

Expanding the use of renewable energy

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MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

WE all know that there is a close association between the availability of reliable, uninterrupted power supply in industry and commerce and in the attaining of socio-economic potential and decent living standards. In this era of globalisation, there are few issues that better demonstrate the confluence of politics and business than energy. From fuelling the economies of the rich countries to driving economic development in poor ones, it has an effect on almost everything that we do. Consequently, ensuring the safe supply and distribution of energy has to be an important part of strategic state policy.

It is this perspective that has persuaded the present government to attach the highest importance to attaining self-sufficiency in our energy needs within the next four years.

Bangladesh's per capita energy consumption is very low. The 2008 energy consumption value stood at about 250 kgOE (oil equivalent) compared to 550 kgOE for India, 515 kgOE for Pakistan and 430kgOE for Sri Lanka. Total primary energy consumption in 2008 was 33.5MTOE (million ton oil equivalent) and the energy consumption mix was estimated as indigenous biomass 62%, indigenous natural gas 25%, imported oil 12%, imported coal and hydro together at about 1%. Of this, natural gas, an indigenous non-renewable energy resource, plays a vital role in the growth of our economy.

Today, Bangladesh generates about 4,000 MW power against the national demand of about 5,500 MW. It also produces about 1,950 MMCFD gas against the national demand of 2,400 MMCFD. It is estimated that in three years from now, at the present rate of growth, power demand will increase to 7,000 MW and gas demand to 3,000 MMCFD. In order to face this changing scenario, Bangladesh will need to add 3,000 MW power its national grid and at least 1,000 MMCFD gas by 2012.

The prime minister has recently told the Parliament that her government hopes to rid the country of the existing power crisis by 2011 by generating 1,487 MW of additional power. She has also indicated her government's firm determination to

ensure that Bangladesh is not only self-sufficient in power by 2021 but also that electricity facility will be available throughout the country.

