

Rating offshore Bangladesh for gas potential

BADRUL IMAM

WE believe the deep offshore blocks of Bangladesh in the Bay of Bengal have good potential for natural gas. Although there is too little data at this moment to be more specific on its prospects, Bangladesh deep sea area may have analogous gas habitat with some other deep sea blocks in the world, where BP has been successful in exploration ventures," said Jonathan Evans, Exploration Director, South Asia Exploration, British Petroleum (BP) company, during his short visit to Bangladesh to exchange views with concerned authorities and people.

"As a major player in this frontier area of petroleum exploration, BP has one of the best technology to engage, and certainly we are looking forward to participating in the deep offshore bidding likely to be announced soon in Bangladesh," he said.

With some multinationals like Chevron, Cairn and Total, already engaged in gas exploration in the country, several major petroleum players from around the world have their eyes focused on offshore Bangladesh, specially the deep-sea blocks. This is for the first time that Bangladesh has delineated its deep offshore exploration blocks, and is likely to announce bidding very soon.

The deep sea is generally referred to the area with depths in the range of 500m to 3000m or more. Considered as the frontier area, petroleum exploration in the deep sea is technologically and economically far more challenging than it is the shallow sea.

**Shallow sea prospect:** The continental shelf off the Bangladesh coast (upto a depth of 200m) has been the target of petroleum exploration from immediately after liberation. The shallow offshore was divided into seven exploration blocks, and six international oil companies were awarded these blocks for exploration during 1974.

After hundreds of kilometers of seismic survey, and drilling of 8 exploration wells, only a small gas field was discovered. It was named Kutubdia, but was not developed because it was too small to be economic. The reasons why all the companies left Bangladesh by 1978 were, firstly, the result of the drillings was not encouraging enough and, secondly, oil was their prime target, and geology dictated that the area was more likely to have gas rather than oil.

The world petroleum scenario has changed since then, and interest in gas rather than oil was in the minds of the international oil companies (IOC) when the next round of bidding was announced in Bangladesh in 1988. Four offshore

blocks were awarded to IOCs in the mid-1990s, and they drilled several deep wells.

Cairn Energy of UK discovered Sangu gas field, with modest reserves, and started production in 1998. Offshore exploration activities again came to a halt as no other IOC could find a gas field.

In the meantime, there was news of very large gas discoveries off the Indian east coast and Myanmar's west coast. The discoveries off the coast of Andhra Pradesh in India are the largest in India, and this has significantly changed the gas reserve of that country (see map).

The gas fields are named Dhirubhai after the name of the founder of the Indian firm Reliance Oil, which discovered the fields. At about the same time, large gas discoveries were made in the sea off the Orissa coast.

On the other side of the Bay of Bengal, off the Arakan coast in Myanmar, the offshore blocks A-1 and A-3 have seen several large gas field discoveries (see map) by a consortium of oil companies, including the Indian ONGC and GAIL and Korea's Daewoo.

The Indians wasted no time in planning for pipeline import of Myanmar gas from the newly discovered offshore Shew gas field. This has been delayed because Bangladesh is not ready to give a pipeline corridor through its territory.

As a result of the large gas finds offshore (in India and Myanmar), the Bay of Bengal has come to the notice of world petroleum players. This brings the Bangladesh offshore area once again to the attention of the IOCs interested in South Asia.

