

Power crisis

Government floundering in response

THE government's latest measure announced to combat the massive power crisis that is crippling the nation, the directive that air conditioning units be prohibited from operating from the hours of 6-11pm, is nothing short of the ridiculous, and suggests a government that is quite out of its depth.

It is true that the government inherited a power crisis, and the people of this country have been patient in waiting for it to be resolved, understanding that these things take time. However, now that it has been in office for well over a year, the government has no excuse for its continuing inability to at least give us a roadmap of what lies ahead.

Even worse than the government's apparent incompetence in dealing with the issue, is the amateurish measures that it periodically has tried to implement in order to relieve the situation. These have included the ill-conceived DST initiative and the directive for reduced business hours for shops.

The anti-AC order is merely the latest in this line of foolishness. In the first place, it will have only a negligible impact on aggregate electricity usage, even if it were enforceable. More to the point, it is totally unenforceable and risks making the government look like a laughing stock.

When the government has failed so miserably when it comes to setting up new power generating plants, fixing and bringing on line the power plants that now lie idle and under-utilised, plugging the endemic systems loss, and cracking down on the numberless illegal connections that proliferate, to try to address the issue with a directive limiting use of air conditioners demonstrates a lack of seriousness in dealing with the problem.

The report yesterday of the suffering of the patients at DMCH due to lack of power saw the crisis reach its lowest ebb. That the situation has been allowed to reach such a sorry pass simply beggars the imagination.

The government is not doing its job, and ordering people to shut off their ACs sounds to us like the worst form of avoidance of responsibility and buck passing, as though the problem is the excessive consumption of electricity in some quarters and not the government's failure to generate power sufficient to meet the people's needs.

The government needs to stop these asinine ad hoc solutions that serve only to make it look clueless, and needs to address the crisis head-on. Right now, the impression that is created by the government's latest plan, is that it is simply floundering in its response to the crisis.

Exposed level crossings

How long will these 'death-traps' be overlooked?

UNMANNED railway level crossings, where many fatal accidents took place over the years, still remain a major worry to both pedestrians and vehicles in eight northern districts, as 297 out of 415 crossings have no gates or gatemen! The news is a real shocker and an indicator of people's safety having little or no place in the railway managers' plans.

Keeping the railway crossing unguarded amounts to pushing people towards set up gates and employ gatemen is acceptable as these reflect gross neglect of duty and utter disregard for human life. Yet, that is what we have been watching over 540km of railway track in West Zone covering eight northern districts.

The report published in this newspaper yesterday makes it amply clear that there is no coordination between the railway department and other government agencies. The rules of the railway department state that it is the duty of the government departments in charge of constructing roads to bear the expenditures of setting up gates. But West Zone railway officials have complained that the departments concerned are neglecting the duty and the result is that there are so many unmanned level crossings on many busy railway routes. The railway officials have also pointed their fingers at financial constraints which prevent them from taking the safety measures at the crossings. Neither the railways nor roads and highway department can defend themselves by saying that funds are not available for making gates or appointing the gatemen. It seems the issue is not high on the railway department's agenda. Someone in authority must step in to fix the responsibility and act expeditiously to ameliorate the situation.

It is also disturbing to learn that only 29 out of the 118 level crossings in the zone, that are deemed safe, are run by the railway's own staff, the remaining ones being guarded by semi-skilled locals recruited by the railway on daily-wage basis. This again looks like a slipshod arrangement. The railway authorities have to take the matter a lot more seriously, considering the danger it poses to public and adopt all the measures needed to make the level crossings really safe.

Militant outfits in Bangladesh

It is surprising how men of religion have distorted scripture, how the Koran has been twisted and misinterpreted by a miniscule minority of Muslims to wage war.

SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN

IT must surely be a cause for concern for all to read about not only the presence of terrorist outfits in Bangladesh, but also that they are here in large numbers. According to a report in this newspaper there are at least 15 militant groups in Bangladesh -- although we do not have an approximation of their size or their adherents.

