

Urgent action needed Gas field leak threatening blowout

HERE is a looming catastrophe centring around the third well of Titas gas field as analysed and reported in the front page of yesterday's Daily Star issue.

Gas is leaking out at an alarming rate of 15 to 18million cubic feet a day, the waste costing half a million US dollar daily. Even though the engineers of BAPEX, the agency assigned to handle the situation ignoring the eight experts' advice in early February for hiring international consultancy, have put in place pipe outlets, the pressure at the well remains in a critical state. Although an imminent disaster has been averted, portents are in evidence nonetheless threatening a major blowout in the area.

The energy ministry has been in a denial mode in acknowledging the gravity of the situation. Aside from ignoring the local people's report of a developing leak there have been two concrete instances of underplaying the situation. At first the 'angle of the photograph' carried by The Daily Star was perceived to have 'made the gas leakage look magnified and that such leakage in the locality was not unusual'. The ministry basically chose to overlook the Daily Star reports in February containing early warnings and experts' advice to seek international consultancy, this on the ground that the BAPEX, an exploration agency, didn't have the experience of, nor the technology for, handling such trouble in an operationally large gas field. The denial mode can also be read into the instructions given to the concerned officials not to talk to the media.

There are basically two options in the current situation, either we ask for help from any foreign oil companies operating in Bangladesh under contracts, or we hire a reputed international consultancy group to solve the problem. True, this will entail some expenses but it will be worth the money in the sense that a hugely costly disaster would be averted and millions of cubic feet of the finite resource could be saved.

We urge the government to urgently convene an inter-ministerial meeting and decide at the highest level for seeking necessary help to address the problem in the most modern, scientific and expeditious manner.

PID advice to media

What purpose will it serve?

THE PID advice to the media has come as a great surprise and shock to us. It seems to provoke an unnecessary controversy over the role of the press. We find it difficult to understand whose interest will be served by such sweeping generalisations about the role and functioning of the media.

It is ill-conceived and uncalled for and will only contribute to distancing the media from the government. Even if the government has anything to say about the way the media has been dealing with different issues, it should engage with the newspapers that (in its perception) are publishing "misinformative" reports. A vague generalisation will not help anybody -- it can only send confusing signals. The PID should point out specifically the stories that they consider to be "ill-motivated" and the newspapers publishing them. It will obviously leave a bad taste in the mouth if such charges are brought against the media as a whole and will be a disservice to the newspapers pursuing responsible journalism. It is frustrating especially when the Chief Adviser of the Caretaker Government is on record having said something to the effect that in the absence of a parliament the media is performing as a centre of debate and also playing a watchdog role. So, there should be no room for any confusion about the way the media is working.

It is not known who advised the PID to issue such a note. Obviously, keeping the channels of information open is vital to the functioning of the caretaker government, or any government, for that matter. The way the PID letter ends is a veiled threat to the media. Does it convey the message that the government will not be flexible and tolerant to the press in future?

The chief adviser's observation gave a picture of the press playing a constructive role. But the deviation from the appreciative line of thinking may obstruct the smooth functioning of the press. The decision makers have to realise that the press is here not only to highlight the positive actions of the government, but also to expose its flaws and mistakes.

Clear the confusions or lose credibility

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

The nation will not countenance a situation where the corrupt are set free to enjoy their ill-gotten wealth in greater comfort and ease. The law must be applied equally and these people must also be given the chance to disprove the charges against them. The people are not sure what to make of these developments. The confusions must be removed or else the risk of losing credibility is great.

appear not as mere subjective perception but because of the mixed signals that its actions have conveyed to the people. It is our belief that if the contradictions are allowed to deepen and not cleared immediately it will be the credibility of the government that will suffer. A recent government handout has advised the media not to publish reports that might create confusion in the minds of the public. A good advice, that is equally applicable to the government also.

Let us take the issue of the legal procedures in respect of the case of extortion brought against an ex-prime minister. There is not enough at this stage to determine the merit of the case, and in any case it is the court of law that would be the judge of the merit of the case. But a wrong message has been conveyed by the comment of the advisor for law that not only seeks to pre-judge the case but also puts across the impression that the executive is interfering with the legal and

judicial process.

One wonders whether it is appropriate for an advisor to suggest what the course of action the police should follow in taking cognizance of a complaint alleging extortion, and whether to take cognizance of an offence at all. A final report by the police is given only after an enquiry has been completed and it is for the judiciary to decide what the status of the accused should be during the process of investigation, not the executive. Thus one may not be wrong in suggesting that the case against the leader of the Awami League for seeking illegal gratification to the tune of taka three crores, as outlandish and ill-motivated as it may be, can only be dismissed by the relevant agency after due investigation.

