

FOUNDER EDITOR
LATE S. M. ALI

DHAKA TUESDAY AUGUST 25, 2015

Land-related services in dire straits

Digitilisation and simplification of procedures essential

IT is a reality commonly acknowledged that land administration in the country is fraught with corruption and inefficiencies, making it difficult for people to access land-related services and resolve disputes over land. According to a recent report by the Transparency International Bangladesh, people have to pay bribes starting from Tk 100 to Tk 20 lakh at different steps of the process to avail land related services, which highlight the unacceptable extent to which governance and accountability mechanisms are absent in this important sector. Sometimes corruption may also take the form of underhand dealings between influential political leaders and land officials to record khas land, vested and abandoned properties or properties of courts of wards in their name. With "papers" to back their claims, these vested quarters can then easily grab vast areas of land, evicting vulnerable people, including Hindu and landless families, from their homes.

Despite numerous policy measures to modernise and improve land administration and management services over the years, land offices remain a bureaucratic nightmare, with people having to follow eight steps for land registration and another 10 steps for mutation of land. To address the dire state of the sector, the government ought to streamline land administration and simplify the procedures. The land offices must be brought into 21st century and a coordinated, digitalised system be instituted for a more efficient and transparent sector. Monitoring mechanisms, currently lacking, must be put in place, and the severe manpower shortage – as evidenced by 8800 vacant positions – must be addressed if we are to change the way the land offices currently operate.

A grave trafficking crisis

Coordinated, multi-country efforts needed

THE 'discovery' of yet more mass graves along the heavily-forested Malaysia-Thailand border makes the case that the Southeast Asia human trafficking disaster is far from being over. Considering the scale and rate of displacement, the capacity of the countries concerned, namely, Malaysia, Thailand, Myanmar and Bangladesh, to crack down on the traffickers and cope with the refugees has barely improved at all.

While migrants make the perilous and fatal voyage on rickety boats, hundreds die en route and many more are held captive in jungle camps along the border, often allegedly in collaboration with local law enforcement officials, until their friends or relatives cough up enough cash to buy their freedom, according to new reports.

Their sufferings do not end even after they manage to reach their destinations. Most of them receive no government assistance nor are they allowed to work legally, leaving them with little choice but to make do with irregular construction jobs, where they are liable to further exploitation.

Digging out graves is not enough. While addressing the root causes that impel them to take such desperate and risky measures may be a long-term commitment, governments must rise to the occasion, with their responses matching the urgency of this humanitarian disaster.

At this point, governments of this region need to go on an all-out campaign against the trafficking cartels and their accomplices in some of these countries.

COMMENTS

"Taposh fumes at Rab"
(August 23, 2015)

Masud Choudhury

Lots of people were killed in so-called gunfights. Never heard you say anything before.

Adita

So it started bothering you when the law enforcers killed your own men!

Lili

We want your fumes for all other extra-judicial killings, not only for the killings of your party men.

"Truly an all-party leader!"
(August 23, 2015)

Rizwan Chaudhry

That's the true face of many politicians nowadays!

Naila

What a strategic politician this man is!

"How much democracy does a country need?" (August 20, 2015)

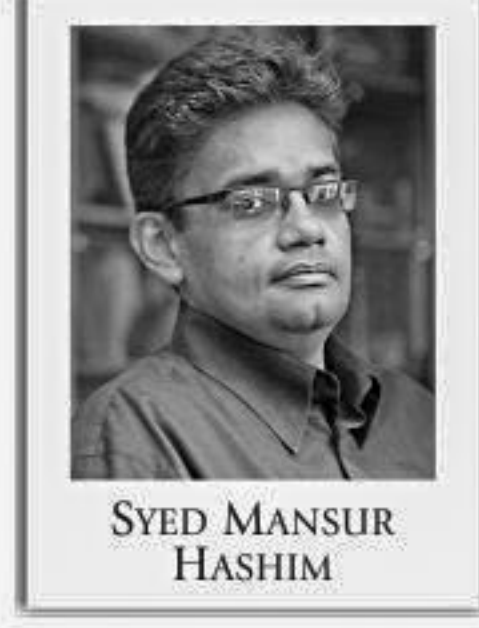
Ahmed Farhad Salim

That depends on your interpretation of democracy.

Hafeejul Alam

More for the ruler but less for the ruled. This is the plain truth about democracy in Bangladesh.

