

## Drainage nightmare

### Give us a break

THE heavy rain on Sunday brought life in the city to a standstill as many areas went under water. Trade and commerce were hit hard along with the service delivery systems. In fact, a very large chunk of the city populace was rendered immobile as logged rainwater obstructed vehicular traffic at several places, leading to a breakdown of life. Even educational institutions had to be declared closed as people struggled hard to maintain a minimum pace of life.

The inadequacies of the city's drainage system were hopelessly exposed by nearly 15 hours of incessant downpour which made many a locality look like swamps in the midst of concrete structures. The natural drainage channels have been in a derelict state for a long time and the surface drains and storm sewers could not absorb the huge extra load of water due to severe structural limitations topped off by poor maintenance of whatever network we have.

The most worrisome part of it is that many residential areas have been developed without provision for linkage with the WASA's drainage system. So there is no outlet in these areas for rainwater, and water logging is the inevitable consequence. Developers seem to have paid little heed to the drainage needs of newly built-up areas. The strangulating situation can only worsen in the days ahead unless something extraordinary is done to ease it. Attempts are reportedly being made to build box culverts and link them to the WASA drainage network. But the question is: why did the planners fail to envisage such a solution beforehand? Planning solutions should be a matter of forethought rather than an afterthought.

People are apparently bracing themselves for another inclement rainy season when water logging may paralyse life for hours or even days together. A similar situation arose at least twice during the last monsoon. But precious little has been done since then to counter it.

The committees that are constituted in such situations have never provided the answer to the problem. The perfunctory exercise of setting up a committee and doing nothing thereafter have sadly typified our approach to a problem that has only aggravated by the year.

The causes behind water logging are well known and so are the remedies. The authorities concerned have to ensure that the drainage system covers the whole city and is allowed to work unobstructed.

## Corrective action would be pro-business

### Chittagong port plagued by corruption

THE recent report by Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) merely catalogues what has been an obvious problem at Chittagong Port for decades. It is no secret that the corruption at the port is pervasive, but nonetheless the figure of Tk 800 crore that was estimated by TIB as annual payment in bribes is an eye-opener, and underlines the fact that it is long overdue for the government to take this matter in hand.

The government (and those in the past) have long made a fetish of what they refer to as pro-business policies. But it seems to us that the continuing existence of such blatant examples of corruption as at Chittagong Port reveal the hollowness of this rhetoric. If the government truly wishes to give business a helping hand, then nothing could be more useful than measures to cut down the corruption which acts as a kind of tax on the cost of doing business that ultimately hurts us all.

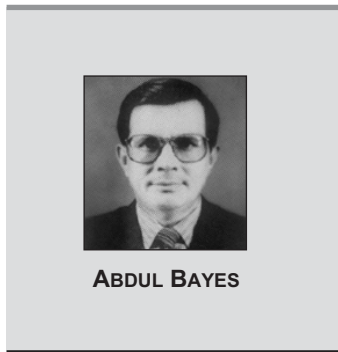
Part of the problem of doing business in Bangladesh is the question of inefficiency that plagues all the services and industries. But as we can see from the Chittagong Port example, the issues of inefficiency and corruption are inextricably linked. Indeed, there can be no question that if corruption were eliminated, or at the very least reduced significantly, that this would not only cut the cost of business, but would also increase the efficiency and productivity of importers and exporters.

When bribes must be paid at up to 18 places to load and unload goods, and in up to 40 places to release them from the customs house, this not only adds to the cost, but also adds intolerably to the time-frame of doing business, which is one reason that our export industry has lagged behind its potential all these years.

From an image point of view, this is also disastrous. Exporters and importers from outside know that trading with Bangladesh comes with these costs, and this contributes to their idea of Bangladesh as a poor place to do business, which hurts us all.

The problem can be solved with political will. It is a relatively small number of people who benefit from the current situation, while the majority of us, both businessmen and consumers, suffer. Tackling the problem should be a no-loss proposition for the government. It is sound policy that will benefit both traders and consumers, and the ripple effects will enhance the nation's image as well.