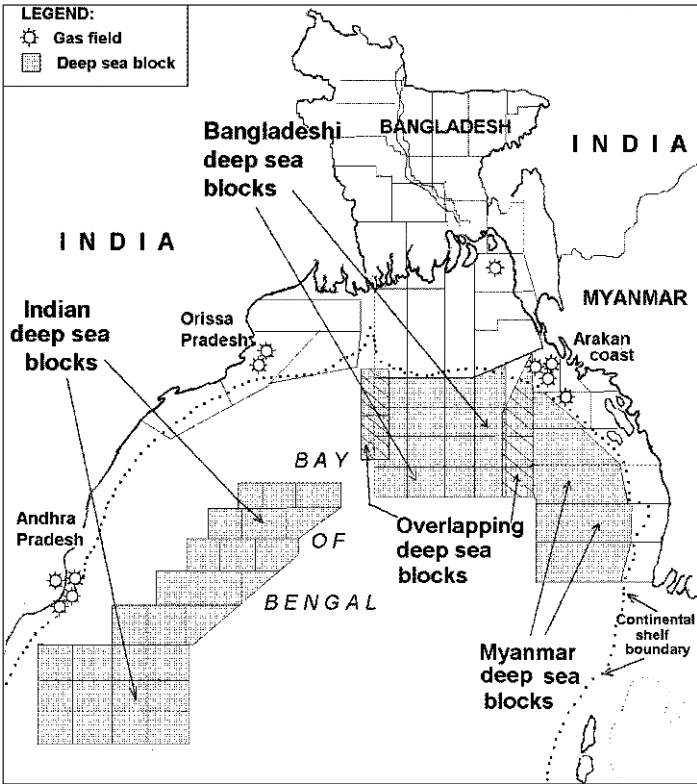
Of special interest are the southern offshore blocks of Bangladesh, off the Teknaf-St.Martins Island coast, because of the close proximity of the area to Myanmar offshore discoveries. In fact, the geological set up of the Arakan offshore and that of Teknaf-St.Martins offshore areas are strikingly similar, and geologists believe that there is a strong likelihood that gas deposits similar to the Myanmar discoveries could be found in that area.

Apparently, the recent take-over of exploration license by the France based IOC, Total, in the southern Bangladesh offshore blocks 17 and 18 in the Bay of Bengal points to the above fact.

**Deep-sea prospect:**

While the Indians had announced their offshore (in depths upto 3000m) block bidding several years ago, and the Myanmar also did the same more than a year ago, Bangladesh has kept uncomfortably quite.

It was only after the media pointed out that some of the Indian and Myanmar deep-sea blocks



were in the Bangladesh deep sea water zone that the authorities seemed to come to their senses.

Twenty exploration blocks have now been drawn for announcement in the deep-sea area south of the existing shallow sea blocks in the Bay of Bengal in Bangladesh (see map). The water depths in the

blocks range from 500 m to 2500m.

Since India and Myanmar have announced some of their blocks within the Bangladesh deep-water zone, these will remain disputed until the three countries settle their respective deep-sea boundaries. Indian and Myanmar blocks overlap an area of 5000 sq km on the west-

ern side, and 16,000 sq km on the eastern side, of Bangladesh deep-sea blocks respectively.

Bangladesh should not waste time in claiming these blocks as its own and, thus, effectively make them disputed, so as to discourage IOCs from entering into contracts with India or Myanmar before the three countries mutually settled the problem.

With very little data, nobody can confidently rate the Bangladesh deep-sea area for its gas resource. But from the analogy with other deep-sea areas of the world, geologists believe there are reasons to be hopeful.

The energy-starved Bangladesh is faced with energy insecurity because the present gas reserve is likely to be exhausted by 2020. With overwhelming dependence on natural gas, and limited options for alternatives, Bangladesh should immediately move forward with the bid announcement for its shallow and the deep sea blocks. One may wonder if the latest frontier in petroleum exploration, the deep offshore, would bring much needed gas resource to rescue the country from an impending energy crisis.

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A constant gardener

SYED MAQSD JAMIL

SINCE the declaration of the state of emergency, there have been three ladies in our national scenario. Besides Khaleda Zia, the outgoing prime minister, and Sheikh Hasina, the AL chief, the other lady is Patricia A. Butenis, the outgoing US ambassador.

It would have been four had Raushan Ershad not been marginalized. Her presence in Bangladesh has been brief, but her participation has been reasonably prominent. The US ambassador naturally enjoys the spotlight.

This has further been highlighted by the importance of the time we are passing through. Her, and the British High Commissioner's, bonhomie with our outgoing state minister for home caught special attention.

The United States of America is the greatest arbiter in the global order. It carries lot of weight in Third World countries like Bangladesh, for a number of reasons. The aid may decline into a pittance, but there is trade to look after, the burgeoning expatriate community to think of and, above all, the US is Shangri La.

Her farewell comment has been on the reforms in political parties. She observed in the

interview that the reforms or changes should not be "imposed" on the political parties, and they should come from within the political parties.

Generally speaking, she has been quite correct in saying that, but for the fact that the context is Bangladesh! It is the perception that forms the image. The perception she holds carries the tradition and practices of over 200 years, and those of her country. Even that tradition could not prevent the "unpresidential" presidential polls imbroglio of 2000.

