

The inexcusable power crisis

CHRONICLE

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NURUDDIN MAHMUD KAMAL

HERE is mounting dissatisfaction about the inexcusable power crisis in Bangladesh. It has led to increasing public suspicion and distrust about the efficiency of the government. The public has been jolted out of its complacency. The electricity crisis has hit the rural population more. We took off our blinders and were horrified by what we saw and what we did not because of load-shedding. People are now raging in pent-up anger and fear of facing a catastrophe this summer.

Till the beginning of 2004, it was touch and go. As the winter of 2005 approached, a new phenomenon was observed. The electricity shortage rose to 1,000 MW. But the Ministry of Energy claimed load-shedding of between 600 to 700 MW per day. A handful of retired professionals pooh-poohed the crisis in power supply, perhaps because of their extended profes-

sional life, either as consultant or as member of some advisory committee appointed by the government. The State Minister for Power's forecast proved inaccurate. To make matters worse, he put his bet on the wrong energy horse.

Against a peak daily demand of 4,600 MW in mid 2005 (Power System Master Plan, 1995), the country's total average generation stood at approximately 3,400 MW. The captive generation of over 1,000 MW is exclusively consumed by private business and industries, and is not hooked with the national grid.

Persistent shortage led to a crisis situation, but the Ministry of Energy remained unperturbed. Only in recent months, the government unwillingly acknowledged the severe power crisis prevailing in the country.

To help remedy the situation, either the State Minister for Power Iqbal Hassan Mahmud or the Prime Minister's Office is trying to procure power plants on rental basis as an

emergency management measure. Reportedly, the Power Division has finally selected three rental power plants. What, however, is intriguing is how the costly rental for a term of "fifteen years" can be an emergency measure and why it was created.

Electricity in Bangladesh is synonymous with urban dwellers. Three to four hours outage is now common in the cities and towns, while the reverse is true in remote villages.

A similar power crisis was witnessed in mid-1996 due to non-fulfilment of megawatt targets in the four five-year plan period (1991-96). 590 MW shortage was created during the period against a forecasted demand of additional 1000 MW (200 MW annually) then. The fifth five-year plan (1996-2001) witnessed a historical improvement, additional 1,750 MW (350 MW annually), showing a total surplus of 500 MW.

The present government barely survived the first two years of their five-year tenure for the surplus

created earlier. Now, the Ministry of Energy is trapped in the challenge of generating additional 350 MW annually i.e. 1,750 MW during 2001-2006.

Against this huge demand, so far 80 MW Tongi plant is the only visible contribution of the present government with their own planning and execution. Even this plant tripped 39 times between March and September 2005 and incurred a loss of Taka 34 crore by not being able to sell power from the low quality plant installed at a cost of about Taka 360 crore.

Incidentally, a 100 MW gas turbine plant costs about \$35 million (including erection and commissioning) in the international power market. However, BPDB's experience with Chinese suppliers' plants are horrendous. The first 210 MW plant at Rauzan, Chittagong encountered over 72 times scheduled and unscheduled outage up to 1997 (commissioned in 1993).

Load-shedding in the evening peak time is a common phenomenon. Day time shedding has now added to the distress along with low voltage that damages the motors of agricultural pumps as well. Apparently, the Ministry of Energy is either unaware or unconcerned that a mandatory policy decision was made in 1996 to support the agricultural pumps that would operate during night only (between 12 and 6am) everyday to avoid load-shedding and low voltage.

The decision worked well because it offered a dual advantage: first, it ensured uninterrupted quality electricity for six hours and second, it hindered stealing in the nearby residences for fear of being caught. Unfortunately, radio and television advocacy program for farmers has also been suspended!

The prescription for reducing load-shedding for this summer is the same as it was in the past years, load management, closing of shops etc. But, as usual, nothing seems to be enforced. The government deceives itself by underestimating the demand (to around 4,000 MW, while the government-adopted Power System Master Plan, 1995 demand scenario was shown at over 5,000 MW in 2006) and "over-estimating" the supply to around 3,800 to 3,900 MW. Nevertheless, during the peak summer (of 2006) load-shedding is likely to range between 1,600 to 1,800 MW, if not more.

