

These frequent power failures

Focus must be on curbing systems loss

A government committee has decided that as many as 15,000 bulbs and airconditioners will be withdrawn from the Secretariat as an austerity measure. The decision was obviously made in light of the on-going crisis in the power sector. The move will be appreciated by everyone concerned about the waste of public resources, especially at the level of the government. The question that we must now deal with, though, is why these bulbs and airconditioners were there in the first place, particularly after a decision in May last year to have them removed. The stark truth, as we understand, is that these extra facilities were indeed withdrawn but were later surreptitiously re-installed. It is sheer wastage of taxpayers' money. Now, if the move to put a stop to such wastage is truly implemented, the country will surely stand to benefit to a significant extent.

Professor M. Tamim, special assistant to the Chief Adviser, has sought to reassure the country that efforts are on to ensure regular power supply despite all the existing limitations. Much as we appreciate his words, the fact remains that we have heard all this before. At this point, we need to ask a simple question: where and what is the outcome of all such efforts to improve the power supply? Professor Tamim sees a ray of light in the fact that the 100-150 megawatts of electricity supplied to the agricultural sector will soon return to the existing supply system. But that still does not hold out much promise for the country. With the countrywide demand for electricity now being 5,000 megawatts and the production being only 3,600-3,800 megawatts, one does not need much wisdom to know why the country is going through the unceasing spate of load-shedding.

Indeed, power outages at present have reached such a critical stage that every section of the population is paying a price. In steamy weather, students have been unable to focus on their studies, businesses have been sputtering along in candlelight and industry has been going through bad hiccups. Household appliances like computers and refrigerators are under threat of going out of order. At the same time, a combination of hot weather and power failure has been threatening the health of people, many of whom have fallen prey to heat strokes. Let us not at the same time ignore the losses resulting from unauthorised electricity connections, which only lead to a horrendous systems loss.

No one expects a miracle to happen for the power sector to improve its performance. But surely some concrete measures, as opposed to a mouthing of platitudes, are called for. A strong emphasis on tackling wastage, in both government departments and private enterprises, has now become an absolute necessity. The CA's special assistant has asked citizens to practise austerity. The more important requirement is for the government to ensure that such austerity is in place --- at shopping malls, wedding receptions, government offices, et al.

Eight-year old arrested?

HC's intervention comes as big relief

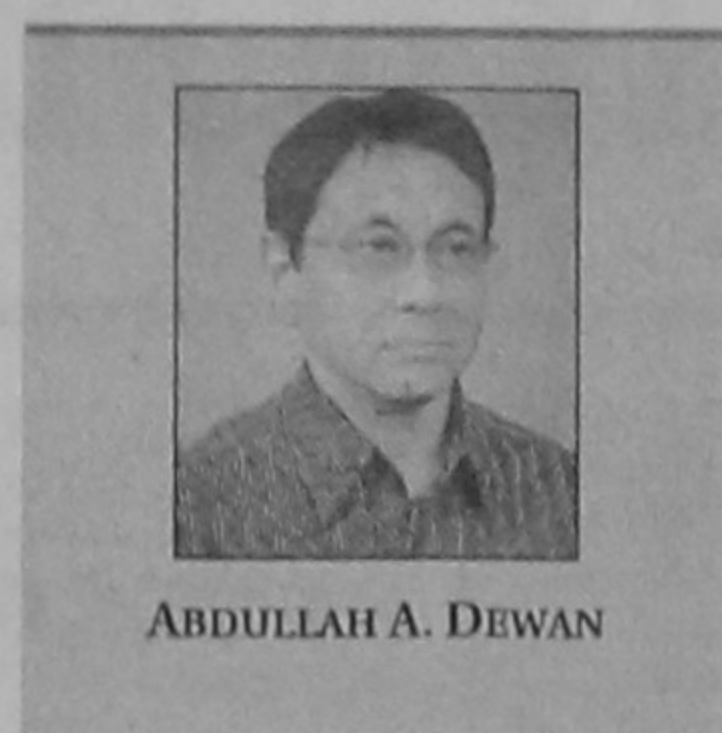
THE High Court's *suo moto* rule on the detention of an eight-year old girl has exposed, once more, the stereotyped, unimaginative and thoughtless approach that may turn enforcement of the law into a ruthless exercise, particularly when it comes to the poor and vulnerable sections of society. The HC took cognizance of a newspaper report and asked the government to explain why the arrest of the minor girl, charged with carrying phensidyl bottles, should not be declared illegal.

