'To do' for Digital Bangladesh

The government passed the national ICT policy with guidance from the access to information program of the Prime Minister's Office. Under this policy, 306 work plans have been drawn up with a specific time frame. By the end of 2009, within the scope of this plan, the short-term projects were achieved.

MUNIR HASAN

ANOTHER calendar year has gone by from the life of e-activism in Bangladesh. However, the difference from other years and 2009 is the Digital Bangladesh program of the current government. A key promise of the government is to turn Bangladesh into a middle-income country by 2021 by creating a Digital Bangladesh that will raise the people's standard of living and improve the business environment.

To achieve that digital society, however, a legal framework and policy is needed. In July 2009, at the initiative of MoICT, a law was passed in the Parliament clearing the way for electronic transaction and for preventing cyber crimes -- essentially establishing the much-needed legal framework for these issues. As a result, Bangladesh Bank, on a limited scale, has been able to open the door to mobile wallet and credit card transaction on the internet. Because of this mobile banking, remittance can be made easy for migrant workers and their families. As a follow up, on October 8, the government appointed the controller of the digital signature authority under the jurisdiction of this law.

Before this development, the government passed the national ICT policy with guidance from the access to information program of the Prime Minister's Office. Under this policy, 306 work plans have been drawn up with a specific time frame. By the end of 2009, within the scope of this plan, the short-term projects were achieved. Among these projects, services like utility bill payment using mobile phone in Dhaka, Chittagong, Sylhet, Pabna, Cox's Bazar and the Hill Tracts, finding out the timetable, fare, seat availability of trains, and receiving advance warning of disasters via mobile phone are already available. DCs and upazila nirbahi officers have been trained and connected via laptops and internet.

At the beginning of this year, the government gave the license to a company to create a fibre optic network around the country. ISPs have been given IP telephone licenses in order to make telecommunication services more affordable. To increase countrywide internet services via submarine cable, internet bandwidth price has been reduced by 33%. The number of mobile internet users is estimated to have risen by 30% in the past six months. There are now 5 million internet users in the country, and 4.6 million among them access it using mobile phone.

A committee has been formed to standardise Bangla. National web portals and various other agency sites have added Bangla in their sites. As an initiative to use technology in land management, a pilot project has been taken up at a thana. All the data related to land ownership in Dhaka has been published in a website. A list of freedom fighters has been published online as well.

Last year, what caught everybody's attention was the increasing use of technology in educational administration. SSC and HSC results were made available via mobile and internet, and were also emailed to the educational institutions. The work for providing laptop and internet connectivity was started in various schools and colleges. Using the data from the education boards, Shahjalal University completed its admission registration process via mobile phone-based applications. For the first time, results of medical college exams and primary exams were available through sms.

To make high speed internet more affordable for students of Shahjalal University and Dhaka University, special free wi-fi zones have been created. To ensure timely availability of textbooks to students, they have been published online. The science and ICT ministry has not only set up computer labs in 128 schools in 64 districts, but has also appointed IT professionals there.

The country's 800 health centres have been given internet and mobile connectivity. Several telemedicine centres have been built. Along with mobile health

Setting up Digital Bangladesh.

services by the private sector, upazila health complexes have started offering similar services. To ensure equal access to technology for all, the government is setting up community e-centres/tele-centres all across the country -- there are more than 2,300 of them now. The Registrar of Joint Stock Companies and Firms has digitalised its registration process. Bangladesh Bank started an automated clearing-house on a trial basis last November.

Besides the government initiatives, various private initiatives have started to bloom as well. "Digital festivals" and "IT festivals" have been held in various parts of the country. Even as remote a place like Bagerhat organised a knowledge festival. BCS, Basis and Bangladesh Open Source Network took active part in these festivals, which have increased people's interest towards computers.

Although there are many good initiatives like these, things could have been a bit better. Among the disappointments, the most important non-starter has been the automation process of Chittagong Custom House, even though the work had been completed and the finance minister had inaugurated it. VoIP has not been properly liberalised and the long distance telecommunication policy has not been modified even after initiatives were taken to do so. Neither has the work been started for the backbone network of the secretariat. Work on the government's own network, "banglagov.net," has not resumed. Neither has the work for a centre of information and statistics. The major development perhaps is the coming forward of the ministry of ICT to take a more proactive coordinating role in this sector. It's a worthy step towards the institutionalisation of democracy in our country.

