

When will pleasure trips end?

Stop wasting national wealth

IN a country where thousands of crores of taka is siphoned off from banks without so much as whimper from the government, spending a sum of ten crores by Rajuk on wasteful trips, euphemistically called study tours, may look like pittance. But the issue is more fundamental than the sum involved. It is the planned and calculated manner of misusing public money by persons in high places of a government institution that is the point at issue. And unless cognizance is taken and the matter rectified through severe administrative actions after thorough auditing, wasting public money will assume an endemic proportion.

Even a person who has himself availed of the benefits of such pleasure trips terms these as wasteful expenditures for purposeless tours. And no less than the parliamentary standing committee on housing ministry has called these as trips for pleasure shopping having no use for the general public. But all that they have done is to reprimand the relevant authorities since the standing committees have no power to do anything more.

Merely reprimanding is not enough. We feel that such waste of public money borders on criminality and must be taken cognizance of by the government. Unfortunately, the situation of Rajuk, we are sure, is fairly representative of the situation obtaining in most, if not all, of the ministries and department of the government. We are used to seeing bloated official entourages of high profile delegations.

Not only must the errant officers be punished much of the blame for such waste must also be shouldered by the approving authorities.

JCD feuding spills out

Committee formation arbitrary?

OUTRAGED at the announcement of the formation of JCD's new central committee, the faction feeling aggrieved by the decision reacted violently. The reason behind such fierce expression of dissent has had to do with apparently not pursuing democratic procedure to form student body's new central committee. It didn't even spare vandalising the party's central office. The persuasive words of some central leaders fell on deaf ears on the infighting student activists.

JCD's election rules were allegedly violated. In one instance, against four posts 124 were taken instead of 26 as per rules. Moreover, many among the new committee were non-students.

As the students' wing of a large party JCD was expected to hold its councils. It is the councillors who would elect the leadership. But councils have not been formed for a long time. It's basically a reflection of the lack of inner-party democracy and setting aside the principle of election to make room for arbitrary selction of office bearers.

On one hand, JCD leadership claims it fighting to establish a democratic culture by forming a new committee, on the other it is being arbitrary in its selection of its leadership.

Although the internal feuds spilled over to the street and damaged part of the central office the police sadly played the role of bystanders, not surprisingly perhaps.

Will Didi flex muscles against Modi?

ABDUL MATIN

PASCHIMBANGA Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, popularly known as Didi, is very fond of flexing muscles. She first demonstrated her muscle power by opposing the Teesta water sharing agreement with Bangladesh in 2012. Manmohan, then heading a coalition government, returned to Delhi without signing the highly publicized Teesta agreement. Didi triumphed.

During the last general election, Didi challenged the Election Commission (EC) for ordering the transfer of four IPS and three IAS officers in Paschimbanga without consulting her. She publicly declared, "I will not remove a single officer. Let the EC come and arrest me. I throw this challenge to the EC." The powerful EC put a deadline for implementation of the transfer order. Didi yielded.

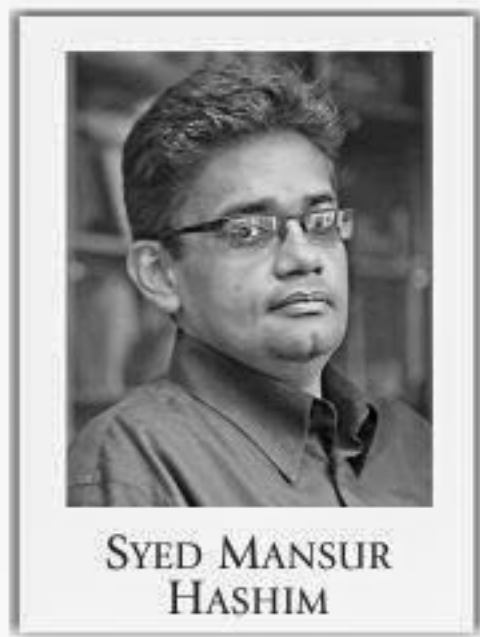
She is in a difficult position now dealing with the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi which handed over the probe of the blasts in Burdwan to the National Investigation Agency (NIA) bypassing the state government. It is alleged that the bombs assembled in Burdwan were meant for terror strikes in Bangladesh. Didi complained of an increasing trend of interference in state matters since the new government led by Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party took over. This is "unprecedented, undemocratic and unethical", she wrote on her Facebook page. Who will yield now?

