

Providing false, incomplete information to EC

Don't let them off the hook!

It is obvious that the Election Commission is in a state of helplessness. That happens to be so because a number of candidates for the city corporation and municipal elections are taking part in the polls despite their non-compliance with mandatory provisions regarding furnishing some specific personal information to the EC. The non-compliance is of two sorts. The first relates to their submission of false information about themselves in the affidavit, while the second concerns incomplete information they have supplied to the EC. It is quite understandable, therefore, that as election day approaches (and that is tomorrow), the EC will be perturbed without in any way being able to do anything at this late stage to prevent such people from taking part in the elections.

One of the election commissioners has, however, sought to reassure the country on the issue. He has made it clear that even if such candidates emerge victorious at the voting, they will subsequently be disqualified, if found guilty of wrongdoing, through a full investigation. That may sound like a good idea, except that there is a very real chance that attempts to take action against them might run into legal complications. And once that happens, there might arise the possibility of long drawn-out legal proceedings and, consequently, a dysfunction in the corporations as well as municipalities. But, then again, the need to ensure that a smooth system is at work in the corporations and municipalities is an absolute one and the whole process of investigations into instances of wrongdoing must be gone through. We must also sound the caveat, though, that the post-election inquiries the Election Commission plans should include not only those who will have won the election but also those who will have lost it. Since the nature of the offence is the same, everyone who commits it must be penalised. Meanwhile, as the polls get under way, we suggest that apart from NGOs there be all the government officials and their staff at the local level, and specifically election officials, to find out exactly where and how candidates to the city corporation and municipal elections have defaulted in providing information to the EC.

Let the drawbacks relating to the upcoming elections be a lesson for the EC as it prepares to hold general elections at the end of the year. The elections to the four city corporations and nine municipalities ought to have set a healthy precedent for the future. That does not appear to have been the case, which only reinforces the argument that much more substantive work needs to come into the planned elections for a new parliament. Since the national objective is the inauguration of a transparent, effective and purposeful democracy, everything should be done to ensure that the process is not derailed in any way.

Stuttering FP programme

High level intervention to provide impetus needed

We are concerned at the slow progress in containing the baby boom for which the Millennium Development Goal (MDG-5) is likely to be difficult to attain by 2015. MDG was set at reducing total fertility rate (TFR) to 2.2 percent by 2010. According to Bangladesh Demographic Health Survey 2007, the TFR in the period 1993-94 was 3.4 percent, which came down to 2.7 in 2007 but did not come down any further. Poor management of the programme is widely considered the main reason for the stagnancy in achieving the target.

The success attained in making family planning popular during the 70s and 80s was the result of unwavering commitment of a dedicated field work force and highly motivated set of officials. The strategy for home delivery of contraceptive methods and distributing communication materials worked well despite initial resistance from community members.

The programme got a boost in the 80s that saw an increase in the demand for long-term and permanent contraceptive methods, and supply of these methods was ensured by both government and non-government organisations. But in 1999, with the introduction of the Health and Population Sector Programme (HPSP), the family planning programme suffered a major setback.

The problems became acute when supply flow of different contraceptives, like oral pills, injectables, IUD and condoms in the country began to dwindle, which caused a large number of eligible couples to abandon family planning practices. Understandably, this led to a baby boom in the country to the discomfort of the family planning advocates and population watchers.

A study shows that while on one hand, the contribution of the public sector in providing family planning methods continues to decline; on the other, the number of field workers to supply contraceptives decreased to 20 percent last year from 23 percent in 2004. It is indeed a matter of concern that some 8,152 posts of field level workers have been lying vacant for last 12 years because of bureaucratic bottlenecks. This clearly speaks for the decrease in door-to-door visits by the field workers in rural areas.

For Bangladesh, a small country as far as land area is concerned, overpopulation will negatively impact its economic and social developments. We must have a pragmatic policy and a fool-proof strategy to keep population growth in check. The departments concerned will have to work energetically to bring the concept of planned family to the center stage of our family life.

