

Gas price hike again! Rescind the decision

THE idea to raise the price of gas in two phases from March is very unreasonable. The decision, to come into effect in two phases between March and June this year, will see a quantum jump in the price of gas. The logic for two-phased increase, so that people do not feel the pinch, is a shoddy and cruel joke on the consumers, more so when the increase of gas price twice in a year itself violates the existing law.

The argument offered by the BERC in support of raising the gas price does not wash. The gas sector is not subsidised at all, and as far as we know, not only has Titas Gas been in the green since 2007, and has also been running up huge profits every year since then. We understand too that the selling price of gas is more than the cost of production. And the gas companies have surplus in their kitty, reportedly, to carry out development activities in the sector. That being so we are at a loss to understand why the consumers are being burdened with the illogical gas price increase.

If the decision is implemented, the consumers will be suffering a 100 percent increase in eight years, and a 50 percent increase in the space of three months only from March to June. Needless to say, this will have a most deleterious effect on every sector of the economy, and with unscrupulous traders taking advantage of the situation, the hardest hit will be the low and middle income groups, in particular, who are already having to make both ends meet with the prices of consumer goods spiraling out of control. Withdraw the injudicious decision.

Fake information on passports

Threat to our national security

WITH the help, reportedly, of some unscrupulous policemen and officials of the Department of Immigration and Passports (DIP), militants and criminals are still obtaining passports with fake information. This is particularly distressing as a passport is what is universally accepted as the best way of identifying someone. Thus, if shortcuts are taken in meeting all the requirements, then the sanctity of the passport is defiled.

Although the number of passports with fake information has significantly been reduced with the introduction of Machine Readable Passports, it is yet to be abolished completely mainly because of the negligence and dishonesty of a section of field-level officials. A provision which allows the passport department to issue passport to an applicant if the police verification report is not available within a stipulated time is also a weakness in the system which is often abused.

The situation gets much more worrisome when one takes into account that militants too are obtaining passports using similar loopholes in the entire process of issuing passport, as it directly contributes to increasing the threat to our national security. Given that extremists have been found using fake information to acquire passports recently, the authorities must take into consideration that the system of issuing passports may already have been compromised, which makes law enforcers' job of identifying militants all the more difficult.

With this in mind, the authorities immediately need to devise a plan to prevent passports with unverified information from being issued. Officials and policemen who are helping criminals acquire them must also be punished exemplarily.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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PHOTO: STAR

Greetings on turning 26!

Being a popular daily of the subcontinent, The Daily Star has completed its 26th year of successful run in the print media. As a regular reader and supporter of the daily I would like to extend hearty felicitations to the DS family including the honourable management, staff, and readers. May the fearless and unbiased dynamism of this newspaper continue to generate creative ideas for years to come.
 Hassan Tareque, Nikunja, Dhaka

Unlicensed driving on highways

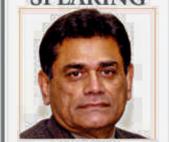
Road accidents have become the most common headlines in the newspapers these days. Unfit wheelers and unlicensed drivers are the main causes behind these crashes.

Many drivers have neither the proper training nor knowledge of traffic rules and regulations. Many of these amateur drivers also take to the road without acquiring a licence. The traffic police should implement measures to identify them and hand out due penalties.

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Looking back at this day eight years ago

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING



BRIG GEN
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EIGHT years have passed since the gruesome BDR massacre in 2009. The trial is in the process of conclusion, although several under trial BDR mutineers have

died during the process, some due to heart attack.

25 Feb cannot be just any other day of the year. 57 officers, that is 10 more than the number of officers killed during the entire period of our Liberation War, and 17 equally unfortunate others, were killed in the two days of carnage. A lot have been written on how the situation was handled, and in this column over the years since then, we have offered our views on it. While it is easy to be wise after the event, opinions are still divided, and questions are being raised about the issue of storming the BDR headquarters and the cost of doing or not doing so. We know the answer to one. The answer to the other shall never be known. But it is dangerous to delve into hindsight because those who do so, according to a wise man, suffer twice, once in reality and then in retrospect. Therefore, delving into what might have been will inflict more pain on the aggrieved members of the victims' families rather than offer any solace. One might well argue that there were other options that the decision makers might have taken. However, the final choice of option had to be made in the fog of the situation, weighing up the likely consequences of each available option, all of which, one can assume, had been deliberated upon. Therefore, one may critique the final course of action on many counts and discover

loopholes. But let it be only said that a good decision is one whose rationale and outcome survive the years that follow the event. We can only leave it to posterity to be the best judge.

