

PLEASURE IS ALL MINE

Eternality of government programme



SHAH HUSAIN IMAM

WE are constantly kept on a heavy diet of big, bloated issues of politics, power and so-called principles. As a result, public sensibilities have dulled towards matters severely affecting their day-to-day life, living and even future. Otherwise, how could we quietly endure the frequent

raises in electricity and fuel prices with no questions asked. Remember, in the last UP state election in India when Priyanka and Rahul Gandhi were approaching a local teashop, some customers just walked away muttering "mehenga" (high living costs) in an apparent huff. Rahul Gandhi, a sitting MP from UP, lost the Congress cause to Mulayem Singh Yadav's son Akhilesh, who went on to become chief minister of the state. Congress got a drubbing in the hands of BSP.

Beyond the subcontinent, we have recently seen how austerity cuts in Spain and Greece agitated people manifestly demonstrating the power of civic voice. They were so worked up that they refused to see any connection between the EU stimulus package and the austerity measures enforceable for the countries.

At home, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina inaugurated a quick rental power plant at Keraniganj on Sunday, as though there wasn't already a large number of them as bad bargain. It is the sheer number and not so much the type that is in question. She also put across a mes-

sage to the people: "They should at least pay up the production costs."

Finance Minister A.M.A. Muhith in his latest meeting with IMF representatives strongly hinted at raising fuel costs with a characteristic flair -- "winter is good time for it."

There you are having increases in electricity and petroleum products, even gas, fly in your faces; these are notorious coming as they do in a host like some locust! Brace up for your own kind of budgetary gymnastics before the government does its kind of unbalancing the books in the long run! Short-term gains have a way of blurring long-term perspectives.

No discussion on the subject, not even in a one-sided parliament, and the opposition's parliamentary boycott to blame equally (lower down their list of demands bleat high living costs!). No public hearing worth the name -- just going through the motions -- and no public debate whatsoever -- just impose higher rates like an unelected or an over-elected government!

The stock argument is flat out simplistic: increasing costs of production or procurement of energy forcing the government's hands to raise the rates. Of course, there's a genuine case of cutting back on subsidies to reduce government borrowings and curb deficit financing for wealth creation through a regenerative economy. But principally at issue is: how much of the cost-

sale differentiation is an outcome of management inefficiency, malpractice, corruption and pilferage and how much of it is a straightforward exercise in merely adjusting to higher costs.

The overwhelming impression is, the government is pulling wool over its eyes imposing raises in utility rates as the most convenient and expedient quick-fix adhocism. Whilst it has to meet IMF conditionalities for \$ 1 billion worth of BOP support it had bargained for, one wonders why the development partners emphasise cut-

ting back on subsidies more than stressing the government's failure to contain cost of production within limits of public affordability consistent with the social good objective?

Former US President Ronald Reagan once said: "Government is like a baby: An alimentary canal with a big appetite at one end and no sense of responsibility at the other."

The narrative of irresponsibility is unrolled in a chronological order. It pivots around the question raised in Prothom Alo: How much is the production cost of electricity? When AL-led Mahajote government took power, the average cost of each unit (1 kilowatt/hour) was Tk.3.50 whilst the sale price was Tk.2.50. Four years on, the cost per unit is Tk.6.25. After quadruple increases in the prices, the sale price is fixed at Tk.5.75. Thus compared with 2009, the differential between cost and price

has come down to Tk.0.50 only.

Why then the prospect of upward spiral in rates again?

The failures of governments during 1991-1996 and 2001-2006 in the power and energy sector created a huge gap between demand and supply. To meet the deficit, like the caretaker government preceding it, the present government too opted for diesel and furnace oil fueled quick rental-based plants on 3 to 5 years duration. Such plants meaning exorbitantly high production cost of electricity and, therefore, still higher retail prices, were originally envisaged for a limited period. This was to gain time for building gas and coal-based electric plants. The overall plan has not worked out with the result that government would pay higher for electricity and demand still higher rates from the consumers. Are we fated to accept it quietly?

Three points keep haunting: One, when would the extractive string of quick rental power plants retire and be done with? Two, let's have a mathematical picture projecting into future liabilities of such types of projects. Three, what has the government done to generate coal-based electricity, or for that matter, progress, if any made, in exploiting alternative sources of energy. Any timeframe?

