

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR
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Illegal chemical factories

A disaster waiting to happen

THE sheer number of risky, illegal chemical factories in Old Dhaka has turned the place into a ticking time bomb. As per a report in a leading Bangla daily, of the 25,000 chemical warehouses in Old Dhaka, 15,000 are located in residential buildings, and 22,000 are illegal. According to an official of the Fire Service and Civil Defence, only two percent of chemical godowns have permits, and the rest of the 98 percent are operating without license from the City Corporation.

These numbers are shocking and disturbing to say the least. Only last month, three people died in a fire in a plastics warehouse in Islambagh, and a fire broke out in the PVC unit storing large amounts of chemicals in a footwear factory in Jatrabari.

It seems that we have learnt nothing from past tragedies. The glaring lack of effective measures by concerned authorities to remove illegal chemical warehouses from the area and to stop these from proliferating is all the more unacceptable in light of previous catastrophes such as the Nimtoli fire incident of 2010 that killed more than 100 people and left hundreds injured.

While the Industries Minister's recent statement on the government's plan to shift all chemical and plastic factories outside Dhaka is reassuring, we urge the authorities to make good on their word. This will require coordination among various entities, including City Corporation, Fire Service and Department of Explosives. Responsible authorities cannot continue to turn a blind eye to these illegal businesses and must beware of the impending disaster.

A commendable initiative

Breaks the stereotype

FOR almost all people who have dealings with land, the visit to the land office can be daunting, because it often entails being swamped by brokers who promise the moon in return for a 'small fee', which is of course, speed money. The allegation that middlemen have monopolised practically all dealings at the land office is a very old one. Yet, people visiting the Sitakunda land office of late have been surprised now that they are met by Mr. Ruhul Amin, the AC (land) who took charge on July 13 and has done away with middlemen altogether.

Mr. Amin sits at a booth at the entrance of the building. With this one simple act, he did away with the coterie of officials and middlemen who made people's access to him remote and near impossible. Such an occurrence is literally unheard of in land offices in the country and we are sure the honest officer is not making a lot of friends in his department. But at the end of the day, Mr. Amin has achieved a feat just by making himself available to people, who can now cut through the red-tape that plague our bureaucracy and practically single-handedly do away with graft.

We would like to thank this young civil servant who joined the service in 2012 for his dedication to the office he occupies. If only others would emulate what he has done, then people at the grassroots would greatly benefit from availing services that is theirs, by right.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Escalators in foot over-bridge

The photo of pedestrians queuing up to mount a foot over-bridge, recently published in the City pages of your newspaper, was very thought-provoking. While pedestrians in Banani are forced to use the foot over-bridge at baton-point even with running escalators, the situation is quite different in the Shahbagh over-bridge connecting BSMMU and BIRDEM Hospital. The patients and older citizens travelling through the area are in particular need of escalators in the foot over-bridge. The city planners should pay heed to it.

N. M. Mahboob
By email

Significance of small river dredging

The print media has recently reported the government's plans to dredge 24 major river routes in Bangladesh by June 2018. A total of 101.4 million cubic metre areas will be dredged, which will cost Tk 18.73 billion. On the completion of the project, heavy water vessels will be able to ply throughout the year, facilitating movement of passengers and goods at minimum cost. We thank the government for taking on such a significant responsibility.

However, the major rivers will drive water away from small rivers, which in turn will dry up in hot weather. Water transport and fish irrigation in the small river areas will be hampered. To ensure truly beneficial results, the Bangladesh Water Development Board should undertake another supplementary project to dredge the small rivers connected to the 24 major rivers. We should not create new problems to tackle previously existing ones.

Md. Ashraf Hossain
Central Bashabo

Is the gas price hike justified?

THE OVERTON WINDOW



ERESH OMAR JAMAL

ON February 23, the government announced that gas prices will be increased by 22.7 percent on average, across the board, in two phases, starting from March 1. The government last increased the price back in September 2015 and, before that, in 2009 and 2005.

The major brunt of the latest price hike will be borne by household natural gas users, as their monthly payment will be increased by 50 percent — Tk. 950 from Tk. 650 for a double-burner stove and Tk. 900 from Tk. 600 for a single-burner stove

Whatever the answer really is, the one certainty clearly visible is that the recent price hike is not only unfair, but is completely counterproductive and may well be detrimental for the country going forward.

