

# A bleeding transport sector

For how much longer?

THE continuous countrywide blockade has left the communications system in complete disarray, causing severe disruption to transport and communications with far-off destinations, especially North Bengal, in addition to triggering irreparable losses to the sector.

As a result of arson attacks and vandalism, only 40% of buses are currently operating on highways. Although law enforcers have decided to deploy 12,000 Ansars in 993 highway spots around the country which have been identified as "risky," it remains to be seen how effective this move would be in ensuring safe passages to those travelling long distances.

Meanwhile, the blockade has substantially cut-off raw material supply lines to manufacturing units, resulting in disruption in productive sectors. The agricultural sector, too, has had to bear the brunt with farmers struggling to market their produce. Only 40%-45% of cargo trucks are operating under the special protection of law enforcement agencies. This is an unsustainable and inadequate solution to an enduring problem.

According to transport owners, the sector loses around Tk. 3 billion per day as a result of the blockade. In addition, transport workers are facing an uncertain future with irregular work hours and risk of death and injury if and when they do work.

When the transport sector, which makes up 7.31% of the country's GDP, bleeds, it naturally affects many other sectors of the \$150 billion economy.

It is high time for serious conflict resolution efforts between the major political stakeholders for normalcy to return to our lives.

# Law enforcers should mount vigil

Petrol easily available!

WHILE people are burnt either to death or suffer the consequences of hurled petrol bombs, petrol is being sold openly at roadside shops. We fail to see why the trade is allowed to take place under the very noses of the police even in the capital city. The primary ingredient in the Molotov cocktail that has become the weapon of choice of opposition activists can be picked up by the litre at any of the roadside shops in many places of the country. We are however informed that the authorities have taken steps to control the sale of petrol throughout the country. Yet the lead item in this paper yesterday shows a picture of dozens of bottles in all shapes and sizes proudly on display in Barguna.

This is a blatant sale of such an inflammable material. Investigative journalism has revealed that shopkeepers have gone on record to state that they simply fill up jerry cans of petrol at the nearest filling station and transfer the content into litre-sized bottles to be sold openly. Hence, if petrol pumps are the source, why are not authorities focusing their sights there? With 35 people dead so far and some 360 vehicles torched since the start of the opposition blockade, eradication of the menace from the source, i.e. petrol pumps, is quite feasible.

# Russia's economic crisis and Rooppur

ABDUL MATIN

RUSSIA is suffering from an economic and financial crisis. The average growth rate of its GDP over 1995 to 2014 averaged 0.86%. The crisis in Ukraine and the subsequent sanctions by the western world began to hurt its economy badly. Its energy sector constitutes 20%-25% of its GDP, 65% of its export and 30% of its annual budget. Naturally, the recent fall in the price of oil has dealt a severe blow to its economy. Crude oil was selling above \$100 per bbl in last July. At present, crude is selling at \$45/bbl. Russia prepared its current budget expecting a steady oil price around \$100/bbl. The government has now decided to freeze spending.

Under economic pressure, its currency ruble lost 40% of its value against US\$. The Russian central bank hiked the interest rate five times last year to boost the ruble. Afraid of devaluation, Russians are selling rubles and buying US dollars. Russian economy got another shock recently after Standard & Poor's had downgraded the country's credit rating. The rating cut will make it harder and more expensive for Russia to borrow money from the European market.

Russia planned to expand the role of nuclear energy for its domestic market and also for export. There are now 33 operating reactors in Russia with a generating capacity of over 24,000 MWe. They had a plan to supply 23% of their electricity from nuclear energy by 2020 and to export over 20 nuclear power reactors to China, India, Vietnam, Iran, Belarus, Turkey and Bangladesh among other countries.

Russia agreed to build two nuclear power reactors at Rooppur and committed to finance 85%-90% of the total cost of the project. Even though Russia has not attached any price tag for the reactors, it is estimated that each reactor will cost at least \$5 billion. It was reported that Russia would borrow this money from the European financial market to finance the Rooppur project.