Gateway to gas



ABDUL BAYES

I had the privilege of participating in a very recent workshop on "Gas Sector Reform Roadmap and Gas Demand - Supply Balance" of the Gas Sector Development Program, organised jointly by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and Technoconsult International Limited (TCIL). Frankly speaking, "reform" and "roadmap" are the key words that drove me to this workshop. Usage of the terms reform and roadmap are so common nowadays that they cease to be nouns, but noises. What then are the roadmap and reforms regarding our gas sector -- the linchpin of growth and development?

Walking but not running

I shall pick up some promising points from the presentation of the secretary, Energy and Mineral Resources Division. The heartening news is that, so far, adoption of action plans is reported to have helped reduce average system loss by half, from 8% in FY05 to 4% in FY08. The system loss is targeted to

BENEATH THE SURFACE
A household in Ashugonj with access to gas pays only Tk. 148 for cooking food by gas whereas a household in Khulna without such access pays Tk. 600 (using firewood) or Tk. 1,725 (for LPG). This not only discriminates among rich-poor and urban-rural residents but also between poor-poor and urban-urban depending on who has access to gas.

decrease to 2% by FY10. By 2010, company boards would determine fringe benefits package and by 2015, establish cost centres for activities of Bapex such as drilling, seismic, gas development and exploration promotion.

Provided Bapex plays on a level playing field with real resource flows and operates under professional standards with incentives of international standards, it could turn out to be competitive as well as cost-effective. By 2012, the government could establish a new south-west gas company in the Khulna region with 49% ownership by the private sector and the rest by the public sector. There is also a separate proposal to establish two separate companies out of Titus and Bakhrabad gas system. Importantly, by 2009, finalisation of National Energy Policy is likely to occur and development of rules and regulations for private sector participation are to be completed by 2010.

Supply-demand balance

The chairman of Petrobangla dealt with the delicate issue of demand-supply balance. Let us first line up

the supply side shocks. There is 7.7 Tcf proven remaining gas -- available for consumption under a tolerable gestation period and there could be another 5.5 Tcf probable recoverable gas subject to further investments. But with massive seismic survey, exploration and drilling, Bangladesh could bag in another 7.7 Tcf, which is akin to a dream but must come true if sustained development is our ultimate goal.

However, the gas production statement shows that in 2002-03, national companies claimed four-fifths of the total production gas. But by the current fiscal year, the share is almost even between national and international companies. During 1965-2007, state owned enterprises drilled 21 wells and discovered ten gas fields with success ratio of 2.1: 1, while Cairn Energy of UK/Shell discovered one field and eight wells during 1996-2007 with a ratio of 8: 1. Most of the foreign companies seem to have higher success rates than national ones for reasons not properly explained.

On the demand side, gas goes as follows: power 41% and captive

power 15% claim roughly 60% of total demand for gas. Other claims are: fertiliser production demands 9%, industry 17%, domestic use 10%, and CNG 4%, meaning upcoming demand for gas would mostly come from power plants.

As P.D. Moncarz, a paper presenter on Policy Imperatives for Gas Sector, stated, by 2020, an additional 10,000 MW would be needed from current additional 5,000 MW. This required increase cannot be met by the gas supply in current power sector fuel proportion. The share of coal as power generation fuel has to increase in the near future to meet MDG goals. Coal can be clean and there is now new technology to ensure minimum environmental impact, as recent developments in coal gasification and underground coal processing are promising. Bangladesh should move itself to the forefront of the world's clean-coal community.

Getting prices right

What Bangladesh lacks most is a rational gas pricing system -- gas is seriously under priced. Under pricing of any commodity leads to

over and unproductive use of this scarce commodity. Let us look at the following statistics supplied by the Petrobangla chairman. For each million btu, gas costs Tk. 148, coal Tk. 285, firewood Tk. 600, diesel Tk. 1,682, LPG Tk. 1,725, kerosene Tk. 1,561 and petrol Tk. 2,766. That means non-users of gas tend to pay two to twenty times more for the same output produced from different inputs. Thus, a household in Ashugonj with access to gas pays only Tk. 148 for cooking food by gas whereas a household in Khulna without such access pays Tk. 600 (using firewood) or Tk. 1,725 (for LPG). This not only discriminates among rich-poor and urban-rural residents but also between poor-poor and urban-urban depending on who has access to gas.

