

Let's import gas from Myanmar



FARUQUE HASAN

FAST growing economies like India, China, and Thailand have been importing natural gas, and will continue to do so in the future to keep the wheels moving.

Yes, we are also one of the fastest growing economies in the world. The World Bank fact sheet 2005-2006 says that Bangladesh is

the tenth most rapidly growing economy among 31 developing countries.

In its Global Economics Paper, issue number 134 published on December 1, 2005, Goldman Sachs has placed Bangladesh among the "next 11" countries, after Brazil, Russia, India, and China, which have the potential to be substantial economies in the next decade.

Against all odds, our country is showing encouraging economic growth thanks to the intelligent and enterprising people. With a corruption free administration, uninterrupted power supply and efficient ports, our annual economic growth rate will certainly reach double-digit. Robust growth of the economy will make Bangladesh an energy-hungry country. What are we thinking of to meet our growing

energy needs and energy security?

A couple of years ago, we were told by our friends to export gas to India; as if Bangladesh would always remain an industrially backward country, and our requirement for energy would never increase, therefore, we should remain happy with some earning from exporting our natural gas.

It is high time now to think seriously about importing natural gas, keeping in mind that our reserves are dwindling fast. Natural gas is not only cheaper, it is also environment friendly. We can import it from Myanmar.

It was reported few days back that, according to the adviser to the Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources, our total proven natural gas reserve is large enough to satisfy the domestic demand till 2011. It is alarming information, as we have a notion that our country is floating on natural gas.

Bangladesh, which has 20.28 tcf gas reserve, ranks 40th in the world in terms of proven gas deposits. Of this, we have already used 6 tcf. The country will be looking for more and more fuel as demand soars with rapid economic growth; and our small reserve of natural gas will

be used up in less than a decade.

In 2005, India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar agreed in principle to cooperate in a gas exploration and overland pipeline project. The pipeline would run from Arakan state in Myanmar, through Mizoram and Tripura, and cross Bangladesh before reaching Calcutta.

Both Bangladesh and India would have the right to access the pipeline as and when required, including injecting and siphoning off their own natural gas. The pipeline would bring gas reserves from the Shwe Field's Block A-1 site on the Arakan coastline along the Bay of Bengal.

This pipeline would also help Bangladesh to supply gas from its own fields in the Sylhet region, as well as from Tripura, to Khulna and Jessore.

Bangladesh laid out some pre-conditions for letting the pipeline run through its territory. We demanded reduction of trade deficit between India and Bangladesh, transit for trading goods to and from Nepal and Bhutan, and India's permission to buy cheap hydropower from Bhutan and Nepal. India refused to accept the

conditions, and is looking for a new route, Bangladesh.

India thought of eight alternative routes, bypassing Bangladesh, for importing gas from Myanmar. If the pipeline is laid through Bangladesh to West Bengal -- as was originally planned -- it would be 900km long and cost around Rs. 450 million.

If it is laid through the northeast, bypassing Bangladesh, the pipeline will be 500 km longer, and the additional cost will be to the tune of Rs. 250 million. But the transit fees to be paid by India to Bangladesh for allowing the pipeline to pass through its territory will offset the additional cost. The Indian government is, perhaps, unwilling to decide on that route for security reasons, as northeast India is under the grip of local insurgencies.

Seeing the uncertainty in execution of Myanmar-Bangladesh-India pipeline, Myanmar has declined to supply gas to that proposed pipeline. Instead, it has signed an agreement to sell 6.5 tcf from A-1 block reserve through an overland pipeline to Kunming (China) for 30 years.

Myanmar is still willing to supply gas to the proposed tri-nation gas pipeline from other gas blocks if

Bangladesh and India are successful in ironing out their differences.

As the gas from A-1 block has been sold to China, we have to get it from block A-2, though at least 150 km additional pipeline will have to be laid to reach that gas field.

India may think that we should be happy with \$125 million annually as transit fees from the pipeline, so we should not tag any conditions to it. But transit fees must not be our main concern. We are to forgo the conditions we tagged to the gas pipeline, not to earn the transit fees, but to use that pipeline to import gas at a cheaper price. Moreover, it is our moral duty to give transit to our neighbour, no matter whether it feels the same way or not.

According to the World Bank, the demand for electricity in Bangladesh is increasing at 500 MW a year, but according to the government it is 800 MW a year. The estimates are based on the present economic background. It will not be surprising if the demand increases in two to three years, to 2,000 MW a year, with charged up economic performance. To run power plants, we will need ever-increasing amounts of natural gas and coal. The domestic production

of gas and coal will be unable to meet the requirement.

