

Energy sector needs tidying up

Time is of the essence

THE energy sector is absolutely crucial to Bangladesh's development. The gas sector alone pulls in revenue of Tk 3,300 crore a year, and with Bangladesh rapidly industrialising and modernising, sound management at the energy ministry is needed now more than ever to ensure that the nation's burgeoning energy needs are met efficiently and effectively.

Despite the importance of the sector, however, the energy ministry and its various revenue generating affiliates are plagued with administrative and operational anomalies, which render them rather dysfunctional in handling the serious responsibilities that they must undertake in the nation's interest.

The fact that there have been seven secretaries in the energy ministry in the past three years says it all. What is needed is continuity at the top and not a revolving door to the office of the secretary, causing paralysis and confusion.

The frequent change of secretaries is indicative of a greater malaise in the entire ministry, which is understaffed and mired in administrative and operational troubles. There is no recognised chain of command or established procedure or system in place, with the result that morale is very low and the whole ministry is operating in a dysfunctional way.

So confused is the current state of affairs that the secretary himself heads three boards of Petrobangla affiliates, calling into question their ability to operate independently and creating all manner of unnecessary conflicts.

This kind of turmoil would be cause for concern in any ministry, but all the more so in the energy sector. In addition to the onerous responsibilities that the ministry shoulders, negotiations with respect to the Tata investment and the tripartite gas pipeline deals require expertise and continuity, neither of which seems to be in abundant supply.

Part of the problem is the fact that the portfolio is headed by the PM who has tremendous pressure on her time not to perhaps allow any single-minded pursuit of the ministry's work. The duties of the energy adviser remain unclear, and perhaps what is missing is a full minister who could pull the ministry together and provide much-needed direction and leadership.

An artificial fertiliser crisis

What stops finance ministry from releasing fund?

THIS is the peak of the Boro season. The fallout of the strike by fertiliser traders which began on December 19 has left the farmers in a state of stupor. The traders are demanding that the Tk 60 crore government subsidy committed to fertiliser import be released immediately by the finance ministry.

The ministry, for its part, is reported to be scrutinising the 'genuineness' of the subsidy bills submitted by the traders -- a technicality that should not have been left unresolved for so long. It was totally unexpected that a matter of such grave importance like release of subsidy funds would be fiddled with in such a fashion. Of course, there was the need for ensuring transparency and fair play but the finance ministry was expected to pay due attention to the time factor. Now the farmers are on the verge of being deprived of the 25 percent rebate on purchase of fertiliser, because of the scarcity situation brought on by the strike and stocking of the input. Actually, the finance ministry's inability to release the funds in time could well render an important government policy decision ineffectual. Obviously, if harvest of boro and some other crops is badly affected then the whole idea of giving subsidy on fertiliser prices will be pointless.

The finance ministry must take the ground situation into account which calls for resuming the supply of fertilisers at a subsidised rate without wasting any more time.

The crisis is another example of the lack of coordination between government agencies and ministries. The ministries of finance and agriculture should sit with the representatives of the fertiliser traders' association and bring a speedy end to the ongoing impasse.

The subsidy money has to be released immediately in order to set things right for the farmers who should have by now used 80 percent of the total quantum of fertiliser required for a good boro harvest.

The battle lines have been drawn?

MOZAMMEL H. KHAN *writes from Toronto*

In any democracy, politics is all about scoring political points. In a nascent democracy, it is more so for the fact that success of a politician largely depends on how adeptly one could fool his/her constituents. In Bangladesh's political landscape, this perception has become more obvious in recent weeks in the backdrop of the PM's letter to the opposition political parties inviting them to sit for dialogues with the intention to contrive a strategy to fight the recent spate of terrorist attacks all across the country. Did the PM really believe that the opposition would extend an olive branch in response to her invitation? The answer is a big nay. Her sole objective was to score political points. The stage was skillfully set with all those who were required to meet that end. Score of journalists and TV crews were available on the spot when a very low ranking official from the PM's office came to the house of leader of the opposition to deliver the letter of invitation. It was shown on TV how impolite it was on the part of the opposition leader that a staff person was there in front of the cameras to tell the letter carrier that there was no one in the house to receive the letter. The government was fully successful in devising a successful script and it surely did score a few points.

However, this short-lived vantage of the government ended as soon as her loyal opposition Kader Siddiqui met with the PM and, in line with most of the reliable media reports, squarely pointed his finger, supposedly, towards the most important partner of the BNP in the coalition government as the mastermind of the bomb attacks. This accusation of Kader Siddiqui took the government off guard. The government made sure that in any future dialogue with any opposition political party who chose to respond positively, either through free will or by compulsion, the issue is not raised

again. It was rigidly maintained when HM Ershad was instructed by the PM's office not to repeat the accusation similar to the one laid out by Kader Siddiqui. With a dozen corruption cases hanging against him, the fallen dictator chose not risk his freedom at this stage of the dialogue drama.

