

International Business News

Iranians told to save power or face daily blackouts

AFP, Tehran

Iranians on Saturday were told to cut their electricity consumption by 10 percent or face daily power cuts because of a severe drought and low production at hydroelectric power plants.

Residents of the capital Tehran could face up to four hours of blackouts each day, officials said according to media reports.

"If consumers do not cut down consumption by 10 percent, we will have blackouts until the end of the summer," Deputy Energy Minister Mohammad Ahmadian told Fars news agency.

Newspapers published a table by the state electricity company dividing the sprawling capital of 12 million into 11 zones, with each area to face from two-hour-long power cuts twice a day from Saturday.

Ahmadian told state television that the table was provisional, and that blackouts were most likely to hit the zones where consumers have failed to save energy.

Ford curbs truck output in shift to more fuel-efficient cars

AFP, Chicago

Ford Motor Co. announced plans Friday to cut back further on North American production of big trucks and sport utility vehicles to adapt to a consumer shift to more fuel-efficient cars.

The sputtering US automaker said its move "responds to the continued deterioration in the US business environment and the accelerated shift away from large trucks and SUVs."

"As gasoline prices average more than four dollars a gallon (3.78 liters) and consumers worry about the weak US economy, we see June industry-wide auto sales slowing further and demand for large trucks and SUVs at one of the lowest levels in decades," said Ford president and chief executive Alan Mulally.

"Ford has taken decisive action to respond to this accelerating shift in customer demand away from large trucks and SUVs to smaller cars and crossovers, and we will continue to act swiftly moving forward."

Vietnam to export more rice after domestic supply guaranteed

AFP, Hanoi

Vietnam, the world's number two rice exporter, said Friday it would increase exports of the grain after determining the country had sufficient supplies for the domestic market.

The move comes after officials had limited 2008 rice exports to 3.5-4.0 million tonnes in a bid to keep domestic prices down in a period of soaring inflation and to ensure its stocks for local consumption amid the global food crisis.

Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung on Thursday ordered the acceleration of rice exports to help farmers sell all of their harvest and to contribute to providing supplies to the world market," the government said on its website.

"After having been able to sufficiently balance domestic consumption for 2008, Vietnam is now capable of exporting a total of about 4.5 million tonnes of rice," the government said.



An Indian fish trader packs fish in Siliguri yesterday. Indian inflation raced to its highest level in 13 years, accelerating to over 11 percent after a fuel price hike. Annual inflation in the world's second fastest-growing economy jumped to 11.05 percent for the week ended June 7 from 8.75 percent a week earlier, stunning economists who forecast it would be around 9.8 percent.

Hong Kong inflation increases as food prices continue to rocket

AFP, Hong Kong

Hong Kong's overall consumer prices increased by 5.7 percent in May from a year ago as food costs continue to soar, official figures showed on Friday.

Food -- excluding meals bought away from home -- remained the major source of inflationary pressure, rising 19.2 percent year-on-year, according to figures released by the Census and Statistics Department.

Among all the food items, pork showed the largest increase, at 56.8 percent. Beef was up 50 percent, canned meat increased 45.7 percent, rice was up 39.9 percent, and edible oils rose 36 percent.

US confirms extra safeguards on beef exports to Skorea

AFP, Washington

Washington on Saturday confirmed a deal to add extra health safeguards on US beef exports to South Korea, and agreed not to export any cattle older than 30 months in a bid to avert mad cow disease.

"Korean beef importers and US exporters have reached a commercial understanding that only US beef from cattle under 30-months of age will be shipped to Korea, as a transitional measure, to improve Korean consumer confidence," said US Trade Representative Susan Schwab.

Seoul announced the deal earlier Saturday, and the extra safeguards were expected to end a bitter row over beef that saw weeks of mass protests in South Korea which threatened the government.

DAIRY INDUSTRY

Underground world of raw milk in US

AFP, Washington

Anonymous drop-offs, arrests and packages disguised as pet food -- it's the underground world of raw milk, the latest health food craze sweeping the United States.

