

We welcome BNP's new position on elections

It is now time for the parties to go to the voters

FINALLY, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party has made a concrete announcement regarding its participation in the general elections. Its readiness to take part in the general elections if they are held on December 28 is a move we at this newspaper are heartened by. We had stated in our editorial yesterday that room was still there for all parties to the issue to arrive at a solution to the crisis. Such a solution now appears to be at hand. The BNP's decision, announced by party chairperson Khaleda Zia on Thursday evening, lifts much of the sense of apprehension that has been there of late. The nation can now surely breathe easier. Even though the decision by the party to go for elections is a belated one and indeed should have come earlier, we feel that the ground has now been smoothened for the polls to be held and for all political parties to make the elections a meaningful exercise aimed at a restoration of government by popular consent. It is in the interest of the country that the elections should now be held in a free, transparent and credible atmosphere.

With the dark clouds hanging over the elections now receding, it is time for the parties to get down to the polls campaign in earnest. That is important, for after all the arguments and counter arguments, et al, that have gone into whether and when the elections can be held, it is the voters that the parties must now turn their attention to. And they can do this through outlining manifestoes and explaining the financial details and implications of the policies they mean to pursue over the next five years. Pious wishes or unattainable programmes are the least of requirements today. The last two years have patently demonstrated the fact that the people are no more willing to put their faith in old platitudes or clichés from the parties but wish to know what concrete programmes they have on offer. It is now time for an end to the kind of drama, some would say melodrama, that has so long been enacted by the politicians and the caretaker government and for politics to be taken to those who, as voters, will actually decide its future course. The parties must feel the pulse of the nation and give it cause to rekindle its faith in democratic politics.

We have already noted a healthy sign of politics regarding party nominations in the Awami League. A good number of old, controversial faces have been denied the party's nomination this time, an act appreciated all over the country. A fairly good number of women have also been given nominations. Let the BNP adopt a similar course, indeed go a step better. By doing so, it will be signalling to the nation that it is ready to pursue the politics of change. As the elections approach, let the participating parties eschew the acrimonious and instead engage in constructive, intellectually stimulating rivalry in their bid to win public support for their programmes.

Women empowerment

Micro-entrepreneurship does the magic

IT is a success story that makes us believe once again in the inner potential of the people of this country who can do wonders against all odds if given a little help. And our morale gets a bigger boost when our womenfolk living in the fringes dare to come out of the shadows to set examples worth emulating. In fact, this is the success story of three women who have changed their fate by properly utilising some micro-credit they had borrowed from credit lending organisations. Through sheer determination, hard work and sincerity Sabina Begum of Gazipur, Baby Chakma of Rangamati, Salma Akter of Pabna have become small scale entrepreneurs today, running their business on a full time basis. It is no mean feat that today each one of them earns net profit of around Tk.30,000 per month.

We are indeed happy that the entrepreneurship skill of Sabina, Baby and Salma did not go unnoticed. Citi Foundation, the philanthropic arm of Citi group and Shakti Foundation for Disadvantaged Women (SPDW) organised a befitting function on Thursday, where the three entrepreneurs were given the Citi Micro-entrepreneurship Award 2008. We are hopeful that the three awardees would do even better in the future to earn similar laurels from other organisations.

The three successful women entrepreneurs have set an example for other micro-credit borrowers in the country. They had invested the money in some innovative projects and worked hard to turn them into profitable concerns. They had returned the seed money to the lending organisations along with the accrued interest, and then had borrowed a bigger amount the next time. This is how they have reached where they are today. They have empowered themselves and brought happiness in their family. They deserve the accolade they are getting from organisations like Citi group. We hope their success story will be widely publicised so that other women can become inspired to come forward with plans of their own. The micro-credit lending organisations may use the mass media to impart the success story across the country. It needs no emphasising that if nearly fifty percent of the population can become self-reliant through engaging themselves in profitable business ventures then our national economy will get the desired upward thrust.

Boosting power generation

POST BREAKFAST

In the era of globalisation, there are few issues that better demonstrate the confluence of politics and business than energy. From fuelling the economies of rich countries to driving economic development in poor ones, it has an effect on almost everything we do. Consequently, ensuring the safe supply and distribution of energy should be an important part of strategic state policy.

MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

OVER the last three years I have used my column more than once to highlight the absence of an efficient and affordable power supply in our country. I have reiterated that this factor is essential for rapid, sustained economic growth and poverty reduction.

In this context, my attention was drawn recently to an article entitled "Effective management in Power Sector and its implication for national security" by Commander Mahmudul Huq Choudhury (published in the NDC Journal, Volume 7 Number 1) and comments made by Tatiana Nenova, senior economist and co-author of a recent World Bank report on the power supply situation in Bangladesh.