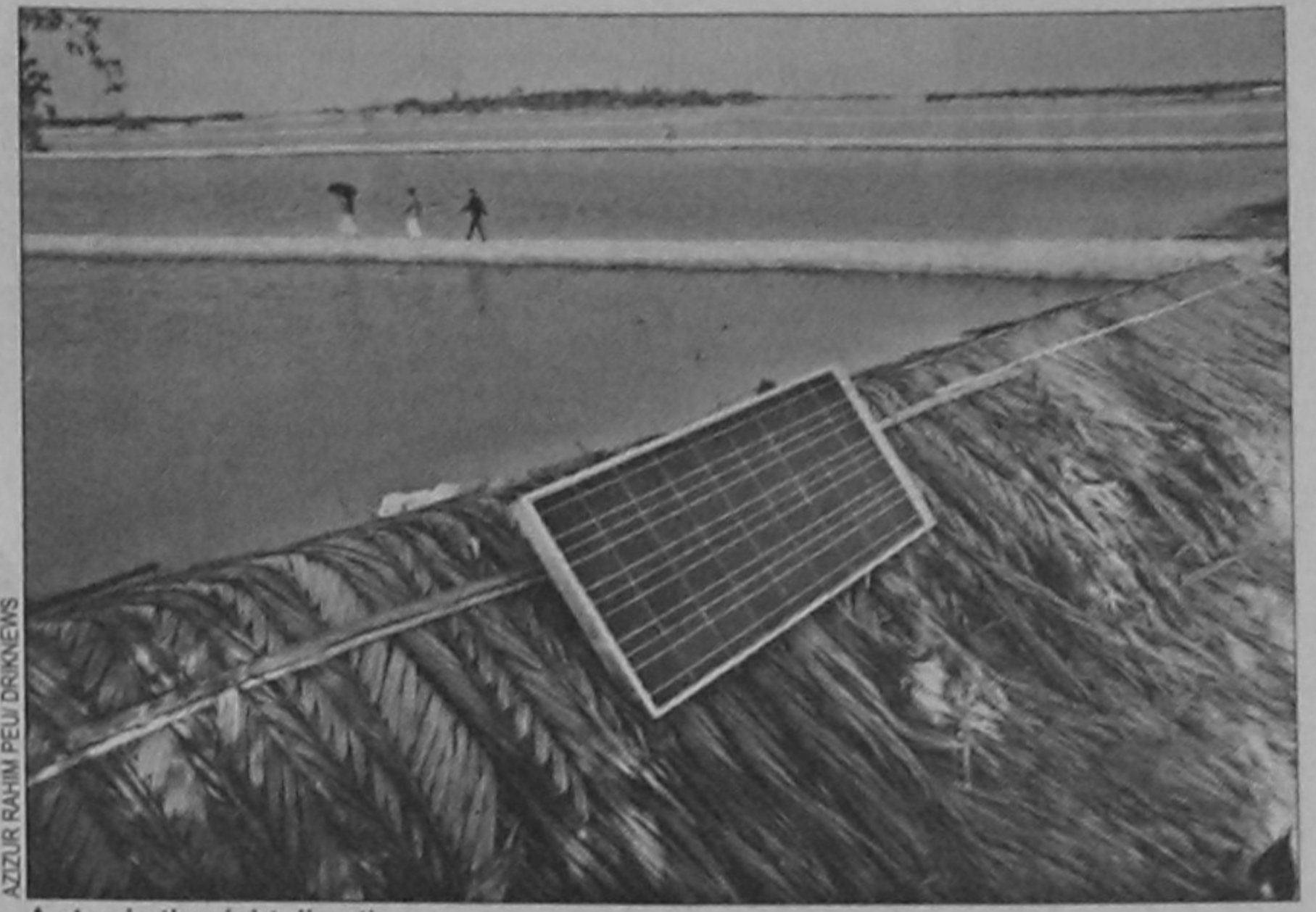
The energy and power advisor to the hon'ble prime minister has endorsed this ambitious program. He considers that it is feasible and possible. I agree with him. It will require a coordinated and comprehensive approach that will access to all different sources of energy -- gas based, coal, fuel oil, nuclear, hydro-electric, solar, bio-gas and wind. It will need massive investment but even that can be achieved.

I will highlight some of the expected areas of advance within the renewable energy sector.

The government has already endorsed a renewable energy policy, which, inter alia, stipulates the establishment of a sustainable energy development agency. There will also be special efforts towards initiation, coordination and monitoring of national programs for energy conservation and the expansion of the use of renewable energy.

A signatory of the NPT, the government is seriously examining the possibility of nuclear power. Bangladesh has already signed a protocol deal with Russia on October 21 after prolonged discussion on possible cooperation in the field of peaceful usage of atomic energy. The country plans to install a nuclear power plant in Pabna district, some 216 km northwest of capital Dhaka. The agreement was signed in Moscow during the visit of a nine-member Bangladeshi delegation headed by State Minister for Science and Information and Communication Technology Yeafesh Osman. In line with the protocol, a joint working group between Bangladesh and Russia is being formed and its composition and schedule will be defined in the working process.

After this comes the use of solar power. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has recently mentioned that the government has undertaken plans to set up solar power plants to generate 280 MW by 2013. At present, Grameen Shakti, a sister organization of Grameen Bank is setting up an average of 10,000 solar panels monthly, producing about 14 MW solar power across rural Bangladesh and providing electricity to more than 280,000 rural



A step in the right direction.

households.

Several other NGOs are also generating about 2 MW of solar power and distributing this to the rural population. The number of beneficiaries is around three million people. Experts believe that Bangladesh has a particular advantage in this regard because it gets optimum sunlight on an average of about 340 days every year. Power-starved Bangladesh is also examining the possibility of using solar power in all new public buildings. The emphasis will be first on new buildings and then gradually in the old ones.