Marta, 29, is among thousands of Americans seeking out unpasteurized dairy products that enthusiasts say can cure everything from asthma to autism -- despite it being illegal in many states on the grounds that it is unsafe.

She orders her produce from an Amish farmer in Pennsylvania and once a fortnight drives to a designated drop-off point in her home state of Virginia -- where raw milk sales are banned -- to pick up three gallons of milk.

"We almost feel like we're drug traffickers when we're buying the milk. It's insane," said Marta, who withheld her surname to protect her supplier.

Despite rising global food costs that have left millions starving, US enthusiasts are willing to pay up to 20 dollars a gallon for this "natural" alternative to processed milk.

Sally Fallon-Morell, president of advocacy group the Weston A. Price Foundation, estimates about half a million people consume unpasteurized dairy products in the United States, with "explosive" growth in recent years.

The US Food and Drug Administration is clear on the subject. In public advice it "strongly advises against the consumption of raw milk," warning it "may be unsafe" however carefully it is produced.

Unpasteurized dairy prod-



In this photo illustration, whole milk is poured into a glass June 12, 2008 in Washington, DC. Thousands of Americans seek unpasteurized dairy products that enthusiasts say can cure everything from asthma to autism, despite it being illegal in many states on the grounds that it is unsafe.

ucts can carry pathogens including listeria monocytogenes, E.coli and salmonella, which pasteurization kills, it says. The FDA recorded more than ten outbreaks of illness caused by eating raw dairy products in 2005-2006.

But Fallon-Morell says

many people no longer trust the government, instead preferring to listen to anecdotal evidence about raw milk's health benefits.

She also cites a recent study based on 15,000 European children that showed drinking farm milk may offer protection against asthma and

allergy.

Marta used to be lactose intolerant and also suffered from colitis, an inflammatory bowel disease, for eight years. But she has felt no ill effects from the raw milk. Plus, she says, "it tastes so good."

"It's the bacteria, the enzymes that are there -- all

those things that are missing from pasteurized dairy products," said Mark McAfee, a California farmer who sells 5.5 million dollars worth of raw dairy products a year in 325 stores.

He says raw milk can help clear up gastrointestinal problems and insists there are no health risks, as long as the cows and the equipment are kept clean, the animals fed on grass and the milk and manure regularly tested.

"Yes, raw milk killed a lot of people 100 years ago but that's not the raw milk we're talking about," McAfee, founder of Organic Pastures, told AFP.

Raw milk sales are legal in California and advocates estimate about 40,000 people consume it there. State authorities carry out monthly inspections and all products carry health warnings.

But it is illegal to export it to other states unless the product contains colostrum, produced from cows that have just given birth, when it is considered a dietary supplement and falls outside raw milk regulation, McAfee says.

Raw milk labeled as pet food is also exempt, but the authorities claim some people are buying it for themselves.

McAfee has now stopped selling it interstate rather than risk prosecution, a possible one-year jail term and 100,000-dollar fine.

In some states, farmers can sell raw milk as part of cow-share agreements where customers buy a percentage of milk production for a fee.

Elsewhere, dairy farmers need a permit, and breaking the law

can have serious consequences.

Mark Nolt was arrested at his Pennsylvania farm in April and had about 25,000 dollars of equipment and food confiscated for selling raw dairy products without a permit. It followed a similarly costly raid last August.

The Mennonite Christian farmer had a permit, but let it expire as it did not allow him to sell yogurt or butter from raw milk.

The father of ten is now fighting the authorities in court, arguing that he has a constitutional right to carry out private business. In doing so, he has become a poster boy for the movement.

"Everything we sell here is raised on the farm and sold to the people putting it in their mouths. The state has absolutely no jurisdiction under that," said Nolt, also refuting that his products made anybody ill.

