

EC should keep above intra-party conflict

It must talk to both factions of BNP without ado

EXCEPT for the work on the voter list with identity card being on course, in all other areas of preparation like bringing in electoral reforms, the Election Commission is certainly lagging behind the pre-set schedule. In particular, the major concern is the unfinished agenda of a massive amendment to the Representation of the People's Order 1972 in the shape of an Electoral Reform Ordinance. Fourteen months since the caretaker government's takeover and with the obligation of holding national election in eight months' time, it's a pity that the Election Commission is stuck in the BNP's internal issue over who legitimately represented the party in taking forward the electoral reform agenda through its last lap.

The EC-imposed 72-hour deadline, on the two factions of BNP to present a united party before the EC or leave it to the commission to decide the matter, which we think was ill conceived in the first place, has already expired. A group from Hafiz-led faction has met the EC against the backdrop of five out of eight available standing committee members of BNP lending support to Delwar faction and urging the EC to recognise it as the legitimate representative of the BNP.

The HC ruling on the writ filed by Khaleda loyalists has rightly stressed that the claim to which faction represented the BNP is a political matter and not for the court to decide.

The net result of the wrangling over the last 14 months is that the EC is bogged down in the BNP's internal conflict, whether it admits or not. It is not for the EC to unite or divide the party by any ultimatum; political realities have to be accepted till they change for the better. Besides, it is not a question of allocating party symbol, it is just a matter of seeking opinions from both factions of BNP on electoral reform and have them reflected on the proposal. We would therefore say to the EC, please don't complicate the matter any more; call both factions of BNP separately, if unavoidable, to meetings; put together an electoral reform package; and present it before the government for its promulgation as an ordinance.

Recovering submerged land

The Bhabadah success is highly encouraging and should be replicated

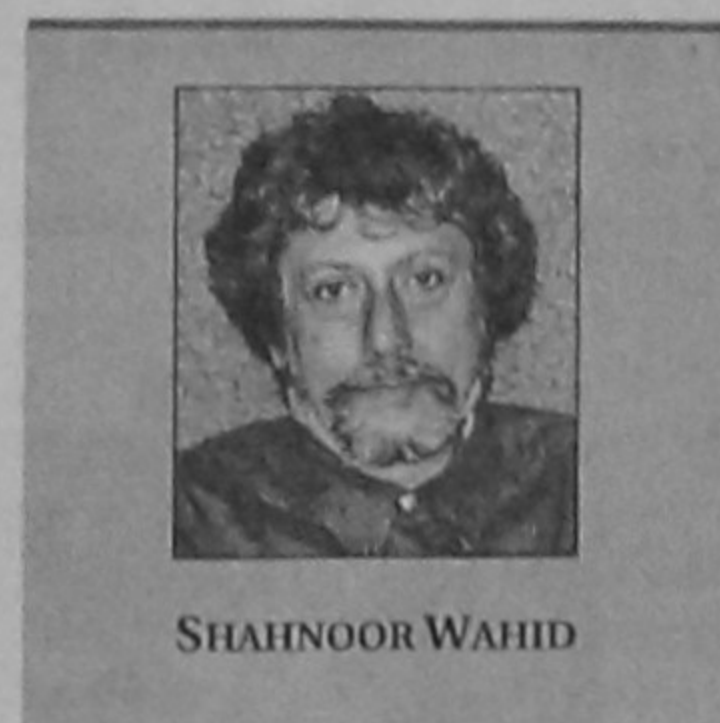
PEOPLE in 100 villages in three upazilas of Jessore district have got a new lease of life, thanks to the recovery of arable land that remained under water for 18 years. They are now looking forward to a bumper boro harvest which will alleviate their prolonged sufferings caused by water logging over 16,000 hectares of land. The members of the 55 Bengal Regiment stationed in Jessore Cantonment have succeeded in removing stagnant water from vast areas and with that the affected people have got back their only means of survival-cultivable land. It has indeed been a commendable effort and we praise our army for it.

What is really surprising is that successive governments and the Water Development Board failed to do anything to mitigate the sufferings of the people in Bhabadah area in 18 years and they were caught in what looked like an unending poverty cycle. The project for clearing the stagnant water over a vast marshy area was finally approved in 2006-07 and the army was assigned the job of recovering the submerged land.

The Bhabadah success should be an eye opener to the planners in the Water Development Board and also the agriculture department. It has proved that the problem of water logging and cultivable land being submerged due to silting of riverbeds and other water bodies can be resolved through excavation of the rivers. The Bhabadah example does indicate that even a gigantic task can be accomplished if an appropriate action plan is adopted.