Infrastructure Development Company Limited (IDCOL), a government partner non-bank financial institution promoting solar home systems in rural Bangladesh, is also planning to set up a multipurpose Solar Irrigation System (SIS) in off-grid areas of the country. Rahim Afroze, the country's largest battery cell producer, is going to assist them in this regard. Special importance is being attached to this because there are 1.3 million irrigation pumps across the country and they consume about 750 MW of electricity everyday during the irrigation season. If we are able to run about half these irrigation pumps with solar power, it could save over 284 million US dollars worth foreign exchange.

I believe that our next step, through a public-private partnership, should be to establish and install two or more solar panel factories. Necessary research already completed has indicated that the silica content near Cox's Bazar could be used for manufacturing the solar panels required for meeting the needs of Bangladesh as well as the adjoining region. Our development partners may consider assisting us in this regard. This will enhance their reputation not only as being eco-friendly but also interested in expand-

ing the green footprint.

IDCOL is presently also involved in promoting the use of manure-fed biogas stoves in the rural areas. A viable clean energy proposition, this has already been put in place in over 39,200 households. The stakeholders are confident that they will have at least 80,000 such consumers by 2011. The eventual goal is to have approximately 3 million households accessing such energy. Major donors, including the Netherlands Development Organisation and the German Development Bank, are assisting in this regard. At present, out of a total installation cost of nearly Taka 22,000, IDCOL provides a subsidy of Taka 9,000. The rest is being financed through microcredit loans. The Bangladesh Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (BCSIR) is also playing an important role in this field. Biogas technology is important because it can also be a good source of bio-slurry based organic fertilisers.

All forms of renewable energy technologies need to be explored and promoted. That will have to include the use of wind technology, micro-hydro power units and exploitation of wave's potential in coastal areas.

One hopes that the government will assist the process of expanding the use of renewable energy by making this sector investment friendly. They can do this by introducing special fiscal measures -- the creation of a special fund, reduced interest rates for loans taken from banks for using renewable energy technology, tax holidays on investment made with regard to production of green energy and removal of VAT/taxes imposed on accessories used in this sector. Such steps will ensure success.

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Plight of tricked job-seekers

All concerned need to work in sync to protect their rights

CHEATING of job-seeking foreign-bound workers by local fraudulent recruiting agencies and their counterpart suppliers in the host countries has been continuing unabated. After Malaysian experience, one is now faced with the extreme plight of migrant workers in Libya at the hands of the Bangladeshi brokers and Libyan companies with dubious antecedents. Reports have it that between five and six thousand Bangladeshi workers are held in confinement in different desert locations, where Bangladeshi-origin brokers in collusion with their Libyan accomplices are holding these hapless job seekers to ransom.

Unfortunately, neither the these migrant workers, nor the government ministry looking after the welfare of such hapless travellers in search of work abroad have learned any lesson from their previous experience. The Bangladeshi's labour counsellor in Libya, though he is in the know of such misfortune of the migrant job seekers appeared to be helpless about the matter. It is reflective of the lack of coordination between the Bangladeshi missions abroad, the government ministry concerned and the agencies looking after the recruitment of these workers. It seems the government's earlier plan of employing professionals at the foreign missions to handle problems of this nature is yet to take effect.

This disturbing report from Libya leaves little room for the government to wait any further about taking prompt action to stop such harassment of Bangladeshi workers abroad. In this context, one needs to bear in mind that this African country holds out huge potential for exporting our manpower there, as the US\$100 billion worth development projects it has undertaken would create the employment opportunity for about one million foreign workers. But to all intents and purposes, such prospect is getting ruined at the hands of a handful of frauds at home and abroad as the government is proving to be rather slow to respond.

The manpower recruiting agencies with good track records and the government people concerned need to act quickly to grab the opportunity. But to make that possible, it will be necessary to mount a strict watch on the agencies operating in the manpower business. The first and foremost task would be to screen out people with criminal records from the trade and punish those and ensure that other such elements may not infiltrate into the business.

