

## Power crisis approaching the abyss?

Govt has to come up with solution urgently

THE frequency and duration of power outages appear to be breaking all previous records. Whereas it used to be of one-hour duration it has now aggravated into between five and six hours. And, to top it off, the frequency of outages has accentuated with too many bursts of power snapping shut over a 24-hour cycle. If this is the situation in the capital city, what it is like in the rural areas can be easily conjured up. The ensnaring crisis is rooted in the deficit of gas supply to power plants and a growing mismatch between the demand for and the generation of power. The government sounds resigned to the unmanageability of the crisis. If that's so, then how confidence can be instilled in the people's mind about a possible way out of the crisis sooner rather than later?

The people's heightened hardship in this hot and humid weather is terribly palpable with darkness engulfing them after dusk, pumped water supply snapped and no electrical fans operating on which majority of the people rely for relief. The adverse effect on productivity, education, economic transactions, link with the outside world and office work in general is incalculable.

With public frustrations surging over the issue, protesters have attacked power offices and blocked roads in Basail upazila in Tangail and Matlab upazila in Chandpur. Also reports from Chandpur and Kishoreganj districts spoke of besieging and vandalising Palli Bidyut offices. The government need to take note of the incidents as a precursor of wider public agitation over the deteriorating power situation. The decision-makers must approach the situation with greater circumspection and application, coming out with satisfactory power management and generation options that are doable and translatable into action on the ground.

That ad hoc measures, palliatives and experiments interspersed with commitments going into the future cannot do has been proven beyond doubt. Notwithstanding government's several steps including day light saving time initiative, reduction of business hours for shopping malls, introduction of a zoning system, staggering weekly day-offs for shops and other commercial establishments, the power crisis remains defiant of any easing off. So, it is all down to concrete action now.

The prime minister has directed all concerned for simplification of procedures for setting up power plants. The people expect results now.

## Ban on physical punishment in schools

Counselling and training of teachers may be necessary

THE government circular banning the use of physical punishment in schools is admittedly a judicious decision.

Such a step from the appropriate authority was becoming a necessity with every passing day, especially against the backdrop of growing number of reports on school children in the capital as elsewhere being subjected to physical abuse at the hands of their teachers.