RATIONALITY OF FUEL PRICES



SYED MANSUR HASHIM

IT is now generally agreed by all major stakeholders that gas reserves in the country are finite and depleting. In the absence of significant new gas field discovery over the last few

years, we are now stuck with a proven and probable gas reserve of around 14 trillion cubic feet (tcf). With our current consumption of about 1tcf per annum, current gas reserves should last a little more than a decade, since gas production will start to dip as wells near the end of their shelf life. Yet, we continue to waste this precious resource with unrealistic pricing. The discrepancy in pricing between one unit of compressed natural gas (CNG) and per litre of octane is so vast that it has fuelled the massive conversion of vehicles that is eating away increasingly at our daily production of gas. Experts have stated that current CNG consumption stands at around 6 percent of our daily natural gas production.

The government has been toying with the idea of introducing liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) as an alternative to CNG. While this makes sense, the reality is that the introduction of LPG for large scale consumption at consumer level is still some years away as associate infrastructure will have to be built starting from terminals to LPG stations and actual conversion of vehicles. All this requires finance and time. So, what are we to do in the meantime? Letting things stand as they are is not really an option. Cheap gas is not so cheap anymore given that there are far more pressing needs for gas than powering sedans and luxury vehicles. For instance, the Chittagong industrial belt has not been able to expand for many

years as there is no new gas connection for new industries or even established industries that wish to expand. The chronic shortfall of around 500 mmscfd (million million standard cubic feet per day) of gas has not been addressed as there is simply no extra gas available.

Introduction of CNG for private vehicles was done on the premise that at the time Dhaka was suffering from massive air pollution. Price per cubic feet (cft) of gas was kept at a throwaway Tk 8 per cft.

We find that Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC) is making bumper profits by selling Octane at the same Tk 99 per litre. BPC arguments notwithstanding, with petrol costing three times as much as CNG, there is zero possibility of stopping the mass conversion of new vehicles hitting the roads and CNG consumption of the overall daily production of gas will continue to mark a steady growth.

