

## Public impatience with frequent power outage

Take them into confidence on a doable action plan

ANGERED by repeated power load shedding, ruefully without notice, residents and workers of Arahazar in Narayanganj left a trail of damage as they ransacked a power sub-station, rural power supply office and a police outpost. This is the first public outburst over a situation whose desperate nature is increasingly dawning on us. Ominously, however, it could be the foretaste of more to come with the government looking perilously close to a full fledged law and order situation. The government, which has had more than its fair share of misfortunes can scarcely entertain such a prospect.

On the other hand though, quite clearly there is little that the government can do to dramatically bring normality in power supply to all manner of consumers, household, industrial and farmland. The huge power deficit is not of this government's making; it is quite evidently inherited, but the harsh reality is it's an academic issue to the people who are suffering it on a daily basis and in rapid progression at that. Not before three years in the very least can power supply be normalised.

Basically, we are faced with a tri-lemma here, if one could coin such a word: there is no way we can generate the needed minimum of power in the immediate future; public frustrations cannot be trifled with or swept under the carpet; and indeed police action can hardly be the answer; on the contrary, it could recoil.

Whilst nobody is left in any doubt that the government is seriously considering various options, short-run, medium-term and long-run, in a bid to improve the energy situation on a sustained basis, there is an impression though that these are somewhat overlapping without any perceptible delineation being made between options. We need to concentrate on the immediate do's, like for instance, better load management, promoting energy efficiency, importing liquefied natural gas to fire power, restoring some of the lost generation capacity, some of which have been emphasised by Dr Towfiq-e-Elahi Chowdhury, energy adviser to the Prime Minister and go about acting on them urgently.

Whatever the government does it must unveil its plan of action with a clear time-line and share its details with the public, not couched in technical jargon, but in terms that they can readily understand and appreciate so as to carry the public with it. A massive public information campaign should be launched to generate confidence in the people that sure-footed alleviation measures are really in prospect.

## Falling rice prices

Farmers in dire need of a beneficial procurement drive

WITH the beginning of the Boro harvesting season, farmers find themselves in a very difficult situation as the price of unhusked rice has gone down to the level where they cannot even recover the production cost. This follows their having incurred heavy losses with crops like wheat and potato earlier on.

The situation calls for efficient handling by the government to protect the interests of the huge number of farmers who produce rice. The agriculture minister has assured us that the government would do its best to protect the farmers. The government has to adopt a liberal procurement policy and fix the price of Boro in such a way that will enable the farmers to make a profit while helping the government to build adequate stocks of rice.

Experts have pointed out the hazards associated with not bailing out the Boro farmers. They may shift to other crops if the Boro turns out to be a losing one this season. This may create a shortage of rice in the country. We must not forget that the situation looked grim last year before the farmers came to our rescue with a bumper Boro harvest. Now, it is the government's duty to reciprocate and help the farmers cope with the falling rice prices.

The point to be noted here is that the production costs of Boro have gone up, despite the government's reducing the prices of fertilisers by almost 50 per cent. The price of diesel had also been lowered. But the farmers had to pay a lot more for other agricultural inputs. The production costs of Boro this season are reported to be higher than that of Aman, a better quality rice.

The issue brings to the fore the question of high rice prices that badly affect the consumers. Now, it is clear that the interests of both the farmers and the consumers have to be safeguarded to avoid any lopsided development in rice production and marketing.

Since attaining self-sufficiency in food is a prime objective before the country, the farmers' interest in rice cultivation must be protected through adoption of policies which will prevent erratic or unexpected market behaviour that might affect both the producers and consumers. The government, in consultation with the agronomists and economists, will have to take such steps as will keep the market steady and predictable.

## Research must not lack objectivity

In Bangladesh we see at times information passed off as research work, or material quoted to substantiate an argument, without delving deep into the matter, which gives a wrong impression of the quality of research and the motive of the researchers.

SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN

IF nothing else Bangladesh can be proud of the fact that there has been a significant growth of research institutes in the country. One should have no quarrels with the number of think tanks and their work since the more people are devoted to scholastic pursuit the more will we be enriched by the addition to the reservoir of basic knowledge.

But in Bangladesh we see at times information passed off as research work, or material quoted to substantiate an argument, without delving deep into the matter, which gives a wrong impression of the quality of research and the motive of the researchers. We have several instances where statistics have been generated to support a thesis to substantiate a predetermined position.

Our attention has been drawn to a set of information by the chairman of Bangladesh Heritage Foundation, who is also the executive director of a government think tank, suggesting that the number of recruits in the military with kawmi madrasa background has risen from 5% before 2001 to thirty five percent in 2006, and maybe even more than that.

The facts above cannot fail to ring a bell in the minds of the readers. Not very long ago we came across such an account in an article entitled "Rise of Islamic Fundamentalism in Bangladesh", jointly authored by Sajeeb A. Wazed, who is also an adviser to Sheikh Hasina, and an ex US army officer. The only difference is that the

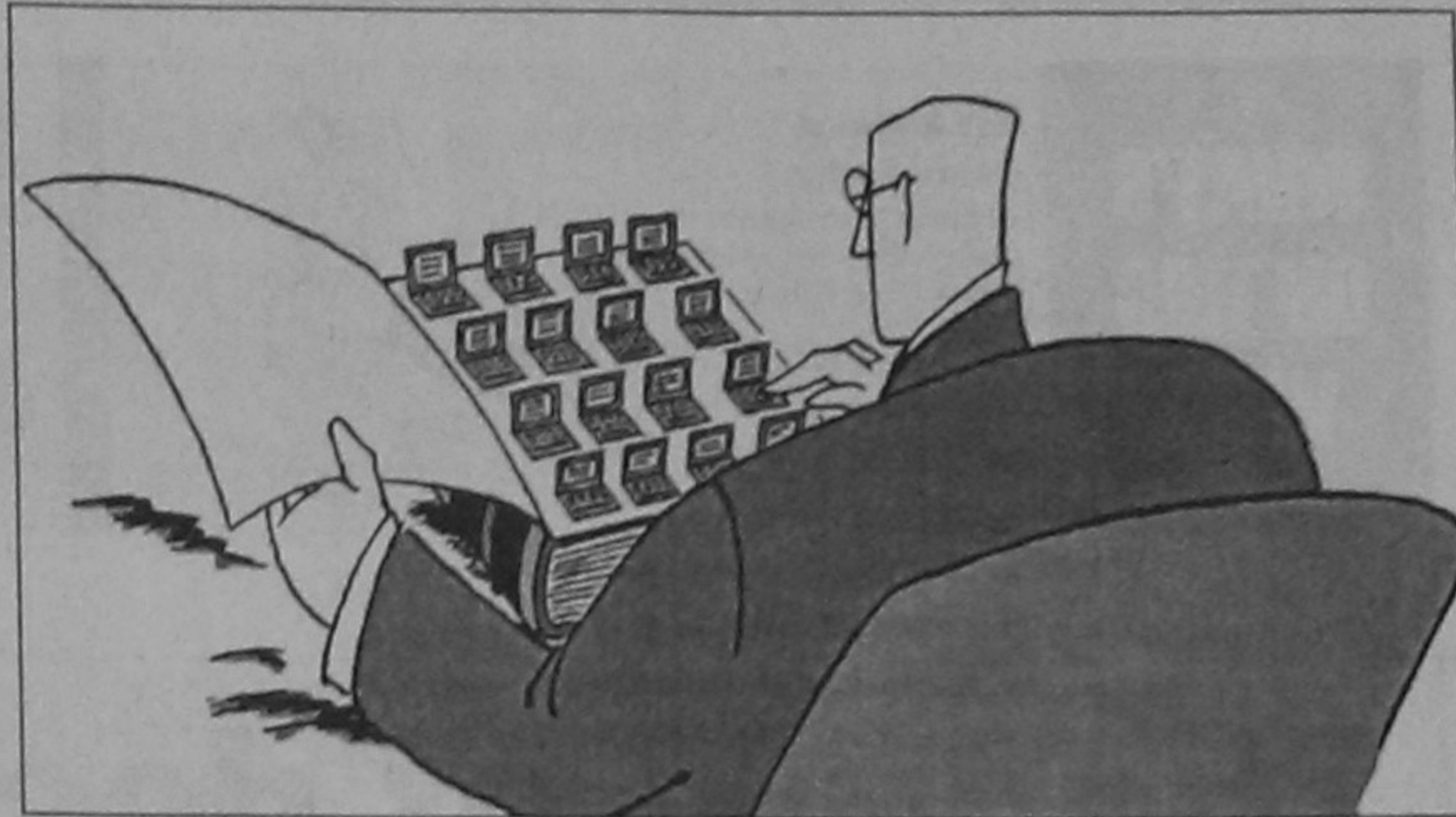
article makes no mention of any particular type of madrasa. And that is why the chairman's comment is a revelation since his research has been able to pinpoint exactly the source of the recruits.

