

Illegal gas connections galore

Stop massive pilferage of valuable resource

INVESTIGATIVE journalism in a prominent Bangla national daily has revealed that Titas Gas Transmission and Distribution Company, the sole authority for establishing new gas lines has effectively stopped its drives to remove illegal networks allegedly under pressure from politically-affiliated syndicates. The situation has reached a critical stage where organised groups apparently operating with the blessing of public representatives are laying thousands of gas lines to households for a "fee" that does not go to government coffers.

We are informed by Petrobangla that this illegal network spans some 200km to districts adjoining Dhaka. The anti-illegal drive cleared some 35km of lines but that has come to an abrupt stop for reasons unknown. What's apparent is that a section of unscrupulous officials and contractors are actively involved in this scam. Indeed, what is even more disheartening to see is that many connections that had been disconnected have again been re-established.

The country is facing acute shortage of gas. New industries and expansion of existing ones are kept on hold citing lack of gas. Thousands of readymade apartments in the country are lying idle because the government has put on hold new gas connections. And here we are seeing a bustling trade in illegal connections that is compounding the situation, both by depriving the government of revenue, and further depleting precious gas that could be put to greater use elsewhere. It is imperative that authorities do something to rein in on this malpractice that is hurting national interest.

Extortion on the streets

Where will hawkers go for redress?

EXTORTION by policemen and political elements is not a new story. But when the extent of it is revealed in the media, as in this newspaper yesterday, it becomes cause for serious concern. Our report, based on figures made available by the Bangladesh Hawkers Federation, shows that on a single day (and that is every day), as much as Tk. 1.3 crore are extorted from 2.6 lakh hawkers on the streets of the capital. Where does the money go? To the police and to local activists of the ruling party and its front organisations, of course.

Now, the inspector general of police informs citizens that whenever specific allegations are made, the department inquires into them. Why not have those inquiries made on the basis of news reports and citizens' complaints? And are we to believe that senior police officials remain unaware of the corruption indulged in by men under their command?

For his part, the local Jubo League chief echoes the IGP. If anyone brings specific allegations of extortion against Jubo League activists, the organization will look into the matter. In a society where citizens can lodge complaints at risk to their self-respect and even life, does the JL leader really believe that anyone will come to his office to name names?

Hawkers' occupation of pavements is certainly not acceptable, but that is a different matter altogether. Yet when extortionists make it a point to derive pecuniary advantage from the predicament of the poor, we are made aware of the long road we yet must travel before we can build a decent social order for ourselves. Will those who matter take note?

Energy from cows!

ABDUL MATIN

ARGENTINE scientists have finally discovered millions of tiny gas fields -- not by drilling thousands of feet below ground but simply by inserting a small tube into a cow's digestive track! Unlike other gas fields, the newly found gas reserves are renewable and more environment friendly! The discovered gas is methane, the main ingredient of natural gas, and can be used as fuel.

A cow's digestive system produces huge quantities methane through a process known as microbial fermentation. This gas is normally vented out through belching (burping) and flatulence (farting). Estimates vary regarding how much methane an average dairy cow expels. Some experts say 100 liters to 200 liters a day while others say it is up to 500 liters. By the way, it can also be explosive. Methane gas from 90 flatulent cows recently exploded in a German farm-shed damaging its roof and injuring one animal.

If released into the atmosphere, methane adds to the greenhouse gases. Cows are believed to be the biggest producers of methane, amounting to about 25% of the total global production. It may be noted that its contribution to global warming is 23 times more powerful than carbon dioxide. For this reason, the Obama administration has proposed cutting methane emissions from the dairy industry by 25% by 2020.

The Argentine scientists came up with a unique solution to kill two birds with one stone. They plan to collect the gas from the cows to reduce global warming and use it as fuel at the same time. The combustion of methane will produce carbon dioxide, another greenhouse gas, but its contribution to global warming is much less effective than methane, as stated earlier. The scientists believe cow-backpacks (or 'fartpacks') can be used to trap the methane gas through tubes inserted into their digestive tracks and extract 300 litres of methane a day from one cow. It should be enough to run a car for 24 hours!