Similar problems exist in many places of the country where people are finding it extremely difficult to deal with adverse natural conditions and changes, on their own. Of course, expertise and adequate logistic support are necessary to recover submerged land. But what is needed more than anything else is the willingness to work relentlessly to render the much needed service to humanity in distress. We believe the members of the army have set such an example in Jessore. It has once again brought to the fore the worrisome truth that our rivers are getting silted up in the absence of river training programmes, which leads not only to loss of navigability but also creates the kind of situation witnessed in Bhabadah.

Dialectics will take us nowhere



SHAHNOOR WAHID

THESE are the times to indulge in dialectics, with the hope of getting back the lost empire. These are the times to talk, with tea, tea-talk that is, and then wait for the time to take the people on a ride once again. Gradually "leaders" are sharpening their tongues to lash out at the power and the powerful, as things remain in bad shape in various sectors, at the moment. These are the times to remain forgetful about your past deeds, about the gross misconduct, misrule, torture, blackmailing, and whatnot.

Every day, we are being entertained by the leaders, with comments like "BNP can get united in five minutes, it is the ego that has to be taken care of first." Very good, sir, if it can be done in five minutes then what's stopping

SENSE & INSENSIBILITY

You see, this is one mighty example to prove that mere dialectics does not solve problems. What you need is commitment, honesty, accountability and self-respect. It is plain and simple that there was no commitment and accountability on the part of the people who introduce themselves as leaders of the people. They came by the dozens in last 18 years but they hardly cared for their own people. It is possible that to all of those leaders who now live in the posh residential areas in Dhaka Bhabadha was not a glamorous project so they did not talk about it.

you? Oh, that ego? Why can't you take care of that ego if it is the only obstacle? If you cannot overcome your ego problem, how do you plan to overcome real-life larger problems that will come in the future days? Will you stop negotiating with international partners or international bidders if it clashes with your ego? That was not a smart thing to say, leader.

Amidst such incredibly hilarious comments and depressing news, we also get to hear something positive, something good, something that lifts up the morale. Alas! Such news items come only once in a while. In Monday's The Daily Star there was one such news item that made me happy after a long while. It is an issue that has been

bothering me for many years. It was the man-made misery that the people of Bhabadaha in Jessore had to tolerate silently for long 18 years. The large area consisting over 100 villages went under knee-deep water after a water project was built on a wrong site, thereby trapping water inside.

The water-logging made cultivation impossible as it devoured the entire land where people had their homesteads and farmland. Cattle-heads kept on dying and there was no way to grow any vegetables. For long 18 years thousands of people of the area pleaded and begged to the local leaders to exert pressure on the government to rid the land of the polluted water. Leaders promised action but once they visited Dhaka, they returned

richer, but with no action recipe. The health condition of the people living virtually surrounded by water worsened every day but there was no one to listen to their lamentation. It soon became a "land that time forgot."

So, after 18 years and after three elected political governments, Bhabadaha has finally gotten rid of the water. Land has come out from its watery grave and farmers are now waiting for a bumper boro paddy (nearly 80,000 tonnes) to make them economically slightly better off. Even better days are expected ahead. But how did the miracle happen? Who is the great "leader" who has taken the initiative to help those hapless thousands who passed 18 miserable years in the water-

logged area?

No, it was not any leader(s) but the 55 Bengal Regiment of Jessore that worked hard for two years to remove the water and bring the land back to shape once again. The money was provided by the Asian Development Bank. The task was simple, that involved re-excavating some canals and small tributaries of Tekka and Sree rivers to take the polluted water to Shibsha river. Actually what was required was compassion and will to do the work. A report says that the excavation work will continue till 2011 to clear the rest of the area of the water that still remain there.

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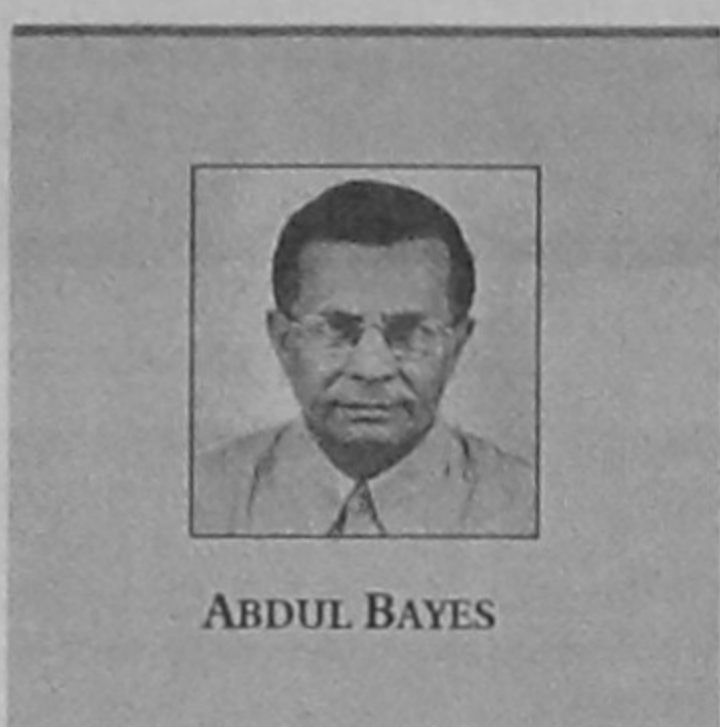
it.