It is difficult to reflect on the BDR carnage without being overcome by emotion. And there are very good reasons for that. Many of the officers, most of them in the prime of their career when their life was so brutally cut short,

pain is still raw, particularly for the kith and kin of the those killed, and for whom neither their memory nor the pain of the circumstances of their death has caused, shall ever be erased.

Apart from the pain, the question that continues to haunt us is the mystery behind the killings and the masterminds behind the so called mutiny whose causal relationship (motivation and the action of the BDR mutineers) has not



PHOTO: STAR

were known to me personally. And I had the proud privilege to be associated with many of them from the very seminal stages of their career while they were being groomed and nurtured into the fine material they eventually became. And almost a decade after the gruesome incident that left 74 people dead, the

been established satisfactorily.

It is heartening that the trial procedure is in the process of being completed, with the High Court laying down a time fiat to both the defense and prosecution to finish their arguments by 28 Feb. This is perhaps the largest criminal case in the country in terms of the number of

accused -- a total of 846 people of which 823 are BDR personnel. And the trial court has sentenced 150 of the accused to death, also the largest in any single case. Whatever may be the verdict of the High Court, and whatever may be in store for those facing the gallows, nothing but finding out the masterminds can assuage the frayed emotions of those that have suffered personal loss in the tragedy. And it was not only the 74 dead one is also talking about the fact that the country's security was put at great risk in the two fateful days of February 2009.

The need to prevent recurrence of such a tragedy, and to stave off any future attempt to target a security element of the government, must be the prime compulsion of the state to go to the bottom of the matter, and there are many a grey area that needs to be clarified. It is remarkable that the enquiry of the committee set up by the government was completed and made public in only three months. But one is constrained to say that the real mystery is yet to be unraveled, a view that is substantiated by two persons who were directly involved with the enquiry process. The member-secretary of the probe committee, Md. Golam Hossain, who was also the additional home secretary said, "We had some limitations. Such type of tasks requires much time, requisite equipment as well as skill. Like CID and RAB, it is not possible for a civil committee to unearth all things." And the then home minister Sahara Khatun said, "Cases have been filed to dig out the real culprits. We will bring the perpetrators to justice after proper investigation."

Certainly, all things were not, and have not, been unearthed, nor have the real culprits been dug out, as yet. We are waiting for both to happen.

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Behind the World Bank's Padma Bridge loan drama



M RAFIQUUL ISLAM

THE World Bank is a major post-war financial institution providing conditional loans to its members. It has no agreement or overarching protocol to which all its members are parties that precisely articulates its underlying core lending principles and policies. This flexibility allows the World Bank to be arbitrary, discriminatory, and double standards in

considering loan applications and setting loan conditionality. This flexibility also brings geopolitical and geostrategic consideration of its major western shareholders as the decisive factor in decision-making.

The US, being the largest shareholder with a de facto veto power on the decision-making, enjoys and exercises extraordinary power over the World Bank, which is used, more often than not, as an institutional tool to advance US interests and serve the cause of allies. Bangladesh has become the latest victim of this too formidable political pressure and influence which presumably compelled the World Bank to decline the Padma bridge loan on flimsy pretext of perceived corruption that judicially proved to be non-existent.

