

Welcome the New Year

Our wish list for 2013

WE have said good bye to 2012 and like everyone else there is a list of wishes that we hope to see fulfilled.

We hope to see an attenuation of political tension. And for that the nub of the issue must be addressed headlong, the onus for which lies mainly on the AL. Unless it comes to grips with the issue of how the next election is going to be conducted we are afraid the existing abrasive nature of politics will only be accentuated. In spite of the PM's out of hand dismissal of suggestions in this regard, she should consider the ideas that are being floated to ensure an acceptable and participatory election in 2014.

There is no alternative to discussions in this regard. The Supreme Court's ruling and subsequent constitutional amendment cannot be a stumbling block to an equitable solution. By the same token it is our expectation that not only would the BNP join the parliament, it would also abjure violence and destructive politics and convince its alliance partner, the JI, to shun violence too.

Alongside eschewing violence, it is our hope that the political parties should opt for other forms of protests rather than hartal to spare the public and the economy of its bad consequences.

We would hope too that the prices of essentials would be kept under control, and instead of increasing the cost of power and fuel, the government would concentrate on reducing system losses in this sector.

2012 has been a year of scams. We trust the government has learnt enough from these instances of gross negligence, complicity of the management in defalcation of public money, and lax oversight, to prevent repetition of the same.

It would give us immense pleasure to see the resumption of the Padma loan, and those behind the scam brought to justice.

We would like a much improved law and order than now, a more people friendly police, and resolution of the unresolved cases of kidnappings and murders of media and political personalities. While we are glad to note that extrajudicial killings have reduced considerably in the latter half of 2012, it should be brought to a zero.

And last but not least, we would like see the trial of war criminals - the most important issue apart from politics run its course without being politicised.

A Happy New Year!

Fatal footbridges

A hazard to public safety

A recent front page photograph of a dilapidated footbridge in the capital's Tikatuli comes as a wake-up call, depicting the deplorable condition of many footbridges in the capital and the danger they pose to pedestrians.

As it is, people are reluctant to use footbridges and would rather cross the busy main roads in hordes rather than walk and climb a few extra steps to get to the other side. So much so, that sometimes traffic police make announcements on the microphone asking people to use the bridges instead.

The encouragement from the city authorities, as well as the fact that many people do actually use them, however, increases the city's responsibility of making footbridges safe for pedestrians. On the contrary, they are at the least, dirty, and at their worst, dangerous. Broken in many places, muddy and slippery when it rains, they have actually caused people to fall off the steps. Sheets of hanging metal as depicted in the photograph also pose a threat to people passing under them. Dubious-looking characters up on the bridges discourage some people from climbing them. Add to that the congestion on the bridges themselves, with rows of vendors selling their wares on the footbridges and they become quite the hazard to public safety.

The city authorities must address a number of issues here. First is the location of footbridges and building them where they are needed most. Second is the construction. Judging from the poor state of the bridges, it is obvious that material and construction have been sub-standard and whether this is due to poor planning or corruption within the sector, it must be addressed. Finally, building bridges is not enough they must be maintained. The city authorities must monitor the footbridges for safety and cleanliness so that, instead of posing a threat to personal safety and hygiene, they make life safer

Energy crisis: who is to blame?



SHAFIQ ISLAM/ DRINK NEWS

The next three years, i.e. up to 2016, no major new power plants are going to come on line, since it is unlikely that there will be any major gas supply improvements in the pipelines. So what now?

situation: (1) Commissioning rental power projects to increase supply. (2) Charging higher electricity prices to reduce demand. (3) Reduce losses in the distribution systems."

Yes, the authorities did handle the first problem very well. Significant new power to the tune of some 3,500 megawatts (MW) was augmented to the national grid during this term in office. The problem is that somewhere along the line the government forgot or, was unable for reasons beyond our comprehension about the *mid-term* energy sector planning. Failure to gauge the need to get a move on to repair and upgrade the old existing plants took the backburner. Again, despite constant prodding of energy experts, the authorities failed to setup baseload power plants based and diversify primary fuel supply sources. Have the rental plants delivered? Yes and no. The mere production of new power is only half the game. The produced electricity needs to be *channeled* to end-users. That requires an upgrading of the *distribution network*. Is it any wonder that there is mounting evidence that the current distribution network is

unable to handle the extra power being pumped into it?