Narendra Modi is not Manmohan Singh. The former has an absolute majority in the Lok Sabha. He is not dependent on Didi like Manmohan was. Modi needs to find out who provided a safe sanctuary to the Bangladeshi terrorists assembling bombs in Burdwan. There are also allegations of collusion between the Jamaat-e-Islami of Bangladesh and the Trinamool Congress of Mamata Banerjee. According to available reports, Jamaat secretly helped Trinamool with huge funds before 2011 and a Trinamool Rajya Sabha MP returned the favour to Jamaat during their agitations against the war crimes trials.

Was Didi aware of the terrorists' activities in Burdwan? Both 'yes' or 'no' answer to this tricky question will be equally embarrassing to her. Under the circumstances, she is most unlikely to have the moral strength to flex muscles against Modi. Nobody should be surprised if she even softens her stubborn attitude towards the Teesta water sharing agreement and the land boundary agreement with Bangladesh. After all, it is the prerogative of the central government to deal with such issues and the decision is normally taken in the interest of the country. Why should Modi allow interference by a state in central issues? Didi should also appreciate that anything good for India should be good for her. The vice versa may not always be true.

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

Saarc energy cooperation



SYED MANSUR HASHIM

THE 5th Saarc Energy Ministers Meeting has finalised the Saarc Framework Agreement for Energy Cooperation. Although Pakistan was missing from the meet, seven out of eight Saarc member countries have now come on board on sharing energy resource across borders. This is undoubtedly a very welcome step in the right direction given that it paves the way for member countries to buy and sell electricity as per individual country's needs. Signing of the framework is due to take place in the coming Saarc Summit that is to be held in Kathmandu in November. Should the framework be implemented it would open the way for the construction of a grid to facilitate electricity transfer among nations.

The agreement had been pending since 2010, and its signing will be a fundamental step forward towards bringing to fruition a Saarc Market for Electricity (SAME). It opens up a lot of opportunities for Bangladesh, which has suffered significant and chronic shortage of electricity over the years. The agreement could pave the way for

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import of hydroelectric power generated, for instance, in North-East India to Bangladesh. The primary focus now should be the setting up of the grid within the next four to five years. The experts' panel will also have to work out the regulatory issues on how energy is to be traded amongst member countries. For Bangladesh, the sooner the grid is operational the better. With no significant new gas finds since 1996, the country has suffered a chronic shortage of 500 million cubic feet of gas per day. It has forced policymakers to play a juggling game between which productive sectors to keep operational and which ones to shut down. During irrigation season, major power is diverted to agricultural belts. Despite the oil-fired power plants that now significantly complement electricity production, we have witnessed the regular shutting down of fertiliser plants.

Although the government has initiated development of a coal-fire based power plant plan to generate electricity, it is still 4-5 years away. In the meantime, required power continues to suffer deficit and it is here that SAME could play the crucial role of filling in the void by importing readymade electricity from an electricity-surplus country in the Saarc region. The bilateral agreement between India and Bangladesh has so far facilitated the purchase of 500 megawatts of electricity. Though a request has been made to increase this cross-

border supply to 1,000 megawatts, there is need to upgrade transmission lines. And one cannot forget the fact that India suffers from its own share of energy deficit. Thus, the requirement for a regional power market becomes all the more imperative.

Bangladesh and India have started power trading and expect to expand its volume. In principle, there are no differences between the parties to increase the volume of power trade and with expanded grid facilities in place; some more electricity may be imported over the next few years. India and Bangladesh are actively progressing on negotiations to build high voltage grid lines to transmit power from the potentially surplus eastern Indian states through Bangladesh to Bihar and West Bengal. If such initiatives bear fruit, Bangladesh may expect more electricity from the grid. In 2030 Bangladesh expects to import 4,000 MW power to support its demands. Part of the electric power may also be imported from Nepal and Bhutan provided the interconnected power grids are built and sufficient investment is made in the hydropower potential sources in Nepal and Bhutan.