Though the Energy Ministry is complacent about the power situation, understandably there is a frantic flurry of activity in the Prime Minister's Office. Perhaps, the cabinet has not yet scheduled any emergency meeting on electricity. But the State Minister for Power Iqbal Hassan Mahmud is busy counting the number of plant shut-down and generation loss, etc. Mark Twain once commented that some people use statistics the way a drunk uses lamp-post -- not for light,

but for support.

We Bangladeshis are crisis-oriented and crisis-callous. Our political masters and the bureaucrats who are comfortably sitting in the driving seat do not seem to understand that it is rationally unlikely for the power crisis to be over soon. Through some miracle, some improvement may be in sight by end 2008. But as soon as the crisis leaves the front page and nobody is held accountable, the wolf would come.

In our case, the wolf was indeed at the door earlier last winter; it has gone away for a time. But it will surely be back, and may well bring the whole pack with it. For beyond this summer looms the peak load demand of over 5,500 MW in the summer of 2007.

Indeed, it might appear to many that the Ministry of Energy does not have adequate and appropriate policies and programs for implementation. Even if they exist, they are there for academic interactions in seminars. Some citizens say that the government has responded to the demands of business houses for action in an uncoordinated, spot basis, seeking remedy for the immediate pains we were complaining about the loudest.

The truck mounted or skid mounted power plants would not solve the crisis. It is time to insist on a thorough health check-up (in the power sector). Admittedly, we are suffering from mental malnutrition.

We should now take time to read and understand the labels on the medicine bottles. The one thing we must guard against is taking a panic dose of wrong medicines, as we have been doing in the past three years.

In our unrestrained exuberance, and pursuit of many goals, we have created electricity famine that was never expected of a democratic government. There already exists an anomalous situation between the urban and rural, the old and so-called new Dhaka electricity management to supply on the one hand, and inequitable generation between the east and west zone, on the other.

The Pali Biddut Samities' (PBSs) consumers suffer most. At times for days even weeks electricity does not reach some PBSs but the people have to pay for even a non-consumption of power. Recently, some residents of Kansat, Chapainawabganj, protested. And for the first time, in the history of Bangladesh, twenty innocent residents of Kansat were killed and many others were injured in police firing on demonstrations.

Instead of sympathizing with the poor rural people's tragedy, the State Minister Iqbal Hassan Mahmud said: "I strongly believe there was politics behind Kansat incident." "While the people of Bangladesh have become extremely concerned about highly volatile energy supply and its conse-

quent impact on energy security in the country, the Ministry of Energy is busy formulating energy export policies. Amazingly, an accomplished academicians of Bangladesh also supports undersale of one energy resource through indirect export!

The Energy Adviser, by way of making a wish list for 300 MW new generation from renewable resource, indicated a total power demand of 6,000 MW up to 2011. This forecast, however, contradicts the Power Division's published monogram which shows a demand target of 9,840 MW by 2012 and indicates an additional need of 6,210 MW by 2012 or about 690 MW annually.

It is no wonder that Bangladesh needs power to improve its economic health. No one doubts this. Perhaps the authorities are not certain. Yet, before the next national election, the government intends to show that they would like to provide affordable and reliable electricity. How that will happen? No one knows. They are neither strong willed nor focused on electricity.

Now, we know the best and the worst that could happen to us and what it would cost. The nation in now faced with the fundamental issue of how to balance electricity demand and supply most advantageously in the periods beyond 2006.

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Japan-Korea islet spat

CLOSEUP JAPAN

Scarcity of resources is compelling many countries to look for valuable deposits deep under the sea. But the law that defines the rights of a state to claim the legitimacy over the sea areas becomes confusing when the territorial expansion of sea territory overlaps with that of another country. Neighbours, therefore, have an obligation to discuss and try to find a durable solution that would satisfy the demands of all parties concerned. Unless Japan and South Korea resolve the issue of the islets in a comprehensive manner, Takeshima is bound to re-emerge again and again whenever the leadership of either of the two countries intends to resort to the narrow world of nationalism with an eye fixed firmly on improving their ratings within the country.

MONZURUL HUQ *Writes from Tokyo*

IN the beginning was the word and the word was God. It is all in words that many of our disputes too have their origin. If the Tower of Babel is the symbol of God's desire to prevent human beings reaching the height where the divines are to dwell, it is we, humans who make the possibility of touching the sky impossible by creating new fictitious dividing lines that keep us eternally separated from each other. And all over the world such dividing lines and claims of ownership are continuing to create new problems, despite the fact that outwardly our world seems to be coming closer than ever before.