One of his customers, Lyn Rales, is holding a fundraiser for Nolt at her home outside Washington, DC. She questioned why selling and buying raw milk had to be so hard.

"I don't see why I can't get milk that I like, and I'm an adult and I'm making a decision. It's not like he's hanging out on the corner saying this'll cure everything -- you have to make an effort to get it," she said.

But Chris Ryder, a spokesman for the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture, said the law was the law.

"We will continue to take action against Mr Nolt if he continues to sell raw milk illegally, and anyone else for that matter."

COLUMN

HABIBULLAH N KARIM

National ICT policy: An interim review

Within the institutional framework of the state, sectoral policies form an important instrument for setting priorities of governance and delineating national aspirations. In this country we are fortunate to have public policy documents in many fields ranging from education to security. Over the years these policies have been compiled at the behest of enterprising individuals in bureaucracy, political leadership or civil society.

While the government has approved most of these policy documents many policies remain largely academic in value, as they are not generally complied with. Even though all these policies are generally excellent in quality and intellectual richness.

The vision, objectives and direction given in such documents have often proven prophetic when complied with.

For the ICT sector, a policy was formulated at the beginning of this decade and was approved by the government in the year 2002. This policy named, 'National ICT Policy 2002', captures the aspirations of the sector and some well-thought-out objectives, cutting across most governance, economic and social sectors.

However, the policy also contains some lacunae. There is a general lack of structure in

the way the vision and objectives have been laid out without the corresponding implementation strategies and programs. Many of the objectives are also bereft of reason and in hindsight, appear to have been impractical and somewhat irresponsible.

For example, the targets of reaching \$3 billion in software exports and of the nation becoming a knowledgeable society by 2006 are truly outlandish.

However, the policy is most conspicuous in the callous non-compliance to its provisions by the government planners since its formal adoption by the cabinet in October 2002. There is no thread in planning or in finance around the objectives laid out in the ICT Policy.

Even something as mundane as allocating a paltry 2 percent of the Annual Development Plan (ADP) on ICT was never complied with or even taken into consideration for ADP exercises. Only this year we are hearing some government planners' talk of at least meeting this ADP allocation target by working out procurement numbers retroactively.

In this backdrop, the industry observers could only offer lessons in cynicism as they termed the policy an academic exercise, without its feet on the ground and without any cham-

panion in the government to fight for it. This apparent lack of ownership of the policy document is ominous and has turned it into a policy orphan that nobody in the government paid heed to. There was also no attempt to obtain a buy-in from the ICT stakeholders on the policy and thus even outside the government, the policy got only queer looks from those with an interest in ICT.

Of course I did not mean to write this column with a black hat on my head. There is a silver lining trying to break out of the dark clouds. The Better Business Forum (BBF), a newly formed vehicle of public-private sector policy dialogues, has rightly given a lot of emphasis on ICT development and has recommended reviewing the National ICT Policy 2002 to bring it in line with our national aspirations and in step with our times.

