

Lethal air pollution Implement effective measures to reduce it

It is an oft-told story that extremely hazardous particles in the air of Dhaka and Chittagong pose a threat to the life of the citizens. They literally inhale poison as they go about doing their every-day chores little knowing the long-term effect on their health. The two mega cities are home to millions of people where they are already living in unhealthy environment amidst filth and debris. On top of that, they are forced to breathe air containing lethal components like carbon monoxide, lead, dust etc. It is said things get even worse in winter when particulate matters (PM) in air is likely to be higher than what is recorded in other seasons.

Research findings suggest that some varieties of particulate matters are found in smoke emanating from burning wood, which can get into our cardiovascular system. Besides, another type of PM created from fossil fuels also affects our circulatory system. The common sources of these pollutants are faulty vehicles, brick kilns, dust from roads, construction sites, and toxic fumes from industries. It is said that diesel-run vehicles alone contribute about 60 percent of the particulate matters, while brick kilns contribute another 25 to 30 percent. What is alarming is that children are the worst sufferers of respiratory and other types of complications from inhaling such poisonous air.

Air pollution is a burning topic discussed in many seminars and workshops in the country. And we understand some valuable recommendations have also been prepared and submitted with the relevant authorities for taking action. But we are not in the know of any effective measures taken by the authorities concerned to reduce the amount of pollutants in the air.

We believe the options left to the relevant authorities are phasing out of all faulty and unfit diesel-run vehicles; closing down of coal and log burn kilns, and installing fail-proof mechanism to keep the roads clean of dirt and filth. While it is the solemn duty of the city corporations to keep the city clean, the relevant authorities must also ensure that no faulty and old vehicles ply the roads emitting lethal gas. Such measures we believe would considerable help reduce the level of pollutants in the air and make our life liveable.

Inadequate law on the disabled

It needs updating to international standards

THE way a state treats its retarded people is a measure of the maturity and sophistication it has attained. Meeting the basic needs of the retarded should have nothing to do with being an affluent country or a poor one. The approach to the retarded is essentially a matter of attitude, ethics and culture. Even in developing countries, with resource constraints, the mentally and physically handicapped children can be taken care of by private and public sectors joining hands. There is scope to garner endowment funds for them. By imparting special skills many of them can be turned into reasonably productive citizens.

The apathy of successive governments towards the retarded can be gauged by the absence of any census on them. It is also glaringly exposed when social welfare secretary and vice president of the National Coordination Committee laments: 'Earlier, the government officials won't even bother to attend meetings of the national coordination committee.' What a pity!

There is a law called 'Bangladesh Disability Welfare Act, 2001' but no rules to implement it. So, for the last six years, the law has been literally on paper only. In the first place, the law is ambiguous in its definition of the disabled and does not specify the needs and rights of the disabled people. Only one ministry is assigned to look after them whereas their access to special treatment and training facilities, rehabilitation and employment attracts the responsibility of the ministries of education and labour. The draft rules are available and should be finalised in consultation with NGOs working in the field.

It is appalling that only 9000 of supposedly 80 lakh retarded persons, as estimated by some NGOs, have got any educational opportunity.

With the strengthening of the local government system, the task could be assigned to it with an adequate budget to finance relevant projects.

We must never forget that as citizens of the state they are entitled to equal rights as any other of their compatriots.

The fall



M. ABDUL HAFIZ

MIKHAEL Gorbachev's rise and role in the former Soviet Union had always been suspect. The mystery surrounding the introduction of his so-called glasnost and perestroika ultimately resulting in the dissolution of his country still lingers. If he, in a way, catalysed the fall of the USSR, he was in the same vein responsible for the worst ever thing happening to the US -- becoming the world's unrivalled superpower.

It's sudden giddy rise to an unquestioned top dog status after the liquidation of the Soviet Union was, in retrospect, only an invitation for the country's intoxicated elites to run their great country in a way that it is at the brink of self-inflicted ruin today.

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PERSPECTIVES

It's sudden giddy rise to an unquestioned top dog status after the liquidation of the Soviet Union was, in retrospect, only an invitation for the country's intoxicated elites to run their great country in a way that it is at the brink of self-inflicted ruin today. American leaders, who had to previously reckon with a formidable ideological foe and to be mindful of the democratic welfare of the ordinary people at home, rapidly grew arrogant, ambitious, and detached from reality.

dable ideological foe and to be mindful of the democratic welfare of the ordinary people at home, rapidly grew arrogant, ambitious, and detached from reality.