Both authors have underlined the close association between the availability of reliable, uninterrupted power supply, and reasonably priced electricity with industry, commerce and the attaining of socio-economic potential and decent living standards. It is also generally agreed that the country has not only inherited a weak power generation and distribution system but is also plagued by inefficient leadership, over-centralisation, corruption and greed. It has also been noted that the countrywide system is characterised by heavy system losses (theft) and poor revenue collection. Quite correctly, the World Bank feels that electricity shortages remain a critical barrier to growth and private investment and a source of major expense for productive sectors like garments, chemicals and pharmaceuticals.

Bangladesh's per capita electricity generation is one of the lowest in the world, and official figures put household access to electricity at slightly over 44 percent (2005). Demand for power has always outstripped supply and generation through normal methods and has been unable to keep pace with requirement. The current net generating capacity is about 4120 MW as against an installed capacity of over 5000 MW and peak demands of up to 4832 MW. Interestingly, Nenova has also pointed out that heavy

reliance on generators has meant that reported losses arising out of a poorly performing electricity grid are seriously understated.

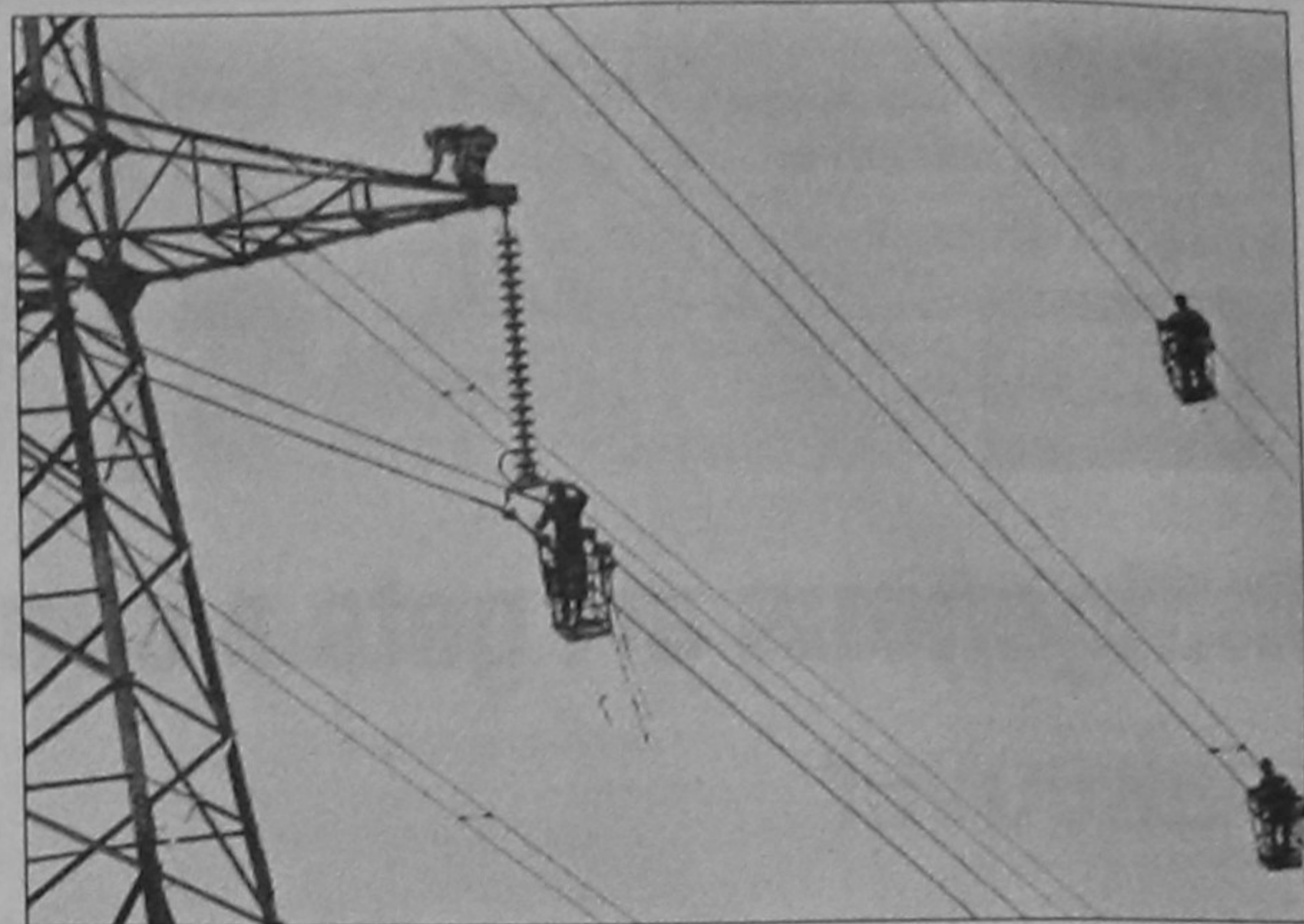
Private participation in the production of power has been encouraged by the government but has failed to really take off due to bitter recrimination, primarily on the tariff issue and problems related to planning policy, and institutional and operational levels. Adverse impacts due to this persistent shortage of power supply have resulted in "demonstrations, strikes, violence, low production, and in some cases closure of industries."