If India abandons the plan to import gas from Myanmar, then we are to go alone. The route from the Arakan coast into Bangladesh via Cox's Bazaar will be the easiest and shortest.

Moreover, this route has minimum hilly terrain. We may import gas through Bangladesh-Myanmar pipeline from that country's offshore block A-3. With the gas from Myanmar as fuel, power plants can be set up at Chittagong. We need power not only for industries, but also for irrigation of paddy fields.

Let us not dillydally, lest we lose the opportunity to access the gas at A-3 block. If the question of choice between the Myanmar-Bangladesh-India pipeline and the Myanmar-Bangladesh pipeline arises, then we must go for the first one; if no question of choice arises then we are to go for the second one.

Faruque Hasan is a freelance contributor to the Daily Star.

Now it's our turn

It's not going to be easy but if we don't try how would we know? The adage "no risk no gain" might be pertinent. We want a better future for our young generation, but what are we willing to sacrifice to achieve it? Better future will not ring our doorbell one fine day; we'll have to work for it. Our future generations will not forgive us if we don't fulfill our obligations; our failure will be a bad example. They may remind us that we haven't done our share, so why do we expect them to do theirs.

A. BATEN

THE time has come for those people who were never in Bangladeshi politics to play a role. Good administrators, owners of and workers in profitable private or government organizations, and professionals such as doctors, engineers, lawyers, and educators should step up to play major roles in politics and in our future governments.

The current government can be their role model. Its time for us to chase out those politicians who have run the country to the ground in the last 36 years, who stole from the people rather than give them what they wanted.

People no longer trust them. Indeed, we can't afford giving them another chance. John F. Kennedy once said: "Don't ask what the country can do for you, ask what you can do for the country." Giving is also receiving. Yet it seems that our corrupt politicians did not honour this adage. That's why they have landed in jail, and honest non-politicians are running the country better than ever.

If honest individuals don't join our political system, history will likely repeat itself. We will go

backward again. Future generations will suffer due to our cowardice, and our unwillingness to take responsibility for our country. The upside of taking the chance is a bright future for the young generation as well as the country. They will remember you as their hero, and you will be able to say that you did the best you could.

Your act will encourage others to come forward, and they will be able to bring more to the pot. Together, we will create a positive environment in our politics and send strong signals to corrupt politicians. The current government has already belled the cat. Indeed, the difficult part has been done; we just have to follow their footsteps. In turn, they will likely help us out.

We have to put aside our fears, skepticism, and individual priorities, and put our country's future at the forefront. We must offer our services to the current administration. We all have something to offer. People from all strata have to step up; journalists, lawyers, teachers, businessmen, students, law enforcement individuals, and Bangladeshis living overseas, all have to contribute

more than ever to our country's future.

Time is of the essence here; the current government has done the ground-work but they have a long way to go. We have to strengthen their hands; we have to work with them any way we can; support them wholeheartedly when they do something right, and offer them constructive criticism, too, when they make mistakes.

We should help them catch corrupt individuals and keep prices of essential goods down. We should offer our services to produce more electricity, and we also have to learn how to use electricity efficiently.

These efforts will help make our economy stronger. We should welcome foreign investors and show the expatriates that the situation has improved, so they could return and offer their expertise. Let's give credit where it is due. And remember, we are all doing this for a bright future for our future generation as well as for ourselves.

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future for our young generation, but what are we willing to sacrifice to achieve it? Better future will not ring our doorbell one fine day; we'll have to work for it. Our future generations will not forgive us if we don't fulfill our obligations; our failure will be a bad example. They may remind us that we haven't done our share, so why do we expect them to do theirs.

Indeed, we have two alternatives -- we can step up, taking the country forward; or we can do nothing and allow corrupt individuals to destroy the country. We know the consequences of the second option. Indeed, we have run out of excuses.

Time is up; we can no longer toss out excuses such as this is not the right time, or the political environment is not suitable. Most likely this is the right time; it may not get any better. Besides, the opportunity may be fleeting.

This is our golden opportunity. Please look around. Things look much better; people are happier and more optimistic, and the law and order situation is improving. There will likely be a positive impact on our economy. Indeed we have nothing to lose and everything to gain.

Let's do whatever it takes to protect our country; we shall not hand it over to those who will ruin it. Let's say good-bye to the old and usher in the new; let's take ownership. Let's remember that we have everything to win and nothing to lose.

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Time for citizens to step up

MRIDUL CHOWDHURY

I still remember the moment when I read in an email that Dr Yunus had announced his willingness to form a political party - I was studying with a group of classmates who were left bewildered as I left the meeting abruptly - too ecstatic to work on assignments in a confined room. I needed fresh air, and a moment of solitary reflection to internalize the new realities opening up in Bangladesh.

