

Keeping an open mind on open-pit mining (part one)

SHARIER KHAN

MY recent reports on the German experience in coal mining have drawn a lot of attention of a number of people, including some highly qualified professionals involved with the Bangladesh Environment Network (BEN), a network of expatriate experts.

BEN opposes the open-pit mining proposal of Asia Energy on environmental grounds, and therefore its activists have studied the reports to see whether or not the German experience has any relevance for Bangladesh. They concluded that Germany's context is very different from Bangladesh and therefore the examples are irrelevant. They argue that open-pit mines are environmentally disastrous.

They have also assumed that Asia Energy has influenced The Daily Star to file these reports by organising and paying for the trip to Germany at a time when the government is formulating a coal mining policy. I believe this calls for a clarification for the benefit of all the readers.

Firstly, The Daily Star did not accept any expense from Asia Energy and paid fully for the travel and hotel expenses of its correspondent. I admit that the biggest fault of my reports was that I had not talked to any aggrieved person in Germany whose life had been affected by the open-pit mines. I also did not talk to opposing political or environmental activists. My four-day program was designed by Asia Energy in collaboration with German mining company RWE. While such a pre-planned visit allows maximum utilisation of time, it always leaves out some vital aspects. This deprived the readers of some essential viewpoints.

Despite this shortcoming, I believe my reports have been objective. I felt that I have enough information to share with our readers that there is a

good example of open-pit mining -- and before we "ban" this method of mining, we should have a second look into the issue.

Asia Energy invited The Daily Star to report on the German mine at a time when coal policy is being formulated with a view to pointing out the German experience before the policy is finalised. This is not an unusual practice. As long as it is done openly and in public view, we can live with it. When the Barapukuria deal was made, nobody invited the press or bothered about public opinion.

The Daily Star did not whimsically choose to accept Asia Energy's invitation as the company is in the centre of a controversy. It sponsored the trip because it believed that there will be some genuine learning by visiting some of the world's best mines and that there will be new knowledge and experience to share with our readers. As a reporter, I was so conscious about what Asia Energy's agenda was that I explicitly mentioned in the report what its stakes were.

Open-pit mining is not synonymous to Asia Energy

Some individuals mix up open-pit mining concept with Asia Energy's interest. While this is true that Asia Energy proposed open-pit mining in Phulbari, this is not true that Asia Energy holds the copyright for such mining in Bangladesh. Open-pit mining method was not discovered by Asia Energy. Talking in favour of open pit mining is not synonymous to favouring Asia Energy.

Open pit mining is a hundred plus years old method that enables large-scale extraction of coal -- and thereby significantly reduce the per ton coal production cost. If open-pit mining of the Phulbari coal zone is the sole reason for opposing Asia Energy -- I vehemently oppose such

mindset. If Asia Energy's Phulbari proposal goes against national interest, let's dissect it technically and politically and then trash it.

None of my reports said that open-pit mines are environment friendly. In fact all mines -- underground or open-pit -- are threats to environment. BEN should investigate what's going on in Barapukuria's environment and balance its views.

The scale of environmental damage is proportional. In underground mines, the production is low and the proportion of environment damage is also low -- if badly planned. In open pits, the production is very high and the proportion of environmental damage is very high -- if badly planned. In both cases, damage is mainly done in handling the underground water tables. If carelessly discharged, the water from any coal mine will have some negative impact.

A Bangladeshi geologist from US wrote in The Daily Star that the residual lakes created in Germany after an open-pit mine is complete cannot have fisheries because of presence of harmful heavy metal and other chemicals. I beg to differ. These lakes have fisheries and used by the public as recreational resorts. People are swimming there and you can see the fish. They have applied proper hydro-engineering to achieve this level of safety. But the water is not used for drinking -- as its not completely safe. Time will make it completely safe. I would like to point out that irresponsible mining has damaged many water bodies and rivers in countries like the US. Despite a lot of measures, coal mines still do have its pitfalls.

