

Gas crisis needs addressing

Rationalising its use is an option

THE capital city is going through the worst kind of gas crisis. In the past, too, the city experienced occasional gas scarcity. But road digging or other causes of local nature did not cause such cases of disruptions. Compared to those, the present crisis appears to be more acute and pervasive as new areas of the capital city are going through the ordeal of constricted supply of gas upsetting the pattern of the residents' everyday life.

While the city-dwellers are smarting from this dislocation in several parts of the metropolis, the authorities in charge of supplying the gas to the households or to other users seem to have resigned to a state of fatalism, as there is hardly any effort visible at ameliorating the city-people's sufferings.

The authorities concerned obviously need to stir themselves into action, if they mean to manage, if not entirely solve, the ongoing shortage in the gas supply situation in the country. At the same time, the users should be circumspect about any wasteful use of gas at their household connections and consciously avoid it.

Admittedly, there is an ever-widening gap between demand and supply of gas -- the present shortage being between 250 and 300 mmmcf -- due mainly to its scarcity at the source, that is, at the production level. But in spite of its limited supply, the number of its diversified users is growing by the day.

But there is no reason why the users won't be able to adjust to exigencies, provided they are sufficiently informed of the situation and taken into confidence about the management plan that should have been put in place. Such information would help the users plan their use better and thereby avoid disruptions in their regular work schedules.

It may be recalled here that in the face of persistent gas crisis in the city and its adjoining areas, Petrobangla earlier informed that it was planning to place a proposal to the ministry concerned about 'holiday staggering' of the gas supply to industries in different parts of the country.

The city-residents, hit by biting winter, are in a state of double jeopardy in the face of further deepening of gas crisis. They are looking for an early decision from the government about its plan on holiday staggering of the gas supply, if any.

The authorities would do well to take this ever-diminishing quantity of gas in the supply lines as an early warning for the impending gas crunch. Though the ultimate answer to this problem lies in the longer plan of exploring more gas fields, in the immediate term the priorities seem to be rationalising of gas use through introducing gas rationing and taking other measures as necessary in view of the increasing demands for gas in different sectors of the economy.

Extortionists back to work?

All forms of patronage must dry up

EXTORTIONISTS are back in business in the city. The house owners of Mirpur had to organise a rally recently to let people know how helpless they are, as organised extortionists are threatening them with dire consequences if they fail to meet their demands. Bombs and firearms have been used to scare people and a security guard of an under-construction house in Mirpur was shot dead by the extortionists on January 6, after they failed to find out the owner. That alone shows how desperate the criminals have become.

The police department itself has admitted that more than 300 extortionists are operating in the city, though a drive is on to arrest them. Similarly, there are around 50 groups of car thieves. Though the police claim that they succeed in recovering over 60 per cent of the cars, the owners have to undergo a great ordeal, if they are lucky enough to get back the stolen cars with many of their parts removed.

Now, we can ill afford to ignore the fact that extortionists are no ordinary criminals. In fact, their presence almost all over the country has a highly negative impact on the economy, as they cause price hike through taking hefty amounts of money from traders and transport owners. In some extreme cases, they set up a parallel system of collecting tolls on highways. The situation improved slightly after some initial crackdowns but it appears to be resurfacing again through a fault line in surveillance.

While there may be many reasons behind the growth and proliferation of this particular type of crime, the truth of the matter is that political patronization is the single-most important factor contributing to its presence on such a scale. The report published in this newspaper on January 17 states that many of the godfathers are involved in mainstream politics.

It has also been reported that the densely populated city has become a safe sanctuary for criminals being chased in the districts by the police. This is an aspect of the crime situation which the law enforcers have to take note of and wholeheartedly address. After all, an improvement in the crime situation in one area must not mean its worsening in another.

Actually, political parties will have to stand guard against giving any leeway to extortionists or criminals of any denomination in whatever guise they may appear.