# The gruesome gas-game



ABDUL BAYES

BA NGLADESH is not endowed with natural resources that one can, possibly, proudly point at. We have a vast population to live on a meagre area of land. The density of population is one of the highest in the world. Besides population, water could be another resource to rescue us from the racks, but for the lack of opportunities of utilising it in a proper manner. Meantime, natural gas has emerged as an important resource to grapple with the groaning poverty. Reportedly, Bangladesh is endowed with natural gas of a respectable size. It is supposed that a proper drilling and distribution mechanism could help us in our development efforts. Already, natural gas is being used in households for cooking purposes -- disconcertingly though only 6 per cent of households so far gifted with gas connection -- and by our fertilizer factories, power plants and some manufacturing plants. Empirical evidences emphatically establish that gas could grease our economic growth. In this column before, we have deliberated on some of those aspects.

At the advice of the foreign oil companies, the initial thrust of the government lay on export of gas to India. It happened immediately after

the current regime took over power. The Finance Minister and concerned quarters were up on the heels to reap home the dollars from export. But various political parties, including Awami League, opposed the move on the point of low reserves to meet domestic needs. Personally, I believe that this scarce energy resource should be used to fuel domestic commerce and industries and thus fetch foreign exchange. The difference between

stepped into the business in a transparent way. The scandal that cost the job of the State Minister for energy, Mr. Mosharrat Hossain, is believed to span far beyond the gift of a cozy car. The gas sector is a potential source of corruption. KAFCO was provided with a long term agreement of gas supply at a price that, allegedly, went against the interest of the country. The same person was then the powerful pawn in the whole gas-game.

politicians to pursue their own gains. Bangladesh seems to be one of those countries where gas companies have been influencing the authorities as far as gas drilling and distribution are concerned. Bangladesh is still a long way to go as far as an appropriate energy policy is concerned. An independent energy commission is yet to function in a transparent manner. It is an irony that the only natural resource base is being left to the

employees and officials are a part of the gruesome gas-game. A simple and subsistence meter reader makes a million out of it! Thus, for both domestic and foreign sources, gas emerged as gruesomely beneficial with little impact on the poor.

A deviation from the traditional tone of gas handling could bring forth immense benefits to the nation and its poverty reduction strategy. Distribution of gas across Jamuna

society. These are just floating ideas on the sea of gas and government could give careful thoughts on them.

We do not want to witness woes of Tengratilla variety any more. Not only that our people are deprived of the access to gas, but also they become victims of the mismanagement of the companies. Just think of their losses during the last explosion just six months before. Were they compensated for? Why should people suffer for the cause they are not a part of?

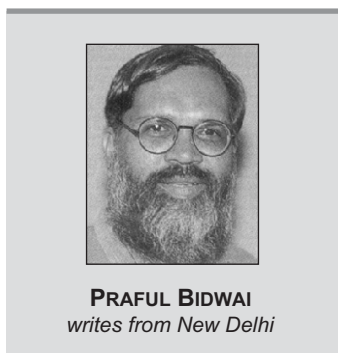
The final finding in the gruesome gas-game, as espoused by researchers, is corruption. Unless this corruption could be contained, there is no reason why and how gas would help our uplift. The only natural resource should be nurtured with proper care and curiosity. Gas could become an important instrument in alleviating poverty provided institutional arrangements are on the right track. The gas sector should be seen as a milking cow that needs proper feed to provide more milk. The gas prices should also be set in tune with costs of drilling and distribution.

The present pricing policies could be praiseworthy for the rich and the middleclass with access to gas but could be costly in the long run in terms of establishing basic infrastructure for gas distribution and drilling networks. With the advent of substitutes and gas availability in and around us, Bangladesh gas needs to be more competitive through devising appropriate mechanisms. The sooner we realise this, the better it is for the country.

Abdul Bayes is a Professor of Economics at Jahangirnagar University.

# A left hook for the UPA

## Warning against 'free-market' policies



PRAFUL BIDWAI  
writes from New Delhi

WITHIN a year, the Left's honeymoon with the United Progressive Alliance has ended. That's the meaning of the decision of the four parties, including the CPM and CPI, to stop attending UPA-Left Coordination Committee meetings.

The Left's withdrawal is not "shadow-boxing," to be ended after a shoddy face-saving compromise, as in Mr L.K. Advani's sordid resignation drama. It seems a well-considered decision, based on policy-level differences.