— despite absorbing about 10 percent of the country's daily gas consumption only. Businesses too are expecting to be hit hard by the hike. According to a statement issued by the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI), the hike "is likely to have a detrimental effect on the investment and industrialisation prospects of the country".

Expressing concerns about how it may obstruct the country's economic growth, the FBCCI said that it is "apprehensive" that the hike "will not only seriously affect the cost of the utilities but also

increase the other associated costs of businesses", which, in turn, "will have the domino effect, leading to an even higher increase of general cost of living such as inflation, affecting every resident of the country". So the fact of the matter, in regards to the price increase, is, that whatever benefit (if any) the government seeks to extract, will actually be negated by its negative spill-over effects.

Why then is the government increasing gas prices so significantly? Mollah Amzad Hossain, Editor of *Energy & Power* magazine, says it is because the government "wants to discourage the use of pipe-gas for domestic use", as it is concerned about the current gas reserves running out around 2031. Ironically, however, while hiking the price of gas,

consecutive price cuts, fuelled by a decline in the global market price.

Back to the shortage of gas reserves, Professor Badrul Imam, Department of Geology, University of Dhaka, writes that "Gas exploration in Bangladesh has not reached a mature stage and therefore the presently known reserve is not necessarily a reflection of the true gas potential of the country" (Tackling our gas crisis, *The Daily Star*, February 23). Given that the government has carried out "minimum" exploration drives over the last decade, he says that "it appears that Bangladesh's gas depletion alarm is perhaps overly played" as without carrying out "serious exploration", it is "not justified to comment on how much reserve growth could be achieved".

Yet, no such plan seems to be in the pipeline.

Moreover, the Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission (BERC), when it increased retail prices of natural gas in 2015, had to instruct distribution companies to stop waste and unplanned use of natural gas, install prepaid metres and stop all illegal gas distribution networks. Disappointingly, however, in August 2016, the former BERC chair had to admit that efforts to comply with the directives by distributors were not as expected.

Amidst all these failures by the authorities, that is, the government, is it fair that businesses and ordinary citizens in general, should have to pay such high amounts for gas and electricity consumption? With fears of gas depleting by 2031 looming large, why is the government not exploring to discover more gas reserves on an urgent basis? And even if exploration projects are not successful, why is the government not pressing to reduce the massive waste and inefficiencies that, one could argue, are having a much bigger impact on the depletion of our gas reserves, than the use of gas for domestic purposes?

The truth is, one could only speculate what the answers to these questions really are. It could very well be that there is no long-term strategy in regards to the country's energy generation and so short-sighted decisions are being made. Another answer could be that there is a lack of political will to put in the hard work of removing the corruption that is widespread in the energy sector, and thus the easy way out is to simply charge consumers more for gas consumption. Whatever the answer really is, the one certainty clearly visible is that the recent price hike is not only unfair, but is completely counterproductive and may well be detrimental for the country going forward.

The government should thus not move forward with the price hike. Instead, it should look to guarantee the nation's energy security the right way — by reducing corruption in the energy sector and by formulating policies such as increasing gas explorations, or by slowly moving to other alternatives in ways which do not run against the interest of the public or businesses.

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IMAGE: WWW.CARBFLAME.COM

the government is failing, according to experts, to take any serious action to redress its scarcity.

This failure becomes even more glaring in the face of a government commitment made in 1998 — that 55 percent of revenues generated from the sector would be used for operating and developing the country's gas sector. Simultaneously, it should also be taken into consideration that while businesses in Bangladesh will now have to deal with higher prices, businesses in countries like its next door neighbour, India, are enjoying lower prices following four

Meanwhile, wastage of gas and inefficiencies in its use still contribute significantly to its quick depletion. Currently, the overall efficiency of all power plants in Bangladesh generating electricity from gas is a meagre 33 percent (Ways to increase energy efficiency, *The Daily Star*, February 23). According to the most recent energy efficiency study in Bangladesh — Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDC) — "replacing steam turbine power plants by Combined Cycle Gas Turbine" could increase electricity generation by "50-60 percent" using the "same quantity of gas".