What remains to be seen is whether the political will is backed up by steps on the ground that will propel countries like Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Bhutan to take the relationship for power trading forward, and if further projects are initiated in this spirit. Initiatives taken till date have significantly helped development of SAME. In the meantime, China has been increasingly showing interest for cooperation in the regional infrastructure network development. The

BCIM (Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar) forum also actively supports initiatives for road and energy sector development which intends to help improve the living standards for the people of the region. Power grid connectivity within Saarc will not only support the development of the 8-nation country forum but will also create opportunities to expand the cooperation with BCIM forum.

As pointed out by the Indian power minister in the recently concluded 2-day summit, the "impact of electricity on human lives is profound, ranging from healthcare to education to employment opportunities. The household per capita consumption of electricity within Saarc is mere 128 units versus global average of 3,045 units." That there is potential for growth, given access to electricity made available through stable infrastructure and workable price mechanisms, is obvious. It will be interesting to watch what outcome will come from the meeting due to be held in Bangladesh in December, where apparently all the four expert groups have finalised their Terms of Reference and Work Plans.

The writer is Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.

Natural gas price adjustment initiative

MUSHFIQUR RAHMAN

NATURAL gas has been the major primary energy input in the country for industrial, business and domestic consumers. Since the late 1960s, pipeline gas connections have been extended to domestic users, mainly in the urban areas, with the objective of expanding commercial uses of natural gas. At present, approximately 2 million domestic consumers use natural gas mainly for household cooking. The gas utility companies estimate that approximately 7% of the total population of the country gets the privilege of getting piped gas supply for everyday cooking. The rest 93% use either costlier bottled LPG gas, or kerosene or firewood.

An average family generally uses two LPG bottles (12.5 kg each) a month for cooking, spending nearly Tk. 3,000-3,500 (those who use kerosene or fire wood spend as much or more). On the other hand, a consumer enjoys piped gas supply from utility companies paying Tk. 450 only per month (for unlimited use) for domestic consumption. It is assumed that an average 2-burner piped gas user consumes 88 cubic meter (3107.7 cubic feet) natural gas for domestic cooking, which should cost about Tk. 4,000 (nearly 10 times the present price). Experts also consider that the equivalent amount of gas if supplied from imported LNG source would have cost Tk. 3,750 (assuming 1,000 cubic feet of gas costs \$ 15). Clearly, it is not at an economic price that domestic gas is supplied to the consumers.

Domestic gas has a finite reserve (approximately 10-12 trillion cubic feet), and at the present rate of pipe gas consumption (including domestic, industrial and commercial uses), the gas reserve will not last more than 10 more years (unless significant new reserve is added). Despite increased exploration efforts, no major gas resource could be discovered since 1996 in the country. So the fear of rapid depletion of gas resource has raised the alarm for energy sector managers. There has been a demand and supply gap for approximately 500 million cubic feet of gas supply daily. This primary energy input shortage has compelled part of the electric power generation units to either sit idle or to use expensive imported liquid petroleum, while industries suffer from gas supply shortages and fail to attain target productions.

In this connection, Dr. Priyantha Wijayatunga, princi-

pal energy specialist at the South Asia department at the ADB, says that "it makes more economic sense for Bangladesh to use its own gas reserves in productive sectors to accelerate economic growth rather than in households." Media reports say that ADB officials called upon the Bangladesh government to continue its efforts in reforming the energy sector to ensure more efficient operations and better services, including pipe gas uses for domestic consumers.

Media reports further say that the state owned Bangladesh Oil, Gas and Mineral Corporation (Petrobangla) is preparing to send formal proposals to Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission (BERC) for rationalising natural gas prices for all types of consumers. Speculations about significant increase per unit gas price and doubling of piped natural gas price for domestic consumers has invited debates in the country. Former Petrobangla chairman



If the earnings from the increased prices are used by Petrobangla for creating funds for gas sector development and for subsidising imported LP gas and LNG (planned to be imported) prices, it will positively impact on the energy sector development in the country in the long term.