The next three years, i.e. up to 2016, no major new power plants are going to come on line, since it is unlikely that there will be any major gas supply improvements in the pipelines. So what now? Current projects in the pipeline can bring in at best, 1,000MW (250MW per annum till 2016) of new power will be added to the national grid. This is a far cry from the 800-1,000MW that needs to be added *per annum* as per demand. Getting back to the subject of planning; the government had hoped to plan for the future on a mixture of domestic gas and imported coal. Since we can now safely delete the gas part in the equation, this leaves coal. Thanks again, to the futuristic approach of policymakers, who chose not to explore our proven reserves of high quality coal -- leaving it for "posterity" and the "future generation." Since there is now zero possibility of mining own coal for use in the immediate future, we are left with imported coal. Astonishing as it may seem, there is again,

unfortunately, little prospect of getting hands on imported coal before 2017- 2018. Because, contrary to popular belief, coal sourcing is not about waltzing down to the international market and ordering a few million tonnes of coal for delivery next month, because no sourcing contract has been done. According to Forest Cookson who states in his article 'the energy scenario: alternatives': "The price of the landed imported gas is reported to be very high of the order of \$12/thousand cft. (Energy expert, Prof. Tamim of BUET considers landing price of LNG in Bangladesh will be no less than \$18 dollars per unit), compared to average prices of the order of \$1.50 for domestic gas. [These are the costs for Petrobangla to obtain gas purchase from the Production Sharing Contractors including the 'free gas' Petrobangla receives from PSC or from the Government's own fields.]

Lastly, the issue of LNG has not moved an inch from the day it was conceived. Now why is that? The issue of sourcing LNG, building a LNG plant has dominated newspaper headlines for the past few years. Policymakers had better start working on their answer to questions revolving around this issue.

Now that we are in a bit of a jam, precisely how the nation is going to crawl its way out of the quagmire is indeed the million dollar question. By foot dragging on to extract domestic coal or import coal or indeed to go for the LNG option, the government has wasted invaluable time. There is now no choice but to rely on rental or import-based oil fired power plants (these could be rental, quick-rental or BPDB plants) -- *these are going to be EXTREMELY expensive*, for this year's oil import bill is hovering around \$3 billion, approximately 25% of annual inward remittance. Who know what the future holds?

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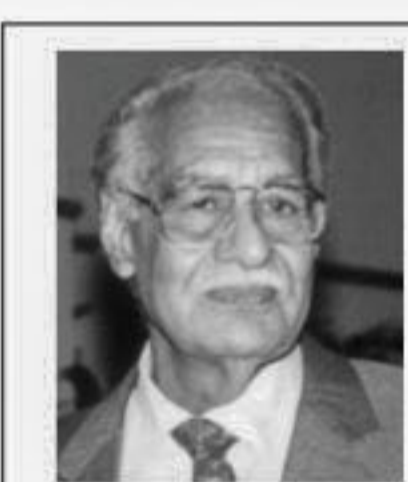
SYED MANSUR HASHIM

WHEN we are informed at the end of the year that the Sunetra gas field purported to have gas reserves

anywhere from 2-3 trillion cubic feet may not be giving us the dividends we had hoped for, there is something fundamentally wrong with our planning. The incumbent party in power is effectively entering into the final year in office. To break such dismal news to the general public grappling with double digit inflation in food and other basic rights, i.e. housing, education, etc. must have been painful. However, it is nothing compared to the pain the public has been putting up with the last couple of years on account of electricity generated by the rental power industry -- electricity that is expensive to generate and to consume and one that provides no long-term solution for the economy.

Now that Sunetra has come up literally dry, policymakers are in a fix. They have no idea how to get out of the gas crisis. To state the situation in the energy sector dire is somewhat of an understatement. We are facing a national energy crisis. In terms of "planning," the government took a two-pronged approach: short and medium-term. As pointed out by Economist Forest Cookson in a recent article in *The Independent* "The government faced two problems: What to do about the energy situation in the short run -- essentially over the period of its tenure. Second, how to develop large scale power projects and provide the fuel that they required. Such projects would come on line in the period 2013-2016. The first problem has been handled quite well. Production of electrical energy will have increased 50% through June 2013, about 11% per year. There were three steps to improve the short run

BETWEEN THE LINES



KULDIP NAYYAR

LIKE an individual, the nation too has a limit of tolerance. For Delhi and some other cities, the gang rape at the national capital

was the proverbial last straw. Students filled the streets to demonstrate and even had one or two pitched battles with the police. One policeman died and many students were injured. Such incidents are bound to happen when anger is sought to be fought with water canons and lathi-charge.

No doubt, the demonstration at Delhi was ignited by deep anger over the rape. But it was an outburst of piled-up resentment against the system which neither delivers justice nor gives jobs. It is a sad commentary on non-governance and ineptness of administrations which have been run by rulers of all shades since independence, particularly after the early '70s.