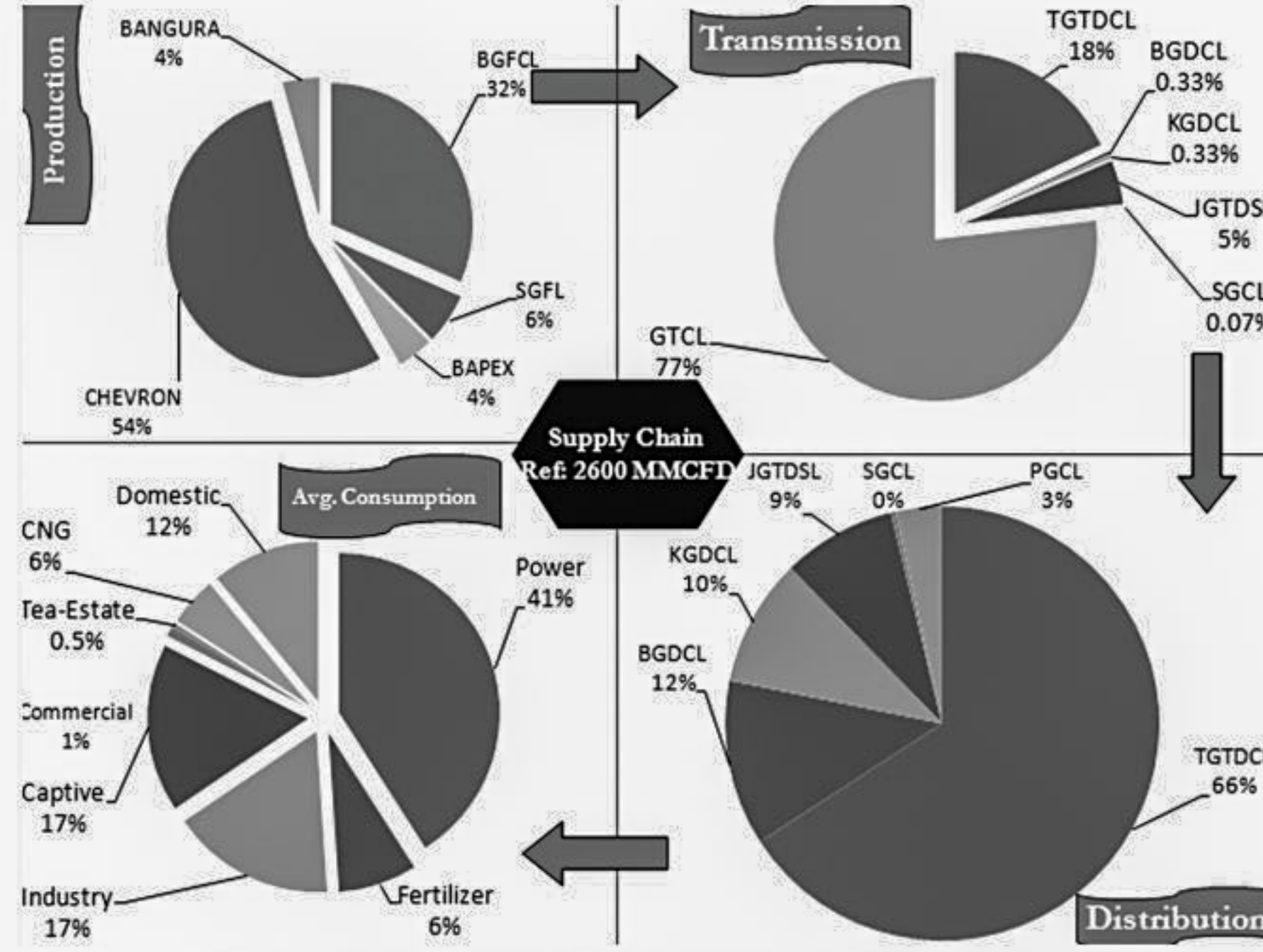
We are informed by the finance min-

prices will be reduced is a decision for the government, but consider this. Would it not be more rational if prices of per unit of CNG were raised and price per litre of octane/petrol reduced to meet halfway? For instance, a price differential of Tk 10 between CNG and petrol/octane would have far greater impact at retail level than simply slashing prices of octane.

It would discourage conversion or even usage of CNG because the average vehicle must wait for hours every day to refuel at CNG pumps. There is also the question of wear-and-tear since CNG conversion reduces engine life significantly on petrol-driven vehicles. And it is not only the engine that gets a shorter lifespan; a 45+ kg cylinder stuck in the boot of a vehicle plays havoc with its suspension, leading to faster than usual replacement of many parts. Vehicle owners would take all that into consideration if CNG was no longer a cheap alternative to liquid fuel like octane and petrol. Most owners would opt to go for a petrol refill instead of wasting several hours a day waiting in line to top up. And CNG-driven vehicles would ration their travel which would also have positive impact on the incessant gridlock the city has become so used to.

More importantly, now that gas supply has hit a wall, natural gas usage has to be prioritised in the national interest. With little or no headway in finding viable alternative primary energy resources, we have to take some hard decisions on whether continued usage of CNG at current price level is feasible. Can we afford the luxury of pumping cheap fuel into carriers for the more affluent in society while industry starves? It is hoped policymakers will take these issues into consideration when revising fuel prices in the coming weeks.

The writer is Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.



Over a very short period, vehicles of all sizes and capacities ranging from cars to 4-wheelers and more alarmingly, city buses had converted to this very cheap fuel. Over the last eight years, price of CNG has moved from Tk.8/cft to the present rate of Tk30/cft. Ironically, global oil prices per barrel have flattened out at around US\$40-45 in the international market over the last one year. But

ister that the government is mulling a cut in fuel prices within a fortnight. This is very good news indeed. The question of course is: precisely how deep a cut is the government considering? According to what has been presented by one energy expert at a recent seminar 'Energy Challenges 2030' organised on August 23, BPC will still make profit if octane is sold at Tk 50 per litre. To what extent

TRASH CITY from Beirut to Dhaka



NAHELA NOWSHIN

YOU Stink! That's the not-so-subtle slogan being used by protesters in Lebanon to demonstrate against the piles upon piles of garbage taking over the capital city of Beirut. On July 17 the main landfill was closed which caused

garbage to accumulate since officials failed to agree on an alternative site. Trash kept growing in other parts of the country in the following weeks as the cabinet faced an impasse on the issue due to political differences.

For us Dhaka residents, the story of Lebanon's waste management crisis seems too close to home, especially when we read about Beirut residents complaining about a city that might as well be the one we live in.

"It's impossible to breathe; it's really disgusting, especially as these are the hottest days of the year," states 30-year-old Karim of Gemayze, Lebanon.

"You can't sit outside any more, because the smell wafts around you, and wherever you walk you're tripping over garbage," says another unhappy Lebanese resident.

While it's not clear if Beirut is now drowning in more tonnes of rubbish than Dhaka is (although I doubt it), rest assured that the severity of the waste disposal disaster Bangladesh is facing increases by the day. The entire city of Dhaka smells of filth. The story of Dhaka's dirty tragedy is one that affects everyone from the rich to the poor, although not in equal measure. There's garbage everywhere—main roads, houses, schools, parks, lakes, hospitals, clinics—and with trash bins overflowing on the streets, traffic pathways are becoming worse than they've ever been.