The way the foreign missions abroad are trying to face up to the suffering of the migrant workers needs some reconsideration. For before having any clear idea of which employing company in Libya has dubious records, staggering the supply of Bangladeshi labourers to the organisation looking for overseas workers may not be the right response.

In fact, the local Bangladeshi mission, the Libyan government and Bangladesh government need to work in sync to avoid such fraudulent employments.

At home, on the other hand, an awareness campaign has to be raised among the common people so that job seekers may not walk into the trap set by impostors and fake recruiting agencies.

Growing interest in jute

It calls for responsive policy measures

THE recently slapped government ban on raw jute export has caused the once famed 'Golden Fibre' to come to the fore. The background story speaks for itself. During the July-September quarter of this fiscal, export of raw jute registered a rise of 28 per cent over what it was in the corresponding previous fiscal. The volume of raw jute produced this year is also estimated to be as high as 5.5 million bales. Matching the rise in exports, the price of raw jute, too, has shot up in the local market. Some traders are also allegedly stocking up on raw jute raising its price artificially in the market. As a consequence, jute mills, which manufacture various jute-based commodities like gunny bags, carpet backing and the like are facing crisis in the supply of their raw material.

Though raw jute export brings immediate cash, the export of jute-based commodities has proved to be more gainful. What is more, the jute mills that manufacture these goods from raw jute employ thousands of workers. Due to rise in raw jute price, these jute mills are suffering. This places the raw jute traders at odds with the manufacturing units depending on raw jute. The situation calls for a kind of decision from the government that can strike a balance between the demands of both the sectors.

The seeming predicament apart, the entire development is a welcome one, because jute has the immense potentialities to open up a new window of opportunity for the export sector. Jute being a natural and at the same time biodegradable stuff, it fits well into the recent surge in the demands for eco-friendly materials. Add to it the fact that jute has long been the source of good seasonal earning for the peasantry until it fell from grace.

This new surge of interest in this crop, therefore, requires of the policymakers to be duly responsive to the emerging needs of this sector of the economy. The jute farmers have to be given the necessary incentive to grow quality jute. To this end, bank credit, good quality seeds and other facilities should be brought within their easy reach. To ensure them remunerative price for their labour, the government needs to free the local markets from the tyranny of the middlemen, who push up the raw jute price artificially and thereby deprive the farmers of their due unfairly.

Judiciary losing its sparkle

Parliament, representing the will of the people, needs to repair the pillar, not to make it still weaker because of the taint that the judiciary has come to acquire. Some remedial steps need to be taken. Only then will the judiciary sparkle once again.

KULDIP NAYAR

DURING World War II, when Great Britain was losing on every front, Winston Churchill, then prime minister, wrote to Lord Chancellor, the Chief Justice, to ensure that the judiciary delivered justice. Surprised, Lord Chancellor frantically asked Churchill why he had expressed such a fear when his attention was focused on how to stop the advancing Nazis. Churchill replied immediately to observe that as long as people were sure to get justice, they would fight for the country even in the midst of reverses.

Today, that type of confidence among the Indian people has been shaken. Two things have happened. One, the judiciary is found wanting, and two, the justice is delayed. Take the first. Chief Justice P.N. Bhagwati said some two decades ago on the eve of his retirement that judicial corruption was growing by "leaps and bounds." Not long ago, retired Chief Justice S.P. Barucha also alleged that 15 percent of the judiciary was corrupt. Judges and other luminaries have accepted the charge without murmur because they know that it reflects the general impression.

Leading lawyers have come out in the open to point a finger at certain judges. Bars have passed resolutions to that effect. A dominant public opinion is that it would not get fair judgment. Media has given specific instances that so and so among the judges was not above board. Whether it is Punjab, West Bengal or Karnataka, the protest against corruption of judges is open and loud. The Supreme Court itself is in the dock

because of allegations at the highest level.