Of sellout and secret deals

To start with, I for one have been rather confused by the issue that relates to the use of the two ports by India and associating that with our national security. To it has been added another new element; that of a secret deal alleged to have been inked by Sheikh Hasina with India.

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A PART from the intense debate that the PM's visit has engendered in the country, some informed some uninformed, it has had one positive impact on the opposition. At least they have been provoked to express their intent to attend the current session of the Parliament.

It is just as well. Given the accusations of sellout and secret deal, which are being made against the government, outside the floor of the house those count for very little. In the Parliament, one would hope, we will get the benefit of a debate that will be informed and rational, backed by logic and statistics, not subterfuge and rhetoric.

The battle of words is confusing the public. And with the media clearly divided on the issue, newer elements, introduced by way of news, are adding to the confusion. While there is every justification to critique actions of the government, particularly when those relate to our relationship with neighbours, callow journalese leads to dilution of the gravity of the issues.

The role of some section of the media only proves what Oscar Wilde had said, that there is much to be said in favour of modern journalism. By giving us the opinions of the uneducated, it keeps us in touch with the ignorance of the community.

To start with, I for one have been rather confused by the issue that relates to the use of the two ports by India and associating that with our national security. To it has been added another new element; that of a secret deal alleged to have been inked by Sheikh Hasina with India.

Allowing another country to use one's

ports is nothing unique and one does not hear about special agreements with others for allowing their ships to call at one's port. However, with India the matter assumes a different tenor. It means that India will transport goods to and from these ports to wherever it wants to inside and outside India. And this is what raises the hackles of some of the critics of the policy, because that amounts to giving transit facility to India.

And they are also unwilling to see the matter in exclusively economic terms. They suggest that the policy would, apart from causing Bangladesh to lose the "captive" market in the Indian North East, also involve it with the ongoing insurgency in that area, because through these ports India might move the accoutrements of war to the North East to combat the insurgents.

While we will deal with this separately at a later date, suffice it to say that the concerns are being highly exaggerated. Anyone with the basic knowledge of military logistics would know that there are far better options of moving war material than through a third country, however friendly.

In so far as transit is concerned, India already has the facility of inland water transit, and that has not affected the security of Bangladesh in any way. I am sure that all the river vessels that ply the riverine routes between India and Bangladesh are put through all the inspection procedures after entering and before leaving our territory.

The issue of surface connectivity between the two countries had been an agreed matter since 1972. The Indo-Bangladesh Trade Agreement on March 28, 1972, (Article V of the Agreement)



Accusation without evidence is not enough.

provided for "mutually beneficial arrangements for the use of their waterways, railways and roadways for commerce between the two countries and for passage of goods between two places in one country through the territory of the other."

While the 1972 agreement was for one year, a new trade agreement, which was signed on October 4, 1980, had similar proviso for surface connectivity. Allowing Bangladesh transit to Nepal is not a new concession either because, in the comment at the 1972 signing ceremony, the Indian foreign trade minister had said: "We, on our part, would be only too happy to provide the necessary transit facilities to Nepal and our friends in Bangladesh."

As for the secret deal, we would call upon anyone with knowledge of such a deal to make that public. The leader of the opposition repeated what appeared in a Bangla daily regarding an agreement for exchange of intelligence between the two countries. Sharing of information

and intelligence is something not new either. In fact, the 1987 Regional Convention on the Suppression of Terrorism calls for greater regional cooperation on legal issues, including evidence sharing and exchange of information and expertise.

The issues of the ports and transit have two very distinct aspects. One is related to trade, commerce and economics and the other with the so-called security. It is also a reality that these are our assets that give us strategic leverage in dealing with other countries. The strategic card must be played prudently so that we can maximise our strategic advantage and the benefits that are linked to it, and it is only after details of implementation of the understandings between Bangladesh and India are worked that out would one be able to say whether that is the case or not.

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Brother against brother

Both sides seem deliberately oblivious to the fact that a widening fracture within the Pahari movement, through an active struggle for supremacy, will only help those who want to sabotage the CHT Accord.