One also feels confused to hear that certain category of people in Bangladesh are immune against certain types of allegations. As we got to learn from the comments of the same advisor, charges of extortion

cannot be brought against an ex-prime minister. At a television talk show recently, a repetition of what he said on the issue earlier, the law and information adviser had termed the extortion case against Awami League president, Sheikh Hasina, "peculiar" and said that the caretaker government would examine the case and take action only if the allegations are proved to be true. He not only made a value judgment on the case, he queried the justification of instituting such a case by saying: "Why such a case will be filed against a former prime minister? Rather, it should have been a corruption case." Which, one would like to ask, is the appropriate forum to prove or disprove an allegation?

I am a legal ignoramus and have poor knowledge about the CrPC, but common sense prevents me from accepting the argument that a citizen cannot seek justice in the court of law if the respondent happens to be an ex-prime minister. Does this not amount to treating criminal cases

in a selective manner? Is there different criterion for different people when it comes to the application of the law?

Related to this is the statement of the advisor that the government will go for amending the CrPC, to curb the power of arrest of the police on the basis of a complaint. The motive behind such a motive is holy there is no doubt. The reform is necessary, according to him, so that the police cannot harass anyone. One would welcome any step by the government that would spare the public unnecessary harassment. But that the intention of the government came in the wake of the extortion case against the head of political party suggests that some citizen are being made more equal than others, at least in the eyes of the administration if not the law.

One is a bit confused too at the news of the possible exile of the two ex prime ministers. While the government claims that there are no such plans the media reports indicate otherwise. There are two assumptions that one could make at the recent speculations about the future of the two ladies. That they are being sent abroad as an expedient to provide a clean and level playing field for a free and fair election. And two, the government is not willing to go through the hassles of long drawn legal procedures against these leaders

(should there be a need to do so). And that is where the confusion is. The government should take the people into confidence and make it clear why such an action has become necessary, if at all.

However, if there are charges that these leaders should answer and if these relate to corruption, either by them or by their relatives or party men, then all the talk about seeing the end of corruption will turn out to be hollow if they are not made to answer the charges. It will be great disservice to the nation if those that are alleged to have not only amassed crores of taka but have also further deprived the nation by siphoning their ill-gotten money abroad, are allowed free as a part of a deal that seeks to gain narrow political dividend out of it.

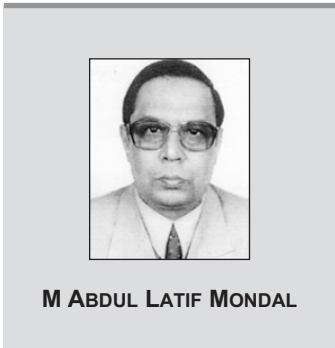
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The author is Editor, Defense & Strategic Affairs, The Daily Star.

Diverting rice from FFW to OMS

BARE FACTS

The FFW program should not only be continued, but also strengthened in future, to benefit the rural poor and to instill in them a sense of pride in earning their livelihood, even if seasonally, from working in a program of the government rather than going for government relief materials. The government has to devise mechanisms to remove the existing loopholes in the FFW program, to serve the interest of the targeted group, i.e. rural poor.



M ABDUL LATIF MONDAL

NEWSPAPER reports and food and disaster management ministry sources reveal that the reconstituted caretaker government (CTG) has recently decided to divert 1.17 lakh tons of rice worth about Tk 209 crore to the open market sales (OMS) drive from this fiscal year's (2006-07) budgetary allocation for food for work (FFW) program.

The government sources suggest, inter alia, the following reasons for this policy shift.

- The government has decided to utilize 1.17 lakh tons of rice for OMS operation out of the current fiscal year's total allocation of 2.17 lakh tons for FFW program, since it was almost impossible to implement the FFW program during the remaining days of the current fiscal year.
- The political turmoil at the end of the last calendar year (2006) hampered the full implementation of the already allocated

one lakh tons of rice for FFW program, and this forced the incumbent CTG to go for a policy shift.

- The availability of 1.17 lakh tons of rice for OMS drive till the fourth week of April is likely to help stabilize the price of rice in the open market.
- The diversion of budgetary money will give the exchequer a benefit of Tk 161 crore, instead of exhaustion of the subsidy of Tk 104 crore that the immediate past government allocated in the current budget for covering trade gap between selling and buying prices of OMS of rice.

Some economists, nutritionists and persons experienced in public food distribution systems (PFDS) have raised questions about the correctness of the decision to divert rice from FFW program to OMS operation. The grounds for their questioning the decision are summarized below.