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

How Trump is testing democracy

THE ASIAN CONVERGENCE



KOICHI HAMADA

WORLD leaders seem to be at a loss about how to approach relations with US President Donald Trump, given his worrying positions and often-bizarre behaviour toward politicians and the media, allies and enemies alike. Trump is not just challenging political convention to "shake things up"; he is testing the foundations of US democracy. That test has the potential to transform existing assumptions about the United States and its global role.

Trump was elected largely for one reason: a substantial share of US voters was fed up with the state of the economy and the politicians who had overseen it. Globalisation — the proliferation of flows of labour, goods, services, money, information, and technology worldwide — seemed to be benefiting everyone except them.

These voters had a point. While globalisation, and the trade openness that underpins it, has the potential to enrich the entire global economy, so far the richest have captured a hugely disproportionate share of the gains. In the US, wages for the top one percent of earners increased by 138 percent from 1980 to 2013, while wages for the bottom 90 percent grew by just 15 percent.

There is now a stark divide between the struggling workers of the so-called Rust Belt and the high-flying billionaires of Silicon Valley and Wall Street. The only people who emerged unscathed from the global economic crisis of 2008, it seemed, were those who caused it.

Trump seized on this rift during his campaign. He tapped the fears and frustrations of this particular group of working-class households, ensuring that they directed their rage not just at the wealthy (like Trump himself), but at the "establishment" — the mainstream politicians who were supposedly in cahoots with Wall Street. For a political outsider challenging the quintessential establishment politician (the Democrats' Hillary Clinton), it was an effective tactic.

But the election is now over, and it is time for Trump to help the people who elected him. It is not yet clear how — or even if — he plans to do that. In fact, if Trump follows through on his campaign rhetoric, he could end up hurting this group — and many others — even more.

During the campaign, Trump often used scapegoats — especially immigrants and major developing-world exporters,

such as China and Mexico — to attract support. The problem is that it is primarily automation, not offshoring or immigration, that is displacing traditional manufacturing workers in the US.

This means that if Trump fulfills his campaign promises — say, to impose severe immigration limits and high import tariffs — he won't actually solve the problem. What he would do is trigger retaliation from major trading partners, such as China, causing serious harm to the entire global economy — beginning with the US.

A better approach would be to focus on improving the management of globalisation, rather than attempting to roll it back. For starters, the Trump administration could offer stronger incentives for foreign investment in

trade agreement (which Trump has now rejected).

Against this background, Trump's meetings with Abe provide some reason for hope that the US authorities will pursue such an approach. The hitch is that even if Trump does see the value in it, he may well want to pursue the management task in his own way. He has, after all, shown a clear preference for personal, bilateral deals, like those he makes with his businesses, rather than engaging in formal, much less multilateral, diplomacy.

In a democracy, such personal deals don't necessarily work. To resolve the complex and often controversial issues that arise, broad agreement is needed, and securing it requires clear ground rules. Fortunately, as Trump will soon

among states, as well as among the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government.

By focusing on checks and balances, the US Constitution's framers created a kind of safety valve for the political system, meant to protect it from unexpected shocks arising from any of its many moving parts. With Trump himself essentially amounting to an unexpected shock, this safety valve — indeed, the US constitution itself — is being tested.

So far, the system has held. The constitutional rights to free expression and peaceful assembly continue to be upheld — and exercised on a massive scale. The courts have not bowed to Trump, most notably by striking down his executive order banning entry to the



Trump's meetings with Abe provide some reason for hope for the effective management of the forces of globalisation.

major sectors like automobiles and infrastructure.

Effective management of the forces of globalisation is how Japan protected its vulnerable sectors. Opening up trade in agriculture significantly improved living standards for ordinary Japanese, but it could easily have hurt the country's farmers. Fortunately, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's government recognised this risk, and took steps to protect local farmers, including in negotiating the Trans-Pacific Partnership

learn, the US Constitution is well suited to provide just such rules.

In Western democracies, the constitution is the supreme law of the land, taking precedence over all other legislation. The same is true in the US. But, as Michael K. Young, President of Texas A&M University, has explained, because the US Constitution was fashioned when various states, which already had their own laws, agreed to create a political union, it functions like a set of ground rules for negotiations

US by people from seven Muslim-majority countries.

But the test is not over. The people and their leaders must continue to defend democracy, and the courts must guard their independence. The entire world is counting on it.

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