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EACH movement, in stasis or motion, gravitates to leaders. Symbols and enigma -- where hopes are invested, even in absentia.

For two decades, the movement for self-determination of the Pahari (Jumma) people of Chittagong Hill Tracts had leaders and symbols. The guerillas of Shanti Bahini were figures never seen, always imagined. Then, one day in 1997, the ghost army's representatives came out of hiding. A helicopter landed in a forest clearing. Designated men on each side, at the negotiation table. Finally, the signing of the CHT Accord with the government, a ceremony with doves, a surrender of guns in a stadium.

So there our curtain goes down, the story ambles along to a happy ending. Or does it? On the 12th anniversary of

the Accord, the coda is that almost no aspect of the Accord has been implemented. Even the minimal steps towards implementation, that began last year under this new government, have provoked an organised opposition from groups that want to cancel the Accord. As always in Bangla politics, stopping things is easier.

A court case is underway, trying to declare the CHT Accord unconstitutional. With large amounts of land and forest timber at stake, those who want to keep Paharis marginalised, and the CHT Accord in permanent limbo, are muscular, connected and funded.

But another issue has emerged as a boon for the anti-Accord groups -- the fractures within the Pahari movement itself, grown sharper each year the Accord remains unimplemented. Up to 1997, the Pahari community was repre-

sented militarily by Shanti Bahini, and politically by JSS (Jana Sanghati Samity). When the accord was signed, a section of the guerilla army and the political movement criticised the Accord, particularly because it failed to provide constitutional recognition to ethnic and adivasi groups. That opposition crystallised into UPDF (United People's Democratic Front), a new political party of Paharis that formed from the refusenik segment of JSS.

While much of the efforts of JSS and UPDF are focused on the conditions of Pahari oppression, some of their energy in recent years is diverted to conflicts with each other. These fractures do not spring out of thin air. Power struggles within movements are standard issues, especially when the struggle continues longer without results.

But another theory is that anti-Accord groups have also done their part to amplify these internal conflicts among Paharis. Certainly for those Bengalis who want to block the Accord, a common and convenient refrain is: How can we reach a settlement with the Paharis, they are fighting each other?

In the latest expression of fracture,

leaders of the JSS called for a political ban on the UPDF. One reason for the call for a ban is that UPDF has opposed the 1997 Accord.

However, according to their recent press releases, UPDF still considers the Accord "unfair" but now accepts it as "fact" and works within that framework. In addition, JSS claims UPDF members are involved in kidnapping in the region. UPDF makes the same counter-claim against JSS. There are diametrically opposed claims from both sides, with no mechanism to get to truth, resolution or stability.

The pertinent question is, where are Pahari political leaders going with this? Do the JSS leaders think that calling for a ban on UPDF, besides being undemocratic, is going to help the movement for Pahari rights? UPDF also has not made significant moves towards making peace with JSS. Both sides seem deliberately oblivious to the fact that a widening fracture within the Pahari movement, through an active struggle for supremacy, will only help those who want to sabotage the CHT Accord.

This is a familiar scenario, from many liberation movements in our past. The third world charisma crisis is embedded with this as well. Guerilla and liberation leaders in the Global South's recent past: They won the war, but lost the peace. In movements and in negotiations, the leader is the movement, the movement is the leader. But after accords, after independence, after an armistice, the same leaders can fail the movement.

It is urgent, on this crucial anniversary, that the two opposing factions of the Pahari movement stop battling each other, and reach some form of pragmatic détente. The government must be an active intermediary, by insisting that both organisations are represented in talks and decision-making bodies on the future of the CHT.

A continued internecine struggle between UPDF and JSS only helps those who want a return of conflict to Chittagong Hill Tracts. This group, pushing the Accord towards collapse, is not insignificant. They take advantage of chaos and continue to profit from the land, while this endless shadow battle plays out.

Naem Mohaiem wrote the chapter on ethnic and religious minorities in several Ain Salish Kendra annual reports.



The Accord did not envisage a split among Paharis