

Four-lane highway hits a snag

Why the time and cost overruns?

THE four-lane Dhaka – Chittagong highway was supposed to be concluded by December 2013. Sino-Hydro, the Chinese company that is responsible for 140km out of 192km of the highway has failed to meet the deadline. The project has run into serious trouble. The Chinese company has demanded higher allocation and a time extension of a year.

As things stand now, the time overrun and the consequent cost escalation relating to the project are a major stumbling block to the completion of expansion work on the most important highway in the country. The principal construction firm assigned to build the greater portion of the highway has completed only 30 per cent of it. The two local companies entrusted with 52 km of the highway have completed between 55 to 60 per cent of the work. Thus there is an overall deficit in terms of implementation.

Though the contract was awarded in 2010, it took till 2011 to find a suitable project consultant to be hired. What is apparent is that the government wasted valuable time for land acquisition – an essential prerequisite to any such expansion work.

We have neither the explanation from the company nor the government as to the delay and the budget overrun. It is imperative that the matter is investigated so as to avoid repetition and accelerate pace of implementation.

Illegal migrant workers' plight

Govt. needs to take a hands-on approach

IN the wake of crackdown on illegal Bangladeshi migrant workers in Malaysia and Saudi Arabia, the country is faced with the unsavoury prospect of receiving a large number of them on possible deportation to their home country. Though their exact number is not available, according to expatriate welfare ministry, over 25, 000 migrant workers have been staying illegally in Malaysia alone. So, it's going to be a big challenge how the government handles the emerging situation in those host countries by helping them to legalise their status as far as practicable.

However, the expatriate welfare and overseas employment minister Khandker Mosharraf Hossain has said that as they were staying there 'illegitimately', they would have to face punitive actions taken by the Malaysian government. But it begs the question how they could they stay there illegally for such a long time. Reportedly, many of them could not meet the deadlines for regularisation in those countries. Had the ministry concerned and our diplomatic missions abroad been able to keep timely tabs on the issue, they could have averted the misfortune.

A closer scrutiny will show that criminal rackets active at home and abroad working in collusion with dishonest officials are largely to blame for what these migrant workers are facing at the moment. Their gullibility is also partly to blame.

The government must plug the loopholes at home and in the overseas missions so that our workers in the host countries are not left in the lurch.

Who will resist BCL?

SHAMSUDDOZA SAJEN

RECENT attack by BCL activists on RU students reminds one of a Bengali adage "I do not want alms, just restrain your dog." The students urged the university administration to rethink their decision of fee hike and introduction of commercially run evening courses. In response, the university administration let loose BCL cadres upon general students, restrained police from taking action against attackers and, worst of all, filed cases against the agitating students! It seems people at the helm of university administration preferred gun to pen and run the extra mile to show their loyalty to ruling party.

What is the merit of students' demand is a different discussion. To say the least, one has to consider that demands of keeping educational expenses at a minimum level and restraining commercialisation of education are parts of our glorious history of student movements for democratisation of education; these demands have nothing to do with asking for tender or free ride on university facilities.

The university administration acquiesced to the students' demands. BCL even brought out a procession in support of those demands. Then why did they resort to violent assault on general students?

In Bangladesh, it has become a tradition that soon after a party comes to power it starts grabbing control of existing democratic spaces by dint of muscle, money and majority. In the case of universities, student wing of the new ruling party resorts to force to assert their hegemony. They do not care for students' opinion. Nor do they care for the university administration as people in the administration become equally partisan, if not more. Ruling party student cadres opt for control of dining, seat allotment, exam schedule, result, playing field, cultural programmes and so on. But who gives them the authority to do so? Are they elected representatives of the students? Universities, the highest echelon of imparting education and values, have become the least democratic space to live in.

So what's the solution? Seeking help from the PM will be of little use when she herself defends the act of BCL saying that they had protested against attack on them, and that not all those who were carrying arms were BCL activists! It seems BCL is a brazen manifestation of arrogance of their parent party.

It is an irony that since the re-advent of democracy in 1991, elections of students' forums like DUCSU, RUICSU, CUICSU have been kept on hold. There remains very little scope for students to vent their grievances or raise any demand. Lack of student forum has also weakened leadership building capacity of universities, for which the country is suffering most.