The question is who should oversee whom? Obviously, the executive cannot do so. Even otherwise, its own image is not without tarnish. If Parliament were to step in, the judiciary would be up in arms. The constitution gives the latter the right to "legal scrutiny" of legislation to ensure that Parliament does not violate the basic structure of the constitution.

There is a proposal to have an ombudsman to look into the charges of even the serving prime minister. The successive governments have promised to set up such an authority but they have shied away from giving it any concrete shape because of the fear of some independent authority assessing their acts of omission and commission.

The working of the judiciary is under a blanket of secrecy. Even when the Central Information Commission (CIC) has asked the Supreme Court to disclose complete correspondence and file noting on the recent appointment of three judges, it has stayed the CIC order. Right to Information (RTI) is a law in operation. Transparency is necessary for the functioning of a democratic system. How helpless the polity looks when the highest body, the Supreme Court, stalls a case pertaining to its conduct.

In fact, there is a question mark against many appointments to High Courts and the Supreme Court. All this is done by the Supreme Court Collegium, a body of three senior-most judges of the Supreme Court. If one were to go back in history, one would find that the central government was party to the messy situation that the country faces today.

Under the constitution, the government's consultation with the chief justice is essential before any appointment to the High Court or the Supreme Court is made. There came a time when the government was unhappy over the rejection by the chief justice of certain names it recommended. An obliging Supreme Court judge came to the rescue of the government to interpret that "consultation" did not mean "concurrence."

It made the chief justice more or less redundant because the government consulted him but did not consider it necessary to have his concurrence. After some years, the pendulum swung to the side of the judiciary. The Supreme Court would consult the government but did not think its consent was necessary.

The case of Karnataka Chief Justice P.D. Dinakaran has brought the pot to the boil. He is alleged to have possessed land through encroachment on government property. The Collegium has recommended his elevation to the Supreme Court. But the government has refused to accept the recommendation. It has asked the Collegium to reconsider its decision.

As per the convention, Justice Dinakaran's elevation is binding if the Collegium re-endorses its recommendation. Were it to do so, the country would face a constitutional crisis. Reports are the Collegium would not press its recommendation. This would, no doubt, avert the crisis. But this is not a permanent solution.

Willy-nilly, the government will have to implement the proposal for the constitution of a judicial council comprising judges and outsiders to give the selection of judges a proper balance. Coming specifically to the case of Justice Dinakaran, a motion for his impeachment in Parliament is already in the air. If impeachment proceedings are initiated, the whole matter would come before the

public for debate. It would do a world of good to the judiciary as well as the executive. One thing can lead to another when the facts are there for all to see.

The second thing is that judgment is delayed for years. It amounts to the denial of justice. The arrear of cases is around 30 million. A person has to wait some 15 years for the judgment. In some cases of murder, the verdict is yet to be pronounced even though the hearing was over more than a decade ago. The union cabinet has cleared a scheme to appoint 15,000 retired judges or those who make the grade, to clear the arrears. Yet, much would depend on how quick the pronouncement of the verdict is. Too much time is wasted on dilatory methods that a litigant adopts to stall the judgment.

Starting from the lower court to the Supreme Court, it is a long legal haul. Some procedures, some debates, some discussions and some paperwork can be cut so that the pace is fast, without compromise on what justice demands. Judicial reforms are something basic to have fast-track justice. At present, the judiciary has increasingly become a mutual protection society.

Judgments speak for the judges. So says Solomon of courts. But over the years they have learnt how to cover up their slant. J.C. Verma, former chief justice of India said: "If we (judges) don't question ourselves, the people may enact a law empowering something to question us." The judiciary is one of the pillars on which the edifice of democracy rests. The pillar is showing cracks. Parliament, representing the will of the people, needs to repair the pillar, not to make it still weaker because of the taint that the judiciary has come to acquire. Some remedial steps need to be taken. Only then will the judiciary sparkle once again.

Kuldip Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.