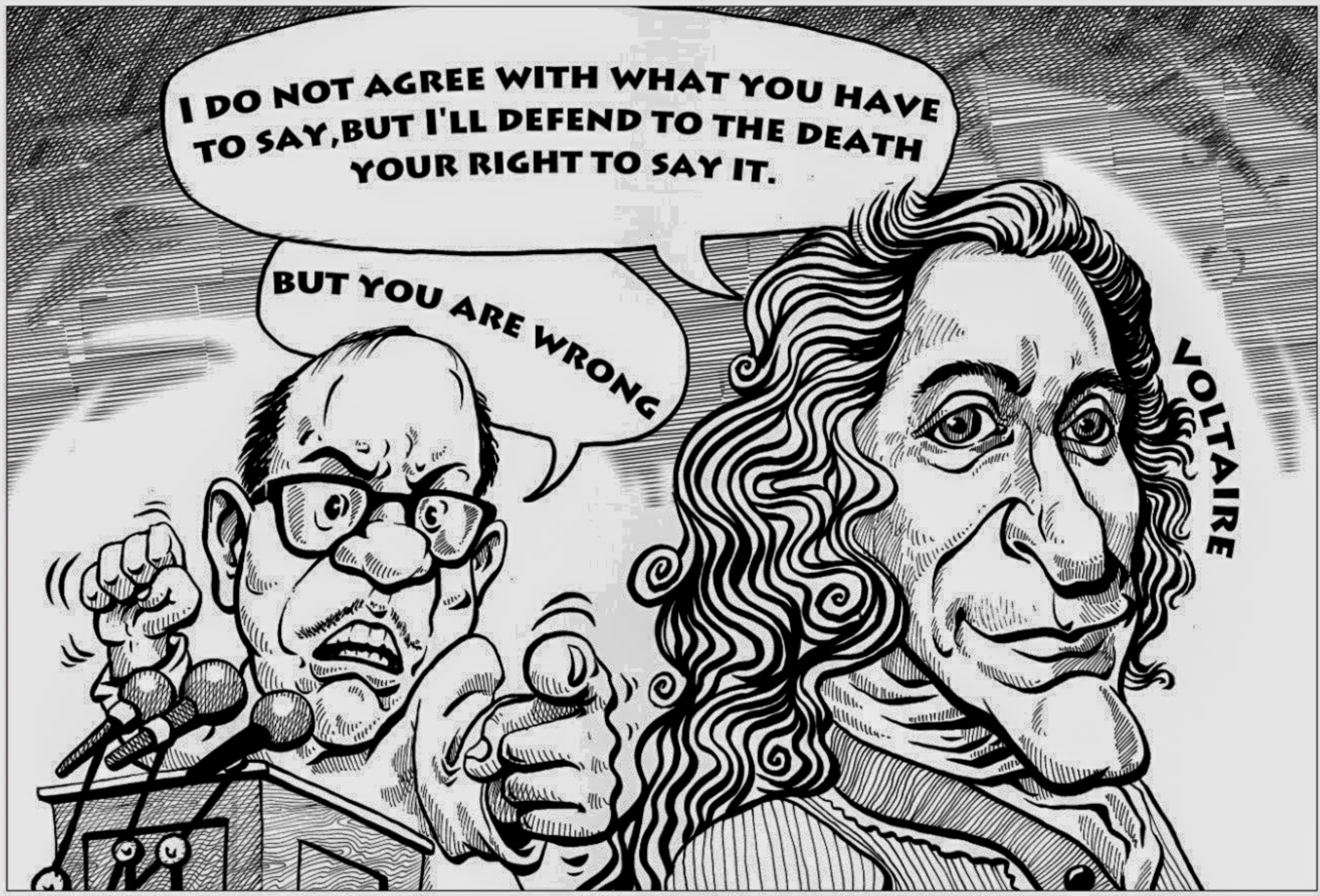
The use of physical punishment in schools to discipline children was a more or less accepted practice in the past. But in recent times, it has lost its context, if only because the environment and the psychosocial conditions under which a modern-day child grows up have undergone a sea change. As a result, after such kind of punishment, these children react in a way that is quite different from their predecessors'. It is not only that the victim schoolchildren may suffer damage to their sensitive organs. It has also been observed that the students thus being abused at school become violent and often mentally disturbed. In extreme cases, they demonstrated suicidal tendencies or even worse, they became revengeful on their teachers. These are certainly very dangerous trends and are harmful for the physical and mental growth of the future generations.

So, the timeworn practice of using rod to prevent the students from getting spoiled was already due for a decent burial. From this point of view, the government ban on corporal punishment in schools has only gone to complete a task that has long become overdue.

Now that the government has tasked the district education officers and upazila secondary education officers to take legal or departmental action against the teachers found violating the government order, the teachers would naturally become discouraged to go for such illegal option in the classroom.

But there is a need for training the teachers in modern methods of teaching through persuasion and setting of examples, rather than resorting to the cane or other harsh means. In addition, counselling of the teachers would also be necessary so that they might be attuned to the new outlooks and attitudes of a teacher in a modern classroom environment.

Traditionally, classroom education has been rather boring to the children. Which is why so far the rates of truancy and dropouts were on the higher side especially in the rural schools. So, under this changed system of disciplining children, the teachers will have to work harder to learn the art of teaching in a more interesting manner by making use of persuasion and demonstration.



## In politics, bluntness can and does work

The British prime minister could have been diplomatic. But there are indeed times when diplomacy does not work, when those at whom such niceties are directed refuse to take note of them.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

DAVID Cameron recently came under fire in Pakistan over his comments on the export of terrorism from Islamabad, if not by it. And then, of course, there are those who feel that he ought to have been a dash diplomatic about it, seeing that Pakistan is these days in a difficult situation battling monsters of various sorts. There are the Taliban. There is the insidious ISI, always in the role of a parallel government. And now there are the floods.

Topping it all is, of course, an inept government led by the likes of Asif Ali Zardari and Yusuf Raza Gilani. And lurking in the shadows is another Bhutto, Bilawal Zardari, who has almost taken it for granted that Pakistan is his family's by right and that he has a role to play in a shaping of its future destiny.