If one goes through the opinions and commentaries as published in the country's print news media, two clearly opposing views have emerged vis-a-vis the necessity of a dialogue between the government and the opposition. On the one side, there are views expressed by those who so far were solidly behind the government in denying the media reports. They, in most cases, con-

curred with the government views in blaming the opposition politicians and the secular intellectuals, both at home and abroad, for collaborating with these reporters with the objective to tarnish the image of the country.

On the home front, the government spared no time in blaming the opposition and taking many of the politicians and freethinking intellectuals into custody following any bomb attacks, notwithstanding the fact that the attacks were targeted towards the opposition rallies, personalities, and secular institutions. Only after the unprecedented and simultaneous bomb attacks, not specifically targeted towards the opposition, on August 17, the government did not directly blame or arrest any of the opposition activists.

However, the speeches of the PM and a few other government leaders still point to "conspiracy to tarnish the image of the country" and "to

make the country a failed state" or "to stop the country's progress and development"--the terms which are exclusively reserved for the main opposition, since the beginning of its inception to the helm of the government.

The militants, who are bent on sacrificing their lives, are not making any bones to hide their intention to transform Bangladesh into an Islamic state. The word "image" is probably the last thing in their vocabulary and they are hardly worried about what the rest of the world would think about their coveted state. It is not only that the bulk of our people despise their objective, they abhor the violent means they are using and want the govern-

ment to deal with them and to bring them to justice.

Does the government need any help from the opposition to deal with the situation, which the government has termed a national crisis? One must distinguish the fact that the crisis is an internal one and has been imposed upon the state by its own citizens, notwithstanding the probable support of some external groups, not of any state. The nation has not been subjected to any external aggression.

Here comes the other school of thoughts. In a working democracy, to deal with an internal crisis, the best forum to discuss the issue is the parliament, where the government can solicit support of the opposition to pass any new law to deal with the crisis. However, with a dysfunctional parliament, where even the carnage of August 21 was not serious enough to warrant any discussions, and a huge numerical strength of the ruling coalition, the

government can pass any law and even can amend the constitution, as it desires without the support of the opposition.

Other than criticizing or supporting any enactment of a new law, the opposition has hardly any say or control in any of the three broad steps required to be undertaken to bring any of the perpetrators to justice.

Firstly, it is the members of the law enforcement authority, who decide who to arrest. It is the public prosecutors, who decide whose bail petition has to be opposed. Secondly, it is the investigating team who decides which material and other evidences have to be used to frame a charge. It is only they who

decide how strong a charge sheet should be or under which criminal code the charge has to be framed. Although, one of the leading accused disclosed their determination (on TV) to throw away the constitution of the Republic, no sedition charge has been brought against any of them. Finally, it is the judges of the court, who would dispense the justice in accordance with the strength of the charge sheet, validity of the evidences and in line with the demand and argument of the public prosecutors.

Each element of this system has been absolutely politicized under the present administration and, at this time, is under the full control of the chief executive of the state, the PM. In addition, when the PM publicly reaffirmed her determination to keep her four party alliance intact, the whole system gets the message who should not be implicated in the process. The opposition could have scored a few important points by

explaining these to the members of the public and by demanding judicial investigations of each case by a tribunal whose members had to be chosen by national consensus and the subsequent public trials of the accused. A case in demand could have been to interrogate publicly the former SP of Rajshahi whose action of providing escort to Bangla Bhai and his entourage in their highly publicised parading of the city street made international headlines.

All these obvious demands would have been a two-way sword for the government. If the media reports and the PM's conversations with the editor of a Bangla daily are to be believed, one would find merit in the opposition's accusation that the PM

knew all about the militants since none of these activities was ever directed to BNP and its allies. It was fine with her as long as they were directing their violent activities towards her arch-rivals.

The political points that could have been easily bagged by the opposition without even participating in the dialogue has been given back to the opposition by the PM through her roaring speech of desperation in the public meeting on December 21 at the Palltan Maidan. The fiery speech reflected multiple dimensions.

Firstly, it has exposed the lack of goodwill that was expected from the PM of nation that has fallen into a "national crisis" due to government inaction, if not encouragement. Secondly, it has disappointed the nation that had expected a conciliatory tone from PM to invoke the opposition to reciprocate. Thirdly, it reflected a complete lack of perception of the PM of the history of the

democratic struggle of the land, which incidentally she now rules.