If you read the country pages of newspapers you will often come across news items that say that local villagers are giving free labour to construct a road or a culvert or dig a canal, as the work was not done by their leaders when they were in power. But I am sure the leaders had had funds allocated for those culverts, roads and canals. Then where did the money go? Do I have to give the answer? The *akalmand* only needs an *ishara*.

Slowly but surely we are heading towards the general elections. Once the elections will be held some of the elected representatives will form a government. Then what? What will they do? What kind of policy they will adopt to bring about changes in the economic and social sectors? Are they aware of what is called "Need of the hour"? Will they be competent enough to visualise what the country will look like fifty years from today, and what has to be done today so that it does look pretty? Will the future leaders be honest and have self-respect? Plenty of it? Yes, self-respect is the key word here.

Shahnoor Wahid is a Senior Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.

Floating on gas but flouting its growth!



ABDUL BAYES

WE drove to Birashar, Brahmanbaria, where Bangladesh Gas Company Limited (BGCL) is located. BGCL is the largest gas producing company in the country, and owns 6 gas fields with Titas topping the list. The other fields are: Habigonj, Bakhrabad, Narshingdi, Meghna and Kamta.

As I could glean, the fields have recoverable gas reserves of 10.4 TCF and the cumulative production stood roughly at 4.5 TCF (till 2005). The wells of the fields have an average depth of 10 thousand ft or so. They are called "sweet gas", with about 96% of methane in the wellhead.

But "sweet gas" can sometimes

turn sour, other things not being equal. A natural gas expert told me that a total of 14 TCF of gas was discovered in the pre-independence period and only 6 TCF could be added during the whole post-independence period. We have already consumed 7 TCF -- more than we ourselves produced. That means, taking facts at their face value, not much of a breakthrough could be in evidence in enlarging the size of the cake, although we

BENEATH THE SURFACE

Given our technological and management endowments, foreign investments should be welcomed without surrendering national interest. At the same time, national institutions should be strengthened or connected with foreign companies as joint ventures. Periodic rise in prices should reflect true opportunity costs, thus, siphoning back the surplus for new discovery and development of the energy sector.

have been swallowing the cake with comfort and carelessness.

In 2001, we were up on feet for exporting gas to neighbouring nations and in 2008, we are desperate to import gas from others. During the last five years, more than one minister/advisor, and almost a similar number of secretaries, changed chairs dealing with gas related policies. But, as usual, gas seems to groan under grievous games.

As a student of economics, I find a serious flaw in our gas pricing. Gas is seriously underpriced in Bangladesh compared to its close substitutes. Our team in the gas fields sat with some local elites and asked them: "How much would you like to pay in the face of a disconnection due to unavoidable reasons, say gas shortage?" They unequivocally echoed: "A maximum of Tk.900/per month from the current level of Tk.400 per month." The next question was "why?" The answer revealed the basic economic principles: "Because we cannot go back to traditional fuels due to severe shortage of such fuels, and even if we do so, we shall have to incur a cost of Tk.1000 or so per month for cook-

ing with alternatives. Besides, economy of time, flexibility in food intake, cleanliness etc. are some of other factors fueling the maximum price."

In the neighbourhood village, a woman told us that she used to send her secondary school going daughters for cooking in a neighbour's burner, suffering social shame and stigma. But now that she has an access, she also allows her in-laws to use the burners.

In Dhaka city, car owners spend Tk.100 on gas for a drive that would have cost Tk.600 by alternative fuel. This causes distortions in demand and misallocation of resources. Only cultivators of paddy should be subsidised for the cost of diesel/electricity and fertiliser, and the rest of the society should pay the actual price for gas. Otherwise, a day may soon arrive when the govt would not lay golden eggs any more!