By that standard, Bangladesh's 15-year dalliance with democracy is a brief period, and an utterly unwholesome one at that. The playing field was so fouled up that it was unplayable, and the system was to stumble and it stumbled. It was not a peaceful standoff, rather a pestilential breakdown that took the nation hostage.

America went to war on slavery but, thank God, Bangladesh came out unscathed from the constitutional breakdown. For struggling nations, when help is needed it should arrive in time and all at a time. Madame Butenis surely understands that this one is not a mere political crisis for Bangladesh, but a matter of national urgency.

If western democracies are

rose gardens, Bangladesh, because of its fecundity and passion, is an "unweeded" garden. Democracy in Bangladesh is yet to come out of the cult of hero-worship. The two major political parties, the Awami League and the BNP, thrive on the phenomenal popularity of their patron saints.

It has become a matter of legacy, and the legacy has been passed on to the two ladies. The politicians, the few that have their own base, found it expedient to submit to the ideological torpor of becoming the faithful among the faithful, instead of perishing on the altar of their beliefs.

Hero-worship attracts many slavish followers, since rewards know moral scruples. Naturally, politics in Bangladesh has seen hibernation of the elders, and luxuriant growth of servile and parasitical faithfals. Standing committee, executive committee and presidium vegetated as names, with their members blissful in their torpor.

Democracy and politics in Bangladesh had become a garden of rank growth. Its inherent capacity has been impaired. It needs a gardener for a while, and the CTG happens to be the only one for the time. Isn't it fair that a local gardener should, obviously and justly, be the best choice?

Madame Butenis has been off the mark there.

Madame Butenis is the ambassador of USA, the leader of the world, and that has also to be taken into consideration. America has its own agenda, the foremost being to secure and strengthen its worldwide sphere of influence.

Global security, peace, and human rights, are its favourite catchwords. The latest addition is democracy, and President GW Bush is its new exponent. America has assumed the role of a constant gardener. It's ambassador's interest in the politics and democracy of Bangladesh is an expression of policy concern. This has a greater urgency for Madame Butenis, because she is moving to a more beleaguered posting in Baghdad!

America, the constant gardener, is busy these days in intensifying its focus on democracy in the Middle East and, by association, in Moslem countries. The weapon of mass destruction campaign in Iraq has become "free the people of Iraq from the despot Saddam and establish democracy."

A sovereign and independent country was occupied, the despot has been sent to the gallows, yet democracy is far from being functional in Iraq. Polls have

been held. It turned out to be an opportunity for the dominant ethnic groups to establish their numerical superiority, and to make the score even in ethnic vendetta.

The social compact has broken down. Peace dies everyday in car bomb attacks. The death toll is not far from 1 million mark. America's lofty vision of democracy in Iraq has become a constant nightmare for the Iraqi people.

We understand that Iraq's own gardener Saddam was not the best of men, but he kept the garden from being run over by ethnic feuds that went berserk after his fall. It proves that even the best of constant gardeners cannot tend every garden!

It will not be fair to say that America is incapable of understanding that every country ultimately finds its own way running its own affairs. It takes time, it may exact a human toll, but when madness tires out the point of arrival is reached.

The point of arrival is the understanding that freedom must be tempered with order. Prince Metternich, the Austrian diplomat, rightly said: "The word 'freedom' means for me not a point of departure but a genuine point of arrival. The point of departure is defined by the word 'order.'

Freedom cannot exist without the concept of order."

A country, in spite of foreboding odds, is best served when left alone for its own gardeners to tend. If, indeed, the human toll is of catastrophic nature the UN is there. The western African nations have come out of macabre bloodletting.

Liberia has even elected a lady as its president. Even Congo is showing signs of recovery. Spain and Portugal languished under dictators for over thirty years, but have ultimately chartered their own democratic course. They did it without the services of a constant gardener.

The success of Bangladesh in its democratic trial can prove to be a model for the whole world. It is a third world country with more than its fair share of wants and ills. Naturally, the wants and ills that come with development will spread moral decay and venality in the political system.

Thankfully, the time of reckoning came when the country needed it most. Most propitious of all, understanding has dawned on us as a nation that the right to rule is not a reward but a responsibility. The best way to help Bangladesh is to leave it to do what it is capable of doing.