Perhaps residents of Beirut can learn a thing or two about patience from inhabitants of Dhaka since the latter seem to be taking the waste crisis pretty lightly in what is one of the most polluted cities in the world. People here have more pressing things to worry about—for example, how to get to

work (or anywhere) on time without getting stuck in traffic that makes you want to pull your hair out. But even then, the awful sight of accumulating garbage and the putrid smell of air doesn't escape you unless you're within the confines of four walls. Unlike the people of Lebanon who are taking to their rubbish strewn streets to demand the removal of mountains of garbage, we in Bangladesh have resigned ourselves to the fate of living indefinitely in revoltingly filthy conditions.

Waste generation in Bangladesh is projected to reach above 47,000 tonnes per day by 2025. The rate of waste collection in Dhaka alone is a mere 37 percent, which means that 63 percent of waste is improperly disposed of posing a series of health and environmental risks in the process. General waste gets mixed up with medical and industrial waste, which is often rummaged through by garbage collectors and even stray dogs and cats. One may also see people foraging blackened drainage water hoping to score recyclable materials. But Dhaka residents will tell you that this is a common scenario in Bangladesh and hardly anything to be "frowned" upon.

Management of municipal solid waste (MSW) is of great concern in Bangladesh, especially in fast growing cities such as Dhaka and Chittagong. Currently an estimated 7000 tonnes of MSW is generated in Dhaka alone, of which only about 1500 tonnes are disposed of in landfills. The rest is locally dumped in arbitrary, open spaces or left completely unattended. Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) is in charge of MSW management in the corporation area while outside the DCC area local authorities are responsible for conducting waste management. Amongst all waste disposal options such as recycling, combustion and composting, landfill is the most favoured option because of its low-cost and the ease with which it can be implemented. But identifying a site suitable to dump municipal waste can be costly; regulations and public/political opposition can make the process more difficult. Siting of a sanitary landfill can be even more challenging because it additionally requires overcoming environmental hurdles,

complying with various criteria, and national and local guidelines such that economic, health and social costs are minimised. Solid waste landfills also have an environmental impact as they later become unsuitable for developmental and agricultural use.

These challenges are exacerbated by the lack of proper infrastructure coupled with poor municipality governance which is largely to blame for Dhaka's waste management crisis. There is no organised method to collect and dispose of waste dumped all around the city streets. There are not enough trash cans and people simply don't care. The nonchalance with which inhabitants treat their surroundings as a garbage disposal area is eye-opening as to why Dhaka is turning into one huge trash city. But on a broader note, the real issue to think about is this:

Unlike the people of Lebanon who are taking to their rubbish strewn streets to demand the removal of mountains of garbage, we in Bangladesh have resigned ourselves to the fate of living indefinitely in revoltingly filthy conditions.

does Dhaka even have the capacity to manage such colossal amounts of waste generated by people living in a city that is 75 percent more dense than Hong Kong?

Apparently it took four to five days of garbage accumulation before the people of Beirut just couldn't take the stench permeating the air anymore. So here's a word of consolation to the residents of Beirut about their beloved city: Dhaka city harbours almost forty times the population as Beirut and Dhaka residents have been living with the suffocating smell of rubbish for as long as they can remember. So don't worry Beirut, you are not alone. Take solace in the fact that we stink much more than you ever will.

The writer is a journalist at The Daily Star.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Stop driving on the wrong side

Dhaka is a city of severe traffic jam. But in recent times, we have noticed a considerable increase in the intensity of traffic jams in Dhaka. Construction work of the flyovers and the heavy rain are two major causes behind this problem. Unfortunately, during these traffic jams, many drivers are unwilling to comply with traffic rules. Instead of waiting in line like others, some decide to start driving on the wrong side of the road. Such actions cause even more congestion and severe problems for the traffic police and other commuters.

I think this particular problem can be solved by increasing the number of law enforcers at critical traffic points in the city. A city cannot thrive without a proper

and smooth traffic system. So, until the flyovers are completed, the government should consider increasing manpower on the streets.

Shahriar Kabir
Dept. of EEE, BUET, Ramna, Dhaka



PHOTO: STAR

Ignoring the importance of English

It said that the importance of learning English at all levels of education is being ignored. There is no question that Bangla is and shall remain the national language. However, to be competitive in the shrinking global environment, we should and must have sufficient knowledge in English language. Our authorities must understand this and put all due emphasis on it.
Engr. S. A. Mansoor
Dhaka