In the era of globalisation, there are few issues that better demonstrate the confluence of politics and business than energy. From fuelling the economies of rich countries to driving economic development in poor ones, it has an effect on almost everything we do. Consequently, ensuring the safe supply and distribution of energy should be an important part of strategic state policy. In this regard, the best way forward in meeting the challenges confronting the energy infrastructure should be a constructive engagement between the private and the public sectors.

Unfortunately, in Bangladesh, till now, political will has been lacking in charting out a meaningful perspective plan for such a partnership in the energy industry - both through the use of fossil fuel (a clear and defined coal policy) and also alternative renewable sources. Our present caretaker government has failed in this regard.

I have discussed the various facets of this exercise with academia, engineers and others involved (from the private sector) with both renewable energy and fossil fuel since being nominated as Chairman, Bangladesh Renewable Energy Society. It has been an interesting experience.

They have all agreed on one point. A true transformation of the energy system, making electricity production carbon-free through nuclear, renewables, carbon capture and storage and sifting transport and temperature control towards electric power would require massive investment. They also pointed out that there was no



Electricity is a must for development.

clear sign that the Bangladesh government was really willing to take on the costs that such a transformation would involve. The current international financial crisis and lack of supply of new funds was also referred to in this regard.

However, I am an optimist and believe that we can overcome obstacles.

It would be pertinent here to state that we should try to learn from China. That country's astounding economic growth has been accompanied by spectacular additions to its electricity generation. It added an estimated 100,000 MW in 2006 alone. By the end of this year, 99 percent of its huge population will have access to electricity. China has managed to do this by moving towards nuclear power (six nuclear power stations are currently under construction) and other forms of renewable energy.

It is now the world's leading producer of photovoltaic solar panels and also its largest exporter. Those involved in this industry have mentioned that China and Japan could have done more but are facing two constraints -- a global shortage of silicon -- the main component in photovoltaic technology -- and sufficient numbers of skilled contractors and technicians to ship and install the panels.

Well, we continue to hear from our geologists that we are rich in silicon (the Cox's Bazar coastline). If we can confirm that we have the basic material, the next step should be manufacturing of the panels and acquiring necessary technical training for rapid deployment. Promoting this sector as a part of clean energy could be achieved through international assistance and by the Climate Fund being set up to tackle the effects of climate variability.

As mentioned earlier in several of my articles, it is time that our political masters take decisive steps towards the production of nuclear power. It will be costly and

might take more than six years to complete. The Three Mile Island accident in the USA in 1979 and Ukraine's Chernobyl disaster in 1986 had accorded pariah status to this industry. Nuclear plants are, however, now seen as a way for countries to achieve energy security as shortages of uranium fuel are deemed less of a risk than shortages of oil and gas.

European countries as well as the US have started changing their stance in this regard. It has been reported that we are also thinking of having a nuclear facility that can produce 1000 MW of power. We meet the necessary international legal and safeguard requirements. There is now no time to lose, given the fact that our gas reserves are in a poor state and need extensive investment (\$8 to 10 billion according to Dr. M. Tamim, Special Assistant to the Chief Adviser for Energy and Power), if the potential is to be fully extracted. We must move towards nuclear power generation, the sooner the better. This should be priority number one for the next political government.

Using wind turbines as a source of renewable energy could also be examined, particularly in the coastal areas. However, the intermittent nature of wind power is a drawback, as it will require the supply infrastructure being equipped with specialised technology to monitor and manage it. Unfortunately we are terribly weak in this area.

We need to sit down together -- all the stakeholders and the important political parties -- and agree on least common denominators regarding production, delivery and maintenance of grids. This is a crucial and serious bipartisan engagement that affects our national security. We must not fail in our efforts towards meeting the gap between demand and supply.

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Playing with fire

BETWEEN THE LINES

The BJP is playing with fire when it communalises a case that should be looked into objectively and the guilty punished severely. The problem with the party is that it is trying its best to polarise the country for the purpose of elections, five of which are in progress in the states and then for the Lok Sabha, which are scheduled for next March-April. The party is so power hungry that all other segments of society and the institutions will have to take steps to protect themselves.

