

33 percent vehicles without fitness certificate!

No wonder the large number of accidents

THE statistics are horrifying. How can anyone even think of reducing the number of road accidents when one third of the vehicles that are plying on the roads are without the necessary fitness papers? And this is according to statistics of the BRTA covering the period up to 25 October. And when one takes into account the number of drivers without legal driving license the mix assumes a most dangerous prospect, and one that is reflected in the road mishaps. Surely those with the responsibility to ensure that unfit vehicles are kept off the streets are not doing their job with honesty.

While it is the responsibility of the BRTA to issue driving licenses and fitness certificates, it is for the police on the city streets and on the highways to check vehicles for legal and up to date documents. And on both counts there is not only lax oversight, the deep rooted corruption pervading both these agencies is also responsible for the horrid state of affairs in the road transport sector. One has to spend only a few minutes on the streets to see the roads saturated with dilapidated, rickety jalopies passing off as vehicles right under the nose of the traffic sergeant without a bother.

Merely coming out with statistics is not enough. We would like to know what the BRTA has done or is planning to do to correct the gross aberration. It is serious matter since unfit vehicles take lives. And those entrusted to prevent that do not do their job properly are committing a criminal offence.

Waterway workers' strike

Urgency for remedial action felt

AN incident of either an internal fight aboard a cargo vessel as the police claimed or of robbery that workers would have us believe, triggered work stoppage along the inland waterways on Saturday. The fact that seven persons went missing from a lighter vessel was scary to the remaining crew but the wild cat strike resorted to by all waterway workers smacks of precipitate action.

True, there has been a nagging sense of insecurity in our inland waterways due to robbery and extortionist forays and the workers have had pent-up grievances about. Even allowing for that, in this particular case, they should have insisted on an expeditious rescue operation and demanded to see the colleagues first even before going for a limited suspension, let alone triggering a country-wide workabstention.

The chain effects have already engulfed Mongla and Narayanganj with three lakh workers of 20,000 cargo-carriers joining in, when last reports came in. The outer anchorage of Chittagong Port has felt the ripple effect. All this can have a telling impact on trade and business particularly in the backdrop of a series of hartals.

It imperative that the inland waterway authority engages the Bangladesh Noutan Sramik Federation in a dialogue with participation of representative from river police and coast guards to devise effective ways and means to combat robbery and extortion along the waterways. We cannot leave our rivers so frighteningly unsafe.

The virtue of inclusiveness

EDITORIAL: The Hindu (INDIA)

THE new Maharashtra and Haryana Assemblies have only 12 Muslim MLAs between them and no Muslim Minister. The number of Muslim Ministers in nine major BJP-ruled States thus remains just one. The non-BJP-ruled States do better, the share of Muslim legislators and Ministers being much closer to their share in the population, but some Congress-ruled States like Uttarakhnad too have no Muslim Minister. On the back of a General Election that swept the BJP to power but produced a Parliament with the lowest proportion of Muslim MPs in over 50 years, this is cause for concern. Undoubtedly, this has to do with the communalisation of political parties, but it is also about the communalisation of voters. Under the first-past-the-post system, Muslims are now likely to win only from constituencies with an unusually large Muslim population. In the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, the likelihood of a Muslim winning dropped, falling to just 1 per cent in constituencies where Muslims formed less than 20 per cent of the population. Political parties breed and then react to this communalisation, responding by nominating ever fewer Muslims from constituencies where they are not in sufficient numbers for reasons of "winnability". Following the BJP's sweep in Uttar Pradesh in May despite nominating no Muslim, the Samajwadi Party, which has nominated more Muslim candidates than any other national party over the last 50 years, reduced the number of tickets given to Muslims in the recent by-elections in Uttar Pradesh.

But Muslims being in positions of power does not necessarily ensure development outcomes for Muslims, the argument goes. However, the dignity of political representation and high office is not only a means to an end; it is an end in itself too. Moreover, while political representation is certainly not the only mode of development, the Rajinder Sachar Committee Report recommended it as one of the solutions to the disproportionate educational and economic backwardness of Muslims. The century-old fight of backward class empowerment movements and political parties to gain political representation in the southern States led to a situation where backward classes in Tamil Nadu and Kerala today have better development indicators than upper castes have in some northern States; political empowerment matters. Some dismiss these findings as a legitimate concern for a democracy, subscribing to what the late Professor Iqbal Ansari called a sort of "political Darwinism". By this same token, he wrote, concerns about the representation of women in politics would be dismissed as sexism. Expecting the legislatures to represent its diversity more fairly is not tokenism; it's what inclusive democracy truly looks like, as opposed to majoritarianism.