Another important point is that there are some industries with old machines and technologies that consume more gas for the same unit of output than newer ones, thus distorting the demand for gas. There is no reason why such "inefficient" users should not be identified and their supplies shut off to divert gas to more productive units. That process might bring new equilibrium between supply and demand.

And finally, an application of the principle of qui-marginal could compel users to be more careful about gas usage. By and large, high demand for gas emanates from the following reasons: the low price of gas compared to other fuels; the inefficient technologies that consume more gas than required; and the systems loss that tends to exist

as a result. Thus, the answer to high demand for gas is a high price -- a basic economic law often forgotten in the face of populist prescriptions.

Running but not walking

The gas sector should now be running instead of walking. The recent energy crisis worldwide made it mandatory to speed up its snail's pace positions. Thus in the coming years, the government has to strengthen the indigenous base of extraction, drilling and exploration of gas, bringing in coal (clean coal) to meet the growing power demand. Only gas-based power generations could recoil other attempts for which gas is meant.

Second, roadmaps should be mapped quickly and urgently, otherwise mishaps could be very costly to the nation. For example, if it takes GTCL months to buy and build pipelines, how can it transmit gas to destinations? This point relates to good governance in the gas sector.

Only public-private and domestic-foreign partnership could pave ways for the development of the sector.

And finally, appropriate and economic pricing is a must to save the goose that lays the golden eggs for us. When prices truly reflect economic costs, resources could be generated from the market for further investments in this sector. Subsidies should be safety nets for the poor but not safe havens for the rich! A gateway to gas needs more action and less talk.

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The woes of our migrant workers



A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

THE unwarranted violence and arrest of our migrant workers by the Kuwaiti police for staging strikes in demand of promised pay and other facilities, is an extremely shocking piece of news. This was front-page news on The Daily Star and other national dailies on July 31, accompanied by a picture of a deported worker in bandages and wearing a bloodstained T-shirt, who was reported to be dragged out of his residential camp and was mercilessly beaten up by the police though he did not take part in any protests.

Around 5,000 Bangladeshi workers went on an indefinite strike in Kuwait City as of July 21, protesting underpayment and a lack of provision of other facilities promised by their employer. The Kuwaiti police arrested about 1,000 workers on the charge of instigating labour unrest and went so far as to deport more than 200 workers. Those who are arrested but not yet deported await a similar fate.

These Bangladeshi workers provide the most essential menial labour, like cleaning in the royal

palaces, hospitals, oil companies, universities and other important establishments under the ministries of health, oil, education and defence of the government of Kuwait.

But the companies that placed them in such hazardous jobs pay only 18 Kuwaiti dinars a month, instead of the 50 dinars they were promised at the time of recruitment. Moreover, the company has not paid two months' wages to a good number of workers, who did not even receive a weekly holiday.

One of the most unfortunate aspects of this episode was that the labour counsellors at the Bangladesh Mission in Kuwait, who were supposed to redress the grievances of Bangladeshi workers, hardly came forward to help the victims. Bangladeshi workers in Kuwait stormed our embassy last year, since embassy officials did not intervene on behalf of their countrymen even after realising they had been cheated out of five months of wages by their Kuwaiti employer.

These gross violations of migrant workers' rights have not been going on in Kuwait alone, but also in some other countries

including Malaysia, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. Bangladeshi workers are now in 100 countries across the world, and most prominently in Malaysia, South Korea, Singapore, Maldives, United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Libya, Lebanon, Germany, Australia, Iran, Japan, Italy, and Spain. They are mostly engaged in various hazardous occupations and their rights are frequently denied.

The criminal conduct of a Bangladeshi worker in Bahrain, who killed his Bahraini employer following a dispute over wages, prompted Manama in taking a harsh decision of collective punishment to all Bangladeshi workers. The Bahraini government decided to stop issuing work permits to Bangladeshi or employing new Bangladeshi workers after some parliament members demanded that all Bangladeshi workers be expelled by the end of 2008.