Dr. Hossain Mansur said in an interview with Samakal (October 15) that Petrobangla would apply for gas price enhancement to BERC.

Petrobangla obtained approval from the Energy and Mineral Resources Division for forwarding such a proposal. Following necessary legal procedures BERC will fix the new gas price per unit for different categories of consumers in the country. As reported, Petrobangla favours doubling gas price for domestic consumers as the organisation intends to establish parity among the pipe gas users and those who are not connected with the gas networks in the country. Also, Petrobangla feels that the present gas price encourages wasteful use of gas.

In addition, Petrobangla intends to propose gas price increase for other categories of consumers, including captive gas consumers, CNG users, power generation companies, urea fertilizer companies and tea producers.

Major gas price hike will have impacts on utility and commodity prices. Sufferings will be obvious for the fixed income group of people in case of increased cost of gas supply. If the earnings from the increased prices are used by Petrobangla for creating funds for gas sector development and for subsidising imported LP gas and LNG (planned to be imported) prices, it will positively impact on the energy sector development in the country in the long term.

The wrtler is a mining engineer.

LETTERS

TO THE EDITOR

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Hold probe into frequent train accidents

In railway parlance, the pair of parallel rails is called permanent-way. However, given the regular frequency of train derailments happening all over the country in the last few months, isn't it better to call it temporary-way? Many passengers got injured and



PHOTO: STAR

on occasions there were fatalities too. Also there was serious disruption in railway schedule, and trains were delayed because of it. Only the other day, a daily reported that people now prefer to travel by train, given that here the risk of delays or accidents are rare compared to frequent sinking of launches in rivers and regular serious accidents on roads and highways.

So in public interest, a serious high level inquiry should take place to find out the reason why train accidents are happening so often.

Engr. S. A. Mansoor
Dhaka

International Day of the Girl Child

International Day of the Girl Child was observed across the world on 11th October 2014. This day promotes girls' human rights and highlights gender inequalities that remain between girls and boys and addresses the various forms of discrimination and abuse suffered by girls around the world. Violence against girls limits their opportunities and choices and threatens their futures. We want an end of harmful practices such as sexual violence and child marriages all over the world.

Hasna Begum
Advocate, Supreme Court of Bangladesh

Congratulations to JS speaker

It is heartening to learn that the Speaker of Bangladesh Jatiya Sangsad Dr Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury has been elected the Chairperson of the executive committee of Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) for the next three years in the CPA elections held in the Cameroonian capital of Yaounde recently. Dr. Chaudhury has earned a great honour for Bangladesh by winning the election. Heartiest congratulations to her.

Professor M Zahidul Haque
Department of Agricultural Extension & Information System, SAU, Dhaka

Comments on news report, "State's costly silence," published on October 17, 2014

Snr Citizen

It's a very good piece of news that false cases against Limon have been withdrawn. Limon now needs rightful compensation and rehabilitation. The media again can help develop public opinion and draw the attention of the authorities.

Nawfal Talukdhara

The government should not only compensate Limon for the irreparable emotional and physical damage he sustained, but also take the responsibility for his higher education.

"Thermal scanners for int'l airports" (Oct. 17, 2014)

SM

What is the plan if some are infected with Ebola? Where will they be treated and who will supervise it? Do we even have a HAZMAT department to safely dispose of the medical and patients' wastes?

Sayed Rahman

This is undoubtedly a good initiative. Ebola, at this moment, is the most threatening epidemic disease of the world. So far we have seen a lot of contagious diseases but Ebola is completely different from them. We should remain alert about this virus.

"Centralising teachers' recruitment process" (Oct. 16, 2014)

Rahman Mostafiz

Education is such an important matter with which we cannot compromise. Bad quality teachers should not be recruited.

"Abdul Matin was an angel in human form" (Oct. 17, 2014)

Nds

The dignity and courage symbolised by this man is a thing of past that many in modern society cannot comprehend.