Hiking gas price: For whose interest?

RAZEKUZZAMAN RATAN

ON October 30, 2014 Petrobangla submitted a proposal to Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission (BERC) for increasing the price of gas. Before that, the media reported that the prime minister had approved a proposal for increasing the gas price on September 30.

BERC's Selim Mahmud stated that though they had accepted the proposal, they requested Petrobangla to re-submit a new proposal that would consider all the organisations that have been granted licence by BERC.

Petrobangla Chairman, Ishiaque Ahmed, said, "Petrobangla, in its proposal to BERC, has asked for increase in gas price. Now it's up to BERC as to what they will do. Petrobangla doesn't have a say here."

It is a repetition of the old trick: placing one's responsibility on another's shoulder. Currently, the country consumes about 2,330 million cubic feet (cft) of gas daily. In 2013-14, we consumed about 820 billion cft of gas. At present, of the 25 gas fields, 19 are operational.

Forty four new fields were explored in the last five years, and their net production capacity increased to 588 million cft daily. The plan for 2015-16 includes exploration of 28 new fields. The target for increasing gas production per day in the coming years is 765 million cft.

Currently, out of our total consumption, 41% is used for manufacturing electricity, 17% by captive power plants, 17% by the industrial sector, 8% for producing fertilizer, 5% as CNG, 11% for residential purposes and 1% for other usage.

Today, there are some 2.5 million direct or indirect consumers who fall under the category of daily users.

There are 72 gas based power plants. Collectively, their total capacity for producing electricity is more than 2,300 megawatts. In the last 6 years, production capacity of gas increased by 27.53%. The public will have nothing to look forward to in spite of increased production if they have to pay more.

What is surprising is that the prime minister's recommended proposal to increase gas price will range from 5% to 122%, but the foreign fertiliser and cement manufacturing companies like KAFKO and Lafarge will be exempted from paying the enhanced price.

Then what's the reason for increasing the price? Is our gas sector incurring loss? It still yields profit despite massive corruption, providing benefit to foreign companies at the cost of national interest and purchasing gas from foreign companies at rates much higher than that of local companies. Petrobangla and the companies involved in exploring, transmitting, logistics and supplying are making profit.

The public will find the disparity in the gas procurement cost between local and foreign companies astonishing. BAPEX's current selling rate is Tk. 25 per 1,000 cft, but if the same amount is procured from a foreign company it costs Tk. 200.

Petrobangla is paying the high price to foreign companies from its own coffer. In spite of this, it still has money in the gas fund which it uses to drill and explore a number of fields. Had national interest topped the list, then the gas sector could have made even more profit. Instead of increasing gas price we could think of lowering it.

Let's assess how much profit Petrobangla makes by

buying gas and selling it to the consumers. According to Petrobangla's MIS report, in 2013-14 fiscal year, the amounts deposited to the national exchequer by various companies are: Bapex -- Tk. 304 crore, Bangladesh Gas Field Company -- Tk. 2,304 crore, Sylhet Gas Field Company -- Tk. 1,086 crore, Bakhrabad Gas Systems Ltd. -- Tk. 68 crore, Karnaphuli Gas Distribution Company -- Tk. 212 crore, Titas Gas -- Tk. 610 crore, Jalalabad Gas -- Tk. 65 crore and Petrobangla -- Tk. 328 crore.

On average, Petrobangla is making a profit of over Tk. 3,000 crores every year. An important point to note is that as Petrobangla procures more gas from the international companies the yearly profit keeps nosediving every year. Nevertheless, it's still a profitable organisation.

What, then, is the rationale behind hiking the existing price of gas?

Since gas is not in short supply, the hidden agenda behind increasing the price is to make more profit. But what needs to be identified is: where do the massive profits end up? Utilisation of profits has always been a mystery, and no party has been held accountable in the past.

A question was once raised -- why is gas supplied for residential purposes at such a cheap rate and why is the rate of waste so high among households? Why should government pay subsidy for supplying gas to a small number?

However, only 11% of total gas supplied is consumed by households. It is assumed that the 27 lakh household consumers squander a significant portion of gas supplied to them, but in reality, much more gas is wasted in the energy, fertiliser and industrial sectors. The poor people and people with limited income have to cook for several families with a single burner stove and in many cases they also share the light from a single lamp, so there is little scope to fritter away gas at this level. If price is increased then the government is likely to earn Tk. 135 crore, but every consumer with limited income will have to pay Tk. 500 more. Mind you, this is a country where defaulters get away with thousands of crores every year. But it's all right if we can squeeze more out of poor people.