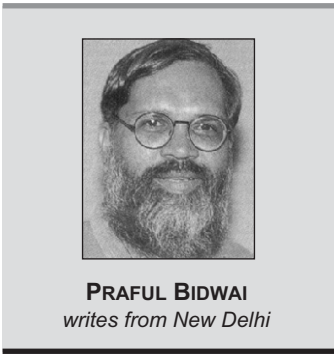
It seems that the PM is surrounded by a group of sycophants, not friends. The PM would be well advised to go through the pages of history that was not very kind to the despots who had ever brought sedition charge against any of the popular politicians of this land. All our national heroes from Sher-e-Bangla to Suhrawardy and Bhashani to Bangabandhu have been subjected to such charges more than once without any capitulation by any of them.

However, all the despots have been thrown into the dustbin of history while all the accused remain in the hearts of the millions and would remain so for all time to come. Lastly, by dismissing the demands of the opposition as regard to the proposed reform of the EC and the CTG, and her determination to hold the election even without the opposition's participation, the PM seems to have forgotten the humiliating end she herself had to meet in 1996.

A democratic leader transforms to despotism when he or she fails to listen to the voice of the people. A few months ago, one such choral was sung by the people of a southern city through their verdict in the mayoral election. The similar message was once again loudly delivered by the people of Dinaipur in a recent by-election. The four party alliance was not able to save any of those days for the honourable Prime Minister. Has the PM completely failed to listen to such loud and clear voice of the people? Her speech of despondence, unfortunately, reaffirmed this understanding.

Dr. Mozammel H. Khan is the Convener of the Canadian Committee for Human Rights and Democracy in Bangladesh.

The cash-for-query scandal



PRAFUL BIDWAI
writes from New Delhi

Cumulatively, Rs 12,800 crores has been spent under MPLADS -- a sum *higher* than the Union elementary education budget!

It's tempting for MPs to exploit a scheme that's totally "legitimate" to buy support from key groups. A majority succumb to the temptation. Some Northeastern states have adopted similar schemes where each MLA can spend a huge Rs 1 crore!

Under India's Constitution,

genuine, it's wrong to accept a bribe for asking it. If it's not authentic, the offence is doubly deplorable.

The two exposures highlight the need to make India's political system more participatory and accountable.

It's noteworthy that 6 of the 11 MPs caught in "Duryodhana" belong to the Bharatiya Janata Party, as do 4 of the 7 in the MPLADS scam. This exposes the hollowness of the BJP's claim to be

be jailed. One percent want to *hang* them! Two-thirds say *less than 10 percent* of politicians are honest.

This expresses a strong upper or middle class prejudice. Politicians are certainly no more corrupt than the businessmen who bribe them. Corruption is pervasive in India.

A Transparency International survey finds that Indians annually pay more than Rs 21,000 crores in bribes to get public services. Fully 80 percent bribe the police -- 14

have no right to condemn others for doing the same, and even less to single out politicians. This is not to condone corruption among politicians. Many politicians are corrupt, but other groups are equally, if not more, so.

The Duryodhana MPs took a maximum of Rs 1.1 lakh. But Indian businessmen have under- and over-invoiced exports and imports to transfer an estimated Rs 90,000 crores to 450,000 crores abroad!

penalties for varying malpractices, including defection, defalcation, intimidation and thuggery. This will help deter political wrong-doing.

Second, there must be *the right to recall* MPs for incompetence or corruption.

Third, MPs must evolve a code of conduct. This was first proposed in 1951, in the Mudgal cash-for-query case. It was revived in 1993, and led to the creation of Ethics Committees in the two Houses.

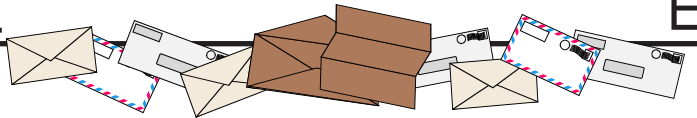
Under the code, MPs must truthfully record their assets and interests. All their actions with a bearing on policy or monetary gain should be scrutinised under the Right to Information Act.

Finally, there must be a focused effort to reverse the recent deterioration in the quality and duration of Parliamentary debate. India must reform certain ultra-conservative conventions which exempt government from debating *policy* in Parliament and from seeking Parliamentary ratification for international agreements.

The sting operations show that the time has come for real, focused, political reform.

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.

Tuition fees

It is really a matter of great concern that the private universities are charging very high tuition fees from the students. Since the public universities can accommodate only a portion of the students seeking higher education, students have to turn to private universities. But if they ask for big amounts of money, the students from families with limited income cannot pursue higher education. It seems like many other things higher education will also become a private preserve of the rich.