Maldives, too, is a country where the rights of our migrant workers are violated often, a country of only 300,000 people, where more than 25,000 Bangladeshi workers provide essential cheap manual labour in

the tourism and construction sectors. Our migrant workers faced a number of attacks a few months ago in different parts of the Maldives and a worker was even found tied to tree by his employer for nine days while another worker was castrated and murdered.

Thousands of Bangladeshi undocumented workers in the United Arab Emirates faced acute problems while trying to either regularise their immigration status or to leave the country under a three-month amnesty that ended on September 2 last year.

More than five lakh Bangladeshi workers are now working in the UAE and many of them are victims of exploitation and breach of contract. The UAE, that needs more workers for its huge construction industry, has recently signed an MoU with many manpower exporting countries, including Bangladesh, in a bid to ensure rights of foreign workers.

There are widespread allegations that our missions abroad are rarely concerned about our migrant workers, even when they

cry out for help. The labour counsellors, who are posted there to act promptly to redress the grievances of our migrant workers, treat them very poorly. A greater responsibility thus develops on the caretaker government for protecting the rights of our nearly five million migrant workers, on whose sweat the basket of the country's foreign currency is inflating.

A big misery of our migrant workers is that they get lower salaries than the same category of workers of other countries. An unskilled Bangladeshi worker in Middle East countries gets 300 to 400 riyals per month on average, while workers from Sri Lanka, Philippines and Pakistan get 700 to 800 riyals. Malpractices by the manpower recruiting agencies and a lack of strong monitoring by the government are said to be responsible for it.

Everybody will clearly remember the tragic death of 11 Bangladeshi job-seekers who died starving day-after-day on the sea while trying to cross the Mediterranean; we shall also remember the 24 job-seekers who were abandoned in the deep Sahara desert where they wandered for several days without any food and drink and were thrown into jail in Mali after police rescued them from the desert.

Enraged by the Mediterranean and Sahara tragedies, the government decided to take stern actions against the unscrupulous manpower agents, who allured the youngsters with the promise of a better livelihood abroad. Expatriate Welfare and Overseas Employment Ministry formed two

separate committees to identify manpower agents involved in such rackets, but the activism lost its intensity as the days wore on and public outrage over the tragedies died down.

The woes of thousands of our migrant workers in the Middle East are extremely shocking for us. Large numbers of workers, deported from Kuwait bloodstained and empty-handed, have once again brought to light the terrible torture and difficulties they face in foreign lands. Our migrant workers are always subjected to many kinds of harassment and exploitation at the hands of their foreign employers. But our government in general and the missions abroad in particular are not at all sincere in redressing the woes of our migrant workers.

Foreign and Expatriate Welfare Adviser Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury had told the media that the government would sign a protocol with 16 different countries for protecting the rights of our migrant workers employed in those countries. One and a half years have already elapsed and we have yet to see any development.

We urge the government to immediately ratify the 1990 UN Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and their Families. This is the first international document that provides assurance to the rights of the migrant workers. And though Bangladesh signed the convention in October 1998, we have yet to ratify it.

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Taliban resurgence in Pakistan



KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

GOING DEEPER

"During this process (of Pakistani forces fighting foreign terrorists) the Pakistani Taliban effectively established themselves as an alternative leadership to the traditional tribal elders. By the time the Pakistani government realised the changing dynamics and tried to resurrect the tribal jirga institution, it was too late. The Taliban had killed approximately two hundred of the tribal elders under charges of being Pakistani or American spies."

Areas (FATA).

Democratic presidential candidate, Barack Obama, was more forceful in demanding that the US confront Islamabad on the question of funding of Islamist extremists. According to Obama: "It is not just in the interest of Afghan security or the US's security, it is in the interest of Pakistani security that we shut down those (terrorist) bases."

While one cannot dispute the urgent necessity of confronting and defeating terrorism in any form one has to consider whether the Pakistan government has the capacity to wipe out Islamic extremism in areas that for centu-

ries defied central control, that during the regime of General Ziaul Huq the Taliban were given both financial and material assistance by the US and the then Pakistan government to fight Soviet aggression in Afghanistan, and no less that the US invasion of Iraq as an implementation of President Bush's doctrine of preemption is largely perceived in Pakistan and in many Islamic countries as a war against Islam and, as a result, is bound to put any government in Pakistan in a difficult position to be on the same page with the US war on terror.