The tender age of the accused should have been enough to convince the prosecutors that legal proceedings against her would be both unfair and untenable. This is a clear case of child abuse in which a minor was employed for carrying drugs. The culprits who strapped the bottles with her waist and legs are the ones the law enforcers should have sued and brought to justice. Obviously, poverty and lack of social security leave a huge number of children highly vulnerable to all kinds of exploitation. In this instance, the girl was used for committing a crime. But there is no doubt that an eight-year old could not be held responsible for what she did.

The law enforcers showed complete lack of sensitivity to the child's vulnerability and inability to defend herself. After all, enforcement of any law cannot be a mechanical exercise devoid of due concern for children whose mental immaturity is an evident countervailing factor in such cases. It is only proper that in case of a proven child offence, he or she can at best be sent to a juvenile reformatory, not certainly to jail. The girl who had to undergo the ordeal of being detained by police represents a large chunk of the population whose basic human and legal rights are often violated some way or the other.

The High Court's *suo moto* rule should awaken the entire law enforcement and justice system to the need for upholding the principles of compassion and fair play.

Fuel versus food



ABDULLAH A. DEWAN

THE hype and hopes surrounding the promise of bio-fuels and the realities of disappointments with its downsides have become a controversial issue of global interest. Everyone is asking: Can corn-based ethanol the primary ingredient for bio-fuels deliver the promises?

The promises persuaded over 300 scientists and business leaders to attend a recent conference hosted by the University of California San Diego. The promise of bio-fuels prompted President George Bush to ask Congress recently for \$225 million for bio-fuel research a 19% increase over this year's federal spending level.

Besides achieving energy independence, proponents argue that bio-fuels are environment friendly as opposed to fossil fuels, which release carbon dioxide (CO2) and are responsible for climate change.

Since bio-fuels are made from plants and algae that absorb CO2 in the process of photosynthesis, they can alleviate global climate change. Burning fossil fuels adds CO2 to the atmosphere while burning bio-fuels releases CO2

that was absorbed from the atmosphere by plants or algae in the past. The process initiates a carbon cycle one that halts further buildup of CO2 in the atmosphere.

Chemical analyses reveal that bio-diesel creates a reduction of:

- 100% net carbon dioxide (global warming)
- 100% sulphur dioxide (acid rain)
- 40-60% of soot emissions (health hazard)
- 10-50% of carbon monoxide emissions (poisonous gas)
- 10-50% of hydrocarbon emissions (health hazards)
- 80-90% mutagenicity (cancer causing)
- Carcinogenic emissions (cancer causing)

Interestingly, there is residual food value once energy is extracted from most bio-fuels crops. With ethanol, the food value is enhanced. The by-products from the distillation process are dried grains, which contains yeast and hence are more nutritious than the original unprocessed grain.

With bio-diesel the left over is oilseed cake after the oil has been pressed out again, depending on what seed is used, this is usually a

highly nutritious, high-protein livestock feed.

As for developing countries, making bio-fuels from home-grown crops can reduce dependence on imported fuels, build self-reliance, and spur local job opportunity and growth. Moreover, dependence on fuel wood, which is often scarce and poses serious health hazards through indoor air-pollution, is also reduced.

The case for bio-fuels seems persuasive but most of the promises are still circulating on paper. Besides, proponents avoid weighing out their downsides.

The diminution of greenhouse gas buildup depends on the types of bio-fuels produced. Transforming plants into bio-fuels ethanol made from cornstarch and bio-diesel made from canola and soybeans uses so much fossil fuel generated electricity that the net effect on greenhouse gases is negative rather than positive.

Considering the total energy consumed by farm equipment, cultivation, planting, fertilisers, pesticides, herbicides, fungicides made from petroleum, irrigation systems, harvesting, transport of feedstock to processing plants,

fermentation, distillation, drying, transport to fuel terminals and retail pumps, and lower ethanol fuel energy content, the net energy content value added and delivered to consumers is very small. All things considered, the net benefit does little to reduce un-sustainable import of oil and fossil fuels required to produce the ethanol.

Get this: It takes more than a gallon of fossil fuel to make one gallon of ethanol -- 29% more (June 17, 2006 editorial in the Wall. St. Journal). A comparison of conversion efficiency from solar to usable energy shows that photo-voltaics (solar cells) are 100 times more efficient than corn ethanol, and 10 times more efficient than the best bio-fuels.

A Montreal Gazette editorial opined that the gains in greenhouse gas emissions and fuel energy are so minor that they certainly aren't worth the hunger they cause.

"When people worldwide start rioting because they can't afford to put food on the table," said The Christian Science Monitor in an editorial, "it's time to 'rethink global security'."