This is why we should learn from the best practices. We need the coal for our energy security. We don't want to spend Tk 1,600 crore for a mine like Barapukuria, then keep on importing coal to run a small

250 mw power plant, and then entirely waste 22 million cubic metres of polluted waters each year turning the whole mining area dangerously dry. We don't want to produce coal that will cost us \$90 per ton. We don't want to ignore the fact that even in Barapukuria's "safe" underground mine area, land is subsiding and potable water is becoming out of the community's reach.

In following the best underground mining practices, we must remember even in Germany -- which is known for one of the best mining related environmental practices -- underground coal mining is so expensive that it needs subsidy. This is why Germany's shares of underground mining for hard coal is shrinking. By 2018, Germany will close down all its underground hard coal mines -- while maintaining 100 million tons of lignite coal mining from open pit mines.

Let Dighpara be our first open-pit mine

Put aside Asia Energy's proposal, and start to consider that Bangladesh can develop open-pit mine, if it is possible technically and if that can be done through compensating for human resettlement and by addressing environmental issues. Let's start from the Dighpara coal mine -- against which Petrobangla has submitted a proposal. I assure you, if Petrobangla drills as many test wells as Asia Energy and has its feasibility study professionally done -- investment will not be a problem. Energy is precious around the world.

What is our extra benefit from open-pit mines? For example, Germany's open-pit lignite coal mine is so cost effective that the latest (2005) 1,000 megawatt power plant generates power at less than 1 Euro cent (1.25 US cent) per kilowatt hour! This is even cheaper than the

Meghnaghat power.

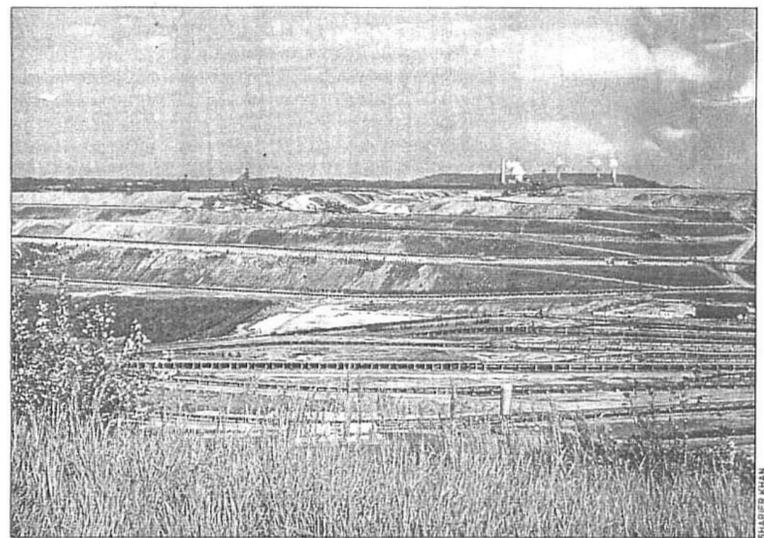
Because of very low coal production rate, underground mines will not save us from our upcoming power crisis. But coal will not only give us thousands of megawatts of power, it will give us clean synthetic petroleum -- which presently costs less than \$30 per ton -- and meet our 3.5 million ton petroleum per annum petroleum demand. Coal is also the source of many types of chemicals and paints. Surely, once we open our horizons, we will be able to explore those fields. Large-scale production does not necessarily imply encouraging export of coal.

National involvement

Personally, I oppose Asia Energy's proposal, mainly from financial aspect because I have always believed Bangladesh is not getting fair financial return in the deal. After seeing the German experience, I realized what was missing from the Phulbari proposal -- it excluded Bangladesh's ownership. Indeed, successful mining companies like RWE or Tata are home-grown. Why can't we have a policy regime to encourage a home-grown company in which private companies may participate, but not hold the ownership of the resources?

Let us learn from the experience of Coal India, the world's largest coal producer -- which used to be a local private company that was nationalised in 1973 and then in the early nineties saw private involvement again.

