

Quest for energy fix

A.B.M. NURUL ISLAM

I was waiting for the dust to settle following *The Daily Star* Leadership Colloquium on Alternative Energy and New Technology held on January 7 before venturing to comment. Since short-term solutions like energy conservation, energy efficiency etc. are quite obvious, I will concentrate on the long-term issues.

Let me begin at the beginning. As far back as the 1960s, when we in the Atomic Energy Commission were pleading with the national energy planners not to burn our natural gas (a valuable raw material for many petrochemicals) primarily for electricity generation, it went unheeded.

Now with depleting gas resources, the government is installing power stations to run primarily on imported fuel oil.

Imagine that, for some reason, the price of oil in the international market shoots through the roof. We will not be able to finance the imported fuel bill with all the money coming from remittances and garment sector. Scary, isn't it?

Japan and France learnt the lesson following the oil price shock in the early seventies: no country should rely primarily on imported energy.

Energy security lies in utilising local resources prudently and, if that is not enough, using an imported resource that is sustainable in the long run.

With the above in mind and having spent 50 years of my life in the energy sector, I will recommend the following:

Go aggressively for utilising our abundant coal resources. The recent Australian proposal for coal gasification for deep-seated Jamalganj coal should be energetically pursued.

The biggest mistake we made in the energy sector had been not investing appropriately in developing local capability in gas exploration and development. This should be corrected. Reinvigorated exploration is likely to yield positive results. Also, the local companies should be allowed to sell gas with a reasonable profit so that they can become self-sustaining and can invest in further exploration.

Like it or not, when one needs large amounts of energy at competitive prices with near carbon-free footprint, the solution is nuclear. Mini nuclear plants, as proposed by the colloquium, will act only as an excuse to delay the talks on Rooppur Nuclear Power Project. Let us consider them as and when they are proven to be commercially viable. Now we need mega-power to

solve our mega-problem (load-shedding). As regards nuclear safety issue raised by one colloquium expert, I would like to refer to my two op-ed pieces on the topic published in the DS on May 19 and June 12 last year.

Admittedly, nuclear power plants are expensive. The Rooppur project hasn't materialised so far mainly because of the financial constraint. But now there is light at the end of the tunnel if we follow the Turkish model. Turkey has contracted for four 1,200 MW PWR reactors from Russia, with construction likely to begin this year. The station will be built, owned and operated by Russia at its own cost. For the first two units, Russia is guaranteeing to sell power at 12.35 euro-cents per kilowatt-hour over 15 years after commissioning (ref. *Nuclear Engineering International*, August 2010 issue, p.8).

This is a unique and unusual arrangement, and a trendsetter from Russia for implementing nuclear power plants in new markets. Add to that the fact that Russia will take back the spent fuel (so-called waste). Can one ask for more? I am sure Russia can be persuaded to utilise cheaper Bangladeshi materials and manpower as far as practicable during construction and operation under their overall supervision as part of technology transfer.

We will be deluding ourselves if we believe that the new and renewable technologies like solar, wind, fuel cell etc. could meet a large part of our energy demands till they become cost-competitive. Nevertheless, currently, use of these technologies is beneficial for off-grid and remote areas.

While regional road connectivity is estimated by the CPD to yield a meagre \$80 per year for Bangladesh, the connectivity that can truly transform the region (India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and later on Myanmar and beyond) is interconnection between the electricity grids of these countries with adequate extra capacity, and tapping into the enormous hydro-potential of Nepal and Bhutan. A positive signal in this respect came recently from the Bhutanese prime minister should be followed up on a regional platform.

For each of the energy sectors mentioned above, the concerned ministry should hold a conference with local and invited experts from abroad and representatives from the major political parties and arrive at a national consensus on development plans and goals through brainstorming sessions. National plans should then emerge under the leadership of an appropriate government organisation. Let us try to do away with the changing



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of priorities and dropping of projects with each change of government.

Last but not the least, and with due respect to the colloquium experts, let us not neglect the local

experts who have their feet on the ground and are grappling with the problems on a daily basis.

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Municipal poll: Victory of democracy

DHIRAJ KUMAR NATH

CITIES are engines of growth and incubators of civilisations. They are crossroads of ideas, places of great intellectual ferment and innovations. People living in rural areas usually receive messages from their nearby cities/municipalities and growth centres. Any difference in the political pattern or innovation in economic and administrative model or any change in fashion and design of apparel that take place in cities is quickly adopted by the people of the country as a whole and rural inhabitants in particular. The rapid urban growth in Bangladesh has changed the demographic character and at the same time made substantial impact on the perception of politics, education and cultural behaviour.

The municipal polls held a few days ago demonstrated a sense of deep respect of the people towards management of their affairs through elected representatives of their choice. It might be that the elected representative is not always best one but the voice of the majority is honoured with due respect. The spirit of right choice is always upheld in a country like ours, where

the wisdom of the majority rule the destiny. There might have been some lapses, debates and disputes, but the real achievement of this municipal poll is that democracy has won the test of time. Suranjit Sengupta and Obaidul Quader also saw the outcomes of municipal poll in same language light, but what remains to be seen is how politicians uphold the image and example so created.

In some places election could not be held due to litigation and in some areas the result has not yet arrived.