The British prime minister could have been diplomatic, certainly. But there are indeed times when diplomacy does not work, when those at whom such niceties are directed refuse to take note of them. You think here of the junta in Myanmar. Years of diplomatic finesse in dealing with it have not worked. And today, when everyone appears to be giving out a blunt message to the gen-

erals in Yangon that they must go in the name of decency, it is not working. Bluntness might have worked years ago. Today it is a thick skin Myanmar's generals wear, one they will not shed voluntarily.

Where Pakistan is the issue, the point is not one of whether or not it has a thick skin. It is one of whether the country is able to imbibe the truth that its intelligence services and at least part of its military have been as guilty as anyone else in a spread of terrorism in South Asia.

Blunt messages to Pakistan's rulers are hardly anything new. Back in the early days of Bangladesh's war of liberation in April 1971, Soviet President Nikolai Podgorny clearly and unambiguously warned General Yahya Khan that only a political solution to the crisis could resolve the stalemate in the country.

Podgorny's missive sent the Pakistani junta into fits of apoplexy, but they did inform the rest of the world that what the Pakistan army was doing in "East Pakistan" was a patent violation of human and political rights. The Soviet bluntness would boost the struggle for Bangladesh, indeed would hugely assist in the fall of the Pakistan state in its battered eastern wing in December 1971.

Over the years, quite a good number of people have remarked on the way

Jawaharlal Nehru dealt with John Fitzgerald Kennedy. Visiting India as a young congressman in 1951, Kennedy launched into what he thought would be a remarkable commentary on American perspectives in post-war Asia. Nehru looked at the ceiling, a sure sign he was not impressed. The meeting ended within minutes.

A decade later, visiting Washington, Nehru and his daughter Indira were guests at a White House banquet hosted by President Kennedy. He spent much of the time talking to Jacqueline Kennedy, explaining to Indira later that he had nothing to talk about with JFK since he thought the American leader did not have much of intellectual content in him.

That was the blunt Nehru. On a visit to Karachi in 1960 to initial a water deal with Field Marshal Ayub Khan, he was in little mood to discuss any political issues with Pakistan's military ruler. Nehru's aversion to unconstitutional rule had always been pronounced. On this particular occasion, it was simply re-emphasised. Nehru had little time for pretentious men.

It was much the same with Lyndon Johnson, Alexei Kosygin and Harold Wilson. All three men, in their separate ways, were of the opinion that Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was a dark influence on Pakistan. In Tashkent in January 1966, Kosygin asked Ayub Khan to keep his foreign minister on the leash.

A month earlier, President Johnson had told President Ayub Khan that Bhutto (and this was in Bhutto's presence), Pakistan's foreign minister, was coming in the way of Pakistan-American ties. Britain's Harold

Wilson, for his part, was convinced that he had come across few men as evil as Bhutto.

Sometimes naivete can masquerade, or seem to, as bluntness. In 1976, as he campaigned for the White House, Jimmy Carter admitted in a magazine interview that he had secretly lusted after women despite being happily married to his wife. His ratings then went into a tumble, but he did manage to beat Gerald Ford at the November presidential election.

In 1969, days after quitting the French presidency following a defeat in a referendum, General Charles de Gaulle was blunt about his place in history as he saw it. Even though his countrymen were trying to forget him, said the fallen leader, in thirty years' time his myth would become a symbol of French grandeur. He would be proved right, as present-day interest in his leadership demonstrates so vividly.

On a winter morning in Delhi in January 1972, on his way home to a free Bangladesh, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, in his characteristic forthrightness, asked Indira Gandhi when she would take her soldiers back from his country. By March 1972, Indian soldiers, part of the joint Indo-Bangladesh command during the war, were making their way back to their country.

Bluntness pays when everything else fails. It eschews euphemism. It may shock and hurt. But it works, sometimes in wonderful ways.

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## Pranab Mukherjee's visit to Dhaka

The state of Indo-Bangladesh relations has to be viewed in the context of public opinion in Bangladesh. Public opinion will be easily won over when benefits become evident from India's action on the ground.

HARUN UR RASHID

INDIAN Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee's visit to Dhaka on August 7 should not be considered only in terms of the \$1 billion loan agreement signed. The visit is perceived as important mainly for two reasons:

- It was the first visit from a senior Indian minister and an eminent Congress leader after the Bangladesh prime minister's landmark trip to New Delhi in January;
- The visit has provided an opportunity to review the implementation of the actions proposed in the Joint Communique released after the visit on January 13.