I strongly believe that giving Phulbari away to Asia Energy just like that would be disastrous. If Phulbari zone is awarded to any coal mining company for execution, Bangladesh must be the large stakeholder in this deal. As a nation, we have the sovereign right to cancel or modify any deal to suit our national interest. My reports have in fact



German open-pit mines do take a toll on the environment, but there are ways to minimise this.

emphasised this point strongly.

What are underground and open-pit mines?

According to the World Coal Institute, there are two types of underground mines and just one type of open pit mines.

In underground mining, Room and Pillar style mining allows a maximum extraction of 40% of coal in the seam. The other approach is Longwall Mining, which uses mechanical shearers to fully extract coal from a section of the seam. A longwall face requires careful planning to ensure favourable geology exists throughout the section before development work begins. Over 75% of the coal in the deposit can be extracted from panels of coal that can extend 3km through the coal seam.

Geologists say the highest possible coal production from an underground mine, anywhere around the world, is 5 million tons a year. There are very few Longwall underground mines around the world,

because this kind of mine is possible in a very limited geological situation.

The World Coal Institute says that open cut or surface mining is only economic when the coal seam is near the surface. This method recovers a higher proportion of the coal deposit than underground mining as all coal seams are exploited -- 90% or more of the coal can be recovered.

Geologists say that presently an open-pit mine allow annual coal production of 40 million tons. And if there is enough demand, such a mine could produce more.

Coal production figures of Indian Coal, that operates both underground and open-pit mines, show that its open-pit mines produce more than six times the coal produced in underground mines. In 2005-06, Coal India produced 45.82 million tons from underground mines and 297.57 million tons from open-pit mines.

This shows that open-pit mining produces maximum

coal. Bangladesh is an energy starved, very low energy consuming country in the country. The supply of our staple source of energy gas is set to decline from 2011. But our power demand forecast is high.

I am not a "supporter" of open-pit mining. My argument is that we keep our minds open, and take the best approach that will benefit us most economically, socially and environmentally. If we must meet our power and energy demands, we cannot depend on small scale mines. We need to produce coal that will help us meet our demands. This is why I am opposed to the thought that open-pit mining should be banned out of hand. Open-pit mines can produce high volume of coal at a given time, which the underground mines can not. Let me reiterate, if the current technologies do not allow open-pit mines in our country safely, I withdraw my case.

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Which way now?

AHMED SHAIQUL HUQUE

THIS is the first time a non-partisan caretaker government had to use repressive measures to quell disturbances in Bangladesh. An incident between army personnel and students on Dhaka University campus erupted into a major show of disenchantment with the government. Only a short while ago, this government enjoyed unprecedented public support.

What could have led to such a drastic change? In his address to the nation, the chief adviser attributed the disturbances to the efforts by certain quarters who were taking advantage of a minor event to destabilise and discredit the government. This explanation is not too different from the excuses used by governments in the past whenever they were unable to contain violence on the streets. However, the sabotage of communication cable around the same time in a remote area of Chittagong and the images on television of men on rampage who appeared to be non-students lend some credence to the chief adviser's claim.

An overview of recent developments and the style of governing can provide insight into the causes that contributed to the severe outburst of dissatisfaction. Earlier in the year, the government received strong support for helping the country get out of an extremely difficult situation. The citizens heaved a sigh of relief at being rescued from the tyranny of strikes and violent clashes between supporters of political parties who competed to demonstrate strong muscle power at every opportunity.

Leaders of the Awami League were delighted at the turn of events, extended full support to

the government, and claimed credit for bringing the new government into power. They were delighted with the arrest of a number of leaders from the rival BNP, and did not protest too strongly about same fate of some of their own party leaders. The government decided to come down hard on corruption, and raised the hope of Bangladeshis by putting behind bars some of the most powerful lawbreakers. No tear was shed for the arrested and absconding corrupt people, and work was progressing on the arrangements for holding free and fair elections.

