

Yet another day of hartal!

Find alternatives to it

THE opposition BNP has called hartal for a third consecutive day today. One man died in Sylhet yesterday as people of Bishwanath upazila, the constituency of missing BNP leader M Ilias Ali, locked in violent clashes with police for several hours.

We are appalled by the sequence of events since Saturday. On that day there were violence and vandalism by hartal supporters to terrorise people to acquiesce in the hartal programme. But Sunday's hartal passed off without any major incident barring sporadic clashes and another death. Commenting on that day's hartal, we had voiced concern on hearing the news of extension of hartal that we may have been thrown into the vortex of a new cycle of violence. By yesterday's events, we have been proved right. What awaits us today is anybody's guess. We urge constraint on both the sides.

It is no news that the country's economy is already reeling from runaway inflation following the opening of some fuel-based rental power plants, declining remittance growth and deteriorating foreign exchange reserves. Exports have been declining due to downturn in Euro zone and the USA. Calling hartal at such a critical time comes as a serious blow to the export and import-oriented industries of the country. Besides exports and imports, foreign investors gradually lose their confidence in our market due to the worsening political situation. To recite the losses sustained through even a single day's hartal is to restate the obvious but we are fraught with more pressing circumstances than ever before to have any more hartal.

Therefore, we would urge the opposition to look for alternatives to hartal which they had already taken recourse to in the form of long marches and mass rallies with a significant degree of success. They drew huge public support for such programmes.

For the government's part it has to allow the opposition the space to perform its legitimate role so that it is not provoked into adopting confrontational posturing to the detriment of a democratic functioning of the state.

Poultry farms gripped by bird flu

Right policy mix needed to save the industry

AT The Daily Star Roundtable on poultry sector organised on Sunday the dire strait the poultry industry finds itself in, has been depicted by the participants. Almost two-thirds of 1.5 lakh poultry farms have been closed down over the last two years due to poor surveillance and lack of compensation for culled fowls.

While a bird flu alert has been on for some time now, with 21 recorded cases and, reportedly, 1,02,348 fowls culled since January of this year, the exact extent of the threat is not known. Due to poor monitoring and surveillance of the livestock department caused by a shortage of staff in rural areas and fund constraints, the government does not have the actual number of affected fowls, so that the magnitude of the problem remains a gray area.

Recently, the government has taken some measures to tackle the situation. One has been the setting up of checkpoints at entry points to the capital to prevent infected fowls from being brought in, culled if found and provisions for penalising culprits. A committee has also been formed to evaluate the situation -- the number of farms closed down, the amount of losses incurred, etc. -- and to make necessary recommendations to improve the situation.

Given the fact that the country was first hit by bird flu five years ago, we believe that by now the authorities should have been abreast of the situation and better prepared to mitigate the effects of the outbreak. We hope the government will lose no more time in doing the needful. Prompt and comprehensive research and investigation are necessary to judge the extent of the situation, followed by policy, laws and their implementation towards mitigating the effects of the outbreak.

Eradicate the threat of the bird flu virus to human beings we must but simultaneously we must cater for the special needs of the poultry sector. Comprehensive policy backup should be provided to the industry in order that shutdown farms are reopened while no more closures take place. Once self-sufficient in meeting domestic demand for protein like chicken and eggs we cannot let such an attainment go down the drain through lack of