The Left's walkout won't immediately destabilise the government -- whatever happens to BHEL. The Left will generally support the UPA, but not all its policies. It's only too aware that the UPA's collapse could help the communal, crisis-ridden BJP.

The Left had sounded numerous warnings about the UPA's economic priorities, which have strayed from the National Common Minimum Programme (NCMP), especially its pro-people measures

like the promised Employment Guarantee Act and increased social expenditures.

The Left legitimately demanded their implementation. The UPA ignored its pleas. At times, it deceptively claimed the Left had been consulted on controversial decisions!

The last straw was the decision to divest 10 percent of the shares of Bharat Heavy Electricals Ltd., a Navratna public sector undertaking (PSU), and a world-class high-

industry like Siemens, General Electric, and Alsthom.

BHEL has warned off attempts by multinational rivals to lure away its engineers with salaries that are six times higher! Over the past decade, BHEL has contributed Rs 11,700 crores to the treasury in taxes. It routinely pays dividends like 40 and 80 percent!

If anything, there is a case for launching BHEL as a truly global corporation, and granting it autonomy to tap the market, fix salaries,

cially odious when the PSU involved is internationally competitive, like BHEL.

The UPA may well reverse its decision on BHEL. But the central issue is bigger. The UPA must undertake serious economic rethinking. It has dragged its feet on the NCMP's pro-poor measures like the EGA, failed to raise agricultural credit and health spending, or create a "Prathamik Shiksha Kosh" with the Rs 13,000-crore education cess.

livelihoods -- small grocers, vegetable-sellers, pavement-stall-owners.

In WTO negotiations on services, the UPA is trying to obtain more H-1B visas from the US for software engineers in return for opening up domestic services. This is a double whammy. Multinational corporations will intrude into education, water, and power supply. More H-1B visas will drain India of software talent.

This trend is likely to accelerate

Washington.

The choice is stark: get into the Council as a US ally/client, or remain an independent power in a multi-polar world.

The sole rationale of a Security Council seat is that it will expand India's room for independent policy-making so she can promote universal causes like peace, equity, and justice. This won't happen.

Worse, the US wants India's agreement to amend the UN Charter to permit military force in "anticipatory self-defence." This doctrine connotes pre-emptive and preventive war and is impermissible under international law. This means a powerful state can wage war on a country if it suspects an attack, or wants to permanently disable it.

This is a recipe for international brigandage. India will contribute to undermining international security if it supports this amendment.

The UPA/Congress must rethink beyond BHEL. The Congress has much to lose by breaking its alliance with the Left. The next Assembly elections will be testing for the Congress. It can ill-afford to get discredited among the people.

The voter punished the NDA for claiming that "India is Shining." It will be truly tragic if the UPA attracts public anger within one year in office -- for claiming everything is hunky-dory.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.

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

Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

### Launch disasters

Launch capsize is a very familiar word in Bangladesh. In these accidents thousands of people lose their lives. These accidents happen because of overloading and other violations of navigational rules.

I think that the authorities concerned have failed to take any steps to prevent death in launch accidents.

**Khairul Muna**  
Dept of ELL, IJUC

### ZIA

Zia International Airport though equipped with sufficient infrastructure fails to provide passengers with standard service due to lack of effective system and management.

Some of the problems passengers are confronting frequently at the airport are the following: During entering the security checkpoint passengers are approached personally by outsiders to carry the luggage. Long cue in check-in counters. Immigration takes hell of a lot of time in checking

documents. Condition of toilets in immigration is pathetic. Insufficient number of trolleys. While coming to car parking passengers are personally approached by taxi drivers. The Civil Aviation Authority should streamline the existing systems and develop new systems to make the airport a vibrant, safe and pleasant place.

**Fahim Hossain**  
120 Kazipara, Mirpur, Dhaka

### 'Black Gold' of Cox's Bazar

I have lost track of how many letters I have read about 'Black Gold of Cox's Bazar' written by Mr. OH Kabir. I must praise him or his perseverance and concern for the neglected precious minerals, which could be found in the sands of Cox's Bazar, Teknaf, Kutubdia, Maheshkhali etc. It is very disappointing that the government is not taking any positive steps and his plea is going unheeded.