There will certainly be a "backlash" against using crop land for

fuel production if "world food shortages worsen," said the Singapore Straits Times in a recent editorial.

Dow Chemical, which is converting soybeans into foam for furniture and car seats, expresses concerns about increasing demand outstripping supply, given there's only so much of these biologically available materials around. The scenario isn't very promising, nor is the conversion of ecologically valuable forests to oil palm in Malaysia or sugarcane in Brazil.

"The problem, for now, is that science and technology have yet to catch up, so commercially viable US ethanol must come from corn. And that puts your gas tank in competition with your kids' bellies for an increasingly valuable resource (Dallas Morning News, April 17)."

As we see, rising oil prices feed back into the bio-fuels production process. With food and fuel consumption intertwined, increases in the price of oil are shadowed by increases in the price of grain. This structural shift has put nearly 800 million automobiles around the globe in competition with 2 billion poor people for food, warranting urgent reversal of bio-fuels madness.

Bio-fuels might have a place, but that place should be carefully weighed against damage to the environment (deforestations) and disruption of the world's food chain. Therefore, research should continue with non-food bio-fuels sources. Brazil has succeeded in using non-food plant material such as sugar-cane waste to produce ethanol.

In the next decade, cellulosic ethanol, which is derived from crop residues, grasses and other plant materials otherwise discarded, may become a reality.

Much of the increased bio-fuels demand come from the US and EU. Many vehicles already on the road in the US are equipped to run on E-85 fuel (a fuel made from 85% ethanol and 15% gasoline).

There is also a widespread use of E10 (a fuel blend made from 10% ethanol) in most automobiles. A growing demand for bio-fuels in many South Asian countries, such as Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia, is transforming agricultural land into bio-fuel crop land.

There are no shortcuts to reducing oil use and greenhouse gas emissions. Politicians in the US and EU countries need to comprehend that a "sustainable bio-fuels" source is illusory rather than a reality either now or in the future. Arable land isn't a zero-sum gameland converted to higher-priced corn is not available for other crops.

As for investors, they need to recognise that pouring money into bio-fuels is a risky bet. What will happen if, for whatever reason, oil prices drop significantly? Besides, government subsidies may quickly dry up once policymakers face up to the reality of their euphoric chimera and food shortages threaten political stability and national security.

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The day after

But suppose a government comes into office that genuinely wants to put the war-crime on trial. Suppose it hangs the guilty or jails them for life. What happens then? I do not believe that much will happen to the political landscape of the country.

This is because, like the pernicious iceberg, the question of hostility to the ideology of Bangladesh that led to the crimes lies mostly submerged, the trials calling attention only to its tip above water. Today, there is little attention to the dangerous bottom nine-tenths; the day after the culprits have been punished will be no different.

MAHFUZUR RAHMAN

OF late, there has been a groundswell of demand for trial of people who committed war crimes during the liberation struggle of the country some thirty-seven years ago. It is time, too.

There can be no doubt that perpetrators of crimes against humanity must be brought to book. It is rarely too late to put them in the dock. Those who killed, tortured, maimed, and raped to stop the emergence of Bangladesh must account for their conduct, no matter how long ago the crimes might have been committed.

Yet, the loud calls for action have tended to obscure many critical issues that war crimes trials alone will never resolve. The drumbeat, if you like, has drowned out many other sounds that need to be heard. It is also necessary to understand the mainspring and motivation of the demands for the trials.

To start with, who are calling for the trials? Many of them are undoubtedly motivated by the genuine pain of witnessing years

of apathy about the matter. I dare say, there are also many whose wish to see justice done appears little more than skin-deep. The motley gathering of the late protesters is worth watching.

It includes many of those who had the power to bring the criminals to justice but did precious little about it. Many of them are from the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, the Awami League, and the Jatiya Party (choose a faction), all of whom governed the country over the last thirty-six years at one time or the other. Of them, the longest tenure was of the BNP. Yet, many leaders of that party have now joined those calling for trial of the war criminals.

Perhaps the oddest thing is the frequent statements from leaders of these parties that the initiative for action "must come from the government." You might be forgiven if you doubted you were hearing right. Leaders who are now saying that it is the government, which must start the process of putting alleged war criminals on trial, were themselves the government. What had they been doing when in power? It all smells

distinctly hypocritical.

Then why are these people so vocal in their call for war-crimes trials? The question can legitimately be asked about some of those demanding the trial, though certainly not about all. One answer readily suggests itself.