Because of present financial crisis, Russia may not be able to sustain its ambitious nuclear power programme, both at home and abroad. A slowdown is, therefore, expected very soon. In addition, they may find it increasingly difficult to borrow money from the European market to finance the Rooppur project in view of the cut in the credit rating and also the imposed sanctions. Even if they get the loan, the rate of interest may be too high. Nuclear power plants are highly capital intensive. A high rate of interest will hike the cost of generation of electricity to make the nuclear plant uneconomic. Under such circumstances, it would be advisable for us to wait and not buy a white elephant in a hurry.

The writer is a senior nuclear engineer.

IMTIAZ AHMED

THE current conflict can be traced back to last year's elections, mainly because most of the political parties -- not only BNP and its allies but also CPB, Gono Forum -- boycotted the elections. They did not accept the formula of January 5 elections that AL tried to sell. AL felt that it might not do well in an all-party election under the caretaker system. Earlier, when BNP was in power, it realised it wasn't going to do well unless it manipulated the caretaker system, which it tried to do by raising the age limit of the chief justice, among other measures. Whichever party is in power -- whether AL or BNP -- is not interested in a free and fair election because it knows that the result won't go in its favour.

In the present context, the opposition BNP thinks that if there is an election it will do well. AL and BNP each have 25% core supporters. And there are 30% voters who swing in their loyalty. BNP is confident that it will get a big chunk of the swing vote in an all-party election. But at the same time it knows that there won't be mass demonstrations for bringing an end to this deadlock or to push the government out. The only option BNP has is oborodh.

As there is no mass movement, the ruling party sees no reason why it should give in to BNP's demand for an all-party election. So it has made it into a law and order issue. The violence benefits the ruling party because it can say: "Look, this (BNP) is a militant, terrorist organisation." I think we may be falling into the trap of state terrorism. That is not going to solve the problem. We have also seen this indulgence in state terrorism by some ruling party members and some government officials.

State terrorism has always been part of counter-terrorism. In many countries we have seen that in dealing with counter-terrorism, state terrorism becomes a principal instrument. Israel would be a very good but extreme example. In Pakistan and even in India -- when it comes to Kashmir -- we have seen that when they deal with counter-terrorism they indulge in state terrorism. But this approach can stop it for a few months or years but unless the basic problem is solved it will come back. It has come back in Kashmir. I see no difference in the case of Bangladesh.

In the ongoing violence we are seeing overwhelming presence of youth, which is not a good indication. Once the youth start hurling bombs, you create a structure that will be very difficult to contain later. As a Russian author once said: "Once you introduce a gun in the narrative, the

# Embracing Obama in an unequal alliance

PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMN



PRAFUL BIDWAI

Pacific and Indian Ocean Region."

The "Vision" accords India prominence in a vast area, "from Africa to East Asia," by involving it in "safeguarding maritime security ... navigation and overflight throughout the region, especially in the South China Sea."

It commits India and the US to "promote the shared values that have made our countries great" (read, democracy, absent in China). It also chides China for provoking regional tensions.

This is the first time that India has agreed to a close long-term military relationship. The document also "welcomes" India's entry into the US-and-Japan-dominated Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum.

The US-India partnership's rationale is to contain China's military and economic power as part of the US "pivot" to Asia. When this was first proposed in 2012, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh resisted it.

This is not because India practised non-alignment. That was abandoned when the Soviet Union collapsed. But there was a policy consensus against India becoming a permanent ally of any state.

The consensus eroded, especially with the 2005 civilian nuclear deal. To get the deal, India voted --under "coercion," a US diplomat said publicly -- against Iran's nuclear programme, undermining the Iran-Pakistan-India gas pipeline. To please US business lobbies, India has periodically compromised its people's interests -- e.g. loosening price controls on essential drugs.

Now, there's a wholesale alignment with the US. Modi has completed what Singh started. Modi is naturally pro-US -- in keeping with affiliation to US Cold War allies RSS-Jana-Sangh-BJP, and his intimate links with the US non-resident conservative Gujarati community.

Obama brought a long list of issues to discuss, but the bilateral talks were dominated by China for the first 45 minutes, thanks to Modi. To the Americans' pleasant surprise, he accepted US language on China without negotiation.

It's hard to say if Modi's China position stems from visceral antipathy (traceable to the 1962 war), China's reported incursion into Ladakh during Xi Jin-Ping's September visit, or recent Chinese moves in Sri Lanka, India's "backyard."