KULDIP NAYAR

THE Indian armed forces are a holy cow. We do not question their expense, nor has there ever been any parliamentary committee to look into their budgetary allocation. Why they purchase a particular type of weapon has been left to the Defence Ministry. To take one example, the navy is bent upon buying the Russian aircraft carrier Gorshkov, even though Moscow has been periodically raising the sale price, which now stands at \$3.2 billion.

Once in a while, a case like the Bofors guns scandal has shaken the nation, but the information came from outside and the ruling party did its best to hush it up. Even the Italian go-between, Quattrone, was pursued up to a point and then allowed to go scot-free, despite CBI protests, because of his high-level connections.

So our trust in the armed forces has been implicit since independence, and never did we suspect that some officer could be ideologically contaminated. All of a sudden, we have been hit by one case, that of Lieutenant Colonel Srikanth Prasad Purohit. He is the senior serving officer who has allegedly played a key role in the Malegaon bombings of September 29.

The blasts took place in mostly Muslim localities, killing 31. As usual, the initial

suspicion fell on Muslims. Malegaon is a small weavers' town near Nasik in Maharashtra, and this is the second time in two years that the Muslims of this run-down area have been victims of similar blasts.

Strange that military intelligence had no clue that one army officer was involved with local Hindu extremists. The credit goes to the Anti-Terrorist Squad (ATS) that unearthed information that those responsible for the crime were Hindu terrorists. The ATS interrogated Lt. Col. Purohit and arrested him after getting permission from the army.

The question anybody will ask is why military intelligence failed to discover that a senior officer was involved. Military intelligence has a large set up in all the three services, and has its men all over the country. When they fail in their job of uncovering extremists in their own ranks, this suggests that they are taking their job nonchalantly.

It is all the more disconcerting that no such previous case has come to light since independence. It may well be an aberration. Yet it is difficult to imagine that a Purohit has been born only in the last few years. An in-depth and overall probe is required.

True, in a recent interview Chief of

Army Staff General Deepak Malhotra has revealed that the army high command is now profiling officers. This is a knee-jerk reaction. A thorough profiling of 31,000 officers is simply not possible, and picking up a few at random will not be fair. What the services have to eliminate is the suspicion in the minds of people that even the military is not immune to communal contamination.

For the common man the armed forces are a bastion of security and protection. I concede that the military does a credible job in hiring recruits from a society that has all the ills and converting them into an apolitical force. But this is a field where the nation cannot afford to go wrong even in one case.

If anyone has any doubts, they should see the sad example of our neighbour, Pakistan. Initial slackness and then General Zia-ul-Haq's effort to have jihadis in the army has created a situation in which some 35% of men and officers are said to be votaries of fundamentalism. Reports have come in that there were people in the Pakistan army who refused to fight against the Taliban in the northern areas.

I do not think that a secular India would ever face such a situation even if the rulers were to connive with fundamentalists of a particular community. The armed forces themselves have such an ethos that they would not allow such a situation to arise.

I know how upset the army was when a senior officer was taken to the BJP office in Delhi for a briefing when the Vajpayee government was in power. The mistaken impression given to the army high command was that some MPs wished to be briefed about ongoing operations.

Still, the worrying point is that many retired military officers are joining the BJP, or propagating on its behalf. Indeed, the party has an association of ex-military men. A few days ago this association sent out invitations on the BJP stationery to a press conference about Assam, scheduled to be addressed by a retired Lieutenant General.

This does not come as a surprise

because the BJP has said that Hindus cannot be terrorists and that the armed forces are a part of Indian society, which has been horrified by the pusillanimous and apologetic approach of the UPA government to terror attacks. In fact, party president Rajnath Singh has said that the party will bear the legal costs of those apprehended in the Malegaon case.

The BJP is playing with fire when it communalises a case that should be looked into objectively and the guilty punished severely. The problem with the party is that it is trying its best to polarise the country for the purpose of elections, five of which are in progress in the states and then for the Lok Sabha, which are scheduled for next March-April. The party is so power hungry that all other segments of society and the institutions will have to take steps to protect themselves.

I do not know why the regimental centres have to have a temple, mosque and gurdwara on their premises. These places of worship exist in those towns and cities where the regimental centres are located. Those who seek the comfort of religion are perfectly free to go there. Why should the army allow religious worship in its places?

Yet much depends upon political parties. They cannot disturb the nation's faith in the ethos of pluralism. This is our heritage from the national struggle and this is what we have enshrined in the constitution. Playing the Hindu card to counter Muslim fundamentalists is hitting at the very foundation of India.

The nation, even before winning independence, said that it would have a secular polity and that is what we have been following, although not as firmly at times as we should. Purohit or persons like him among Hindus, Sikhs or Muslims are a symptom of diseased thinking.

They are a danger to the country's integrity. It's a pity that for the sake of votes some political parties are encouraging them even at the expense of the country's unity. My experience says that they will not go very far.

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