First, the operation of the FFW program normally starts in full

swing in January and lasts through May. This time there existed no possibility of misappropriation of the allocation for FFW program by the MPs, in view of the fact that the country has been under CTG since October 29, 2006.

What is more important is that placement of the country under emergency rule since January 11 created an atmosphere for smooth operation of the FFW program by the local administration without any political interference. So, it is not clear as to why one lakh tons of rice already allocated for FFW program could not be utilized.

Second, FFW, the most important among the non-monetized channels of PFDS, was introduced in 1974 in a situation of acute food shortage in the country, when the people, particularly in the greater Rangpur area, were facing starvation due to high price of food grain in rural market and rural unemployment.

The immediate objective of the program was to create job opportunities in rural areas and, at the

same time, to ensure the supply of food grains in the affected areas. The idea was to pay wages to the workers in kind (food grains) instead of cash, which has many alternative uses, to enable the poor to get the minimum calories for their survival. So, the present policy shift will affect the rural poor who are the targeted beneficiaries of the FFW scheme.

Third, FFW scheme contributes to the development of rural infrastructure which include road rehabilitation/construction, building of small dams for flood control, digging of ponds and canals, desalinization of rivers, re-excavation of fish ponds and water tanks, construction of raised platforms (flood shelters) and the like. Diverting allocation from FFW program to OMS operation will stall those rural infrastructure development activities.

Fourth, many of the rural poor prefer to work for FFW programs, rather than asking for government relief. FFW programs, thus, help shun the relief culture to a consid-

erable extent, and makes poor people self-reliant, at least seasonally, by providing employment opportunities.

Fifth, access to food is the most important component of food security, which has been defined as access by all people at all times to the food needed for an active and healthy life (the other two components being availability of food and utilization of food).

The rural poor, who constitute 70 plus percent of the total rural population (according to the report of population census 2001, rural population constitute 76.6 percent of the total population of the country), need work to earn money for procuring food from the market.

FFW program gives the rural poor workers an opportunity to earn their livelihood between the aman and boro harvesting periods, particularly in March and April, which is one of the two food crisis periods every year. The rural poor have already started suffering from the adverse effects of the policy shift.

Last but not the least, OMS of coarse rice that started from March 18 in the capital, and other metropolitan cities and district towns, has not been able to create a favourable impact on the prices of rice in the open market.

In the first week of March, the price of coarse rice, which is eaten by 85 plus percent people of the country, was between Tk 20 and

Tk 22 per kg in the retail market. The daily Ittefaq reported 4.88 percent increase in the price of coarse rice in the second week of April, compared with the price in the first week of that month. The Daily Star of April 16 reported increase of rice price by Tk 1-2 a kg in comparison with the price of the previous week.

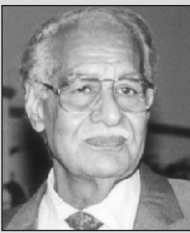
OMS is a short-term measure, and it cannot be continued for months due to the food department's limited budget for the program, and its benefit accruing to a fraction of the urban low-income group.

The vast rural population, particularly the rural poor, is not the beneficiary of the OMS drive, and this alone is sufficient to discourage diversion of the budgeted allocation of rice from the FFW scheme to OMS operation.

In view of what has been stated above, the FFW program should not only be continued, but also strengthened in future, to benefit the rural poor and to instill in them a sense of pride in earning their livelihood, even if seasonally, from working in a program of the government rather than going for government relief materials. The government has to devise mechanisms to remove the existing loopholes in the FFW program, to serve the interest of the targeted group, i.e. rural poor.

M. Abdul Latif Mondal is a former Secretary to the government.

Electoral confusion in UP



KULDEEP NAYAR
writes from New Delhi

A short visit to Lucknow, even after one-fourth of the polling is over, does not clear the electoral confusion that prevails in UP. The state has a population of 180 million, more than Pakistan or Bangladesh. Yet, what makes the confusion more confounding is not the number of people but the proliferation of candidates, political parties and out and out criminals.

The state, like Bihar, has got divided and subdivided into castes, sub-castes and even smaller identities. Sectarian appeals have come to sway them. The outcome of the election may depend on how far a leader has been able to consolidate his posi-

BETWEEN THE LINES

As the nation goes from one election to the other, whether it is for parliament, the state legislature or the local body, it appears that criminals, casteists and money-bags are gaining ground. Politicians are increasingly subservient to them. We do not face any danger of losing the democratic system, but it is wanting in the quality of democracy which makes it meaningful.

tion in favour of the caste he or she represents.

Crime and money are playing their part, and the underworld is supplying the wherewithal from Mumbai and even beyond. Scores of candidates are history-sheets and have strong connections with the most undesirable elements. The Central Election Commission (CEC) has posted paramilitary forces from outside the state to make the tainted local police irrelevant. Similarly, the CEC has transferred officers known for their party allegiance.