Added is the number of terrorist groups operating in and from

Pakistan territory that, according to Ashley Tellis of Carnegie Foundation and Rohan Gunaratna of International Center of Political Violence and Terrorism, can be classified as sectarian, anti-Indian, Afghan Taliban, al-Qaeda and its affiliates, and no less importantly the Pakistani Taliban, who have become an effective fighting machine engaging both the Pakistani military and the NATO forces in Afghanistan.

The emergence and consolidation of Pakistani Taliban in the FATA happened when the Pakistani forces were fighting the "foreign" Taliban elements and, in the process, ignored the transition

of the indigenous elements from Taliban sympathisers to a force fully subscribing to the Taliban ideology. Hasan Abbas, a fellow of Harvard's Kennedy School of Government wrote in an article that "during this process (of Pakistani forces fighting foreign terrorists) the Pakistani Taliban effectively established themselves as an alternative leadership to the traditional tribal elders. By the time the Pakistani government realised the changing dynamics and tried to resurrect the tribal jirga institution, it was too late. The Taliban had killed approximately two hundred of the tribal elders under charges of being Pakistani or American spies."

The disparate Taliban elements banded together in December last year under the banner of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). TTP has announced a program of defensive jihad against the Pakistan army, enforcement of Sharia laws, and to unitedly fight against NATO forces in Afghanistan. These elements appear to be more extremist as the traditional intermediaries between the Taliban and the establishment have been replaced by "a younger generation of more

violent radical leaders who are in a hurry and have no patience for compromise."

Maulana Fazlur Rahman, chief of Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI), a pro-Taliban political party of Pakistan was quoted by the New York Times as saying that "when the jihad in Afghanistan started, the maliks (tribal leaders) and the old tribal system in Afghanistan ended; a new leadership arose. Similar is the case in tribal areas." South Asian expert Stephen Cohen writes in his book, The Idea of Pakistan, that the Taliban grew out of a generation of leaders who had received their education in Pakistan's religious schools in NWFP and Baluchistan, and sought to gain power in Afghanistan and then purify it of contaminating elements. Their success was due in part to support received from Pakistani intelligence and various Pakistani military groups, and especially JUI.

Unfortunately for Pakistan, the Taliban began to see Pakistan itself as a ripe fruit to be plucked. The defeat of the Taliban at the hands of the Western powers had a blow-back effect on Pakistan in the form of sectarian violence, appearance

of drug culture, easy availability of guns, and general social breakdown that came at a big cost to the socio-political structure of the country. Neo-conservative Robert Kagan (The Return of history and the end of dreams) dismisses the possibility of a cataclysmic effect of "the struggle between modernisation and Islamic radicalism" on international affairs because "Islamic resistance to westernisation is not a new phenomenon" and "in the struggle between traditionalism and modernity, tradition cannot win."

In Pakistan, the fight to recover full control of the Swat valley is still continuing between the government forces and the Pakistani Taliban at a time when Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani has just concluded his visit to the US, during which President Bush and Vice-President Cheney reportedly strongly urged the Pakistan government to take more seriously its responsibility in the war on terror despite Pakistan's claim of loss of lives in its forces and civilian casualties in its continuing fight against the Taliban. Many Pakistanis believe that the Westerners' heavy-handed han-

dling of the frontier regions is doing more harm than good because of their ignorance of the tribal customs and unfamiliarity with the terrain in the frontier region. Besides, President Bush is not particularly popular in Pakistan and, consequently, the Pakistan government's war on terror is also hugely unpopular in the country.

One wonders whether the Americans are aware of the paradox being faced by the Pakistani leaders, the paradox of waging an unpopular war that also must be waged at all cost. But then again, as the al-Qaeda and the Taliban cannot be allowed to turn Pakistan into a failed state and cause instability in one of the most volatile regions in the world, one hopes that the four countries -- Pakistan, India, Afghanistan and Bangladesh -- assailed by Islamic extremism in varying degrees would cooperate both within the ambit of Saarc and bilaterally in order to defeat this scourge in this region and the world.

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