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Strengthening industrial administration

Industrial administrators have been described as the bridge between a governmental or semi-governmental agency and the public and private industrial sectors, both domestic and foreign.

A.B.M.S ZAHUR

IMPLEMENTING industrialisation programs is a heavy and taxing responsibility. Industrial administrators are subject to a variety of organisational, political and social constraints. The machinery for implementing industrial plans and for industrial services is often poorly designed.

Industrial administrators have been described as the bridge between a governmental or semi-governmental agency and the public and private industrial sectors, both domestic and foreign. A program will have to be adopted to develop skills in analysing investment or technical assistance proposals and on working out a strategy.

An industrial service or job's administration can be made effective in the following ways:
- Establishing a simple and flexible structure;
- Improving delegation through a clear statement of responsibilities, authorities and their relationship;
- Improving leadership practices;
- Improving the service's co-effectiveness.

The industrial administrator and the industrial manager are counterparts in the industrialisation process. Industrial management practices and techniques are more advanced than those of industrial administration. The following may be adopted for the latter:
- A new and flexible organisational form, known as matrix organisation, is built around specific projects. The project manager is given authority and responsibility for fulfilling the project contract's provisions;
- Among various management responses, management by objectives (MBO) and organisation development (OD) are widely appreciated. MBO involves two main steps: Management at the highest level sets objectives for the entire organisation and top management communicates parts of total objectives to subordinate managers.

Behavioural scientists have developed the methods and techniques of organisation development (OD) to help plan and direct the process of change. These techniques require an impartial third party, which

guides and uses group meetings as a principal means of effecting change.

Industrialised countries are concentrating more on detailed financial data than on the summarised figures appearing in income statements and balance sheets. Industrial administrators need to analyse a potential foreign investor's financial position or compare the degree of financial support available from the competing joint ventures.

It is important to know a company's ability to meet its current obligations. Another liquidity analysis concerns the relation of the company's terms of payment and average collection period of its accounts.

The public and private sectors of industrialised countries have adopted many new management practices to improve decision-making. These practices have in common a systems approach of viewing work to be accomplished, in terms of objectives to be achieved. System analysts provide decision-makers with alternatives and the means of achieving them. The following decision-making methods and techniques are considered important:
- Planning, programming, budgeting system (PPBS). To adopt PPBS, a government must go through a long and rigorous process of establishing output-oriented categories of work. PPBS is now in general use in developed countries and at an early stage in developing countries;
- Management information system (MIS) collects information pertinent to management decisions at various levels. A two-phase installation of a MIS can be considered. The first phase concentrates on improving data reporting, simplifying procedures and centralising data processing. The second phase is based on a long- range plan for automation.

Training is essential in economic development. It should be closely coordinated with research. Research programs in industrial administration in developing countries like Bangladesh are needed. Personnel of developing countries should primarily conduct this research. Setting up of own training goals may be considered.

No proper emphasis was given on the need of industrial administration. To attain a digital Bangladesh, our industrial efficiency level should be raised to enable our industries to compete well with that of our neighbours. We have to prepare at the earliest. For successful execution of new industrial policy, strengthening of industrial administration will have conspicuous positive effect.

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Are we prepared?

The cost of every commodity, whether directly or indirectly related to oil, will increase. Additional payment due to added oil price will create enormous pressure on our foreign exchange reserve, which will have adverse effect on our economy. Are we prepared for it?

MIRZA FERDOUS ALAM

IT is predicted by two leading oil traders, Bank of America and Barclays Capital, that oil price will jump to $100 this year. It is worth mentioning here that the price had doubled to $78 last year. Francisco Blach of Bank of America and Merill Lynch predicted that crude oil may touch $105 next year, and by 2014 it may reach $150. He further continues: "Approximately 1.7bn consumers in emerging markets with a per capita income of $5,000 to $20,000 are eagerly waiting to buy cars, air-conditioning units, or white goods," which is one of the prime reasons for this crunch.