Long back in history, ownership of something seen or reached for the first time was a normal and accepted practice, no matter if people had inhabited a place for hundreds of years. Christopher Columbus reached the shores of Americas for the first time in history sailing from the continent on the verge of modernity and unprecedented expansion of its influence. He claimed the ownership of the whole territory on behalf of the Queen of Spain, ignoring the fact that the land was not a terra nostra as human civilisation had already taken roots over there long before Columbus reached the continent and much earlier than the Europeans themselves turned civilised.

So, the claims of territories by states are a superficial concept that often runs contrary to the reality of situation. And if a territory is a barren or a thinly populated one, the legacy might continue for very long, even long after the word colonialism turned obsolete and meaningless. The Island of Malvinas, what the present day owners call Falkland Island, is a typical example of that absurdity as the territory is being governed from London. A very thinly populated stretch of land situated at the southern end of Atlantic allowed the colonial rulers to turn a blind eye and continue claiming the ownership. Colonialism after all is subjugation of people, not the land. But barren lands, or rather a few empty rocks floating above water can also flare disputes among countries, precisely because the ownership of such rocks might give a country legitimate right to extend the sea area of its exclusive belonging to a further 200 kilometres from that particular point. That is why rocks everywhere in the sea have suddenly become so important and not a single country is willing to give up

the right to their ownership.

The Islets of Takeshima, known in Korean language as Dokdo, fall precisely into the category of rocks floating above the water in the Sea of Japan. In recent days the islets have become new flashpoint of rivalry between Japan and South Korea as both are claiming the ownership of the rocks, citing historical facts and figures as well as other relevant examples supporting the claim. Situated off the coast of western part of Japan's main Honshu Island, the islets of Takeshima was incorporated to the administration of Shimane prefecture almost 100 years ago. This is the main point that Japan stresses in claiming the ownership of the disputed rocks, which has been occupied by South Korean naval forces for quite sometime now.

South Korea on her part claims that the origin of the name Dokdo traces back much earlier and they also do not hesitate to mention that at the time Japan put the islets under the administrative jurisdiction of Shimane prefecture, the country was too weak to prevent any such Japanese move. It should be noted that Japan invaded Korean Peninsula in 1910 and kept the territory under Tokyo's colonial subjugation until the end of World War II.

Takeshima or Dokdo, whatever the real name is, suddenly re-emerged in the limelight of international news as the two outwardly friendly neighbours all of a sudden started flexing muscles for an apparent show off of strength to claim the ownership of the rocks. It all started with words or vocabularies. The South Korean government earlier made an official announcement of its desire to submit a proposal at an international conference scheduled in June to register Korean names for seabed features near the disputed islets. The Japanese side was worried that the move, if not stopped in time, might even prompt South Korean authorities to move further and propose the change of name of the Sea of Japan as well, which the Koreans refer to as East Sea. That was the starting point of a new muscle flexing game surrounding names or words in vocabulary.

To counter the Korean move, Japan resorted to a different tactic. Without losing much time, Tokyo made an announcement declaring Japan's intention to dispatch a number of Coast Guard vessels to the areas near the rocks to conduct a seabed survey off the South Korean held islets. This was soon

followed by sharp exchanges of words between the two sides and South Koreans made it clear that they would seize any Japanese survey vessel if entered waters near the rocky islets. As both sides refused the back down from their respective position, they eventually decided to hold high-level meetings during the weekend to find a possible solution to the standoff.

The weekend discussions held in Seoul between the foreign secretaries of two countries eventually led to a last minute compromise that was helpful in defusing the tension for the time being. The two sides have agreed that Japan will postpone the plan to conduct the survey and in return South Korea will refrain from submitting a proposal at the international conference for giving seabed features Korean names. The two governments also agreed to resume talks in May over setting an agreed Exclusive Economic Zone line, which has been seen by experts as the sticky point that flared the recent outburst of controversy.

With new economic powers on the rise, East Asia is gradually becoming an area of growing tension and mistrust. Japan is already having serious territorial dispute with China concerning another set of small islands in East China Sea. Japan is accusing China for starting the extraction of natural gas from an underwater gas field, claiming that Chinese drilling is siphoning off gas deposits from the Japanese side of the dividing line. China so far has simply ignored such Japanese complaint and is saying that they are involved in deep sea drilling only in areas that belong to them.