Unfortunately, the state has a horde of former chief ministers who, even in the wilderness, continue to have a few top IAS and IPS officers in their tow. As before,

the election has turned into a caste war, with religious leaders holding their drooping flags and raising stale slogans.

Chief Minister Mulayam Singh Yadav leads other back classes (OBC), and former chief minister Mayawati, the dalits. Both sides are wracked by revolts from within. Mulayam Singh's yadavs are pitted against yadavs and kurmis, and the dalits against dalits and chamars. The yawning gap in the Mulayam Singh ranks is larger than the one in the Mayawati camp. But his plus point is the support of Muslims all over the state.

Despite the uncertain scenario, the two main contestants who have enlarged their space are:

Mulayam Singh's Samajwadi Party and Mayawati's Bahujan Samaj Party. The BJP is third and the Congress does not count for much. What comes out clearly is that no political outfit is anywhere near an absolute majority in the 403-member assembly. In terms of votes, 60 percent cent of OBC remain shackled to Mulayam Singh, and 70 per cent of dalits to Mayawati. She has also tried to appeal to upper castes by fielding candidates from among them. This may prove to be her trump card.

Still, the bulk of upper castes avow their allegiance to the BJP, which is emerging from its poor third position to a close second. The party has got a flip following its victories in Delhi and Mumbai

municipal elections, and the assembly polls in Punjab and Uttarakhnad. What is visible this time about the BJP is not so much of the pro-Hindutva profile but its open, blatant anti-Muslim campaign.

The party intentionally released a cassette abusing Muslims all the way, to begin its campaign in the state. The reason it withdrew the cassette was not because the party realised that it had gone too far to vilify Muslims, but because the CEC had taken adverse notice of it. As expected, the party gave a political colouring to the episode. It was the crime which BJP president Rajnath Singh was trying to cover with satyagrah, and pretending as if he was fighting for the truth.

At the time of writing, the CEC's decision was not known. But this incident proved -- if any further proof was needed -- that the BJP was behind second to none in demolishing institutions like the CEC and polluting the atmosphere. Fortunately, communal thinking has not yet contaminated the countryside, where the popula-

tion is mixed and where people do not fancy a slogan, song or poster abusing Muslims who have lived in their midst peacefully for centuries. Muslims have a 15 per cent vote in UP. The BJP which has based its electoral strategy on hatred against them must have calculated that it would not get a single vote from them.

Muslims look like picking the winning candidates and voting en bloc for them against the BJP nominees. They did this in the last general election, and contributed to reducing the strength of the BJP and its allies in the Lok Sabha. The community would have returned to the Congress after having vainly tried others in the last three decades.

But the party is hopelessly weak, and has targeted not the BJP but Mulayam Singh who has a secular image. I wonder whether the Congress has not started on the wrong foot. Rahul Gandhi, Congress president Sonia Gandhi's only son, initiated the campaign with the statement that "the Babri masjid at Ayodhya would not have been demolished had a Gandhi been in the prime

minister's chair."

This remark, however innocent, has unnecessarily divided the party. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh had to come to the defence of Narasimha Rao who was the Congress prime minister at the time of the Babri masjid's destruction. The opposition has exploited the fact that Rahul's father, Rajiv Gandhi, had opened the locks of the Babri masjid and had started the election campaign from Ayodhya.

Indeed, Rahul Gandhi has attracted attention. His visit to Deoband, the Islamic learning centre which once reflected the Congress thinking, has been the high point of his tour to UP. Conservative clerics who opposed partition are impressed with him. He may appear to be a babe in the woods, but he comes out transparently secular and devoid of political humbug. He has a mind of his own, although it looks as if he is being curbed and contained. The party is trying its best to improve its tally of 25 in the last assembly to a figure of 40 or 45. Were it to do so, it would carry enough weight in the

assembly, which might be hung once again.

Diversities, in a way, are India's strength. But when they take the shape of compartmentalisation, as is beginning to happen, they are in the way of unity. The election results will show whether the diversity of castes is a passing phenomenon, and whether the voters transcend such barriers when they queue up before the polling booth. My worry is that the voter is succumbing to appeals in the name of jat (caste) and dharam (religion), and not assessing the merits and demerits of candidates.

As the nation goes from one election to the other, whether it is for parliament, the state legislature or the local body, it appears that criminals, casteists and money-bags are gaining ground. Politicians are increasingly subservient to them. We do not face any danger of losing the democratic system, but it is wanting in the quality of democracy which makes it meaningful.

Kuldeep Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.