Something rotten in energy sector management

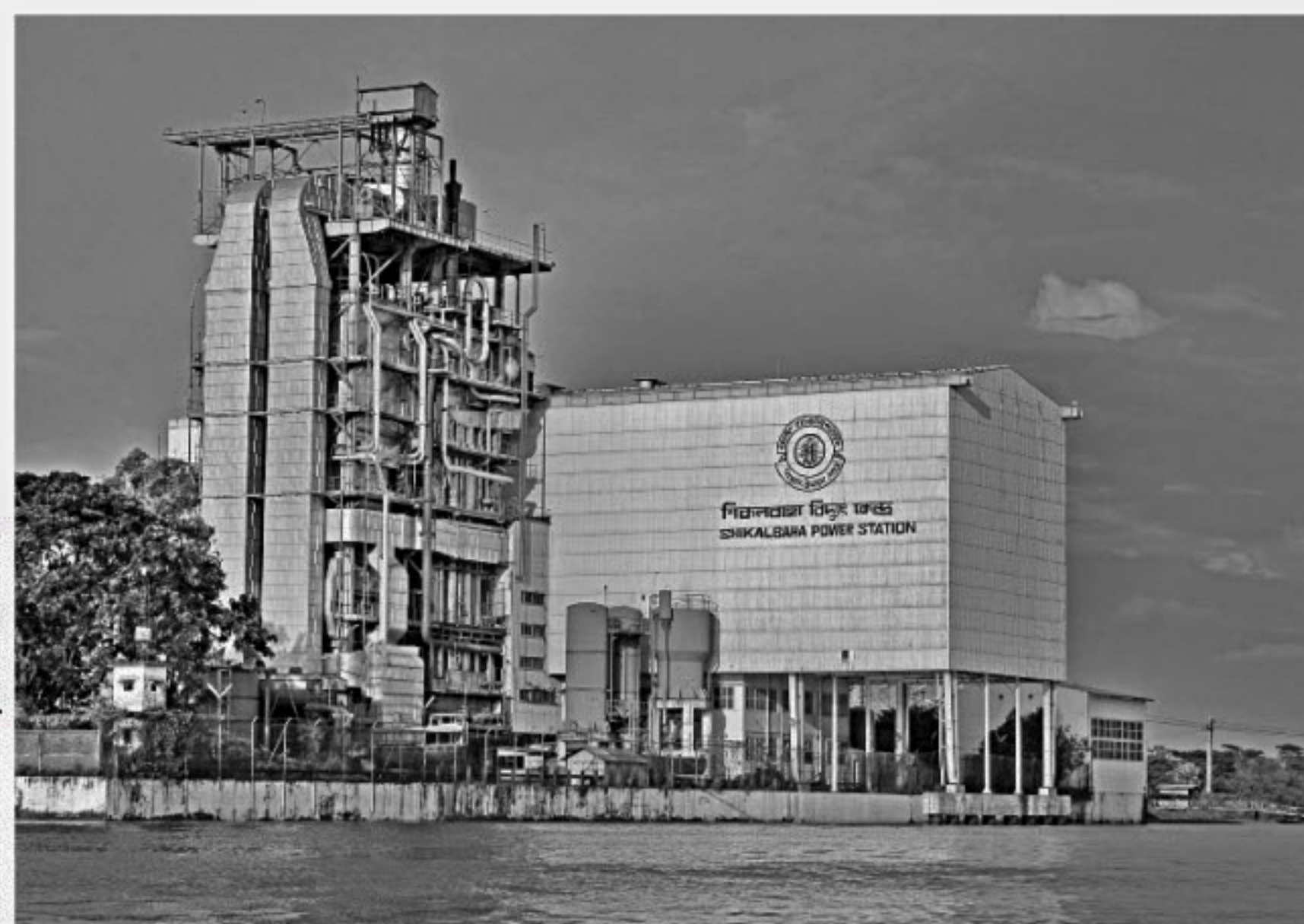
SYED MANSUR HASHIM

BESIDES the deteriorating law-and-order situation, the other much-talked about subject across the land is where on earth has all the electricity gone? We had been promised that much of our power shortage would be mitigated in the year 2012. Unfortunately that has not happened, but is it fate, or is there a much more rational explanation as to why the much-hyped, much promised policy centred on quick-rental power plants has failed to deliver?

Another nation that went the quick-rental way, i.e. Pakistan, is facing the brunt of having adopted an energy policy that is overtly dependent on import based fuel-fired power plants. By late 2011, the country was facing a power shortage of nearly 60% and, according to reports published in the *Express Tribune*, the state-owned Pakistan State Oil had been forced to halt fuel supplies to power plants due to unpaid oil bills amounting to a stupendous \$1.78 billion!