Scarcity of resources is compelling many countries to look for valuable deposits deep under the sea. But the law that defines the rights of a state to claim the legitimacy over the sea areas becomes confusing when the territorial expansion of sea territory overlaps with that of another country. Neighbours, therefore, have an obligation to discuss and try to find a durable solution that would satisfy the demands of all parties concerned. Unless Japan and South Korea resolve the issue of the islets in a comprehensive manner, Takeshima is bound to re-emerge again and again whenever the leadership of either of the two countries intends to resort to the narrow world of nationalism with an eye fixed firmly on improving their ratings within the country.

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Population growth rate rising again

In the years 2004 and 2003, population growth rates in Bangladesh were 2.8 per cent and 2.6 per cent respectively. From the year 2000 to the year 2002, each year the annual population growth rate was 1.59 per cent. How come, when population control is one of our most important national priorities, our annual population growth rate has jumped up from 1.59 per cent to 2.9 percent in three years!

FARUQUE HASAN

BELIEVE it or not, in Bangladesh where 1,300 people squeeze into one square mile, population growth rate was 2.9 per cent last year. The US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) has revealed this figure in its Fact Book, though our government has been hiding this statistic very cautiously, perhaps out of shame, if it at all possesses that.

Our performance in the field of family planning was equally dismal during the two years previous to the year mentioned above. In the years 2004 and 2003, population growth rates in Bangladesh were 2.8 per cent and 2.6 per cent respectively. From the year 2000 to the year 2002, each year the annual population growth rate was 1.59 per cent.

How come, when population control is one of our most important national priorities, our annual population growth rate has jumped up from 1.59 per cent to 2.9 percent in three years! Our official target is to reduce annual population growth rate to 1 per cent by the year 2010. The target sounds now a joke.

What has caused the popula-

tion growth rate in Bangladesh to shoot up over the last three years? According to Unicef, infant (under one year of age) mortality rate in Bangladesh has reduced from 149 per thousand in 1960 to 46 per thousand in 2003; and under-5 child mortality rates has reduced from 248 per thousand in 1960 to 69 per thousand in 2003. Again, the same UN organization says, in Bangladesh, the life expectancy has gone up from 44 years in 1970 to 62 years in 2003.

We could not step up our family planning program, keeping pace with the reduced child mortality and heightened life expectancy. This situation has contributed to the waxing of the annual population growth rate in the country. Our family planning program has become almost moribund, as it has not been getting periodical prodding from the international donor countries and agencies. The donors have now been busier in combating HIV/Aids, giving less importance to family planning.

A few years back, donors advised our government to stop house-to-house family planning service and open family planning clinics at locality level; we complied with that advice. This change of strategy in family planning program has also contributed to

the shooting up of our annual population growth rate over the last few years. Now the donors concede their mistake in giving such advice and we are paying the price of that mistake.

As we know, Sonargaon was one of the ancient capitals of Bangladesh, 28 kms south of Dhaka. A few years back, some of my friends and I took a motor-launch from Sonargaon for a river cruise in the river Megna. After about two hours journey downstream we reached a shoal. At that place, the Megna is so wide that it is impossible to see either of the banks of the river from that shoal. The motor-launch anchored at the shoal; we disembarked from the boat to be greeted by hundreds of pot-bellied, rickety and half naked children. While walking along, I asked one of them whether he used to go to school. The answer was no, as there was no school on the shoal.

A few grown ups came forwards to meet us. I asked them what was the name of the shoal.

"I don't know," answered one of them.

"Balur Char," someone said from behind.

"No, that's not the name," protested another person.

This short conversation meant

that the shoal had no name till then, such a new shoal it was.

We went up to the dwelling place of the shoal. There we found young women clustering around with suckling children at their laps. Children of all ages were there everywhere. A new shoal with such a high population! Unimaginable.

"They need family planning," I said in a low voice to a friend standing beside me. One of the women, who seemed ready-witted among her companions, overheard me and said to us, "What can we do, there's no medicine on this shoal."

By the word medicine she actually meant contraceptives.

It is the duty of the government to bring each and every remote area of the country under a family planning program to make contraceptives available to each fertile couple. There is no scope on the part of the government to shirk this duty, if we don't want to be bogged down deeper with the weight of over-population.