The statistics are the result, as expressed initially, of a research conducted by the Bangladesh Heritage Foundation, whose methodology, unfortunately, the researches would not let us in on. However, there is a similarity in the tenor of the said article and the chairman's remarks. There is an attempt in the article to paint the army as Islamist (*maulabadi* according to the authors), which, according to them, is the cause of rise of Islamic extremism in Bangladesh.

One would like to take issue with that position, but for the moment suffice it to say that only those without a thorough understanding, or borrowed wisdom about terrorism, extremism and so called fundamentalism, would ascribe the rise of a dangerous phenomenon to the perceived character of an institution like the armed forces as has been done in the article.

While one may dismiss an article authored abroad as not credible enough to be taken seriously, we cannot treat the remarks of a head of a government research organisation in the same vein primarily because of the impression that the remarks have conveyed. One cannot fail to see the grave implications contained in the remark that cannot be dismissed as a slip of tongue.

However, even if one were to accept that the reference to kawmi madrasa was indeed



Research: Conclusions must reflect facts.

a slip of tongue how does one explain the "terrorist linkage" to these recruits?

One cannot be blind to the fact that such statements and comments have very serious implications, even if made unwittingly. In other words, if the statistics regarding the numbers is to be believed, given that several thousands are recruited in the army every year, we have an army that is infested with religious extremists and terrorist sympathisers!

My talk with the head of the Heritage Foundation gives me to understand that the figures were in fact extrapolated from the above-mentioned article, "Rise of Islamic Fundamentalism in Bangladesh". The Foundation has revisited the issue and having deliberated on the matter further would like to say that it does not concur with the figures of the Harvard International Review article.

While it is a comforting fact that the issue is being revisited there are other matters that need clarification too. One would like the Heritage Foundation research team to ask how the data that they quoted was arrived at by the authors of the said article. One would like to know the methodology.

Is it a random sampling or analysis of the personal documents of the thousands of recruits since 2001? How was the jump from six percent to thirty-five arrived at? What is the source of the information? Did the AHQ or the various Arms and Services Centre provide it?

No one can deny that extremism and terrorism are matters of concern to the nation. And these need serious scholarship, deliberation, diligent research and thorough study to arrive at suitable and appropriate methods to combat. Shoddy work conducted in a half-hearted manner only helps in detracting from the main issue. Furthermore, it provides leeway to those that are protagonists of extremist ideology to expand their influence.

It must also be kept in mind that the nation is ill-served when the image of a very important national institution, which is at the forefront in counterterrorism activity, is distorted by questionable statistics which is sanctified through seminars and roundtables.

Brig. Gen. (retd.) Shahedul Anam Khan ndc, psc is Editor, Defence & Strategic Affairs, The Daily Star.