As a result, instead of keeping a steady course, they hatched dubious plots to put their super rich country permanently in global driver's seat. As so feverishly proposed in the "Project for a new American century" even before George Bush sneaked into office, the neo-con elite lined to go straight for the world's oil jugular in the Middle East.

Obviously, taking control of oil had been the driving motive of the project. The 9/11 attacks only provided the all purpose security ability, these neo-con ideologues needed to inflict even more grisly tragedies around the world to accomplish their goal of cornering the world's energy market.

It's not just foreigners sitting on oil who these elites disdain.

America, once envied for its egalitarian ethos and fairness, has been relentlessly pushed backward towards the social condition of a third world plutocracy. One surely romanticised America if one believed that its rulers observed all their professed values, but those values mattered as a check on excess when the breaches were plainly exposed.

Not anymore. Now everything -- torture, invading weak countries, wire tapping, the lobbyists buying the government and even treating a dim-witted president as if he were "Der Führer" -- are all okay. A carte blanche for the rich who detest democracy as a matter of principle is also okay.

The top one percent Americans siphon off 21 per cent of all wealth now, while the lower half of the American wage earners get by on 13 per cent. The top one tenth of one per cent of Americans -- 300,000 -- last year, made more money than the bottom 150 million Americans. This revealing information comes in David Cay Johnson's new book "Free Lunch."

Of course, this lucky lot adores Bush as do some religious fundamentalists of lesser means. Still, according to Zogby polls, only 24% back George Bush. But President Bush and his wrecking crew behave as if they were unanimously acclaimed. The cost of this appalling attitude is nearly 30,000 troops' casualty, deteriorating public services, official lawlessness, rising prices, stagnating wages, and insecurity for the average earners.

Yet Bush, the patrician with a "just folks" accent vetoes a bill to provide health care for poor

American children while the military sucks down more than half a trillion dollars a year. The Iraq was squanders nearly three quarters of a billion dollars everyday. These are all at the cost of ordinary Americans' well being. Even with this dismal record of the administration, the Americans are urged to cheer by a media so pliant that it would make even an old Pravda hack blush.

Is Iran still on the cards? If Bush and Cheney can get away with it now that would fit their perfect pattern of making life much worse for everyone but themselves and their cronies.

Meantime, the dispirited dissidents in America are now reduced to the pathetic posture of praying only that the wary military chiefs would block an attack on the Iranians. The Pentagon reportedly already squelched an earlier plan to bomb Iran.

When the successful revolutions are attacked they are forced to swing defensively to the right and because the authoritarianism so easily becomes a habit -- the revolution soon expires. Iran in early 50s was slowly democratising under Mosadegh -- until he nationalised oil. The CIA removed him for his policy of

looking after the Iranians first.

In the 70s Ayatollah Khomeini arose as the towering symbol of the anti-Shah movement, which also consisted of the leftists and liberals. But they were very first casualties as the right wing Islamic regime came into being under external duress. But the constant western the rails against Iran only produced far more staunch anti-west leader like Ahmadinejad -- an exact counterpart of Bush. Any further attempt to provoke him will hoist the US on its own petard.

With oil and oil only floating in their imagination, Bush and Cheney long ago proved conclusively they are not fighting in the least for democracy, either at home or abroad. Putin, Gorbachev's successor in new Russia, the successor state of the USSR is also in a fighting mood to protect his oil interests.

However, democracy never being a creed either in USSR or Russia, Putin is spared of this burden. While Putin's Russia keeps rising to achieve its mundane goal, the unrivalled superpower's precipitation from its lofty heights of idealism continues with its war mongering for oil.

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War games



M. J. AKBAR

THE November campaign might be for Gujarat, but its politics is about the next general elections. The very uncertainty about the date of a general election makes the politics that much more intense.

Since no one knows when it might happen, for both individuals and circumstances could galvanise events, you have to be prepared for as early as April and as late as autumn next year.

The end of the last session of parliament proved, in front of a nationwide television audience, that the government was in a minority on the one policy initiative that has defined its term in office, the nuclear deal with the United States. Even middle-of-the-road parties, like the resurgent BSP, had moved towards the opposition phalanx by the end of the debate.

This leaves Prime Minister Manmohan Singh with just two options. He can either run a minority government, or he can go to the people. The second is obviously more honourable. A government is born by the arithmetic of a plurality in the Lok Sabha, but it survives on a diet of

credibility. Without credibility, a government becomes sick, just as an industry becomes sick without capital or revenue. You can continue operations, but only by accumulating losses. In politics, those losses mean fewer seats in the next parliament.