There has been a new awareness among the population of the enormous sacrifices made during the liberation war. Resurgence is probably too strong a word, but it is popular now to denounce war crimes. Some of the political leaders may simply have been playing to the gallery, the elections being on the horizon, or appearing to be.

But suppose a government comes into office that genuinely wants to put the war-crime on trial. Suppose it hangs the guilty or jails them for life. What happens then? I do not believe that much will happen to the political landscape of the country.

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calling attention only to its tip above water.

Today, there is little attention to the dangerous bottom nine-tenths; the day after the culprits have been punished will be no different.

One likely consequence of the trials may even be that political parties whose ideologies are opposed to the very idea of a secular Bangladesh will be able to claim that the punishment of the culprits of the past gives them a clean slate now.

If the matter is only one of punishment of individuals and not the parties they belong to, then the punishment of the individuals can be turned into an advantage by the parties.

With the culprits gone, the parties can claim to be squeaky-clean inheritors of the original idea of Bangladesh. This is a bizarre scenario, but not unlikely. Given that the number of the war criminals has inevitably been dwindling through death, these political parties could be in a happy state of claiming legitimacy in exchange for a relatively light penalty. A way must be found to deny them that claim.

The demand for war trials in the last few months has left out the far more important threat posed by the continuing spread of forces that are opposed to the idea of a secular Bangladesh. One feels the absence across the board in speeches, statements, newspaper articles.

A recent speech by a noted intellectual-economist whom I

admire is perhaps typical in this regard. Its theme was the failure of the nation to put the war criminals on trial and the consequences of such inaction.

Among our failures he talked of many things: our inability to achieve the goals of a just and democratic society, the failures of the political parties, growing gap between the rich and the poor it is difficult to see the connection between these very legitimate concerns and the trial of war criminals but there isn't a single mention of the threat to the secular ideology of Bangladesh. The killing and torture in 1971 were committed basically in the name of an anti-Bangladesh ideology. And we do not mention its menace when we call for trial of the perpetrators. That is the nine-tenths of the iceberg.

There is no greater or nobler reason d'être for the creation of Bangladesh than the ideology of secularism and pluralism that started to bloom during the language movement in the early 1950s.

Almost three decades ago, Professor Muzaffar Ahmed, a respected, left-wing politician, said secularism in the context of Bangladesh was even more important than democracy. The comparison may well be disputed, but the point was spot-on.

The erosion of secularism in the political landscape of the country has often been mentioned, and has remained unheeded. This has gone hand in hand with the increasing

Islamisation of public life in the country, and a continuing threat from radical political Islam.

Of the latter, the violent demonstrations around Baitul Mukarram not long ago to protest against the alleged anti-Koran stance of a new national policy on women recently approved by the government, is only the latest, and perhaps not among the most blatant, instance.

In the past couple of years, militants have gone on rampage around the country, with bombings, assassinations, and threats to religious minorities. They have stifled freedom of expression with violent demonstrations of self-inflicted outrage. After a relatively quiet past few months, they appear to be gathering strength.

More than incidentally, these people will not be anywhere near the purview of a war-crimes tribunal, and, yet, they are as much a threat to the secular ideology of Bangladesh as those who fought that ideology in 1971.

Nor will those who seek to Islamise public life in Bangladesh in "peaceful" ways. Nor will the calls for war crimes trials by themselves focus attention on the many subtle ways in which secularism has come under attack in the country not excluding seemingly innocuous pronouncements by many of the leaders of the country themselves, elected or presumptive.

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The bitter truth

LETTER FROM AMERICA

On her campaign trail, Hillary repeatedly badgered Obama for "elitism." She may have a point. Although Obama was raised by a single mother and was on food stamps early in his life, that impoverished Obama is hard to detect in the present Barack. Instead, his suave demeanour is all Ivy League; more reflective of Columbia and Harvard, both of which he attended, rather than his lower middle class upbringing.

FAKHRUDDIN AHMED

AS expected, Hillary Clinton won the Pennsylvania primary on April 22, 55% to 45%. Although Barack Obama outspent Hillary 3 to 1 in TV advertising, the Democratic party establishment led by Governor Ed Rendell and the mayors of Philadelphia and Pittsburgh delivered the state to Hillary, who was born in Scranton, Pennsylvania and managed to sell herself as the hometown girl.

Pennsylvania is the second oldest state, and the older voters overwhelmingly favoured Hillary,

as did women, the white working class, the churchgoers and gun owners. The young and the African Americans voted overwhelmingly for Obama.