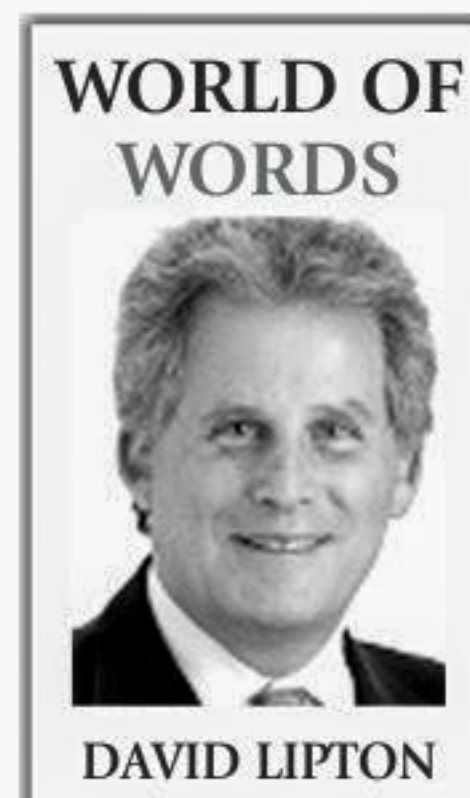
It could also be questioned why new residential connections have been suspended. Out of 225-230 crore cft, residential users consume about 25.29 crore cft. According to a report, 225 crore cft of gas is being produced currently and 40 crore cft is being wasted. The main culprits are the powerplants, fertiliser factories and the industrial sector as a whole. So now we know where the government should focus for stopping wastage.

Also, some 17% of total gas is used in the captive power plants and a major portion of wastage occurs when smaller generators are used to produce electricity. We must focus on how to modernise the old powerplants since, with outdated technology, their current productivity is about 25-30%. It would be possible to increase productivity by 55-60% with modernisation.

Last but not least, one wonders for how long we will have to depend on foreign companies instead of equipping our local companies with technology, training and knowledge. It's up to the public to decide how they want to see the end of the problems encompassing the gas sector.

The writer is a member of the Central Committee of Bangladeshers Shamajtantrik Dal (BSD).

Eastern Europe's 25 years of transition



DAVID LIPTON

the close of the Cold War, Central and Eastern Europe's economies were burdened by pervasive state ownership and concentrated investments in heavy industry. Fiscal and monetary policies had focused on boosting industrial growth, without regard to macroeconomic balance, resulting in chronically excessive demand and widespread shortages. To make matters worse, most of the region -- Czechoslovakia being a notable exception -- was plagued by unsustainable external debt and soaring inflation.

Meanwhile, few economists or policymakers had the background needed to tackle the complex tasks ahead. Such was the scale of the necessary transition that neither modern macroeconomics, nor the International Monetary Fund's nearly 50 years of experience, offered much guidance. The challenges to be overcome were daunting, and many thought it would be impossible.

Instead, four key ingredients contributed to successful transitions. First, courageous politicians and policymakers took on the challenge of designing crucial reforms and explaining their consequences to a public that was understandably wary. They understood the historic nature of the task and embraced the challenge.

Second, the reform strategies focused squarely on the essential: the liberalization of prices to reflect scarcity and facilitate the allocation of resources; stabilization of finances to end shortages and inflation; and privatization of state-owned companies and assets in order to improve corporate governance and performance. Countries that implemented these policies generally made the quickest and most complete progress.

Third, the allure of rejoining Europe after years of isolation, together with the European Union's commitment to enlargement, provided a gravitational pull -- and a legislative template -- that helped policymakers justify and implement difficult reforms. Unpopular laws sometimes brought down governments, but the ultimate litmus test for any new policy remained: "Will it lead us back to Europe?"

Finally, external support helped the region's heavily indebted countries face the twin tasks of implementing

structural reforms and coping with financial instability. Financing from the IMF, the World Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, and bilateral lenders, along with debt relief from official and commercial bank creditors, helped relieve the pressure. Technical assistance, capacity building, and support for privatisation -- of banks, in particular -- further smoothed the way.

Overall, the progress has been impressive. Several Central European countries have achieved per capita GDP levels (measured in terms of purchasing power parity) that place them on the lower rungs of the eurozone's income ladder. Standards of living in the region have improved dramatically -- even if full convergence with Western Europe is far from achieved.