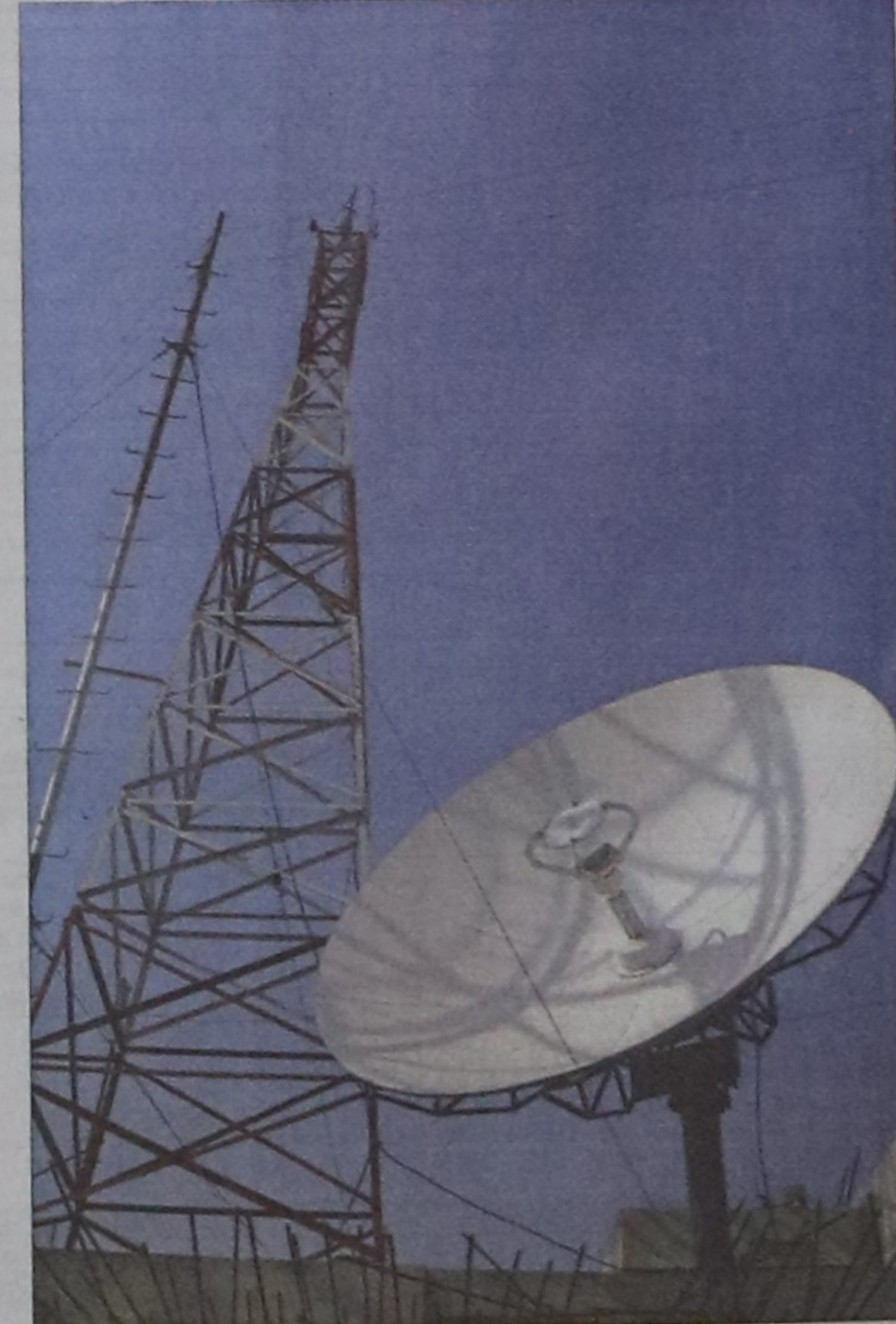
In pursuing this BBF recommendation, the chief adviser's office must be commended for its sagacity in forming a committee, bringing in representations from all stakeholders of ICT under the leadership of a widely acclaimed academician, Professor Jamilur Reza Chowdhury. His relentless effort over the years for the development of the sector in the country has won admirers

among all. This committee held its first meeting in May this year and decided to form a working group to assess the implementation status of the ICT Policy 2002 directives and come up with a revised policy framework.

To align the policy prerogatives with the aims of the industry, the leadership of the working group was unanimously given to a representative from the ICT industry. This working group has been working at a feverish pitch over the last several weeks in putting together a revised ICT policy by looking at where the 2002 policy has been complied with and where it has not, looking at similar policies of many countries of the world including those in the region and beyond and how to align the ICT policy imperatives with those in other national policies.

A pragmatic national ICT policy can be a very powerful tool for achieving our national goal of graduating from the ranks of the least developed countries to those of middle-income countries before 2020. Let us hope that this time, the ICT policy will have a strong champion in the government and many owners among the stakeholders.

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