Examples of US political interference in the World Bank decision-making are numerous. Its lending to the Philippines continued notwithstanding repeated failures to fulfil loan conditions by a staunch ally of the US, the authoritarian Marcos regime, which favoured US multinationals to operate freely and greater export of US goods and capital into the Philippines at the expense of the socio-economic welfare of the people of that country. The World Bank granted multiple loans to the apartheid regime of South Africa in the 1960s as a mark of US and UK support for the regime despite the UN General Assembly resolution banning such loans. Despite the widespread support of its influential west-

ally of the west, in power and salvage him from the 1996 sure election defeat to socialists. This loan was widely dubbed as the 'Clinton Facility' (Economist, 2 Oct 1993, p 72). These examples are cited only to put the Padma Bridge loan saga in the historical context of power-politics dominating the World Bank, a congenital and structural deficit.

The World Bank's original mission was to serve the interests of western capitalism. Its third world development agenda is a subsequent policy-shift adopted not so much as an appreciation of the marginalised economic plight of the third world, but was dictated by the necessity of its very survival following the introduction of the Marshall Plan for European economic recovery. Its current neo-liberal policy of de-regulation,

to what colonialism once played for rapid European development and industrialisation.

In response to mounting criticisms, the World Bank is showing some signs of amenability to reforms but its approach to reform is seemingly slow, piece-meal, and inadequate to abandon its original mission of guarding the wealth of rich states and resist the pro status quo force of vested interests -- both economic and political alike. This is quite apparent from its handling of the Padma Bridge loan application. Its rejection on the ground of alleged corruption was perceived and pre-emptive as it was yet to release any part of the loan for the project. With all fairness to the World Bank, Bangladesh investigated the claim and found no existence of such corruption. Nor did the World Bank pro-



duce any tangible evidence of its alleged corruption. Finally, a Canadian court has recently found no evidence of the alleged corruption. The arbitrary decision of the World Bank has cost Bangladesh financially and damaged its image internationally. As a result, the outpouring of public resentment against the World Bank demanding its accountability in the mass media is understandable. The call for compensation and the High Court Division order of 'probe to find falsifiers' (Star, 16/2/17) with a view to bringing them to justice may not be gainsaid in the interest of accountability and potential future victims of power-abuse in the World Bank.

Bangladesh's decision not to take the Padma Bridge loan from the World Bank and to go ahead on its own was a costly but courageous response to challenge the traditional bullying pressure that US executives and their friends exerted on Bangladesh through the World Bank. Neither the World Bank nor the US enjoys the unfettered monopoly of power in global politics that they once used to deploy. They both now face competition from the recently established Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. This perhaps explains why the World Bank has granted loans following the rejection of the Padma Bridge loan and the recent visit of Bangladesh by the World Bank President. Given its economic conditions going from strength to strength, Bangladesh has reasonable bargaining power to shop around and albeit avoid falling prey in geopolitical conundrum.

liberalisation, and privatisation has been transferring wealth from third world debtors to first world banks, which has contributed significantly to the ballooning inequality that now exists in the world economy. This strategy exports the crisis of capitalism in developed creditor-states abroad without requiring them to address their own domestic economic policy pitfalls and mismanagement that have caused successive global financial crises. It allows the inherent flaws of the free-market capitalism to continue without any need to reform to the system. Hence seeking and receiving loans for sustainable development like the Padma Bridge appeared to be a stretch of expectation from a financial institution that is highly politicised to behold and guard the US economic interests and political dictations.

The non-transparent and unaccountable operation of the World Bank, combined with the IMF, has quietly been transferring resources and funds from their poor debtors to rich creditors. A plain arithmetic calculation of their operation during the first 50 years (1944-1993) shows that the net transfer from debtors has outpaced what these two institutions together provided for their debtors, which 'have lost around [US] \$500 billion per year in GDP as a consequence of these [neoliberal] policies' (Australia: The World Bank and the IMF, Australian Parliament Report, Canberra 1993, p 16; J Hickel, The Truth about Extreme Global Inequality' Al-Jazeera, 14 April 2013). Clearly the World Bank, in collaboration with the IMF, has been instrumental in expanding western capitalism, a role similar

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ern shareholders, such as France, the World Bank could admit Vietnam as its members and grant loans until the lifting of the US embargo on Vietnam imposed since the US invasive Vietnam War. The World Bank had to grant Russia a substantial almost unconditional loan essentially to keep Russian President Boris Yeltsin, an