The technology has been under development at the National Institute for Agricultural Technology (INTA) for a number of years and is still at "proof-of-concept stage". The world has 1.5 billion cows (55 million in Argentina alone) and billions of other grazing animals. If the experiments at the INTA prove to be successful, imagine how much methane can be extracted from the planet's cattle heads to supplement the global fossil energy resources and how much it will contribute to the reduction of global warming.

Good luck to Argentine scientists! I wonder if our scientists will follow suit. We have a cattle population of 23 million. Is it not worth trying?

The writer is a former chief engineer of Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission.

Social Progress Report 2014: Are we doing better?



ASHFAQUR RAHMAN

SO where is the US intellectual, Henry Kissinger? His fond dream of seeing Bangladesh as an 'international basket case' has indeed floundered. So much about such intellectualism. In the early seventies, the way to measure the progress of a nation was to look at its Gross National Product (GNP) per capita. That was the only reliable criterion. Hence Kissinger thought Bangladesh deserved such a characterisation. Soon however, Mahbubul Huq, a Pakistani economist, introduced what he called the Human Development Index (HDI). Here he included a broader definition of wellbeing. He included a composite measure of three dimensions of human development. They were: living a long and healthy life (measured by life expectancy), being educated (measured by adult literacy and gross enrolment in education), and having a decent standard of living (measured by purchasing power parity). He, therefore, provided a broad prism for looking at human progress and the intricate relationship between income and wellbeing.

Then came the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDG). Eight MDGs, which range from halving extreme poverty rates to halting the spread of HIV/Aids and providing primary education, all by 2015, was a blueprint agreed by world leaders and spear-headed by the United Nations. The aim was to meet the needs of the world's poorest and to build a better world. Work is now in progress to find out what more can be done after 2015.

An original idea for designing a social progress index was conceived in 2009 when experts, academics and social leaders met at the World Economic Forum (Global Agenda Council on Philanthropy and Social Investing). This proposed index was a challenge to increase the impact that social entrepreneurs, business leaders and policy makers could have in the world. Inspired by the Global Competitive Index to spur competition between nations to improve the environment for social innovation, this new index was born. In 2013, the Social Progress Imperative launched its first project called the Social Progress Index (SPI) at the University of Oxford.

The methodology used was developed under the leadership of a Social Progress Advisory Board chair, Professor Michael Porter of the Harvard Business School, with guidance from scholars drawn from the Rockefeller Foundation, M.I.T. and others. It may be noted that the conceptual underpinnings of this Index drew from the work done by Joseph Stiglitz (previously of the World Bank), Amartya Sen (Nobel Laureate in Economics) and Jean Paul Fitoussi of the French Commission on Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress. The 2013 report included several countries but it was at an initial stage.

Last week, a more comprehensive index based on observations of social and environmental factors directly rather than only economic ones has been tabulated and measured. The factors include personal safety, ecosystem sustainability, health and wellness, shelter, sanitation,

equity, inclusion, personal freedom, choice, etc. They were lumped under three different dimensions -- Basic Human Needs, Foundations of Well Being and Opportunity. Thus, the whole idea behind introducing SPI was to loudly state that economic progress is a necessary step, but it is not sufficient for personal welfare. SPI ranks 132 countries this year on 54 indicators.

A study of the SPI shows that in the country rankings 'some countries pull above their weight when it converts dollars of output into social progress.' Thus, New Zealand a small island country in the Pacific, tops the SPI. So does Costa Rica, another speck of a country as well as Uruguay. The USA is a nation where GDP dollars spent do not seem to be matched by social progress. This is clear when expenditures in health and the costs incurred do not translate into the top health wellbeing for its population. Both India and China, the two most populous nations are coming up in economic clout, but their dollars spent are not bettering the lives of their citizens. Another exciting revelation from the 2014 SPI is that 'societies that lacks things as social inclusiveness and political freedom lag far behind their potential (Turkey and Russia). This means that citizens of these countries do not enjoy wellbeing from the GDP that is already theirs.'

How does Bangladesh fare in the SPI that came out last week? Out of the 132 countries Bangladesh ranks 99. We are above India (102) and Pakistan (124) in overall position. But below us is Sri Lanka (85) in South Asia. Although our per capita GDP is less, our basic human needs is 57.28 and our Foundations of Well Being is 59.4. Only our Opportunity dimension scores 39.44. If it is any consolation to us, China stands in 90th position compared to our 99th position, and Russia is in 80th position. The overall best performing country in the SPI is New Zealand, followed by Switzerland, Iceland, Netherlands, Norway and Sweden. But they are tiny countries with relatively small populations. Japan, the 3rd largest economy in the world, is in 14th position while the USA occupies the 16th position in the world.