The source of my jubilation was the strong belief that Dr Yunus' entry into politics through forming Nagorik Shakti (NS) would undoubtedly usher in a new era of politics in Bangladesh; where the voices of those generally trampled upon would finally find an outlet, where new platforms would be created for progressive, honest and citizen-centric politics led by the youth and, most importantly, where the existing and emerging parties would strive to live upto the standards defined by NS.

Much to my continuing disappointment, Nagorik Shakti has yet to make a formal public emergence with clearly defined political ideologies. But the need for such a platform has increased many-fold, because of the recent attempts by the caretaker government to send to exile the leaders of the major parties of the country on the basis of flimsy justifications, and the swift reversal of their decision after pressure from the media and the civil society.

Many who initially embraced the new caretaker government's resolve to fight corruption, and welcomed the military's strong

support in strengthening key democratic institutions, are now having second thoughts.

What initially seemed like an effort to give power back to the citizens is now apprehended by many to be an effort to shift power from one group to another, leaving the citizens just as powerless and voiceless.

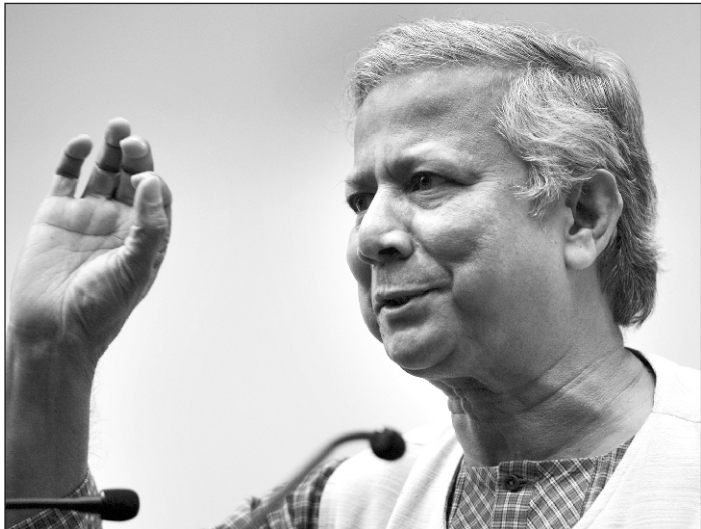
But what can we, the citizens, do under the circumstances? Should we wait to see which direction this caretaker government and the military take the country towards? Should we wait for our political leaders to take a stance? Should we wait for new parties like Nagorik Shakti to bring in fresh perspectives to politics? Perhaps not -- all of this calls for too much waiting.

We, the citizens, have to step up to make our voices heard through whatever media or platforms that we have access to. We have to express our expectations from the caretaker government, from the military, from the existing political parties, and also from the emerging parties.

We have to convey very strongly what we want, and what we don't want. Due to years of subjugation by corrupt and undemocratic rule, we, the citizens, seem to have lost faith in the fact that WE count.

The recent withdrawal of decisions regarding the exile of two leaders is a testament of the power of citizenry. We cannot just be silent observers as the "titans" battle for control of the country. We also cannot afford to be critics, just sitting on the fence blaming the leaders.

We have to get our hands dirty, open ourselves to possible criticism, and get actively involved in



shaping the country's fate. Otherwise, our inactions may be taken advantage of by the current power brokers to guide the country into yet another phase of dictatorial control with "manufactured legitimacy."

Dr Yunus has certainly taken an important first step towards creating a political platform for voicing opinions about the kind of new Bangladesh that we envision. Although he has so far hardly used that platform, it is still up to us to take courage and inspiration from this to get more politically involved, whether through Nagorik Shakti, other independent parties or existing party platforms.

I eagerly look forward to seeing many more intelligent, well-intentioned and honest (young) people rise to the occasion, either through direct political mobilization or through finding expressions through various communication

platforms.

True democracy can only begin to emerge when there are adequate opposing political views and platforms to ensure a healthy environment of check and balance -- and I sincerely hope that the cleaning up efforts of the caretaker government and the military are geared towards that rather than installing yet another "set of rulers" in an undemocratic way.

No matter where we are, or what we are doing -- it is high time that we speak out, act, and try to establish that it is really the citizens of this country who should matter at the end of the day. And that we will not be just silent observers of yet another power-play among the elite "rulers" and "ex-rulers" that only tries to gain legitimacy through muscle power and fear of repression.

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The price of deference

OWEN MATTHEWS

PRIME Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is Turkey's most talented and most popular politician. But he's apparently not talented or popular enough to break through a secularist glass ceiling to the job of president. On Tuesday, Erdoğan, bowed to political pressure and nominated Abdullah Gul, currently foreign minister, as the ruling AK Party's choice for president when the Parliament begins its vote Friday.