Blunt questions have been raised in Pakistani media on why the state, which is both the biggest debtor and creditor in this scenario, is unable to rectify the situation. Whether it is lack of competence or whether there have been other reasons that include allegations of corruption and personal gain that have pushed the ruling party into adopting an energy policy heavily dependent on rental power plants.

While Pakistani policymakers ponder on what to do, the rental power plants on which hundreds of millions of dollars were spent remain offline due to a shortage of fuel, which has come about due to unpaid fuel bills to state-owned bodies, power producers and naturally state-owned fuel suppliers like Pakistan State Oil (PSO). Policymakers have landed themselves in a vicious cycle from which it will be difficult to extricate the economy as both time and money have been



WAHID ADNAN/ DRINK NEWS

As per newspaper reports, thanks to reduced import of oil, major parts of the rental power plants have had to sit idle and government continues to pay to the rental plant owners as per contract without having supply of electricity!

wasted in the pursuit of much needed power.

Bangladesh is, interestingly enough, following a path similar to that of Pakistan. The energy mix in Bangladesh currently sees a third of total power being supplied by rental plants. Thanks to volatility of oil prices in the international market, many rentals are now offline, resulting in increased power outages at both consumer and industrial level. While there has been a lot of chatter on new gas finds and liquefied natural gas (LNG) to be inducted to ease the nation's power crisis, these are at best mid to long-term plans.

According to a report published in *Prothom Alo* on April 23, the best case scenario according to Petrobangla, for new gas finds (if any) by state-bodies

or foreign companies (such as Russia's Gazprom) is the year 2015. The situation with LNG is even further down the line (putting aside the suitability of imported LNG with approx. \$15 for each 1,000 million cubic feet compared to \$1.5-3 for the same at present from domestic source). Storing of imported LNG is a technical challenge that involves the construction of a LNG terminal in Moheshkhali, the construction of which is slated to begin in mid-2012 and, according to experts the construction will take at least a year.

Hence, with both LNG and new gas remaining safely out of reach for the immediate future, Bangladesh continues to rely on imported diesel and furnace oil based rental power plants. With nearly a 1,000 MW of electricity

being generated by these plants, the national exchequer has had to dish out anywhere between \$2.5-3 billion per annum to pay for the nearly 3 million tons of additional fuel.

The question at this juncture is: could we have avoided adopting an energy policy that has brought so much pain to countries in the region like Pakistan? The jury is still out on that one. Why was the decision taken on the premise that new gas deposits would surely be discovered (and the discovered gas will be ready to feed the power plants!) somewhere down the line; or, an agreement with Myanmar would surely be signed for a trans-national pipeline to assuage Bangladesh's energy crisis, especially since the talks for the tripartite trans-national pipeline extending from Myanmar-Bangladesh-India fell apart in the mid '90s where it was our lack of foresight that helped derail the talks in the first place?

At the end of the day, policymakers have decided that our proven deposit of coal reserves will be kept for future generations. No arguing with that infallible logic. But as per newspaper reports, thanks to reduced import of oil, major parts of the rental power plants have had to sit idle and government continues to pay to the rental plant owners as per contract without having supply of electricity!

In the final analysis of things, Bangladesh has opted to go for power generation using rental and quick-rental plants without taking into cognizance the issues associated with supply of oil and financial commitments in terms of foreign exchange payments over the long haul. Thanks to our collective farsightedness, we are sitting collectively in the soup. But we rest assured that our policymakers are working very hard on the issue and the solution is "just round the corner."

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| The New York Times EXCLUSIVE

Echoes of the End of the Raj

KWASI KWARTENG

THE Arab Spring, the threat of Iran as an emerging nuclear power, the continuing violence in Syria and the American reluctance to get involved there have all signalled the weakness, if not the end, of America's role as a world policeman. President Obama himself said in a speech last year: "America cannot use our military wherever repression occurs."