This is shocking, particularly because for many years the gullible among the public were lulled into believing that no such groups existed in this country, and that all the talks about militancy and religious terrorists were but a figment of the imagination of the media. It is disconcerting too to learn from the report that these elements have been operating in our territory without any let or hindrance between 1991 and 1998 and between 2001 and 2005. (One is not sure about their activities between 1998 and 2001. One wonders whether they went into hibernation during that time or were neutralised; these are matters that the investigators must unearth.)

In other words, either the government of the day was completely incompetent to detect their presence or was complicit in their activity. That was a perilous circumstance on both counts and for which those who are in default must be held to account. And much as one would like to disown the fact, it can be said without sounding alarmist that Bangladesh has become a part of the terrorist architecture.

For the record, some of the groups have merged and formed new groups while some have bifurcated. And although we had been living in the company of the extremists for some time, it could be said that our country has not been their primary target -- at least till

now. But that should be little solace for anyone who is familiar with the behaviour of the militants. And nothing could be more damaging to the country's security than to have extremist groups with alleged sponsorship of foreign intelligence agencies using our territory to pursue their political objective of targeting a third country.

Activities of these groups should be a matter of serious concern for us particularly at a time when the region is embroiled in anti-terror operations led by a country whose strategic calculus between the seventies and the nineties was principally played out through the anti-Russian war in Afghanistan, and which was sanctified with the honourific of First Afghan Jihad.

The matter assumes singular importance given that the US is seeking to wrap up and strike tent from Afghanistan, with neither its adversary weakened nor its protégée in that country strengthened enough to face up to the extremists on his own. No wonder that not only Mr. Karzai but also many in the US administration see in the dialogues with the extremists a viable option for the resolution of the Afghan conflict. The situation in Afghanistan has been complicated further by India and Pakistan jockeying for influence in the country.

But it is the current anti-terror campaign and the Islamist extremists groups that we would like to dwell on a bit more.

It is an irony that the US is so heavily committed in terms of resources and manpower in fighting its onetime anti-Soviet allies. If one were to trace the birth of these groups and glance at their background -- at least of those mentioned in the said report -- it would be clear that most were created in the early nineties, after the Soviet withdrawal. And evidently, it is the success of the Afghan



An ominous threat.

Jihad which was the motivation that led them to believe that an Afghanistan could be replicated elsewhere.

But the greater significance of this lies in the overlooked reality, which was submerged in the euphoria of an impending US Cold War victory during this time, and which was, as one author has commented, an extreme version of political Islam was harnessed as a force against the Soviets. And this force, instead of being subdued has accreted in strength to wreak havoc.

One may recall the event in the White Houses lawn in 1985 where President Regan introduced some Mujahedeen leaders as the moral equivalent of America's founding fathers. It was then that the convoluted version of jihad was sanctified. And unfortunately, it is the people of this region who are still suffering from the Afghan War fallout. In hand-

ing out the Soviets their Vietnam the US presented the world with a Frankenstein which it has been unable to rein in.

The history of the extremists, their professed objectives and their motivation make interesting literature. Of these the Lashkar-e-Taiyeba draws one's attention because of the extent of its global influence. It is surprising how men of religion have distorted scripture, how the Koran has been twisted and misinterpreted by a miniscule minority of Muslims to wage war. It only proves true William Blake's couplet that "The priests promote war and the soldier peace." The irony is that the majority has preferred the path of least resistance by choosing to remain silent.

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Dumping the junk

We are aware of the drives in the recent past for seizing the unfit vehicles in the capital. The Dhaka Metropolitan Police traffic department seized around 13,000 unfit vehicles from August 2009 to January 2010. But they had to release around 11,000 of them due to lack of alternative transportation and dumping grounds.

M. ABDUL LATIF MONDAL

IN its special four-page cover issue on March 24, *The Daily Star* (DS) pinpointed various dimensions of traffic traumas caused by unfit vehicles and reckless driving in the capital city. The stories showed how the reckless and careless driving of the public vehicles, most of which are unfit as per motor vehicles laws, was causing deaths to hundreds of pedestrians and maiming even a larger number of them every year, and how they were creating traffic jams enjoying "unbridled freedom to pick up and drop off passengers" anywhere they wished, and how they were polluting the air and creating serious health hazards for the people in the capital city.