Ronald Reagan again: "The nearest thing to eternal life we will ever see on this earth is a government programme."

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HUMAN TRAFFICKING DETERRENCE AND SUPPRESSION ACT 2012



A bold step towards safe labour migration

The United Nations in Bangladesh and The Daily Star have joined hands to raise awareness on violence against women, as part of the UN Secretary General's global UNiTE campaign. This is part 4 of a series of articles that will appear in The Daily Star until December 10, focusing on the context, the policy interventions, and the actions needed in combating violence against women in Bangladesh.

TABASSUM MOKHDUMA

I was married at 15. When I was 19, my husband and my mother-in-law sent me to the Middle East. I had a 6-month-old baby and I did not want to leave him. My mother-in-law pressurised me.

My employer kept me as his slave for 13 months. I could not go out. I could not send any money. Except the day I entered and the day I left, I never went out of the house. I did most of the domestic chores. My employer or one of his brothers forced me to have sex with them almost every night. They were 7 brothers and only my employer was married. It made no difference because he also came to me.

Rahim (not his real name), along with four others paid Tk.550,000 each to a broker to go to a country in Europe as migrant workers. But instead, they were taken to a different country and kept hostage. When the victims' relatives went to the broker, he charged an additional Tk.400,000 each to send the five to their final destination. The five, however, were sent to a Southern African country without passports where they were arrested and put in jail.

These two stories might sound unusual, but unfortunately they are true and the number of such real life stories is increasing day by day.

Many parents encouraged the migration of their unmarried or divorced daughters. Interestingly, in a study, it appeared that mothers were more interested in migration than fathers. Many mothers envied their migrant daughters when they saw them returning with money and displaying power and influence which they themselves could never exert.

Whenever the issue of human trafficking comes up, the first type of torture that comes to mind is sexual exploitation. But it is not the only form of exploitation that a trafficked victim suffers from. Labour trafficking victims, for example, suffer other tortures and are abused badly besides being sexually exploited. Trafficked women and young girls, on the other hand, especially suffer multiple forms of sexual exploitation.

Most women are lured by promises of a good job, and labour migration is a sector that has great economic potential as well as high risks for multiple exploitations at the same time, with a thin line between the two. While a safe and secure labour migration can bring happiness, an unsafe one, on the other hand, can bring sorrow.

Labour migration from Bangladesh is seen as an important driver for our economy, with approximately half a million leaving the country officially every year and remitting more than \$12 billion in 2011 to the economy (13% of GNP, 9 times of FDI and 6 times of development assistance).

Thus, the government and the communities are all encouraged towards this attractive venture.

However, with the increasing flow of migrant workers (both men and women), the risk of unsafe migration leading to sexual as well as labour exploitation and ending up in a human trafficking is inherent. With poverty being a major factor of this densely populated country and the subservience of women, trafficking in women and girls is prevalent.

The new Human Trafficking Deterrence and Suppression Act 2012 is a comprehensive Act, and has been drafted keeping international standards and conventions in mind such as the Palermo Protocol. For the first time the country has a dedicated law to address human trafficking.

The special feature of this Act is that it does not impede, but rather endorses, migration of people for overseas and domestic employment, thus striking the balance between nurturing safe migration for development and combating human trafficking and abusive exploitation.

Special features of the Act are:

- Provision to try cases even if the offense is committed abroad by or against a citizen of Bangladesh;
- Provides an integrated package of protective measures for the victims and witnesses of trafficking;
- Offers scope for victims to get compensation from the offenders;
- Provides wide powers to law enforcers to investigate and facilitate cross-country investigation;
- Promotes proactive inquiry and pre-emptive searches;
- Provides for accountability of different stakeholders including government and non-government sectors;
- Lays down premises for private public partnership (PPP) for its implementation;
- Opens wide arena to protect and promote human rights and dignity of victims.

The Act creates room for the establishment of an Anti-Human-Trafficking Offence Tribunal with power to try criminals in speedy and effective manner. Furthermore, it provides for the setting up of a fund to support anti-human trafficking activities of both government and non-government agencies and civic activists.

