The site is set at Ruppur. Such a project would also require heavy investment in power transmission as well. The maintenance cost, moreover, which includes taking safety measures addressing environmental concerns--is also very high. The government will have to carefully deal with the issue of dumping nuclear waste as it is still a problem for even the most advanced nations.

A nuclear power plant cannot be built overnight and it is also a very costly investment. The project's financing has also not been found. If the government can ensure finance and strike a deal for these two plants within a few months, these would come into operation from 2017-18. Therefore, it would not solve the on-going problem.



With gas supplies depleting at a frightening rate the need for alternative sources is immediate. PHOTO: PETROBANGLA

Solar Power

Solar power is still globally the most costly solution but definitely a practical one because of the relatively simple installation of the power system in rural Bangladesh. It should work in the same way mobile phones became widely popular in the villages. Presently over 300,000 households are using solar energy equivalent to 15 megawatts. But solar power did change lifestyle in coastal to hilly regions. With the view to developing renewable energy resources to meet five percent of the total power demand by 2015 and 10 percent by 2020, the government has already lifted duties on solar power panels to popularise solar power in remote communities. This has cut down solar panel prices by 15 percent.

But in terms of megawatts, it offers nothing bigthough it will provide an easy solution in the rural settings.

Rental power

The concept of rental power projects is new in Bangladesh, and few people really understand the difference between rental power and independent power projects (IPP).

While IPPs are permanent set ups, along with long-term contracts and require 10 months to 18 months to install, the rental plants can be installed within 3 months for a short term and are temporary in nature. An IPP contractor procures plant equipment after getting the contract and the rental power contractors must already have equipment before getting the contract.

Unfortunately, the past BNP led alliance government turned the rental power system into a farce when it started awarding 40 plus deals to various ministers and party men much in the same manner as they would dole out relief materials.

During the caretaker regime, several rental power contracts totalling 300 mw capacity were signed. There was distinct favouritism for a local company Energy Prima--owned by the Hosaf Group, though it was not a rental company. As a result, these deals did not produce the desired result.

But don't let the bad deals dishearten you. Rental powers, if implemented by genuine contractors, are quick and short-term solutions for the on-going power crisis. These plants can be petroleum based and they can be installed to cover a good part of load shedding for the period while large duel-fuel IPPs are installed.

Coal

Bangladesh's other natural resource is coal--which remains nearly untapped. The first coal in Bangladesh was discovered in 1958 in Jamalganj--1000 metres below the ground. Ever since, four more discoveries were made in Khalashpir, Barapukuria, Phulbari and Dighipara. It is primarily estimated that these deposits have 2700 million tonnes of coal--equivalent to 37 trillion cubic feet (TCF) gas.

Presently the country has 7.7 TCF proven gas and 12.90 TCF probable gas reserve.

Of these five discoveries, the Barapukuria coal deposit is being tapped through an underground mine. However though Barapukuria has 391 million tonnes of coal, the mine will produce only 30 million tonnes in 30 years. The high quality coal from this mine is being used for a 250 mw power plant and the present mine can at best produce additional coal for another 125 mw. But if Barapukuria was an open pit mine, more than 90 percent of that 391 million tonnes reserve could have been extracted.

The debate on new coal mining arose over British company Asia Energy's proposal to develop an open pit coal mine in Phulbari. A pressure group that is campaigning