compress the BJP's vote-share. There are signs that the Thakurs are moving from it to the SP. The Muslims are shifting towards the Congress.

Most BJP allies are also likely to suffer serious erosion. The Samata and Trinamool will probably plumb new depths.

However, the Congress man-

age in UP. But that's because Ms Mayawati refused -- under the BJP's blackmailing pressure. Similarly, the Samajwadi Party wasn't willing. But the Congress has roped in smaller parties like the Apna Dal and Momin (weavers) Conference.

Ms Sonia Gandhi's "Jan Sampark Abhiyan" is getting an excellent response. She shows increasing maturity. If the Congress tactfully uses Ms Priyanka Gandhi as a campaigner, it will gain tremendously. It must concentrate on careful candidate selection, focussed campaigning amongst critical groups, and voter mobilisation.

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He was a successful minister! He desires to excel in his new portfolio as the minister for commerce. Reasons, however, are there for thinking otherwise. Firstly, he was a failure (in popular perception) as home minister. Secondly, he has no experience at all in the realm of finance and commerce.

Mohammad Zaman

One-mail

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE

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Sohel BUET

The cardinal sin!

I was talking with some people in a meeting in Toronto. As usual, in a meeting of Bangladeshi everyone was talking about the current politics and violence in Bangladesh. Most of the people in that meeting were very much worried about the situation prevailing in their beloved country. I was the only one who is here not to stay rather to spend some time in academic activities. So everyone was asking me about the actual condition of educational institutes and the cause behind the changing trend in student politics.

I personally know what they were

saying is not at all wrong. They were raising the same questions that I had in my mind and I am carrying those to find the appropriate answers.

On the campus of an internationally renowned university a very famous writer and a professor of that university is brutally attacked. A former president is attacked in front of the police by alleged terrorists. Almost all public universities are running with an unthinkably long session jam. The faculties are going to strike to have an elected vice-chancellor. In another university, the teachers are calling hunger strike for their promotion.

All of us may treat things as a third world country's regular scenario. But we are not trying to get

at the root of it. We are just trying to have ad-hoc solutions. If we look deep inside these incidents, all of these are the reflection of the frustration of the student community. They are being used by the politicians. Students are dragged into this field.

If anyone takes BUET as a case study, it is evident from this institution that it functioned very efficiently when student politics was banned. Well, I admit that a student body is very much needed to voice the grievances of students. But if the legal student representatives and the student unions are not active and the elected members are too aged to represent the students, I really don't believe that there is any logic to

retain this union in the university, as it is ruining the general student's life, rather than improving it.