It is being argued that Bangladesh is "floating" on gas, and that gas greases economic growth. Rhetoric aside, the reality is that, so far, only one-tenth of households have access to gas; another one-third has access to electricity -- mostly produced by

gas. At the moment, power and fertiliser claim roughly two-thirds of total gas supplied, industrial units about 12 percent, domestic about 11 percent and captive 9 percent. Region-wise, the whole of the North and the South remain outside the orbit of natural gas, and pervasive poverty prevails in those regions.

As we could gather, BGCL paid Tk.1,5670 million in 2004/05 to the government in the form of SD, VAT, dividend and income tax. Presumably, the gas sector was the largest tax-payer to the government till few years back. The most pertinent question is: how much of that was poured back to the sector for exploration and development (including human resources development)? Can we not make a vibrant gas sector with our own resources? That would, of course, demand a cut on "unproductive" expenses of the government.

However, we were impressed by the hard work of the field level staff and, supposedly, they are no less efficient than those in IOCs. The recent seepage in a well of BGCL gas field and the efficiency with which it was dealt with speaks of the quality of our

field level officials. The disturbing well was "killed" to keep four of the neighbouring wells alive. In monetary terms, Tk. 2700 million was saved by forgoing Tk.900 million!

But how much are these blokes being paid compared to their counterparts elsewhere, and how many of them have been sent abroad for training or acquisition of skills? Sadly, we smell a rat in the whole process. For example, IOCs pay about \$1.7 million each year for human resources development. If it had been properly administered, by now, Bangladesh should have been blessed with a basket of technical hands of international standard. Unfortunately, like in other projects, unproductive sources seem to have stolen the cream to "enrich" themselves, thus, putting our gas sector in peril. Bapex is paralysed due to paucity of funds and trained manpower, some of whom have left the country for a better fortune.

On the other hand, there is, allegedly, a big difference in the prices that government pays for gas from IOCs and domestic companies. Although there has been some modest improvement in the downstream side of the channel in terms of transmission and distribution, almost nothing has emerged in the upstream side in terms of discovery of gas fields, inshore or offshore.

By and large, the government needs to build up strong and competitive indigenous institutions to deal with gas. Rice and gas cannot be left to the whims of

international companies or to the private sector alone. Both the government and the private sector should play on a level playing field. Neither "hands on" nor "hands off" policies, but an optimal mix of the two could possibly provide us with a win-win situation.

Given our technological and management endowments, foreign investments should be welcomed without surrendering national interest. At the same time, national institutions should be strengthened or connected with foreign companies as joint ventures. Periodic rise in prices should reflect true opportunity costs, thus, siphoning back the surplus for new discovery and development of the energy sector.

The bottom line of the message from available statistics is that Bangladesh will go out of gas within the next few years unless backed up new discoveries. The demand for gas had been growing at a much faster rate on the heels of heightened oil prices now peaking at \$130/barrel. Only proper policies pertaining to exploration, pricing, transmission and distribution could save us from upcoming problems. Bangladesh may float on gas at the moment, but lack of accurate vision and proper policies might flout our dream of a high growth and rapid poverty reduction.

Abdul Bayes is a Professor of Economics at Jahangirnagar University.

Dam busters

Even so, Taliban forces sneak close enough to frequently shoot rockets, mortars, RPGs and small arms in the direction of the British base and the dam site. The insurgents approach the dam by filtering through several surrounding villages that grow a combination of opium poppies, wheat and corn, while at the same time warning local men not to work at the dam under penalty of death.

RON MOREAU and SAMI YOUSAFZAI

IN many ways the Kajaki dam is a symbol of Afghanistan's troubled history. Built by the United States back in the 1950s, it fell into disrepair for lack of spare parts under the Taliban. Now the United States is trying to rebuild the 330-foot-high earth-filled hydroelectric facility as the centerpiece of a hearts-and-minds strategy in the strategic Helmand River valley.

If repairs remain on schedule, the dam will become the country's largest power source -- producing some 52 megawatts of electricity -- by the middle of 2009.

Of course, it's not going to be that easy. Analysts expect a summer surge from Taliban insurgents, who are already stepping up their assaults on the dam and other

reconstruction projects in the east and south of the country.

According to a report by the Afghanistan NGO Safety Office, nongovernmental aid agencies have suffered twice as many attacks during the first three months of this year as they did during the same period last year, leaving nine NGO workers dead and the same number wounded since January.

The difficult-to-secure dam has been an especially enticing target. Insurgents control portions of the unpaved road leading from Helmand province's capital, Lashkar Gah, to the dam, forcing the Americans to airlift machinery and crews to the dam site in stark desert and mountain territory that resembles Arizona. A company of British paratroopers defends the

facility by providing a three-mile wide security "bubble" on all sides.