Unsurprisingly, however, the picture is far from rosy everywhere. Some countries, especially in the Balkans and the Commonwealth of Independent States, are far from completing the transition and have gone through repeated cycles of hope and crisis. As elsewhere in the world, growth in the region has slowed sharply since the global financial crisis erupted in 2008. The pace of reform has slowed in many countries -- and reversed in a few. Geopolitical considerations have complicated matters

further, as the conflict in Ukraine demonstrates. Looking ahead, one can envision two broad scenarios. In the first, the region risks a cycle of weak growth, retreat from market-oriented policies, and increasing disillusionment. As a result, convergence with Western Europe could slow, with many countries lagging far behind -- a far different outcome from that envisioned during the boom

of the mid-2000s, when convergence within a generation seemed almost like a birthright.

In the second, brighter scenario, rapid convergence to advanced-economy income levels continues, supported by a focus on two priorities, detailed in a new IMF report. A renewed commitment to macroeconomic and financial stability allows governments to rein in persistent deficits and growing debts and address their economies' increasing volume of bad loans. Meanwhile, deeper structural reforms improve the business and investment climate, strengthen corporate governance, expand access to credit, free up labor markets, control public expenditure, and bolster tax administration -- all of which puts their economies on track for sustained rapid growth.

The IMF for its part, has been a committed partner to Central and Eastern Europe and its transformation throughout the past 25 years. It stands ready to help countries in the region make the next quarter-century just as impressive.

The writer is First Deputy Managing Director at the International Monetary Fund, was Senior Director at the US National Economic Council and National Security Council during President Barack Obama's administration and Under-Secretary of the Treasury for International Affairs under President Bill Clinton.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Shifting site of proposed NPP

This is in reference to the article, "16 more barges and Rooppur" by A. B.M. Nurul Islam published in your esteemed daily on 7-11-2014. Even the present lowest flow through the Ganges i.e. 3,100 cusec as reported is not at all sufficient for 2000 MW Nuclear Power Plant. Actual design will determine the exact volume of cooling water requirement. From the rule of thumb, it will be around 8,000 cusec. Hence, the only answer appears to be a cooling tower. This water will, of course, be circulated. Once charged, the cooling tower would need make-up water to replace the amount lost due to evaporation, drift, leaks etc. Depending on the design and weather conditions, the make-up may be 2 to 3 percent.

Given the requirement of cooling water and the transportation of heavy equipment for the NPP to the site, the site may be reconsidered and may be chosen at some sea shore of Bangladesh. Abundant sea water for cooling and the advantage of heavy equipment transportation and ease of handling may be considered.

Prof. M.A. Quaiyum
Former Chairman
Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission

Fake war heroes must face justice

I have come to know from TDS that two secretaries who forged freedom fighters' certificates to extend the tenure of their job have resigned from their job recently. They should have quit the day the ACC submitted its findings and asked the government to take action against them. But they stuck to their chairs shamelessly without even thinking that their subordinates had lost all respect for them. It is further reported that they resigned after the government ordered them to do so. My question is, is that the end? Haven't they committed a crime? Shouldn't they have been arrested? Are there different laws for the elites and the powerless?

Shahjahan Hafiz
Gulshan, Dhaka

Way to attain inner peace

Recently I visited a Hindu temple. There I met an eighty-nine-year-old man who was speaking with some youngsters. The place was crowded with devotees. The words and the crystal clear voice of that man attracted me. I went to him and asked, "How's your day?" He replied, "O my son! Bhagwan (God) knows. He sent me here once and will take me back one day. I have many siblings but they are staying away from me. I cannot do any heavy work to earn my bread. I am grateful to this temple." I asked him if he had any message for the new generation. "Young people should be strong and stout both physically and mentally and should not give up till their goal is achieved," he said. This made me think about life in a new way. This old man has been abandoned by his near and dear ones but he is at peace. His philosophy of life can be a guideline for many of us to lead a simple and peaceful life.

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Comments on commentary, "Propaganda and the war crimes trial," published on November 7, 2014

Truthprevails53

Kamaruzzaman is a monster and deserves death; he tried to glorify himself in the name of Islam.

Dev Saha

This man has killed many innocent Muslims in the name of fighting for the Muslims.

M. Emad

A bold commentary.

Asif Kamal

Thanks for this piece. The pro-Liberation government have to be strategic to counter Jamaat's systematic propaganda. I'd like to get the editor's attention on publishing a series of write-up on why justice couldn't be served immediately after the independence.

"Prison preparing for execution" (Nov. 6, 2014)

Akm Bari

Finish the job of hanging this convicted war criminal in light of the Supreme Court verdict.

Shining student

I was born in 1984. I just want to know one thing. We all know Jamaat was against our independence. But some people of Jamaat say that they were forgiven after 1971. They try to convince people as to why Bangabandhu did not take any steps for this tribunal. What took them so long to hold the trial?