Democracy is the best way to resist whims and repression of any autocratic system. So our demands should be immediate resumption of elections of student forums. Let our students be brought up in a democratic environment and fight for democratic values.

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Chittagong arms haul and our intelligence agencies



STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

THE trial and sentencing of top bosses of the country's apex intelligence agencies in the arms haul case has brought into focus the issue of the role of the intelligence agencies in pursuit of tasks commanded by the government. The country had never witnessed so many senior operatives of the administration and the government hauled to court and meted out death sentences.

The general opinion is that the accused have got their due because of the imponderable but dangerous potential, given the likely destination of the consignment that their action (of supplying arms to a dissident group of neighbouring country) had for the security of the country. However, given the seriousness of the issue and the many unanswered questions, and the various comments regarding the matter, one is constrained to say that the matter merits more robust discussion on the use (or misuse) of the specialised agencies of the state as well as the need to establish a mechanism of formulating state policies, particularly those that impact national security, and safety of the people.

Let us recall the significant aspect of the case. First, the size of the lot was enough to equip several infantry brigades. Secondly, it is the first time such a clandestine transfer has been anticipated. Thirdly, it is the first time that such a matter has been taken to court and, fourthly, the main accused are, among others, heads of two prime intelligence agencies.

There are basically two important aspects of the matter. First issue relates to the supply of weapons to a dissident element of a neighbouring country. Secondly, the handling of the matter post discovery of the consignment. The latter would need to be gone into in more depth, given that the matter straddled three regimes and several reinvestigations.

The issue of supply of weapons clandestinely must certainly prompt several questions. First, whether it was being done in pursuit of the policy of the government of the day. Secondly, whether the intelligence agencies were working to implement government policy. Thirdly, whether it was being done skirting the highest decision making echelon and without executive authority.



We have dealt with the first and second points in last week's column. As for the third, it is difficult to conceive of a situation where the intelligence agencies were indulging in clandestine support of fissiparous forces of a neighbouring country unbeknownst to the political authority, at least in Bangladesh. But such a situation is not unique. Look at the Iran-Contra Affair. Some senior US government officials secretly facilitated the sale of arms to Iran which was under arms embargo. They had also hoped that the arms sales would secure the release of several US hostages (in Lebanon) and allow U.S. intelligence agencies to fund the Nicaraguan Contras to fight against Nicaragua's Sandinista government. When the story broke, President Reagan was quick to assert that the arms-for-cash deal was done without the knowledge of the executive authority. And those who were involved in it went beyond their remit. Of the 13 that were indicted subsequently were the US Secretary of State, Head of the CIA, National Security Adviser, and the Assistant Secretary of State.

The Chittagong arms haul is not only the issue of ten truckloads of arms that were accidentally hauled up on April 1, 2004, nor is the sentencing to death the people involved in the clandestine shipment of weapons to an insurgent group of a neighbouring country. It involves a larger question, which we the common people are not privy to but exposed to the likely negative consequences of that policy. And that is who formulates these policies and what advice do the intelligence agencies provide regarding the possible consequence of such policies? The arms haul is a painful example of the absence of a defined mechanism for formulating national security policies. And one can suggest too that this was extremely ill-advised.

One of the lessons that we should draw from this is that policies, both security and foreign, must not stem from personal predilections or knee jerk reactions. Those policies must be formulated by committees and owned up by the government if they happen to stumble or go wrong.

Another lesson is that the intelligence agencies must remain obligated to the state and not to the party that runs the government of the day, and should therefore proffer accurate and objective analysis of various issues. And they must be prepared to face the music should things go wrong because carrying out orders of higher authorities cannot be a mitigating factor in their defence, although the government of the day should have a lot to answer for.