Someone among the shoal dwellers told me that once the visiting British High Commissioner (not the honourable present High Commissioner) promised to set up a school on the shoal. I don't know whether the shoal dwellers have already got the school. If they have not yet got a school, then the government should set a school there for the children of the shoal.

Not only our towns, even our villages have become extremely crowded. These days children swarm everywhere in a village of

Bangladesh. They belong to the "vaccination generation." We have been successful in reducing the child mortality rate through pursuing an aggressive child immunization program; but utterly have failed in half-hearted birth control program.

The "vaccination generation" is coming up of age. They will need job, shelter, clothes, and medicine. Will it be possible for the government to provide jobs to so many young people entering the job market every year? What future is waiting for this generation? Till now we have been able to increase our food production. But how far will we be able to do so? No doubt, our soil is extremely fertile; still this soil has is yield limitation. Every year, expansion of urban areas due to ever-increasing population is engulfing more and more of our arable lands. Rivers, canals, wetlands, hills, forests, etc of the country are being encroached upon by the extra population.

We as a nation remains obsessed with the political hurly-burly in the country, in what America is doing in Iraq, in debate on "who is the declarer of independence," and so on. We must turn our attention to the serious problems our nation is facing and concentrate all our efforts to get rid of those problems.

We must think of what Bangladesh we are leaving behind for our children.

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Who are running this country anyway?

The list of failure, mismanagement, malpractice and plundering must be much longer than reported in the newspapers. And the authenticity of the reports is conspicuous on the very face of the naked, underfed and even unfed children and women living in both the city slums and villages of this country. Doubtless there are stories of 'successes' also but at what cost and how many, in comparison to those of failures?

M SHAUKAT ALI

NEWSPAPER reports of the last one month saying traders of different shopping centres of the city held hostage by toll-takers, police fire on picketing farmers demanding regular power supply for cultivation, power crisis paralyses both industries and public life; common people at Kansat raise their voice for survival, MPs and Ministers shamelessly trading their honour as people's representatives; Bangladesh Biman paralysed by corrupt officialdom; farmers gherao DC offices for fertilizer, garment factories have virtually become gas chambers for poor unfortunate female workers and

last but not the least the failure of the government to curb and control the prices of daily necessities are all glaring instances of sheer incompetence on the part of the government machinery.

That Biman has become a 'kamdhenu' for high-ups, plundering crores of taka every year, Bangladesh Railway has been paralysed with ulterior motives while the Minister for Communication brags of introducing Maglev train on Dhaka-Chittagong rail route, mills and factories in the third largest industrial city of erstwhile East Pakistan are on the verge of extinction (while jute mills on the bordering areas of our neighbouring country are reported to be fattening every

year), sugar mills running at loss though sugar price is sky-high, no hope of improvement in power sector in sight, failure to realise compensation from UNOCOL and NIKO etc. are only a few examples of the inexcusable incompetence of the administration.

The Finance Minister does not feel shy to bloat about the increasing allocations in his routine budget while fattening the so-called public representatives and their sycophants through squandering public money continues viciously squeezing the common people dry. Crores of taka is being spent to embellish the already-glossed life-style of those in power and position while funds are falling short for doing the precious little

things most needed for the benefit of the common people. Millions of unemployed youths are passing days in torment and despair but effective efforts to create employment opportunity still remain a far cry.

The apparently incompetent hands in the government has rendered the public land transport system almost lame, rather cunningly pawning the common people to the private motor transport owners' syndicate. In this very heart of the country -- the capital city -- a few roads are being 'beautified' on a regular basis while in many parts city dwellers are passing days in intolerable sufferings for lack of commutable roads, water and power supply. There's only Tk 5/- allocated per head for healthcare while rampant and shameless plunder -- as was reported in a number of dailies -- is going on in the BSMMU (formerly PG Hospital).

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When can we expect our 'un-compromising' leaders will wake from slumber to deal with the incapable and incompetent junkies of administration with uncompromising sternness and sagacity? Or have they been held hostage to the plundering and vicious politics of the country?

Alas, with what zeal and expectation did the mass vote them to power! How long have we to be waiting for a leader as farsighted and patriotic as Mahathir or Lee Quan U? Is it our destiny to be perpetually ruled by shamelessly greedy, imprudent and quarrelsome leaders?

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