The fact is, Modi has strategically embraced the US.



gun will be used." Since you are introducing violence, re-educating the youth and making them relearn will be hard.

So in our present crisis, a change of power won't change anything because the ruling party will manipulate elections. No matter who is involved in this violence, today or tomorrow the parties have to come to the people. They cannot recreate January 5 again and again and again. They have to come to the people. So what is required is not only a political charter but also a social charter so that people don't suffer. It is not going to solve all problems but we will be one step ahead to achieving democracy, and I believe the current situation will be contained.

In the social charter, we need an understanding not only between the two major political parties but also between the political parties and the people. Parties need to trust the people and say we will go back to you; we trust you; in the meantime we will not fight, which will kill you or hurt you. In that way, they can re-educate people in a democratic society.

Civil society has also an important role to play here. Not all of them might agree to it. But what the civil society can do is to come up with a decision together or with a better charter to break this deadlock.

Some think civil society

should have a political party. That is a wrong understanding. Civil society is supposed to be multi-layered. A civil society is one where you have dissent, contradictions, varied opinions, etc. Out of the contest between these opinions, something will emerge. Out of the various opinions emerging out of civil society, the political society can take some and leave some.

Lastly, we are seeing that many ruling party members are over-emphasising on development in such way that it seems that democracy and development are two opposite things. It seems as if the ghost of Ayub Khan is still roaming around, because, he was the one who came up with the slogan 'decade of development.'

We cannot negotiate when it comes to democracy. More importantly, the very creation of Bangladesh was for democracy. We are forgetting that. In the 1970 elections AL won, but power was not given to them. A genocide followed, and that led to the birth of Bangladesh. Democracy and the birth of Bangladesh go together.

The commentator is Professor, Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka.

# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

## Arson attacks on transports

I am deeply saddened and touched by the suffering and death of arson victims in recent weeks in Bangladesh. This made me think, how could we prevent arson attacks by the terrorists? One of the reasons of this kind of continuous assaults is that the perpetrators can flee unchecked as security personnel are spread thin in highways and city roads.

I suggest the government recruit an adequate number of cops to beef up the highway police squads and give them transports and proper supplies. If we have 20 properly armed cops in every kilometre in plainclothes, the terrorists would be deterred from committing arson. From cost perspective, this will be lower than what is incurred through people's death, suffering and national economic loss.

It may take time to recruit and train this kind of a big force. In short term, we may depute Ansar and VDP reserve members and place them under highway police department. Also, retired but physically fit defense, BGB and police officers and Jawans can be offered 1-2 year of contractual service to overcome the current manpower shortage. If there is not enough reserve personnel available, hire some workers from "Food for Work" programme for 6-12 months and give them short training to be employed. Let them work under the highway police and guard the transportation sector from the arsonists and terrorists. Hope government will take proper action to safeguard people's life.

Ishak Zaman  
USA

## Withdraw the blockade

The citizens of the country will highly appreciate if the BNP high command withdraws the blockade immediately so that the 14 lakh SSC examinees all over the country can take their exams without fear. The anxiety of the examinees and their parents is growing day by day. It is high time BNP lifted the blockade for the greater interest of our children.