The immediate purpose, however, was to witness the signing of the \$1 billion loan by India to Bangladesh for 14 projects related to infrastructure, river dredging within Bangladesh and power transmission from India.

At the signing ceremony, Mr. Mukherjee reportedly said: "The credit is the largest ever amount given by India to any country. I am confident that this credit line will be the stepping stone for a shared destiny and will transform our bilateral engagement."

Bangladesh Finance Minister A.M.A. Muhith reportedly said that the size of the credit was more than double the assistance Bangladesh received from India over the

last 40 years and that "India's assistance in improving the railway infrastructure will facilitate Bangladesh's transit to Bhutan and Nepal."

During the brief visit, the Indian finance minister met Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, and it has been reported that the issue of quick implementation of some of the issues covered in the joint communique was discussed.

It may be recalled that the visit of Bangladesh prime minister to New Delhi this year ushered in a new era of opportunity in bilateral relations and put in place a comprehensive framework of cooperation in all possible areas.

Although the credit line is substantially for establishing interconnectivity, many economists believe interconnectivity through multimodal transport with India should not be seen as a bilateral matter. It will have impact on South Asia and beyond the region.

Foreign investors from Asean, Japan, South Korea and China, besides Western countries, will see a great opportunity to invest in Bangladesh for markets within the region and beyond.

Furthermore, interconnectivity is also to be perceived as a service industry, which constitutes a big component for any modern economy, and Bangladesh can use its potential as a service industry through interconnectivity.

It is noted that although extensive dis-

cussions are taking place at the government-to-government level on bilateral issues, the public in Bangladesh want results on the ground. The general perception among people is that the implementation in the areas agreed at the highest political level has been painfully slow on matters that are of interest to Bangladesh.

While India gives top priority to transit facilities through Bangladesh to northeastern India and denial of sanctuary for Indian insurgents in Bangladesh, Bangladesh's top priority rests on water sharing with, and water management for, common rivers (54 rivers flow into Bangladesh from India), implementation of land border agreement of 1974 and duty and hassle-free access of Bangladesh's products to India's market.

With regard to bilateral trade, both countries agreed "to address removal of tariff and non-tariff barriers," and that border haats (markets) would be established in selected areas -- including the Meghalayan border.

Bangladesh wanted to open the border haat on Bangladesh-Meghalaya border on April 14 (1st day of Bengali Year) but could not. Recently, the Bangladesh commerce minister expressed his disappointment at the delay in establishing border haats and removing tariff and non-tariff barriers.

People expected that an-adhoc water sharing accord on the Teesta River would have been concluded by this time. They also thought that no Bangladeshi national would be killed because it was agreed that the respective border guards would "exercise restraint" to prevent loss of lives but, as of mid July, 101 Bangladeshi nationals had been killed by BSE. Furthermore, nothing tangible occurred with regard to the implementation of the 1974 Bangladesh-India Border Agreement.

As the saying goes, the proof of the pudding lies in the eating. Many Bangladesh people believe that India, with its vast resources and more than a trillion dollar economy would be forthcoming in following the "Gujral doctrine," which means strict reciprocity is not intended for smaller neighbours, and whatever accommodation India is able to give it will provide without asking for reciprocity.

Regrettably, many in Bangladesh take India's promises with caution because, in the past, either the promises were not kept or were put into cold storage due to the federal-state bureaucratic maze in India.

In the book *The Jamdani Revolution* (2009), former Indian foreign secretary and high commissioner to Bangladesh, Krishnan Srinivasan, writes: "The political will and attention span have been lacking in New Delhi. In other words, the Indian government has tended to allow the hardliners and Hindu chauvinists to set the agenda for its policy towards Bangladesh, when a more rational approach would have been to come to some understandings on Dhaka's agenda."

We hope the visit of the Indian finance minister will bring benefits to the people of Bangladesh in facilitating the early implementation of core bilateral issues, and removal of the bureaucratic hurdles in India.

Finally, the state of Indo-Bangladesh relations has to be viewed in the context of public opinion in Bangladesh. Public opinion will be easily won over when benefits become evident from India's action on the ground. The sooner it happens the better it will be for promotion of bilateral relations.

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