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Entering an era of coal based power

BADRUL IMAM

THE realisation that Bangladesh has to come out of its gas-based mono-energy status probably came too late, and there has been too little preparation for that. As late as 2009-10, the share of gas for electricity generation, for example, was 89% while the share of oil and coal was 5% and 3.5% respectively. With gas reserve decreasing and gas supply unable to keep pace with increasing demand, the "best" the government could do was to adopt a controversial rescue strategy by increasing the share of costly imported oil to fuel the power plants. Thus the share of oil (mostly diesel and furnace oil) in power generation jumped to 21% in 2013 from 5% in 2010. The price tag that came with this change was hefty; the oil import bill increased from Tk.16,789 crore in 2009-10 to Tk. 38,036 crore in 2011-12 according to Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation. The economic fall-out of using such costly oil has been the most discussed topic as people saw that rental and quick rental power plants sprang up and gobbled a huge sum of money. Consequently, the power tariff went up.

Coal would have been a good alternative in the above situation if it could replace gas. But it was not to be, because coal issue suffered because of serious management crisis. Nobody in the last few decades gave coal mining a reasonable thought. That left the country totally unprepared for a crisis when gas was in short supply.

The share of coal fuel in power generation at present is in the 2% to 3% range. But that may change in the short term, thanks to the official projections of coal-based power plants to be installed. These projections estimate that power generation in 2020 would be about 20,000 MW, 50% of which would be coal-based.

The above implies that about 10,000 MW of power is supposed to come from coal-fired plants by 2020. At present, coal-fired power generation capacity is about 200 MW and therefore we have 6 years to add another 9,800 MW coal-based power to achieve that goal. The projections further suppose that half of the coal-based power (5,000 MW) would be generated by locally produced coal and the other half (5,000 MW) by imported coal by that time. That looks very unlikely to happen, if not impossible. There are two issues to consider here; availability of coal and installation of power plants.

Let us consider the availability of coal. To generate 5,000 MW power by locally sourced coal, the coal mines need to produce 15 million tonnes coal per year by 2020. At present, Bangladesh has a single coal mine at Barapukuria (Dinajpur) that produces about 1 million tonnes of coal per year. That means, in about 6 years time additional production from local mines should be at least 14 million tonnes per year. If we assume that underground coal mining in all the coal deposits (including Barapukuria) in Bangladesh are developed to produce at double the rate of current Barapukuria production, the annual production would be 8 million tonnes (2million tonnes x 4 mines). This is almost half the amount required from local coal fields by 2020. Therefore, for the local mines to supply the required amount of coal some degree of open-pit mining is inevitable. But open-pit mining will have no easy ride in Bangladesh. There are several reasons for that.

Firstly, in 2006, a foreign coal company attempted to develop an open-pit mine, but the plan was aborted

because it was overly ambitious, was planned on a mega scale, had poor public relation and finally led to a violent clash between people opposing the mine and law enforcers, resulting in death. So foreign coal companies got a bad name and people are normally against them. Secondly, both the prime minister and the opposition leader of that time took side in favour of the people and against open-pit mine, charging up the people's sentiment further. As long as any one of these two persons heads the government, she would hesitate to break her promise because it would be politically damaging. And thirdly, the unfavourable geological, hydrological and social environments render open-pit coal mining more difficult than in West Bengal in India, for example. To what degree open-pit mining may develop in Bangladesh will depend on how these three issues are handled.

The feasibility of open-pit mining is limited to only two coalfields, Phulbari and part of Barapukuria. The other two fields, Khalashpir and Dighipara, have coal at greater depth which can only be exploited by underground mining. Any plan to develop open-pit mine in Phubari has to begin with neutralising the charged sentiment of local people against open-pit mine. This does not seem easy because over time this sentiment has consolidated further, to the credit of local and national politics that is apparently safeguarding people's interest. In fact, feasibility of open-pit mining is more of a socio-political issue than a technical one.

However, a conservative approach to open-pit mining would be more acceptable to people than a mega project. Presence of coal at lesser depth, like in the northern part of Barapukuria, may perhaps permit open-pit mining because the environment would be less affected and fewer people would be dislocated.

The 5,000 MW power generation to be based on imported coal involves different factors. Fifteen million tonnes of coal is not a large amount to import per year considering the annual coal production of 500 million tonnes in India and 3,500 million tonnes in China. But neither India nor China will export coal to Bangladesh because they have to supplement their supplies by some import as well. The two most reasonable options of coal sources are Australia and South Africa (Indonesia is a lesser option), both far away places, meaning transport cost would push the unit coal price higher.