## Stimulus package and the recession

In an open economy, external shocks are regular occurrences as the FM presciently and progressively did while bypassing the vested interests' usual critiques of the just released stimulus package.

ABDULLAH A. DEWAN

ON Sunday the finance minister (FM) announced the much awaited "stimulus package" -- Tk.3,424 crore instead of the Tk.6,000 lobbied for by the FBCCI -- covering the agriculture, power, and export sectors.

Tk.450 crore is earmarked for three export sectors, Tk.1,500 crore for farm subsidy; Tk.600 crore for power sector, Tk.500 crore for agricultural loan recapitalisation facility, and Tk.374 crore as reserve for the social safety net.

Some leaders of the RMG sector were disappointed. They shouldn't be. This sector brings in forex earnings of approximately \$4 billion while expatriates' remittance in recent months has been around \$10 billion. So, shouldn't scarce resources be allocated to economic entities that promise the highest return?

At a time of declining exports, due to external shocks, the best way to keep domestic workers employed and factories running is to create domestic demand by discounting prices for domestic consumers. Bailing out funds recipients, exporting

products at lower prices to keep their supply chain competitive and active, would be tantamount to transferring benefits to foreign consumers at the cost of domestic taxpayers.

That seems unwarranted at this time since -- as the FM observed -- export growth of the readymade garment sector was not yet "bad." So, firms in RMG sector receiving stimulus funds should invest them in modernising their capital equipment.

Some of the funds for the agricultural sector (including fisheries, poultry, and livestock) also should be invested in procuring efficient equipment, and the farmers' woes should also be taken into consideration in any bailout venture. Buying rice to keep the market price high should be a priority. Besides, funds should be diverted to infrastructure development.

On remittances, the FM referred to the ongoing diplomatic initiatives to protect the expatriate labour market and explore new ones. That's not enough. Returning expatriate workers should be retained for better future job prospects abroad.

The FM has rightly observed that the

effect of global recession on our economy isn't comparable with other Asian economies -- especially those integrated with the global capital market and the banking sector. In fact, the size of the stimuli and the recent data indicate that any adverse effects on the economy so far are mild at best but warrant vigilance. This also calls for a review of how recession is defined and measured.

In US, recession is characterised by declining real GDP growth for two consecutive quarters. However, the severity of recession is measured by how far the actual GDP is below its full employment level -- the so-called "recessionary gap," or GDP gap.

The American concept of full employment GDP refers to a situation in which everyone who is willing and able to work finds a job. At full employment GDP, the measured unemployment is still positive -- mostly due to structural and frictional unemployment (workers leaving one job and searching for another/moving to another job are experiencing frictional unemployment, estimated at around 4% -- but non-existent in most developing economies).

For Bangladesh, full employment GDP may be defined as the GDP that can be produced when all available land, capital, and all other non-human resources are fully employed. The reason for exclusion of labour in my definition for Bangladesh economy is obvious -- there are many times more job seekers than the economy's capac-

ity to employ them in a well defined activity, ceteris paribus. Besides, in a predominantly agro-based economy, measuring unemployment isn't an easy undertaking.

So, how do the policy makers measure recession in Bangladesh without knowing the full employment level of unemployment -- hopefully not the same way BNP's finance minister Saifur Rahman forecasted GDP growth in Dec 2005. While discounting Bangladesh Bank's estimate of GDP growth range of 6.3-6.8%, he made his own prediction of over 7% growth based on his "visual drive by construction sites" from Dhaka to Sylhet (DS: December 23, 2005, The FM's drive by GDP growth model).

Regardless of how recession is measured in Bangladesh, expatriates' job losses and declining remittances and export demand are external shocks that cannot be offset with any amount of domestic fiscal incontinence. However, discretionary spending will be almost perfunctory once spillover effects of external shocks inflict the threats of massive unemployment and shutdown of businesses and factories.

In an open economy, external shocks are regular occurrences -- and government responses must not be opaque and desultory; instead they should be targeted in a cautious and measured way -- as the FM presciently and progressively did while bypassing the vested interests' usual critiques of the just released stimulus package.