Following reports in the DS, the secretary of the communications ministry told the DS on March 24 that the government had decided to seize all over-20-year-old and unfit public vehicles and dump them at designated places. He further said that

the government would strictly implement the existing motor vehicles laws and, if necessary, make them tougher to make city roads safe and better. The footpaths would be cleared of all kinds of junk and temporary shops to make room for pedestrians.

The plan unveiled by the communications secretary has given rise to certain questions: (a) When there is no scope for half-hearted implementation of a law, what has so far prevented the authorities from strictly implementing the existing motor vehicles laws? (b) Why were the plans in the recent past to remove unfit vehicles from the city roads abandoned? (c) Will not the proposed plan also meet the same fate? (d) How will the authorities ensure movement of the city's millions of bus passengers if unfit public vehicles such as minibuses and buses, which number in the thousands, are removed? (e) What has so far prevented the authorities from clearing the foot-

paths of all junk and temporary shops to make room for pedestrians?

The Motor Vehicles Ordinance-1983 and the Motor Vehicles Rules-1984, as amended from time to time, have got clear provisions as to when a vehicle has to be declared unfit for operation. The owners of the public vehicles, particularly of minibuses and buses, are very influential people. They adopt a two-way approach -- one, creating political pressure upon the BRTA, and second, bribing the corrupt officials of the BRTA -- for renewal of fitness certificates of their unfit vehicles. Quoting BSS, *The New Nation* published a report on March 10, which said that 50 percent of vehicles plying the roads in the capital did not have fitness certificates and were causing environmental hazards.

We are aware of the drives in the recent past for seizing the unfit vehicles in the capital. The Dhaka Metropolitan Police traffic department seized around 13,000 unfit vehicles from August 2009 to January 2010. But they had to release around 11,000 of them due to lack of alternative transportation and dumping grounds.

In order to phase out unfit minibuses from the Dhaka city, the last caretaker government issued a handout in August, 2008 asking the owners of such minibuses to take their vehicles to other districts after amending the documents. The move did not succeed as most of the

banned 20-year-old minibuses plying different routes of the capital did not have proper documents. Available reports suggest that the owners have been operating these vehicles successfully by "managing" the Dhaka Metropolitan traffic department.

The communications secretary said that the government had taken up an aggressive action plan and would not compromise on the issue as had been done in the past. The government aimed to remove all unfit vehicles from the city streets within the next two years. While sincerely wishing the success of the program, the people of the Dhaka city will be eagerly waiting to see its results.

According to the BRTA sources, around 16,000 buses are running in the Dhaka to serve its estimated 10 million people. Communications Minister Syed Abul Hossain revealed in February that the government was set to import 800 new buses, both single-decker and double-decker, to ease transport in Dhaka city by replacing unfit buses gradually, and that the new buses were expected to ply the city roads within the next six months. This is not a big number compared to the number of unfit buses on the city roads. Anyhow, replacement of unfit public transports, particularly buses and minibuses, with the new ones should be a continuous process.

In recent years, there has been tremendous increase in the number of private cars on the city roads. According to one estimate, out of more than 500,000 motor vehicles now plying the capital city roads, 200,000 are cars. A survey of Dhaka Urban Transport Projects has revealed that private cars carry 8.73 percent of total commuters and occupy 34.41 percent of space of the roads. The cars are responsible for causing serious traffic jams.

The absence of a mass transport system has led to this rapid increase of private cars in the capital city in recent years. We have not been able to develop metro rail or commuter trains. We do not even have an efficient and reliable taxi cab service. The city of Dhaka is surrounded by rivers, but we have not been able to develop water transportation around the city. If we can develop a mass transport system, the use of private cars will significantly decrease on the Dhaka city roads.

There can be no compromise in removing the unfit vehicles from the city roads. Development of a sound mass transport system in the Dhaka city will be a step forward in remove the stigma of "second-worst" liveable city in the world.

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