Furthermore, Bangladesh has to invest heavily to build the required infrastructure to transport coal to the power plants, like a port with enough draft to anchor coal bearing mother ships (deep port facility), river dredging, railways and so on.

Coal price higher than that of local coal, expensive infrastructure development programme, annual cost of maintaining coal transport and handling facilities may all inflate the power price. If that price is not substantially lower than the price of the power generated by liquid fuel, then power generation through imported coal would be a non-issue. The success of transforming the power generating system from a predominantly gas-based to a predominantly coal-based one would depend on how efficiently the above factors are managed. The official projections of power generation will remain as wishful thinking unless they are shown to be practical.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Death of Buriganga

Buriganga is one of the most famous and historical rivers of Bangladesh which is now left in a terrible condition. A lot of toxic substances are



regularly thrown into the river. According to experts, 5mg Dissolved Oxygen (DO) must be present in 1000mg (1litre) of water for any aquatic fauna to live. But in Buriganga water the amount is 0.12 to 0.40mg. So there is no chance that any aquatic animal can live in Buriganga, which is a serious threat to our environment. What is more, the river has been shrinking because of illegal construction by river grabbers. If we want to save Buriganga, once a mighty river, steps should be taken right now. It is already too late.

S. M. Imranul Islam Rajon
Executive Officer, Janata Bank Limited

Ershad puts a chameleon to shame

I am feeling embarrassed and deeply ashamed for writing a letter thanking Jatiya Party Chairman, Hussein Muhammed Ershad, which was published in *The Daily Star* on 12.12.2013, titled 'Thank you Ershad'. What a fool I was to believe the words of a person who is called 'Bishwa Behaya'!

Before going to CMH he said to reporters that he would not participate in the one-sided election and if pressure was put on him, there were loaded pistols under his pillow, and he would use them. I believed him and thought that he was repentant for all his past escapades.

Now it has become clear that Ershad and his party are greedy for power and wealth; they will not hesitate to betray people to achieve their goal. If they refrained from joining the election, the country would have been saved from an election people did not accept.

He has put a chameleon to shame with his ability to change his colours.

Nur Jahan
Chittagong

Comments on news report, "AL blames 'intruders', BCL expels 2 leaders," published on February 04, 2014

Mofi

The minister said, "Criminals, backed by Jamaat-Shibir, got mingled with the general students." Shame on you!

If this is how you look at this violence, then we can clearly imagine what action you will take against the criminal BCL activists.

Shahin Huq

Lying and scapegoating are deeply ingrained in the Awami psyche. What else can we expect from Awami League and Chhatra League when the top leadership have murderous tendencies!

S.M. Iftekhar Ahmed

It seems apart from AL's ego, it will be the BCL that will make a significant contribution to their downfall.

Kantik Syed

Awami League should realize that they are walking on thin ice. Hasina ought to understand that she has to show strong leadership and eliminate the destructive vermin in the party and the student body. She should also get rid of sycophants around her. This term is very crucial for her to act as a statesman with vision and neutrality.

Snr Citizen

Education, what ails you?

Akhtar Shah

This "not one of ours" is a chronic disease of denial and it's highly contagious, both parties suffer from it. Why doesn't AL admit to it and show that they mean business and will not tolerate violence and extremism by anyone, including from their own. This will make a nice change, if AL severely punish these people under the law and expel them permanently. Biswajit murder did not occur so long ago and no matter how blind their loyalty to the party is, nothing could justify breaking the law.

"RU authorities' role questioned" (February 04, 2014)

Shahin Huq

I don't see any difference between the RU administration and the Chhatra League thugs in the street. Without the former's approval I don't think the latter would dare to fire live bullets upon students who protested tuition fees hike.

Barkat

When unelected government comes to power it affects every level of society. From top to bottom this government is illegitimate and illegal. It will do everything and anything to keep power. Police and security agencies are none but AL party men under complete control and for full use of AL and its affiliated gangs.