Dr. Abdullah A. Dewan, founder of polliconomy.com, is a Professor of Economics at Eastern Michigan University.

## Digitising our campuses

The concept of classroom teaching is still predominant even at the world's top universities. Old library buildings and hundreds of thousands of volumes are not an alternative to digital libraries in computer hard disc.

SHAMEEM MAHMUD

NOT surprisingly, the country's two highest seats of learning -- University of Dhaka and BUET -- have been ranked 4922 and 3801 respectively in webometrics ranking of world universities. Such a performance is not unexpected when the Spain-based survey measured "academic activities of the universities, which were reflected on the web". Thanks to much ignorance to digital media in our academia that brought such a shocking news to the nation at a time when it bears a vision to build a digital Bangladesh by the year 2021.

In any policy dialogue or public discourse in general campus violence tops the agenda as reasons behind poor academic environment. Recent intra-party and inter-party clashes of students organisations followed by closure of a number of universities exhibit certainty of such contention. But at the same time, we have either overlooked or failed to grasp the importance of other factors that have been affecting positions and value of our higher educa-

tion in global and regional competitiveness.

Debates are less on faculty pedagogical approach at our academia to the design of learning objects. In many considerations, we are lagging much behind to pace with the global changes brought by digital technologies in knowledge acquisition. We are a mere spectator in the whole range of changes. Lack of access to digital technologies may be an excuse, but not a convincing argument. Fund crisis to buy computers and provide high-speed Internet connections can be an explanation, but not satisfying. The problem is less related to money, and more to the attitude.

Since the mid-1990s when Internet first came to Bangladesh, public universities have taken a number of projects mainly to create IT-literate human resources and to increase access to the Internet for their students and teachers. Some of these universities have created a digital catalogue of library entries and made available e-journals for faculty, apart from confirming virtual presence through own websites.

The concept of classroom teaching is

still predominant even at the world's top universities. Old library buildings and hundreds of thousands of volumes are not an alternative to digital libraries in computer hard disc. Books and journals are not replaced by e-journals and e-books. But, these have brought significant changes in the scholarly arena. Higher educational institutions are increasingly integrating their teaching methods with the sophisticated use of new communication technologies where Internet plays the leading role.

E-learning doesn't necessarily mean electronic learning or online learning, but "extended learning" when the course teacher integrates Internet applications in teaching methods. Here digital technologies are not replacing teacher's role in the classroom, but aiding the lectures in multiple ways. Online reading texts and discussion forums are a few examples that made it possible for both teachers and students to engage in more effective dialogues on course contents beyond the classrooms and hours. Access to the university's own digital library, open digital libraries (e.g. google scholar, google books, world digital library of the Unesco), e-journals, you tube or google video, podcasts are all potentials of the web that are being used by educational institutions extensively.

But, policymakers of our universities have considered web as a mere communication tool and built individual websites with necessary (!) contents. Most of these contents are hardly updated. At best, these

websites can be labelled as electronic versions of university brochures or prospectus. We have failed to consider the university website as a platform for multiple functions -- be it academic or administrative. Policy makers of our higher academia should think to integrate digital technologies from classrooms to libraries to administrative works.

The process can start with true digitalisation of library and open it to students and faculties so that they can have access to search, borrow and renew books, journals and other materials online from any workstation using their secure username and password. A well-planned effort is necessary to update university websites and introduce online platform of learning that teachers and students can use for academic and administrative purposes. This will provide faculty and students with exciting tools, templates, and electronic discussions (or forums) for scholarly communication. Using the online learning platform (which is commonly called blackboard in many universities and colleges) teachers can make available course outlines and reading texts to class schedules, class projects and assignments, and so on. The Web can give new meaning to the word "learning".

Shameem Mahmud is a Lecturer at Mass Communication and Journalism, University of Dhaka, and post-graduate student at the University of Amsterdam. Email: mahmud.shameem@gmail.com