Call it the curse of Harvard! After John F. Kennedy in 1960, no Harvard alumnus has won the US presidency on the Democratic ticket. Two of the more recent nominees, Michael Dukakis in 1988 and Al Gore in 2000, considered shoo-ins, lost.

They were too cool to connect with working class white voters. His loss to Hillary in the Pennsylvania raises questions about whether Obama, a Harvard

law graduate, is afflicted with the same disease.

A Dukakis TV ad in 1988 proclaimed: "They want to package a president. Wouldn't you rather elect one?" I distinctly remember thinking: "They expect people to understand this ad?" Typical of Dukakis's Ivy League mentality, that ad, like the rest of his campaign, went way over the average American's head.

Hillary is a child of privilege. She attended Wellesley College and Yale Law School. But like the super-rich Kennedys, she connects with the poor folks. She may not be one of them, but her game attempt to

identify with them made the hunters, gun-owners and bowlers of Pennsylvania prefer her two to one over Obama. (In spite of Hillary's gimmicks, it was a tie with the beer drinkers, at 44%.)

On her campaign trail, Hillary repeatedly badgered Obama for "elitism." She may have a point. Although Obama was raised by a single mother and was on food stamps early in his life, that impoverished Obama is hard to detect in the present Barack.

Instead, his suave demeanour is all Ivy League; more reflective of Columbia and Harvard, both of which he attended, rather than his lower middle class upbringing.

An incident in a Pennsylvania diner during the recent campaign encapsulated the Barack's incompatibility with the working-class whites. The owner of the diner offered Obama a cup of coffee. Obama declined and asked for a glass of orange juice instead. That is elitist and suicidal! Candidates never ask for a substitute. They gulp whatever is

offered without fuss. Just ask the whisky-downing, beer-drinking, duck-shooting, gun-loving, and, consequently, Pennsylvania primary-winning Hillary!

In the Philadelphia debate on April 16, Obama was visibly irritated when the moderators asked him about Reverend Wright, his sitting on a board with a former Weather Underground (a 1960s leftist terrorist group) member, and why he does not wear an American flag-pin on his lapel.

Bristling, Obama answered that he could not be held responsible for the views of acquaintances, and that he preferred to display his patriotism through actions rather than by wearing a pin.

All are honest answers, except that none cut much ice with Joe six-pack. Unlike John McCain and Hillary Clinton, Obama is a relatively new face in American politics. He is a blank slate. Americans want to know his views on race, terrorism and patriotism, among other things.

That Obama knows he is post-

racial, advocates hunting down Osama Bin Laden, and is patriotic, is not enough. People have to be convinced. And Obama has not done a good job convincing.

"These are legitimate questions," as Hillary has often said, and exploited. Republicans will attempt to paint Obama as anti-white and anti-Semite for his association with Rev. Wright, soft on terrorists because of his contact with a former member of Weather Underground, and unpatriotic because he does not wear the flag-pin.

Obama may think these are silly accusations, but they are not. If Americans can be made to believe that Obama is all of the above, he will not be the next president. Obama is especially vulnerable because his father is an African.

Presidential candidate George Herbert Walker Bush endured persistent ridicule from the press for wrapping himself up in an American flag, visiting flag-manufacturing companies, and asking the conventioners to

recite the pledge of allegiance at the Republican National Convention in 1988.

He portrayed opponent Michael Dukakis as weak on defence by publicising a photograph of Dukakis in a tank, looking like a clueless buffoon. Defying history, even after eight years of Republican presidency under Ronald Reagan, Republican Vice-President George H. W. Bush was elected president in 1988.

Many working class whites voted for George W. Bush over Al Gore in 2000 because "he was the guy they would like to have a beer with." Working class whites are not ashamed to be patriotic and corny. They resented the media's portrayal of George W. Bush as "stupid" and voted for him en masse.

Working class whites, constituting 48% of the population, do not consider Barack Obama one of their own. It is not necessarily for his race. He does look elitist and aloof to them.

Instead of attempting sociological analysis of why they are "bitter"

and "cling to guns and religion," Obama should accept them as they are and honour their history, tradition and lifestyle, if he is to win them over.

The good news for Obama is that Hillary will only pick up 15 or so more delegates because of her Pennsylvania victory. She will cut his popular vote lead by about 215,000, which Obama should recoup with expected victories in North Carolina and Indiana on May 6.

However, if Barack Obama wants to be the next American president he must come down from his Ivory tower, level with the Americans, and convince them in ways that the average American can understand, that he is indeed a post-racial, patriotic, and mainstream American.

Barack Obama will not be elected president on his own terms; he can only be elected president on the American people's terms.

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