America's position today reminds me of Britain's situation in 1945. Deep in debt and committed to building its National Health Service and other accoutrements of the welfare state, Britain no longer could afford to run an empire.

Moreover, Britain, which so proudly ruled the waves a generation ago, was tired; it lacked the willpower to pursue its imperial destiny. America's role as an imperialist is even more fragile, as it never had Britain's self-confident faith in its own imperial destiny. Americans have always been ambivalent about the role of global hegemony.

Today, American retreat is not motivated by traditional isolationism, but by practical necessity. Like post-World War II Britain, contemporary America no longer has the financial resources to maintain an empire -- one which, in America's case, was pursued only half-heartedly in the first place. Deficits and debt have been more damaging to dreams of empire than any genuine shift in ideology.

My own parents grew up in the Gold Coast of Africa, as British power ebbed, so I feel I have a direct connection with this phenomenon of collapsing empires. The Gold Coast, of course, became Ghana in 1957, the year after the Suez crisis. Today I am a member of parliament, so I have a double perspective on empire.

Much as the Second World War has been identified as the end of the British Empire, future historians may well see the financial crisis of 2008 as the end of the American empire. Yet, the retreat of

American power, particularly in the Middle East, has potentially left the world considerably more unstable and uncertain.

America is a much smaller figure than the colossus that seemed to bestride the world in 1989, when an article titled "*The End of History?*" could, paradox though it was, be taken seriously.

The suspicion has always lingered that America was a less than enthusiastic imperial power. It never sought to administer foreign lands directly and indefinitely, even though the presence of American bases in Japan, Germany, Britain and, more lately, in Saudi Arabia did look like soft imperialism.

During the cold war, America saw itself as the leader of the "free world," a claim to moral leader-

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ship as bold as that of any empire in history. Its dominion relied on the force of alliance, direct assistance and social and economic example, rather than occupation. Only in the last 10 years has America intervened militarily to decide who rules in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya. This assumption of responsibility as a global policeman was nothing if not the act of an empire. Yet Americans were always reluctant to admit this.

It was striking that, during this period, neoconservatives espoused a more overt imperialism. American reluctance to wield the sword of Britannia was the core of their irritation at their country's foreign policy. They exhorted the United States, like a slow, sluggish pupil, to play a role for which it had no natural inclination.

A hesitancy to get involved in the messy details of international politics has been a feature of the

American body politic since independence. George Washington's famous admonition to "avoid foreign entanglements" is one of history's most notorious false quotations -- a three-word compression of a more subtle thought about avoiding Europe's squabbles.

Nowhere, in fact, does that phrase appear in the great Farewell Address of 1796. Yet subsequent leaders have followed the accepted version of Washington's remarks. Later, Woodrow Wilson preached self-determination abroad, and the Vietnam War taught Americans that their powers were limited. Today, the neoconservatives seem like quaint figures from a past that many Americans would rather forget. In 23 years we

have gone from the "end of history," a world in which liberal capitalism and democracy seemed utterly dominant, to President Obama's rather limp declaration about the limits on what America can do.

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The history of the British Empire suggests that any form of empire is misguided. First, empire is too expensive. The rise of China and the emerging world has meant that, even if America rebounds, its economy's relative size will be smaller. Surely it will not be as preponderant as it was in 1945 and 1989. This alone makes multilateral action more likely than solitary leadership.

Second, as the British discovered, maintaining an empire requires too many calculations and too much knowledge -- experience, even -- for any one power in today's world even to attempt it.

Iraq and Afghanistan should have taught America those lessons.

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

April 24

1877
Russo-Turkish War: Russian Empire declares war on Ottoman Empire.

1955
The Bandung Conference ends: 29 non-aligned nations of Asia and Africa finish a meeting that condemns colonialism, racism, and the Cold War.

1957
Suez Crisis: The Suez Canal is reopened following the introduction of UNEF peacekeepers to the region.

2006
King Gyanendra of Nepal gives into the demands of protesters and restores the parliament that he dissolved in 2002.