Prime Minister Indira Gandhi tried to suppress grievances and disappointments by authoritarian methods although she had swept the polls on the promise of eliminating poverty. Nobody can accuse meek Prime Minister Manmohan Singh of authoritarianism but almost nine years of his rule shows that he is too much of a bureaucrat who knows rules but not how to take drastic steps. Even his belated address to the nation was bald and lacked punch. At least he could have stopped the spectacle of ugly controversy among the Delhi chief minister, union home minister and the police commissioner.

The students were angry and there was disconnect between them and the government. They expected some heads to roll. But mere statements could not allay their mistrust. The general feeling was that none would

be punished and soon it would be business as usual. The government should have transferred Police Commissioner Neeraj Kumar straight-away. His explanation was a poor defence of his failure. If nobody in his force was to blame, then who blundered? To maintain law and order in Delhi requires imagination and novel ideas, not the outmoded ways to which the police are used. What was also lacking was human touch or personal contact.

Delhi's Lt. Governor was on a vacation and according to state Chief Minister Shiela Dikshit, he was not contactable. Why should such a person remain at his post? Even his tenure of second term has ended. His drama, after return, of suspending a few lower functionaries lacked script.

The appointment of a judicial commission has not evoked response because commissions have ceased to have credibility. The one headed by Sri Krishna to probe the 1993 communal riots in Mumbai and the other by M.S. Liberhan on Babri masjid demolition remain on paper. The accused on both the reports are people who are politically powerful. What would the commission on the Delhi gang rape prove when there is no faith left in such attempts to silence articulate voices?

The mother of the raped girl has complained that the police put pressure on her, says a letter of the magistrate who went to record the statement of the girl. Shiela Dikshit has rightly taken up the matter with the home ministry, which has ordered an inquiry to find out how far the mother

was intimidated by the police, which denied the allegation.

In fact, the entire judicial process has no respect in the eyes of the people. It takes too long to get the guilty punished. At present, there are 400 rape cases pending for years to be adjudged. Even if the Delhi gang rape is listed for fast tracking, there are so many loopholes in the law and there are courts of appeal which will take their own time. Laws have to be changed. More importantly, the legal system requires overhauling. Capital punishment does not deter rapists. Chemical castration is a must. There is a public demand for it.

Parliament members were up on their legs to ventilate their importance. Two political parties demanded immediate and drastic measures to deal with the guilty. Strange, none asked at least the resignation of MPs sitting among them with charges of rape. One explanation given is that the Election Commission should take action. Why not parliament itself? (One third of Gujarat MLAs face criminal cases, including rape).

All political parties should realise that the youth in the country does not find the existing institutions giving answers to their questions: Why so much poverty? Why an increasing gap between the rich and the poor? Why the stranglehold of caste and creed? Why the failure of government to appreciate their aspirations? The Congress leaders did talk to some students in batches but found no leader who could pacify or represent them. The leaderless mob is the worst that can happen in a country. Some

lampoon elements were able to introduce violence. This means that the youth is a combustible material which can be set on fire by some demagogues.

Many years ago, alienated students at Osborne in France almost brought a revolution. But the movement failed because of ideological differences among the students. More recently, the Arab Spring in some Muslim countries changed the rulers. Mobs came on to the streets and found a common cause: authoritarian rulers drenched in corruption. In China, the students gathered at Tiananmen Square to protest against the dictatorial regime. But then Beijing, with no democracy, crushed hundreds of them to kill dissent.

The present rulers have nearly got away with all their excesses. This is because India is an open flabby society. People can express their views freely despite the pressure and prize. But it lives under a delusion that the status quo can be maintained. What has happened at Delhi is a warning. The system requires overhauling. Even the election of members has to be looked into because money and musclemen have reduced the polling to a farce. The police in many states have become the private army of chief ministers.

Overall, the country is peaceful, not because the people are contended but because they still have confidence of changing the complexion of parliament and state assemblies through votes. But this confidence is lessening election after election. More than that, the poor cannot live in the cold, hungry and without future, for another 65 years, the span since independence. They want to live. In another context, the raped girl, fighting against death, says: "I want to live but could not. The nation appears helpless."

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

January 1

1877
Queen Victoria of the United Kingdom is proclaimed Empress of India.

1942
The Declaration by United Nations is signed by twenty-six nations.

1992
Russia is officially formed.

1995
The World Trade Organization goes into effect.

1998
The European Central Bank is established.

2012
Kim Jong-un is officially declared the new Supreme Leader of North Korea.