The oil spike brought the global economy to a shivering halt in 2008. This time the crunch may hit before the West has fully recovered.

The predicted oil price hike will not spare Bangladesh and other oil importing countries. The cost of every commodity, whether directly or indirectly related to oil, will increase. Additional payment due to added oil price will create enormous pressure on our foreign exchange reserve, which will have adverse effect on our economy. Are we prepared for it?

Bangladesh is sitting on a considerable amount of coal and gas reserves. Having understood that, we have not taken appropriate steps to ensure the best use of these resources in order to reduce our dependency on imported oil. We do not have well thought-out long term plans to optimise our energy resources. Unfortunate but true, a far-sighted coal policy has not yet been formulated.

We are in a mess with our natural gas resource. We do not know the precise reserve of gas this country is blessed with. It is time to ascertain precisely the volume of gas reserve we have and utilise this energy resource with extreme care so that it can be fruitfully used for years to come.

Most of our existing power plants are gas powered. The time has come to decide whether we should establish more gas-powered power plants or look for power plants that use some other type of fuel. Since we have a considerable amount of coal reserve, the increasing demand for electricity can be catered to by building more coal-powered thermal power plants. It will reduce the dependency on natural gas. Natural gas can be used in more value added industries like CNG, petrochemical etc. Sensible use of natural gas will reduce the dependency on imported oil.

We must be prepared for the worst before it comes.

Mirza Ferdous Alam is an engineer.

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3 problems that fix themselves

Nury Vittachi

SOME people have a negative attitude towards suicide bombers, considering them to be unproductive members of society. It's a fair point, and I must admit, I'd be reluctant to invite one to dinner, unless I was really desperate.

I once had a former boss (a newspaper editor) to dinner, and had trouble finding other guests grotesquely evil enough to match him. A suicide bomber or mass murderer would have been perfect, but there is a curious shortage of them in my social circles. I really must get out more.

But there's one recent trend in suicide bombing circles that one has to applaud. There have been at least six recent cases where suicide bombers succeeded in blowing up only themselves. In one case in Iraq, the bomber did not even slightly wound anyone else or blow up any buildings. He simply blasted himself out of existence.

Bravo! How can we encourage this type of behaviour? Can we not give him some sort of award, which encourages others to follow suit?

At the gathering last night, I asked people to identify other self-fixing problems. My mentor/waiter offered the example of the hunger strike on Death Row in the US jail system a few years ago. "That was a problem that would eventually have solved itself, and saved a pile of taxpayer's money," he said.

A drinker of a highly conservative bent said that the existence of smokers and drug addicts would qualify if he was in charge.

"Why on earth do they put warnings on cigarette packets and try to help junkies?" he said. Instead, he said, society should remove all the warnings and make illegal drugs so strong that they would be instantly fatal. "Wham-bam, the tobacco and drug addicts would wipe themselves out," he spluttered.

His intolerance for substance abusers was rather undermined by the fact that he was on his seventh drink, so I reminded him that alcohol was classified as an illegal drug in many societies.

Undeterred, he went on to make an even more obnoxious suggestion. "Gay people are a problem which will solve itself. They can't have babies so they will all die out. What will they do then?" he asked. I pointed out that crusty miserable old conservatives had been wrongly predicting the same thing since the days of the ancient Greeks, two and half millennia ago.

The most intelligent comment came from a female. "The biggest problem that will solve itself is the presence of the most pestilent species on this planet: the human race," she said.

She turned out to be a supporter of the Voluntary Human Extinction Society. Run by a guy called Les U. Knight, this group aims to encourage humans to stop having babies because Earth would be a much nicer place without people.

As soon as humanity vanishes, all the horrors of modern existence, including wars, bombs, torture, crime, High School Musical, Hello Kitty and so on simply vanish.

It all sounds brilliant. Yet there's got to be something wrong with this argument. I'm just not sure what it is.

Incidentally, if any suicide bombers are reading this, we recommend you take your gear to a remote location for a test run. Bye!

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