Mr. OH Kabir disclosed that huge deposits of Zircon, Rutile,

Magnetite, monazite, Garnet etc worth millions of dollars can be found in the sands of some coastal areas and that the Australian Titanium Company has applied to the government of Bangladesh for granting them a mining lease license for extraction of minerals at Cox's Bazar. Sea beach. We also learnt that the average heavy minerals content of our sand is 10 percent higher than the Australian sand but Australia has captured the world market as the biggest beach mineral exporting country.

We request the government to accept the Australian company's offer and utilise the bounty the Almighty Allah has given us. Much time has been wasted and the government must act without delay.

**Nur Jahan**  
Chittagong

### Border issue

I am not at all surprised to see the media's role on border issues these days. Preference of news is well understood. Killing by BSF on almost

regular basis, looting, and violating the boundary have become a normal phenomenon. Putting permanent infrastructure inside our territory often gets obstructed by the BSF; our people live in fear across the borders. All seems normal or a matter of no concern to a greater part of the media.

While I am against inciting hostility against India, but to give our sovereignty or self respect a call in our mind we should build awareness so that we make our position clear and stand on a sound and strong footing to negotiate our points. Our nature, water, trade, borders, if all go to them, then what will remain for us??

Had the media's power been used to serve the national interest, our position could have been different.

**M M Haque**  
Jeddah, K.S.A

### Law against use of chemicals in food

Now that the DS has actually started a series of reports on the mishandling, use of harmful chemicals and adulteration of food-items in this country, one would wonder why the government is not going for a new

clear-cut law against such irregularities. To save the nation, specially the children, from slow poisoning and mental/physical retardation, such a law is necessary without wasting even a single more day. Why do these things seem to be so difficult for our government to control and monitor? Why don't our "leaders" just look at the systems and regulations in place in the neighbouring countries?

Isn't there anything our policy makers can do or would want to do about these?

**CNR**  
Chittagong

### Student politics

At the very threshold, it should be clarified that I am not against any movement of students but the way student politics is going on is

totally disgusting. After the tragic demise of Shammil, Student of Psychology Department of Dhaka University, it became a common phenomenon for the general students to express grief through bringing our processions and wearing black badges. But when we see that a group of student leaders think of gaining political benefit from this. Each party-backed student wing wants to gain from this muddy water. Where is our morality and ethics? Is it the Oxford of the East? Who are studying here? Who is teaching them? Who is guiding or influencing the administration to let the student leaders create a violent situation on the campus?

Leaving books and academic materials our reputed institution's young scholars are now cordoning the main entrances of Dhaka University. Their target is to thwart BCL leaders and activists from entering the campus. For whose interest they are doing it? Will they get any benefit? Of course, not.

### Bazlur Rahman Mohsin Hall Dhaka University Declared rate vs. effective rate

In Bangladesh we are experiencing a boom in the Consumer Credit Schemes (CCS) offered by both banking and non-banking financial institutions. Home loan, auto loan, credit card, education loan, marriage loan etc. are few of those schemes.

These schemes quote interest rates accompanied by technical jargons and this way there arises a discrepancy between the declared rates and the effective rates. For instance, some state interest rate on annual basis while some opt for monthly basis or even daily basis. Moreover, some go for monthly reducing balance while others choose annual reducing balance method. This way the effective interest rate becomes higher than the declared rate by 2-4% or even more.

Had there been a uniform method

of quoting the interest rates the customers would not have been baffled or even, cheated. If we can ensure transparency, only then we can expect a long term sustenance. Therefore, the Bangladesh Bank is requested to take necessary steps and save millions of investors.

**Engr. Hafizur Rahman Arman**  
East Bashabo, Dhaka

### Use of acronyms

I entirely agree with Minu Afza about the use of acronyms, DS May 19. Those who live abroad don't know many acronyms. So you should not be oblivious of their problems.

**Mahmud Hussain**  
On e-mail

### Transport fare

Transport fare is being increased whenever the prices of fuel go up. This causes serious problems for the people in general.

The authorities concerned should find a way to keep the situation under control.

**Ashish Kumar Sarker**  
Dhaka