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Sheikh Hasina's counter proposals



KAZI S.M. KHASRUL ALAM QUDDUSI

AWAMI League president and former premier Sheikh Hasina has come up with some novel proposals for reforms, which should turn out to be a reformer's delight in view of the heightened fervour and pressure for political reforms in Bangladesh.

In her latest surprise move, she proposed that no leader over the age of 60 should be allowed to remain a member of the Awami League presidium or central working committee, and that all leaders exceeding 60 be accommodated in the advisory council.

Previously, in an exclusive interview with *The Daily Star*, Sheikh Hasina categorically said

that the party president's post, or the same person should not hold any other party position, more than twice.

She also added that not only should the party chief be barred from becoming the prime minister, all central committee office bearers should also be prohibited from becoming ministers or state ministers as well. In her words: "One group of people should run the party, and another set should run the government."

The AL chief's proposal has come at a time when some senior leaders of her party have already been secretly preparing a set of reform proposals. Through this proposal Hasina has finally disclosed her thoughts on leaving the post of party chief, which she has been holding since 1981.

Party leaders claim that the AL chief had earlier announced retirement from politics at the age of 57, but refrained from doing so in the wake of the election debacle in 2001, and repression against AL leaders and workers following the polls.

Now, if her proposal regarding age limit is implemented, apart from Hasina herself, the AL general secretary and most of the presidium members will also have to quit their present posts as they all are above 60. A few such leaders have already reacted sharply and opposed Hasina's proposal, while younger leaders very naturally welcomed it.

Though there is doubt even among some AL leaders about the

sincerity of Hasina's proposals, they deserve consideration in their own right. If Hasina's latest proposal is really implemented, only two AL presidium members Sheikh Fazlul Karim Selim and Kazi Zafarullahcan continue in their posts.

The AL presidium members aged over 60 are Zohra Tajuddin, Zillur Rahman, Sajeda Chowdhury, Amir Hossain Amu, Abdur Razzak, Tofail Ahmed, Suranjit Sengupta, Dr. Mohiuddin Khan Alamgir, Matia Chowdhury and Ataur Rahman Khan Kaiser.

Meanwhile, central leaders Abul Hasnat Abdullah, Prof. Abu Sayeed, Asaduzzaman Noor, ABM Mohiuddin Chowdhury, Nurul Islam Nahid, Prof. Ali Ashraf, HN Ashiqur Rahman and Akhtaruzzaman Chowdhury are also above 60. Previously, some senior leaders of the AL presidium were reportedly preparing proposals for curtailing the party chief's absolute power, and for not allowing any leader to simultaneously hold the posts of party president and prime minister.

Upon receiving the proposals unofficially, Hasina, perhaps, opted to go further, and wanted further amendment to those proposals. Reportedly, in response to Hasina's latest proposals, the dissident leaders who planned to submit a draft of proposals prepared by them to Sheikh Hasina now seem hesitant to do so.

Admittedly, a rift has appeared in the Awami League over reform in the party, since the interim administration began pressing for reforms

in the electoral and political processes.

A section of the AL led by a few senior leaders was trying to pursue reforms keeping Hasina out, while others insisted that things had to be done under her leadership. Apparently, psychological warfare is going on between Sheikh Hasina and some senior AL leaders who were clandestinely working for reforms.

Hasina's latest proposals must have given the war a new twist, with those leaders left in sort of a quandary as to their next moves. At the same time, leaders reposing trust in Hasina seem to have been boosted by the latest development, and the effort to reform in AL minus Hasina seems to have suffered a blow.

Truly, reform is not at all a hush-hush matter. Interestingly, however, the hide and seek game centering on intra-party reform has already created an uneasy situation in the country. While indoor politics is still under a ban, reports of underground meetings of various groups with the objective of either intra-party reform or of float- ing a new political party, or parties, have drawn a fair amount of public attention.

Reportedly, these groups are enjoying support from the interim government. However, a new political party consisting of splinter groups from big political parties did not fare well in the past.

Though a third political force would definitely be welcome, viability of such a force can hardly

be guaranteed. Thus, reforming the existing major political parties can very well be a better alternative. Moreover, while persuasion can do the trick under the prevailing situation, coercion, I think, results from a sheer misreading of the circumstances.