There is, theoretically, a third option: walking away from the nuclear deal. But that, too, would mean a decisive dent in credibility. You cannot lead people to the pot of gold at the edge of a rainbow, and then proclaim retreat because you want a few more months in an arid status quo. It would be a very self-indulgent political leader who thought he could get away with such a ploy.

Dr. Manmohan Singh is a mild man; that does not necessarily make him a weak prime minister. If I judge him correctly, he would prefer to take the high road towards an election, rather than the smudgy path of debilitating compromise. Obviously, this decision is not his alone. But, as an economist, he will have other, and equally powerful, arguments on his side.

The most persuasive, surely, will be next year's price rise. The government has postponed an increase in oil prices for political

reasons, but it cannot postpone the inevitable. The relevant Group of Ministers (headed, but naturally, by Mr. Pranab Mukherjee, who seems to get all the work and little of the reward) has no choice but to recommend a hike. The inflationary spike that has been the story of the last two years will convert into a sharp spiral. There is already a subterranean sliver of discontent among the have-nots. Rising prices are the catalyst that could turn them hostile. Any delay in elections would only serve to reduce Congress seats, not increase them. It is a bad bargain to sell the future for a few months of the present.

Why cannot elections wait till the scheduled spring of 2009? The political agenda has messed up the dates on the electoral calendar: that's why. For starters, after the confrontation between allies on the nuclear deal, the limp would be too long. Instead of just one foot being a drag, the government might get static, with both feet injured. A general election in 2009 would also be held according to the redrawn boundaries and new reserved constituencies for Dalits to account for demographic

changes. Many dozens of MPs would have to fight elections in constituencies they would hardly recognise. There is strong pressure on all parties to hold elections before the end of 2008, when old constituencies remain intact. There is also the whiff of a controversy that could explode into a fireball. There are protests in Bihar that Muslim voters have been artificially merged into reserved constituencies, making them ineligible to vote for Muslim candidates. Which government in its senses would risk wading through such a boiling cauldron?

Every country has an army, but most countries, fortunately, do not go to war at the drop of an intelligence analysis. What do the big brass of defence services do during the long fallow periods between conflicts? They indulge in war games, simulating reality on the planning board and keeping the boys busy in exercises that come as close to a projected battle situation.

Politics in a democracy is not all that different, except that there is far more warfare. Elections come once in four or five years; the time in between is consumed by planning for its

outcome. Government decisions are tailored not just for the public good but also for the political fit: the voting constituency must be served before the electorate is addressed. Even as words fill the air, substantive issues are being given a wet run in Gujarat before they face the final test in a general election. The big three are economic policy, as seen through the looking glass of the price rise and social justice; the nuclear deal; and the Muslim vote.

For the Congress, the Muslim vote is crucial. In 2004, Narendra Modi stampeded the Muslims in the Congress box. The BJP won Gujarat and lost the country. This time, the problem is more nuanced. Modi might be the same person, but the situation is different.

George Bush is now in the picture, thanks to the nuclear deal and the strategic alliance. The Congress dream is to ensure that the spectre of a revived Modi outweighs Muslim anger against Bush. But is the Modi shadow large enough to envelop Bush as well as hide the sprinkle of questions that dot three and a half years in office? You cannot blame Modi for doing nothing about the Srikrishna report. Or for doing nothing about the recommendations of the Rajinder Sachar committee. Or for the indifference with which a sub-plan for Muslims in the 11th national plan was arbitrarily rejected. And you cannot quite blame Modi for the fact that the Congress has found a new ally in Gujarat, Gordhan Zadaphia. Who is Mr Zadaphia? He is the man who was

home minister of Gujarat during the 2002 riots and as culpable as anyone else. We know that democracy has a few reserved seats for cynicism. But surely there is some bottom line.

We will also get an idea in Gujarat whether there is enough sympathy for the nuclear deal among the urban middle class. The deal is also linked to economic reform and growth, objectives dear to the heart of urban Gujarat. Dr. Manmohan Singh's tour program was drawn up with this in mind. There is, probably, no state more pro-American than Gujarat. This should be a factor in any potential Congress revival. Modi is by nature, and inclination, a polarising figure with a sharp communal bias: to accuse him of communalism is only to reassure those who are faithful to him. But even those who oppose him bitterly, for rational or personal reasons -- he has, for instance, thwarted a number of careers in his own party -- need issues on which to campaign for a future better than he can provide.