Even so, Taliban forces sneak close enough to frequently shoot rockets, mortars, RPGs and small arms in the direction of the British base and the dam site. The insurgents approach the dam by filtering through several surrounding villages that grow a combination of opium poppies, wheat and corn, while at the same time warning local men not to work at the dam under penalty of death. "This (security perimeter) is a small area of goodness in a sea of unsavouriness," says British Maj. Mike Shervington, who commands D Company, 2nd Battalion of the 2nd Parachute Regiment, the dam's main security force.

Shervington doubts that the local road -- made dangerous by

Taliban checkpoints and roadside bombs -- can be sufficiently secured to allow a third turbine to be trucked in from Kabul within the next six months. "The enemy uses IEDs to deny us the ability to protect and bring development to the people," says Shervington.

US officials are optimistic that once the dam's three power plants come online and the level of the emerald-green reservoir behind the dam is raised another 40 feet through the installation of new gates, the surge of electricity and irrigation will help win residents over to the government's side. But Shervington knows he's in for a tough fight. "We are anticipating a very busy summer," he says.

While he prepares for a hard season, some senior US officials are questioning the Taliban's ability to keep up the pace of its attacks. Last year was the most violent in Afghanistan since the Taliban was overthrown in late 2001, with the United Nations estimating that some 8,000 Afghans died -- mostly insurgents, but also at least 1,500 civilians.

Richard Boucher, the US assis-

tant secretary of state for South and Central Asia affairs recently downplayed the Taliban's challenge. "The Taliban threats of a winter wave seem to have gone the way of last year's spring offensive," he told an Islamabad press conference earlier this month. "It never happened."

The Taliban, for its part, claims that its shift from large-scale engagements to smaller hit-and-run operations is less a sign of weakness than a change in strategy to counter heavy casualties incurred last year. A senior Taliban commander in southeast Ghazni province, who requested anonymity for security reasons but who has provided Newswest with reliable information in the past, says provincial insurgent forces may have lost up to 50% of their deputy commanders in 2007.

The US military believes it captured or killed some 100 midlevel Taliban commanders last year, as well as several senior leaders, in the east and south. As a result, says the Ghazni commander, Taliban leaders have ordered their lieutenants to limit insurgent operations to

units of five to eight men to minimise casualties.

Local commanders and subcommanders have been told not to meet in face-to-face strategy sessions in groups larger than two in case they are targeted by precision air strike. The Ghazni leader adds that commanders and fighters who had become dangerously negligent in using cell and satellite phones have been ordered to rely on harder-to-trace communication methods, such as couriers.

According to the leader, the Taliban are also planning to increase the number of suicide bombings, particularly vehicle bombs, as well as the planting of roadside IEDs and small-unit ambushes of Afghan and coalition supply lines. A record 150 suicide attacks took place in Afghanistan in 2007, and the Taliban official claims that there is a six-month waiting list to be trained as a suicide bomber (known to the Taliban as "wrestlers").

Twenty-four Afghans who were recently trained by Al Qaeda experts in the techniques of fashioning explosive-and-ball-

bearing-laden suicide vests, and of wiring large-scale vehicle bombs, have recently infiltrated into Afghanistan from the Pakistani tribal area of Waziristan, the commanders say.

Operations involving vehicle bombings may be "15 times" more expensive than those using an individual on foot wearing a suicide vest, he says, but they are more deadly and effective. He pointed to an early March suicide attack on an American and Afghan National Army post in Khost province's Sabari district in which an explosive-packed construction truck rammed into the base, killing two US soldiers.

According to the commander and a recent video released by the Jalaluddin Haqqani insurgent group, which is allied with the Taliban, the truck's driver was a young German of Turkish origin who had also been trained in Pakistan's tribal area. The Ghazni commander says the Taliban prefers to steal vehicles used in car bombs, not to save money but because they are more difficult to trace.

Indeed, Taliban commanders boast that between suitcases of cash sent to them by jihadi supporters in the Gulf and the millions they received in ransom for foreigners they kidnapped last year, funding has become less of a problem for their operations. And while they lack the firepower to go head to head with the coalition's military, their hit-and-run operations are taking a lethal toll.

In recent days several Taliban commandos killed 11 policemen sleeping in their Kandahar outpost and a suicide bomber killed 23 people, including two senior policemen, in remote Nimruz province. In other attacks IEDs have killed six coalition soldiers, including the son of the new Dutch armed forces commander. Their deaths brought the number of coalition troops killed so far this year to 44. The small-scale fighting in Afghanistan may not make for big headlines, but its ability to disrupt projects like the dam is potent -- and deadly.

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