What can Bangladesh learn from examining the SPI? Two major areas need further attention of our policy planners to accelerate growth. They are Basic Human Needs (nutrition, basic medical care, water and sanitation, personal safety and shelter) and Opportunity (personal rights, personal freedom, choice, tolerance, inclusion and access to advanced education). We emphasise on these two major dimensions so that we all understand that it is in these two areas that we need to put our budgetary dollars for fruitful spending. Our economic pundits as well as our political leaders must stop frittering away energy on irrelevant issues.

Wise men like Professor Yunus, Sir Abed and other ordinary men and women of great talent have relentlessly pursued some of these goals as mentioned in the SPI for Bangladesh. We have been able to quickly come so far because of their hard work and foresight. We have indeed been able to debunk the sheer nonsense that certain so-called intellectuals in their spur of exuberance had uttered and had created visible paralysis in vision and foresight in a great nation like Bangladesh.

Is Henry Kissinger able to read this Social Progress Index 2014 report?

The writer is a former Ambassador and a commentator on current affairs. E-mail: ashfaq303@gmail.com

Indian elections and India-Bangladesh relations

ANAND KUMAR

INDIA is holding parliamentary election which is most likely going to change the present regime at the centre. Even if Congress manages to spring a surprise and comes back to power, its two prominent leaders Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Finance Minister P. Chidambaram would not be in new government. Thus, a new government at the centre in India is a certainty, only the party that comes to power could be different. This likely change has also caused some unease among a section in Bangladesh who apprehend that India-Bangladesh relations would be adversely affected. However, this may not be the case.

On the contrary, it is possible that there could be some positive developments. India has been going through a policy paralysis for the last several years. This affected decision-making in economic and foreign policy arenas. Economic reforms were not taking place, which resulted in slowing down of economy. This has turned out to be a major reason behind the unhappiness with the present government. The situation left a lot to be desired, even in the foreign policy arena.

The Indian government suffered a major embarrassment when West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee refused to accompany Prime Minister Manmohan Singh during his Dhaka visit in September 2011. This happened because the government at the centre was not stable. It gave a lot of space to regional players who did not let the centre carry out its responsibility of foreign policy making with full freedom. However, the centre could also be blamed for not taking them into confidence before arriving at a deal.

This situation could change if a stable government comes to power in New Delhi. Though it may be difficult for any government in the centre to ignore the point of view of West Bengal represented by the government of the day in the state, a properly functioning central government would be in a better position to negotiate a deal and finally implement that.

This is possibly the reason why Bangladeshi diplomats posted in India too feel confident about the future of bilateral relationship. This was manifested in the recent statement of Mahbub Hassan Saleh, Deputy High Commissioner of Bangladesh, who said that there would not be any problem even if Modi, prime ministerial candidate of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), comes to power. The High Commissioner of Bangladesh, His Excellency Tariq Karim, already enjoys good rapport with Modi as he has met him in Gujarat. Former foreign minister Dipu Moni also met top opposition leaders when

she was in India last time. She has already discussed important issues in bilateral relations with the opposition. This would now come handy in case opposition NDA comes to power. Modi has himself said that the neighbouring countries have nothing to worry if he forms the government. In fact, Modi, being concerned with increasing Chinese presence in South Asia, could take some positive measures to strengthen the bilateral relationship.

Out of the two big ticket issues the new government would find it easier to implement the Land Boundary Agreement (LBA). This agreement is nearly ready and has already been placed in the upper house of the parliament with the objective that it does not expire with the tenure of the parliament. It shows that the parliamentarians are sincere about it. The new government in New Delhi might at best like to tweak the deal a little and go for it. This tweaking could also be just to pacify the various opponents of the deal.



Teesta River now.