The government appears to be quite oblivious of what is going on in the name of higher education in the private sector. Well, one may argue that it is open market economy. But the point is that the universities must provide the facilities that

students require for quality education. But that's not the case here.

The government should immediately frame the rules to regulate tuition fees in private universities and save the students from the hands of people engaged in profiteering alone.

Aziz Ahmed
Dhaka

Our motherland

Firstly, I would like to thank the writer of the letter entitled "Bidding corruption goodbye!" (DS, 28/11/2005). This was a positive letter that inspired me. Bangladesh is our country, our beloved motherland. If the country achieves good name & fame in any area, the credits ours.

Nowadays we are passing through a very hard time. We must address the burning issues and bring back order to society.

Cadet Elias
Faujdarhat Cadet College Chittagong

Bush's realisation

George w Bush finally realised that he was responsible for the war in Iraq as he was fed with flawed intelligence information by CIA. At this point one might feel relieved of the fact that wise Bush has responded to his call of conscience! No, Bush is exactly there where he was, i.e. it is he who unleashed hell upon a moderate Iraq and its people. Iraq today is a completely destroyed land.

Bush and his allies attacked Iraq on the false pretext that Iraq had WMD and that it was enriching uranium for nuclear power. All these turned out to be false and today Bush's mere realisation has already cost a millions of lives, including children and women. Iraq, a land of

five thousand years of culture & civilisation is all dropped down at a false rather a mere whim of a world leader- George W Bush. Bush has excelled in one point he has surpassed the Nazi Hitler as he's been doing all this at a time when the civilisation is at its peak.

Rafiqul Islam Rime
Agrabad, Chittagong

Talent hunt programmes

When the Indian talent show Indian Idol shown on Sony TV, it became a huge success and the satellite channels of our country introduced their own talent hunt programmes. But the programmes didn't achieve much except the Close-up 1 premiered by NTV. Though the idea of discovering a talented vocalist has been taken from foreign shows, it has originality and glamour, giving it

a huge fan base.

Its contestants have earned widespread fame and popularity and no one can deny that some talented singers have been discovered from the show.

It was still sad to see that the misuse of SMS voting by audience eliminated strong contestants like Sonia from the race.

Nayeem Islam
Class-9 The Aga Khan School, Uttara, Dhaka

Pakistan and Bangladesh

As a Pakistani, I would like to respond to the comments by Siddhartha Basu from Boston, US. Pakistan is spending five billion dollars every year on defence only because India is spending four times that amount for its national

defence.

South Asia is not like Europe and Saarc is not like the European Union. Individuals who are thinking that Saarc is like the European Union are just daydreaming.

The ruling Junta in Pakistan was wrong. Bangabandhu had won the election with nearly 100% majority and he should have been given the reign of the government in 1971. And if this was not possible, the two wings of Pakistan should have separated into two separate governments peacefully. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the great leader, had every right to rule Bangladesh (then East Pakistan). His arrest was against all norms of civility and the subjugation of the East Pakistanis was morally wrong.

Now, Pakistan and Bangladesh are two separate countries. These countries now have nothing in common except religion. We can look to the

Arab countries and observe that the language is the same and so is the religion. However, there are 22 Arab countries.

Bangladesh has taken with India a Bay of Bengal initiative. This is the correct direction for Bangladesh to take, and we congratulate the Bangladeshis. In the same manner, it would be correct for Pakistanis to form a group with Central and West Asian countries.

There are eight lakh Bangladeshis in Karachi, Pakistan, and the majority of them must have arrived there after the creation of Bangladesh. There is no treaty between Bangladesh and Pakistan that allows its citizens to immigrate, so it seems that the Bangladeshis are there illegally. These Bangladeshis are obtaining jobs and earning money which they are then sending to Bangladesh. Whereas in Bangladesh, the

unlucky Biharis, about 240,000 in number, are living in camps. At the time of the creation of Bangladesh, these Biharis were not living in camps but in colonies (in Mirpur, Mohammadpur, and other places of Bangladesh). They had paid for their quarters, and it wasn't given to them free. But after the creation of Bangladesh, they were forcibly moved from their dwellings and placed in camps. Now they are passing a wretched life.

It would be advisable for the governments of Pakistan and Bangladesh to arrange for the transfer of the Bangladeshi people in Pakistan to Bangladesh (because these people are living and earning in Pakistan illegally) and Biharis to be transferred from Bangladesh to Pakistan.

Jamilla Razzak
Chicago, US