Gujarat is a key indicator, because the two national parties are also the only regional players. The results will test the resilience of both. The Congress has the advantage, because the odds are against it, and defeat will not be too demoralising. The real test will be for the BJP, if its expectations go haywire.

But both Congress and BJP should wait for the results before they send out Happy New Year cards.

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What to do about coal?

If Bangladesh fails to develop its coal resources promptly then there will not be enough electricity to support the economic growth except by importing coal. Importing coal is very wasteful. It also fails to provide the development boost to the western regions of Bangladesh that exploiting the coal resources would achieve. The coal import strategy is then both not economic but it also condemns the western half of the country to continuing poverty with respect to the east

FORREST COOKSON

THIS article is one of two that deal with the key issues in the coal industry. This first article deals with three questions: (1) Does Bangladesh need to develop the coal industry? (2) What technologies are appropriate for coal? (3) How should coal fit into the development of the power sector? The second article will deal with how to develop the coal sector.

Does Bangladesh need to develop the coal industry? If Bangladesh wishes to grow at 7% per annum for the next decade, then the electricity supply must grow at 9%. This requires adding 6,200 MWs of power generating capacity over the decade. There is sufficient

gas reserves available to fire about 3,500 MWs, although the real state of reserves is somewhat opaque. This leaves a minimum of 3,000 MWs of coal fired plant required. If there is no development of coal fired plants then the GDP growth will be held to perhaps 3.5% per annum. The shortage of electricity will keep the manufacturing sector and the service sector from developing rapidly. That is the choice -- develop the coal or grow the economy slowly.

I am wrong in this only if there is much more natural gas available than is now counted in the gas reserves. There is room for a lot of argument about the reserve level, but I think the balanced conclusion is that more gas availability is

very questionable. Certainly, Petrobangla is very conservative in its outlook. Furthermore, the country needs much more urea production than is now possible, requiring additional gas for that use. There is no doubt that there is a great deal of natural gas within Bangladesh, but it takes time for exploration and development. During the next ten years it is likely that there will be major natural gas discoveries; future power requirements after the next decade can be partially fueled by the newly discovered gas. But during the ten years in front of us it is urgent to get the coal fired plants running.

The alternative to developing the coal resources is to import coal. That seems an expensive alternative when there are

authorities and the mine owners work together.

The critical question is whether the economics of the project are such that the costs of managing the environment can be covered and the investment can still retain a reasonable rate of return. Open pit mining is acceptable only when the return is sufficiently high to cover these special costs.

In the case of Phulbari, the environmental costs are covered, as indicated from the available data. That is, the project can produce coal at competitive international prices, earn a reasonable return to investment, pay all of the taxes due the government, and cover all the costs of resettlement and environmental management. Of course, this analysis is based on the existing tax structure and any significant change in taxation the existing project would nullify this conclusion.

How should the power sector be developed? The existing view of the power sector is based on the idea that

the combined cycle plants that provide a base load plus a peaking capacity is the optimum way to generate power. Based on this conclusion, the approach has been to build more and more combined cycle plants to cover both the base load and peaking plants to meet the high demand levels in the evening hours.

Is this the correct approach? If we want to compare to coal, it is necessary to decide the price of the gas and underlying that the price of crude oil. The existing analysis of the Master Plan uses \$30 per barrel, far too low; more realistic estimates of oil prices lead to coal being cheaper than oil as a fuel for Bangladesh power plants. Once one goes to \$60 per barrel, then the coal is the cheaper fuel for generating electricity.

The preferred approach to the power sector would use coal for the base load and the gas for the peaking. Ideally, one would want to build MW 6,000 of coal fired plants over the next decade. That would require 450 million mt of coal to be set minimum cost.

The conclusion from this brief discussion is obvious -- the coal sector must be developed as rapidly as possible and used to fuel the base load. For Bangladesh, that means approving the existing Phulbari project, encouraging Tata to take up open pit mine at Barapukuria, and starting immediately to develop coal fired power plants through IPPs. By starting at once the generating capacity of the power sector can just meet the needs of the economy at 7% growth.

If Bangladesh fails to develop its coal resources promptly then there will not be enough electricity to support the economic growth except by importing coal. Importing coal is very wasteful. It also fails to provide the development boost to the western regions of Bangladesh that exploiting the coal resources would achieve. The coal import strategy is then both not economic but it also condemns the western half of the country to continuing poverty with respect to the east.

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