STAR

There are many positive things happening in India-Bangladesh relations even while India is holding parliamentary elections. There were reports that India had offered Bangladesh another one billion dollar credit. Bangladesh is reportedly considering allowing India to take its power transmission line through Bangladesh so that hydropower generated in North East could be transferred to consumers in North Western India. Bangladesh is also likely to benefit by getting some hydropower. Moreover, it is also possible that Bangladesh might get some hydropower produced in Bhutan. Thus, the win-win cooperation seems to be going on unhindered.

Indian corporates are willing to invest in Bangladesh. Hero motors, the largest manufacturer of motorcycles in India, has decided to invest \$40 million in Bangladesh. This would create 200,000 jobs. Besides, it would also help address trade imbalance. The confidence of Indian corporates to invest in Bangladesh indicates that they believe that relationship is only likely to improve further.

India and Bangladesh may not have been able to solve two big-ticket issues of LBA and Teesta water sharing but they have done well by not getting bogged down by them. A general environment of friendliness has resulted in other benefits which are no less important. In fact, the goodwill and mutual trust generated from them could actually lead to solution of Teesta water sharing and the LBA. This would not have been possible in an environment of hostility.

Kaikobad: A true face of humanity

April 24, 2014 was the first anniversary of Rana Plaza tragedy. On this tragic day, we once more remember the pain and agony of our garment workers and their families. We also remember the shameful lust, greed and brutality with which our garment workers were treated and put in the death trap. While reading the features, articles, and editorials published in The Daily Star, I was taken aback by the absence of a face, of at least an article about the valiant soul -- our true face of humanity, Ejaz Uddin Chowdhury Kaikobad. Does this mean that in barely one year we forgot him, we forgot his legacy of sacrifice for humanity?

May I request TDS to publish a feature on Kaikobad? I am sure there are plenty of things to say about the man. I remember I read many quality reports and articles published in TDS immediately after his death in Singapore.

M M Islam Khokan
 Canberra, Australia

Holiday trip turned fatal

The recent tragedy at St. Martin's Island which led to the untimely death of six students of a renowned private engineering university has shocked the whole nation. After the accident took place, the ministry concerned has decided to formulate specific guidelines for study tours and excursions of private educational institutions.

But what will happen to those who have lost their children and siblings in the tragedy? No doubt, the close kin of the lost ones are in psychological trauma. The dead students would perhaps remain as examples for future tourists who would be much more cautious in their adventurous journeys to the coastal areas of the country. Lastly, we would like to extend our heavy-hearted condolences to the bereaved families. May the Almighty be our saviour.

A sad reader
 Dhanmondi, Dhaka

What is the purpose of education?

Question leakage during public exams and adoption of unfair means in the exam hall are becoming common in our country. Is obtaining a certificate or getting the desired GPA everything for a student? Students should realise that the purpose of education is not only getting degrees but to also enlighten themselves with the light of knowledge.

Intishar Rashad
 Student
 Notre Dame College

Comments on news report, "Dramatic rise in Teesta water," published on April 23, 2014

Mortuza Huq
 All credit should go to the people of Bangladesh and thanks to BNP's pro-people long march. If people are united, everything is possible.

"Survived, only to suffer" (April 23, 2014)

Hardreality
 Only a few days ago we spent a hundred crore taka behind organising a gathering to sing the national anthem just to make a record, which could be broken any day. But we let those 1134 dead workers' bereaved families and nearly 2000 injured workers languish in inhuman condition. Our ruling elites give much more emphasis on getting public attention than the sufferings of the poor people. Truly, we are a morally bankrupt nation.

"Secretary sued for corruption" (April 23, 2014)

Turja
 Scrapping the provision of ACC law that required prior permission from higher authorities to file a case against government officials is commendable. I think Mr. Showkat did something distressing for the AL high-ups and got sued. Because, alteration of 3 katha to 5 is not a big deal when thousand crore takas are being swindled from banks. Besides, people are making crores of money by doing unholy business.

Hardreality
 It sounds great (!) that ACC has finally gathered enough courage to sue an incumbent secretary. The problem is whether the ruling party will let ACC perform on its own or make the commission run the case ad infinitum.

Nazmul Haq
 The secretary said that he had made appeals to the Rajuk seeking alteration of categories of plots. Well, Mr. Secretary, does that mean changing the size of the plot from the position of power makes it legal? I hope ACC will be able to show this gentleman the address of Nazimuddin Road.