In theory, the job was Erdoğan's for the taking. The president is elected by parliament, where Erdoğan commands a healthy majority. But the military remains politically powerful, and all year rumblings of discontent have served as a warning for Erdoğan not to take the job. The reason? Erdoğan is seen by many in the traditionally secular nation as dangerously Islamic.

It's not that he's done much while in office to give that impression. He's made his career in a series of mildly Islamist political parties, and in 1999 he served a four-month prison term for "sedition" after he quoted a famous Turkish poem describing "the mosques are our helmets, the minarets are our spears."

Although Erdoğan has been extremely careful to avoid actually introducing any overtly religious legislation since coming to power in a landslide election victory in 2002,

he's still deeply distrusted by the secularists.

They want the presidency, currently held by a militantly secular former judge, to be a check on Erdoğan's power, not the crowning point of his political career. Army leaders aren't the only ones who are suspicious; earlier this month a million marchers turned out in Ankara to protest his running for the top office.

Enter Abdullah Gul, Erdoğan's right hand man and Turkey's quiet and able foreign minister. Although Gul is a devout Muslim, he's seen as more of a moderate than Erdoğan. The reasons for that perception are historical -- they date to the political Islamic movements of the 1990s, when Gul led a moderate rebellion against Erdoğan's one-time patron, Necmettin Erbakan, the devout prime minister ousted by the Army in 1997.

In the actual tenure of the AKP in office since 2002, though, there has been little difference between Gul and Erdoğan. Most importantly, Gul hasn't been in jail for sedition. (Before the AKP introduced new laws in 2003 to allow Erdoğan to become prime minister, a conviction on sedition was enough to ban a person from running for political office for life.)

Yet even Gul knows that he needs to grovel to break the ceiling. On Tuesday he told parliament that "Turkey needs a secular president" and promised to uphold the ideals of



Recep Tayyip Erdoan

Turkey's radically secular founder, Kemal Atatürk. Gul is also expected to be discreet about his wife, Hayrunisa, who wears an Islamic headscarf.

A law dating from Atatürk's time (and still in force) bans headscarves from Parliament, universities, schools and all state workplaces and official functions. Erdoğan sent



Abdullah Gul

his two daughters to US colleges to get around the ban. Gul will almost certainly not move into Çankaya palace, the official presidential residence, and will keep his wife

away from official functions.

So much for the AKP being fire-brand Islamists. This week has shown that they're actually willing to bow to the establishment when they

need to. They're also going along with a growing nationalism in Turkey. A drop in support Turkey's EU bid from 70 percent in 2005 to just 30 recently, has put the pro-European AKP on the defensive. Their challenge is to stop the Army, the ultra-nationalists and the secular establishment from filling the vacuum.

Erdoğan and Gul's answer has been to try to be more nationalist than the nationalists, threatening restive Kurds in Turkey's southeast with terrible retaliation after a spate of attacks on Turkish security forces earlier this year.

More worryingly, they've also backed calls from the military for an incursion into northern Iraq this spring. Gul complained last month that the Kurdish separatists of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) had used "remote-controlled explosives and weapons obtained in Iraq, including from the Iraqi Army" against Turkish troops. "We cannot tolerate this," he threatened. "If the Iraqi government cannot stop it, we will have to take action."

There are also indications that preparations are already underway on the ground. According to press reports, mine-clearing operations are underway along the border, while Turkish special forces reportedly have penetrated up to 25 miles inside northern Iraq to prepare the advance and seal off PKK escape routes.

As many as 200,000 Turkish soldiers were brought up to the

border last month. Turkey has been resupplying Army divisions along the Iraq border and has cancelled all leave for these formations for the next three months.

Turkey has been saber rattling on Iraq border for years, but last month, for the first time, Turkey's top general, Chief of the General Staff Ya'ar Büyükan?, publicly called on the AKP government for a green light for action. Whether or not to grant it will be a crucial test for Gul and Erdogan.

PKK rebels have stepped up their spring campaign in Turkey, killing nearly a dozen troops and police over recent weeks. Doing nothing could mark the AKP as soft on terror and damage its chances in November's parliamentary elections. The Army, at the same time, can cast itself as the true guarantor of Turkey's national security in calling for action. Yet if they agree, Ankara risks all-out confrontation with Washington and the Kurds of northern Iraq, as well as unrest among their own 14 million strong Kurdish population.

Turkey's new president will face an enormous foreign-policy challenge. Caving in to the military would win him political points at home, at the cost of sparking a dangerous and uncertain conflict on Turkey's most volatile border.

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