Reform is the demand of the people and the government alike. Thus, comprehensive and inclusive reform, incorporating initiation of intra-party democracy as well as preclusion of intrusion of black money and muscle into politics, is the expectations of all quarters interested in reform.

I, thus, fail to understand the rationale behind the so-called "minus" formula. Can there not be spontaneous reforms that would pave the way for clearing our vitiated political culture once and for all?

Plagued by allegations of corruption of all hues, and with senior party leaders either in jail or distanced from heras depicted in the news item in *Daily Star* covering her interviewthe former premier still shows unwavering determination that she would come out stronger by disproving all charges if she is given a fair chance to fight.

I think reform should be allowed to take its own course, and Sheikh Hasina be given a look in. I am more than certain that history will give her the marching orders should she fail to stick to her proposals, and come good in terms of execution.

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Velvet behind the fist

NEWSWEEK INTERNATIONAL

TURKEY'S military appeared to be poised for war. Responding to a surge in Kurdish separatist attacks launched from northern Iraq, Turkish troops massed on the border -- while commandos reportedly staged hot-pursuit raids inside Iraq itself.

At the same time, though, inside Turkey the Army was trying a very different tactic -- an unprecedented bid for hearts and minds that may end up doing more to end Kurdish violence than brute military force.

What a difference a year makes. Last May, the cities of Turkey's southeast were convulsed by bloody riots as ethnic Kurds vented their anger at discrimination, poverty and police brutality. Last week the streets of Sirnak and Diyarbakir were again full of demonstrators, many of them Kurds.

But this time they were protest-

pen here."

This is a dramatic about-face for the Turkish military, which is better known for heavy-handed tactics like destroying more than 3,000 villages and forcibly displacing nearly 400,000 people during the 25-year Kurdish insurgency.

Yet clearly, at least some in the military now recognize that Kurds can be allies in the war on terror, and not just an untrustworthy fifth column. "Terror organizations fear democratization," says Ihsan Bal of the Ankara-based International Strategic Research Organization, citing a sharp fall in attacks after reforms granting Kurds more cultural rights.

At the same time, old habits die hard. Many in the military remain deeply suspicious of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan -- not just because of his Islamist past, but because of fears that his Brussels-backed reforms have only encouraged Kurdish hopes of independence. By allowing Kurds to teach



A Kurd insurgent

ing not against the government, but against the very group that claims to fight for their rights -- the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK. Turkish authorities sanctioned the rallies, where speakers denounced the PKK's latest terrorist attacks in Kurdish, a language once banned by those same, fiercely nationalist authorities.

Most surprising of all, the protests were encouraged by the most hawkish institution in the country -- the Turkish Army, which on the eve of the rallies called on all citizens "to demonstrate their collective opposition against the terrorist attacks."

The turnabout seemed to have a rapid impact. Last week the PKK abruptly announced a ceasefire in the wake of nationwide protests by Turks and Kurds alike against its latest campaign of violence. Previous ceasefires have crumbled. But this one could last -- particularly if Turkey's politically powerful military turns a new leaf by engaging the Kurds, rather than simply by concentrating on killing off Kurdish terrorists.

"Turning grass-roots people against terror is the key," says one senior EU diplomat in Ankara, who is not authorized to speak on the record. "It happened in Spain in 2000, when the people turned out en masse against (he Basque terrorist group) ETA. It could hap-

and broadcast in their own language, hard-liners fear, Erdogan has conceded that Turkey's 14 million Kurds belong to a different culture -- which the hard-liners see as a first step to separatism.

How to deal with the PKK's latest campaign of bombings and ambushes has also become a political football in the run-up to early elections next month. Opposition parties have accused Erdogan of being soft on terror for refusing to sanction a military incursion to whack PKK bases in northern Iraq.

A top general has hinted that the solidly secular military agrees, perhaps angling to undermine the Islamist's election chances. Meanwhile, many officers recognize the PKK problem can only be solved by smart policies inside Turkey, not by foreign adventures. In the end, though, it will be loss of popular support, not military action, that will finish off the remnants of the PKK.

Support for the PKK and its radical separatist line has been slipping for years. If Ankara can mobilize moderate Kurds behind an anti-terror movement like that of the Basque country, it will put the rebels on the run.

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