The striking features that emerged from this municipal poll and lessons learnt are:

- National politics was not involved in the election of local bodies in the past. For the first time, party affiliation was focused prominently, drawing attention of public perception to national politics;
- The municipal polls, this time, centered round the mayor only, so the media projected the political point of view indicating that the mayor was the only representative to be elected;
- In the past, voters used to elect a candidate considering his back-

ground -- as teacher, veteran social worker, lawyer of high prudence, retired public servant, nonparty philanthropist, etc. Nowadays, these categories of respectable persons do not contest in municipal polls where money matters a lot;

- A positive change in poll campaign was observed, and posters, campaign with mikes and demonstration on roads, and

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painting of wall and buildings were almost invisible. This showed the people's utmost respect for the electoral code of conduct, and was seen more or less everywhere. In addition, there were no serious allegations of intimidation or act wooing of voters with money;

- Candidates contesting in the municipalities made pledges to the voters to provide urban services, including reduction of

taxes, maintenance of law and order, adequate solid waste management etc. But very few of them promised to renovate the municipal revenue system, collect the arrear taxes or increase the rate of municipal tax for attaining sustainability of municipalities as self-governed entities to make significant improvement in the delivery of municipal services;

- There were only 10 female mayor candidates, whereas the number of female candidates for upazila chairmanship was much more than expected. Anyone might conclude that females are not so dominating in urban culture or politics as in rural areas. Only Ms. Nargis Khatoon of Charghat municipality won the race;
- About 70% of candidates elected belong to the business commu-

nity, 27% were accused of different offences and cases of different nature were instituted in the past against 68 % of the elected representatives. This information was revealed from a survey conducted by the "Sujan," an organisation working for good governance.

Whatever might be the shortcomings of the present polling system, or news of clashes and conflicts, the practice of democracy and people's desire to have elected representatives indicates a great leap towards achieving democracy in reality. To retain the confidence of the electorate in democracy, elected chairmen and councilors must work diligently to provide improved facilities and better living environment for urban people, where almost 33% live in slums.

In fact, there are no social sanctions in urban areas and migration and mobility of residents is a common phenomenon. In addition, environmental and climatic changes are more dominating features of public life, where solid-waste management, medical waste disposal and food safety issues are factors that elected bodies are required to address properly.

All these activities need a lot of money, energy, and technical know-how to keep the cities clean and green. Thus, the requirement of budgetary support for a municipality is sometimes higher than it is for upazila parishad. In such a situation, a municipality must rationalise its municipal financing system and generate a culture of collection of holding taxes, in which mayors and councilors must play predominant role. They must gain the confidence of people by providing better educational facilities and health care services, besides provisions for water supply and sanitation, street lighting, parking, and better law and order situation.

For the sake of democracy, the government should mobilise more resources in municipalities and strengthen their capability by training the elected representatives to understand the rules of management of cities, irrespective of party affiliation. There should not be instances of superseding of municipalities for political reasons and all urban local bodies should be strengthened with delegated authority to operate democratically.

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This abuse must end

MARTIN ADHIKARY

THE recent news about children being maimed and used for begging is terrible beyond any description. It is needless to say that the perpetrators need to be punished. Expatriates finds beggars as they come out of our airport. Worst is the use and abuse of children for begging.

In the book of Psalms it is said: "Children are the greatest gifts and rewards to parents." "Train up a child in the way that he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it," says Proverbs in the Old Testament. I believe other religious books also speak likewise about children as they are so universally precious to all human cultures and civilisations all over the world.

But there have been many people who maim, disfigure and deform innocent children for their greed and lust. Sacred trust and responsibilities are enjoined by religions to bring children up for the realisation of their full human potential. But many



of us prove to be pathetic failures in this vitally important area in our individual and corporate lives. The anti-social people trade on innocent children by trafficking them for the worst kind of professions.

Children from very poor socio-economic backgrounds fall prey to this kind of inhuman treatment. About 40% children on average in the world now live in absolute pov-

erty. The lives of millions of children are at risk. These children make up one-third of the total population of the world of six billion people. This statistics is staggering in the developing nations, where almost half of the population are children. Another one billion children may be born in the next decade, many into extreme poverty situation.

The primary need of children is

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security, and a safe place for overall growth -- physical, mental and cultural -- through relationships and exploration of the world around him or her. Nothing will be of any good if the child does not feel that his or her life is secure. They also need to be significant in our eyes, in our thoughts. They need to be assured that they are precious because of who they are. Children

need to be assured that there are some people around them whom they can trust.

Children's problems include insecurity, hunger, illness, lack of clothes and shelter, abuse, exploitation, lack of education and exasperation or irritation. Children need to be ensured of a dignified life. God made people with full potential for holistic growth -- physical, mental, emotional, social and spiritual. They need to grow to full adulthood in wisdom, stature, favour of other people and with God.

Children are our greatest resource, our present and our future. We need to concentrate on our work for them as they are crucial for national development. According to Unicef, child health and education are the most significant interventions that can be made to develop a nation. Many people are not worthy parents insofar as they do not provide even the basic minimum care for their children. It is a too easy to beget children, but it is not easy to parent

them.

Bangladesh has ratified the UN and ILO Conventions/Charters -- UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, ILO Convention on the Worst Forms of Child Labor (No. 182), ILO Minimum age Convention (No. 15), ILO Minimum Age Convention, Revised (No. 59), ILO Labor Convention (No. 29), ILO Night Work of Young Persons Convention (No. 90), ILO Abolition of Forced Labor Convention No. 105).

However, our country has always been good at signing many international protocols and charters. But not so in implementing any! Not much is done to get them implemented. All out efforts must be made with political will, and integrity on the part of the general public, the civil society, family, government, religious institutions, etc. Above all, nothing avails if there is no genuine care and love for our children.

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