Jamshaid Taher  
Banani, Dhaka

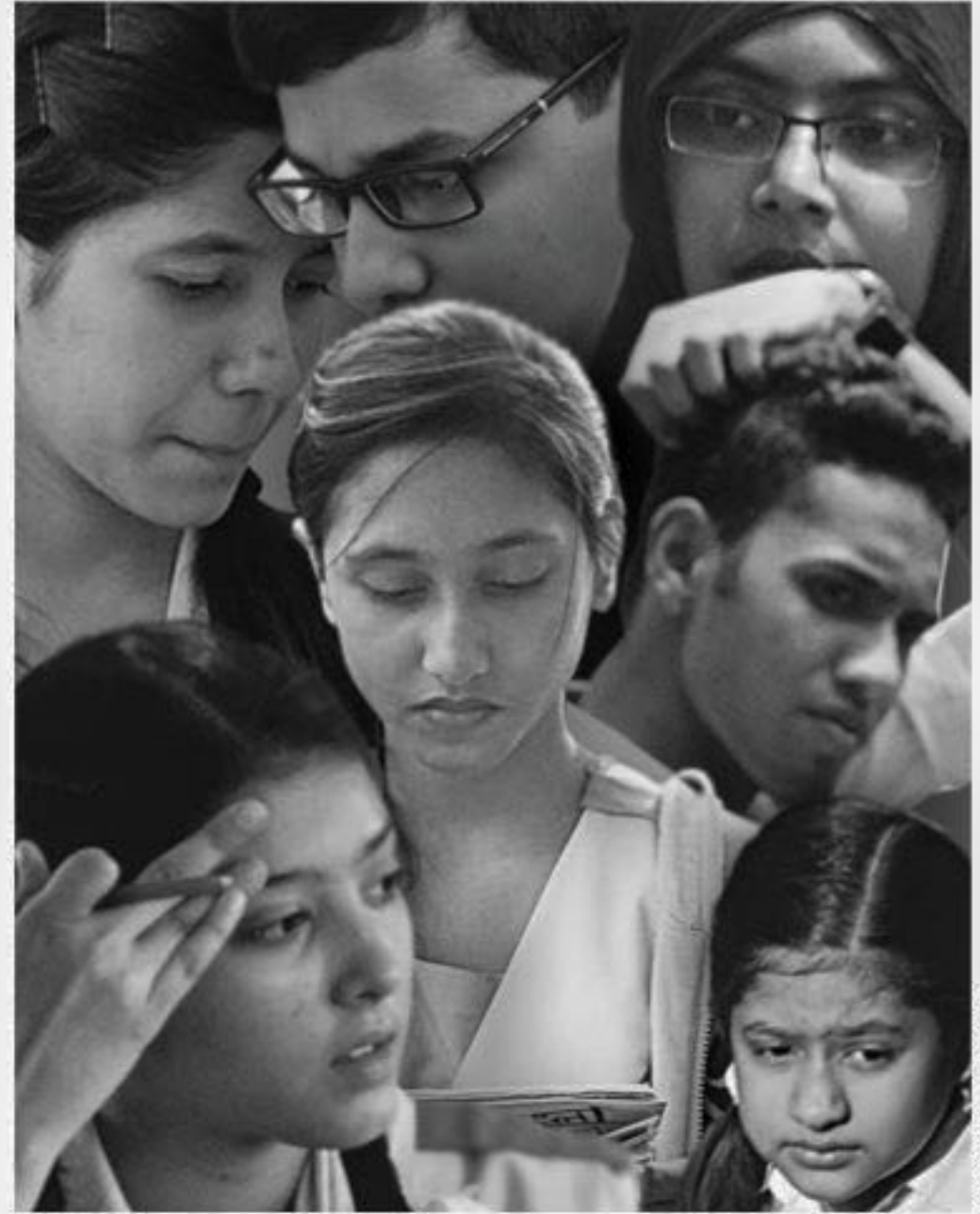


PHOTO: STAR

This year's SSC exams are scheduled to begin from tomorrow amid the ongoing blockade called by BNP and its allies. The examinees and their guardians are in a state of apprehension as the blockade has not been called off. Everyday we hear about human casualties; people are getting killed or severely wounded by petrol bombs. Who will ensure the safety of our children?

We urge the BNP leaders to immediately call off the blockade so that the students can breathe freely and appear in the exams in a congenial atmosphere.

Zabed Wali  
Chittagong

## Comments on news report, "Shibir man dies 'in road crash while fleeing Rab custody'," published on January 28, 2015

M Sirajullah

The father of this man is talking about his son's death. But many have already died and hundreds are suffering from the pain of burn injuries due to these Jamaat-Shibir men.

ATM

If RAB's unjust actions are not stopped ASAP, the day is not far off when a monster will emerge!

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## "Tragic tale of a trucker" (Jan. 28, 2015)

Binodbangali

How many more needlessly have to die?

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## "Big borrowers to get 12 years to repay" (Jan. 28, 2015)

Saleh Tanveer

Government is rewarding huge loan defaulters for their political allegiance by gifting them public money.