However, enactment of a law does not ensure full safeguard. As the law is already in existence, the task ahead is implementation to ensure safe migration and resist human trafficking. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) was instrumental in providing technical assistance to the Government of Bangladesh in the drafting of the comprehensive law. The process was participatory and inclusive and included a variety of persons from different relevant government departments and agencies, UN organisations, NGOs and the civil society.

The government has adopted the National Plan of Action (NPA) 2012 to Combat Human Trafficking, which is a solid step towards this mission. In accordance with the strategies and procedures contemplated in the NPA 2012, the preventive and protective functions under the new law need to be discharged by all duty-bearers and stakeholders.

The GO-NGO Committee on Human Trafficking under the leadership of the Ministry of Home Affairs meets regularly to discuss on this issue, the Anti-Trafficking Monitoring cell at the Police Headquarters to track cases and further, the setting up of the Vigilance Task Force by the Ministry of Expatriate Welfare and Overseas Employment to, among other tasks, monitor recruiting agencies working in labour migration and propose measures for safe, regular migration, are all steps in the right direction.

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China, a trusted friend of developing countries

LI JUN

THE 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) has successfully concluded in Beijing, and the guidelines for China's future internal and external policies have been formed. CPC reiterated that China will always be a trusted friend and sincere partner of developing countries. This shows China's sincere wish and firm determination in deepening its cooperation and strengthening its unity with the developing world.

This declaration is based on the fact that China is still a developing country. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, especially

after the reform and opening-up in 1978, China's tremendous achievements have drawn worldwide attention. Now China is the world's second largest economy in terms of GDP volume. Its comprehensive national strength, international competitiveness, and global influence have been greatly improved. The development of China has had a profound impact on the world. It has proved that there is no universally suitable development model in this world. One country can achieve great progress by actively exploring and firmly sticking to a development path that fits its own situation, rather than simply following the model of other countries. Yet, this is just one side of the coin. On the other side, despite these considerable achievements, China still faces tortuous roads ahead. Its per capita GDP is still among the level of middle and low-income countries. It lags far behind the developed countries in technology, finance, education, etc. The problem of imbalanced, uncoordinated and unsustainable development remains pronounced. Insufficient technological innovation, irrational industrial structure, weak agricultural foundation, and environment constraints are the major hurdles for China's continued development. It is also a tough job to transform the economic development pattern and deepen the reform and opening-up. The status of China as the largest developing country in the world does not change. It is unique that China has a duo identity of the world's second largest economy as well as the biggest developing country. It shows how complicated and difficult it is for a country like China to develop. This declaration has been proved by the history of China's cooperation with developing countries since the establishment of New China. Developing countries are not only China's close

partners in its peaceful development, but also important forces to push forward the democratisation of international relations. For a long time, China and developing countries have treated each other with mutual respect and support, especially in their struggle towards national liberation and development. China has made concrete efforts in helping developing countries even when it itself was not a rich country. By the end of 2011, the Chinese government had built over 2,200 aid projects in developing countries, exempted the debt of over 50 highly indebted poor countries and least developed countries, and trained over 60

thousand personnel from 173 developing countries and 13 regional and international organisations. According to a research done by British newspaper the Financial Times, the amount of loans China provided to developing countries in 2009 and 2010 has surpassed that of the World Bank.

In dealing with international affairs, China has always been adhering to the principles of mutual respect and equality, and non-interference in internal affairs. China always respects the right of developing countries to choose their own social system and development path.

More important, this declaration shows China's concurrence with the expanding common interests of China and developing countries. Only by coordination and cooperation among developing countries, can the democratisation of international relations be pushed forward, a fair, rational, non-discriminatory international trade

system and more equal and balanced new global partnership be built. It is only in that way can we expedite the process of establishing the global economic governing system with reform of world financial system and major international financial organisations at the core, and increase the voice and presence of developing countries and emerging market countries.

Just as developing countries benefit from the development of China, China also benefits from the reduction of north-south gap and the strengthening of self-development ability of developing countries. To achieve that goal, China will continue to provide support to developing countries within its capacity and push for win-win cooperation to bring more concrete benefits to the people.

The writer is Ambassador of China in Bangladesh.



Ambassador Li Jun

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