The government became overzealous in fighting corruption, and neglected the critical task of governing the country. Food prices spiraled, law and order deteriorated, and floods affected the purchasing power and employment prospect of millions of people. Ruthless eviction of hawkers with no arrangement for rehabilitation added to the ranks of the dissatisfied. On the political front, there were hints of impatience as political parties were not allowed to function, and they were unable to play a role in assisting with the governing process. It was impossible for a group of eleven advisers, however capable, to deal with the numerous problems that descended upon Bangladesh within a very short time.

Instead of rearranging the priorities in view of the changing circumstances, the government pushed forward with the mission of "cleaning up" the political system. Fresh rounds of arrests brought in new interns, the most notable being Sheikh Hasina. Statements from an adviser hinting the leaders of Jamaat-e-Islami to be free from corruption and stern warnings from another adviser to prevent

corrupt politicians from returning to power even before they were convicted, weakened the position of the government. The government was losing its impartial status, and the perception was strengthened by the apparently biased way in which the allegedly corrupt people were treated.

Confidence slid further as it was revealed that Khaleida Zia and Saifur Rahman had not declared a substantial part of their income for years. In spite of clear instructions that close relatives of arrested or allegedly corrupt people would not be allowed to pay a penalty on back taxes and get exemption from prosecution, both the former prime minister and her finance minister were allowed to do so. It is common knowledge that members of both families are alleged to be severely corrupt. It has also been reported that Saifur Rahman not only condoned corruption among his family members, he is also accused of using public funds to decorate his villa in Moulavi Bazar, and persuading the government to build a connecting road from the highway for his benefit.

Students have genuine reason to be dissatisfied, as they suffered the most over the years. Completion of education takes much longer than planned, and students are exploited for serving the interests of political parties. Corruption in the Public Service Commission precludes the possibility of employment after graduation and adds to the frustration of students and their families. While students have been sacrificing their career to fight for the interest of political parties, they do not receive anything in return. No government has made sincere efforts to identify the needs of the students with the intention of

addressing them.

As the caretaker government started the campaign against corruption, there was high expectation among students that those responsible for damaging the universities and educational institutions would be brought to task. Several vice-chancellors appointed on political considerations are alleged to have committed massive corruption. Excepting one or two of the former vice-chancellors who are absconding, the others seem to be enjoying immunity from prosecution and they have been allowed to return to their original posts.

How can students have trust in a government that chooses not to prosecute corrupt people in the universities, while coming down hard on a select group of politicians? What are the reasons for according special treatment to former vice-chancellors who committed corruption? A government must not only be fair, but must also be seen to be fair.

Reports in the media are harbinger of worse to come. The personnel deployed to enforce curfew regulations seem to be out of control. Citizens, including media workers and students trying to reach home after getting evicted from dormitories, are receiving harsh treatment from the security personnel. It would be good for the government to rein the overzealous security personnel in, and bear in mind that such treatment of students on Dhaka University campus triggered the crisis.

The government has taken some steps in the right direction. The withdrawal of army camp from the university was swift and the decision to apologise for the unfortunate incident appropriate. The relaxation of curfew for longer

hours reflects a mature approach, but it needs to be withdrawn completely.

Some measures can be suggested to help defuse the tension. The first and foremost task is to bring back normalcy in the life of citizens. Curfew and constant harassment by security personnel is not normal. If the government has specific information on the "instigators" of disturbance, they should be promptly taken into custody. That will make it possible to withdraw the curfew and allow people to resume normal life.

The formation of commissions to conduct enquiries is known to the public as a strategy used to buy time and wait for the crisis to pass. The current situation calls for a different approach. As a state of emergency is in force, it should be possible to conduct a quick trial and hand down appropriate punishment to the person who were instrumental in triggering the crisis. This act will demonstrate the willingness of the government to adopt tough measures to protect the interest of students as well as establish firm control over security personnel who step out of line.

The next task should be to restore the confidence of the citizens in the government. This requires a demonstration of fairness in dealing with corruption. If the government is serious about combating corruption, all allegations must be carefully investigated and all leaders accused of corruption should be treated in the same manner. Support from the citizens has dwindled as they witnessed differential treatment for those alleged to be corrupt.

It is believed that anger directed at the government

emanated from the frustration of people affected by the constantly increasing price of essential commodities. This problem needs to be addressed and placed high on the list of government priorities. The government will have to work in collaboration with traders and retailers to resolve the crisis. The business community can be a vital partner in the process. If necessary, the government should be prepared to inject substantial amount of money as well as logistic support to ensure adequate supply and reasonable prices. This is critical for the government to regain public confidence.

Finally, this is an opportunity to bring about improvements in the system of higher education and employment prospects of students. It is necessary to open a direct line of communication with the students, identify the areas of their concern, explore various courses of action and implement the best option to win over the confidence of students. Political reforms will not be effective unless the students can be rescued from exploitation by political parties. The battle against corruption requires sound and corruption-free campuses that will produce citizens of high integrity to serve the nation.

In addition to the holding of elections and peaceful hand-over of power, a plan to restore trust and confidence in the political system, and the development of a productive relationship with the students could be the contributions for which the government led by Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed will be remembered.

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Two faces of Islam

AL MAKIN

WHAT a coincidence that in the last week we encountered two opposing incidents: the fruitful discussion of Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im's newest work, which was published in Indonesian -- Islam dan Negara Sekular: Menegosiasikan Masa Depan Syaria'ah (Islam and Secular State: Negotiating the Future of Sharia) -- and the international caliphate conference held by Hizbut Tahrir in Senayan over the weekend.

In strengthening the thesis of his previous works, Ahmed An-Na'im reminds us again about political and ideological efforts by the state to formalise sharia at the public level.

Sharia is the dynamic body of Islamic law, which means "way" or "path to the water source." It is the legal framework within which the public and some private aspects of life are regulated for those living in a legal system based on Muslim principles of jurisprudence.

Sharia, according to him, should be practiced piously and voluntarily at the individual level, and its formalisation, such as in the form of public law or policy, will result in a single interpretation, which could bring about repression.

A leading Indonesian intellectual, Prof Azyumardi Azra, says this book deserves our attention for its relevance, particularly to the current Indonesian situation.

On the other side, in front of 90,000 people at Gelora Bung Karno Stadium, Muhammad Ismail Yusanto clearly rejected democracy (The Jakarta Post, Aug. 12). It is not hard to guess the simple and naive rhetorical reason behind the statement that "the highest sovereignty is in the hand of God."

It is irrelevant to compare, to any extent, the arguments contained in the academic work of an-Na'im -- and the like -- and those of Ismail Yusanto and his supporters. The theory, methodology and the approach of the former have undoubtedly been based on at least a passionate three years of research.

On the contrary, the expressions of the latter are likely motivated by

the sake of popularity and public support for plain ideological and political agendas and gains.

In short, we cannot compare between deep reason and emotion, scholarly work and ideological expression, or careful investigation and shallow rhetorical public speech. However, it is interesting to observe how the public responded to both. By doing so, we can perhaps see in a glimpse the public use of reasoning.

Once again, the audiences of An-Na'im and that of the caliphate conference are entirely different. Although reviews of the work of the former can easily be found in newspapers, on websites or circulated in certain mailing lists, the number of readers is still very limited, unfortunately.

However, we should not worry too much. Yusanto himself acknowledged his conference was neither aimed directly at establishing immediately an Islamic caliphate, nor was it related to the declaration of any Islamic party. The Jakarta gathering itself was more like a rock concert.

Many participants went there to show solidarity, not for curiosity, let alone for understanding. It is tempting to guess that as soon as they went home, they forgot the speeches. However, the spirit of the meeting remained intact, albeit without any change to their thinking from before and after the conference.

The analogy of a rock concert seems reasonable here in that if one likes the rock star, there is no need to find any reason and it is not important to listen to the songs sung at the concert. Just enjoy and be satisfied.

Turning to the work of an-Na'im, it is still consumed in limited circles. Yet it is still uncertain whether the stance of an-Na'im or that of Hizbut Tahrir will win the hearts of the Indonesian people in the long run.

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