

Gas pipeline with no gas to supply

Who is responsible for this wastage of Tk 1,200 crore?

THE Bangla daily *Prothom Alo* on April 17 reported how two projects undertaken to supply gas to five districts, costing Tk 1,200 crore, have been a complete waste of public money. In the last 14 years, the districts, including Khulna and Jashore, have not only not received any gas supply, but it appears now that there is no chance of the project being utilised anytime in the immediate future either. To top it off, it appears that the projects were undertaken knowing fully well that the gas in the source of these pipelines was inadequate for supply to all five districts.

Four consecutive governments have worked on these projects. In 2017, a report of the Implementation, Monitoring and Evaluation Division stated that undertaking the infeasible project was irresponsible. Last year, a Petrobangla investigation found that the money spent has yielded absolutely no returns, while accruing large interests on the ADB loan which funded the project. The report also pointed towards names of those responsible from the project implementation organisation. As yet, no action has been taken against anyone.

Of course, no one is willing to take responsibility. The report cited that most people contacted claimed that it was not their responsibility in the first place. On the other hand, all indications point towards prior knowledge of infeasibility. Why was the project approved in the first place then? This is a case of utter negligence. Was it political expedience that led to continuing the project despite the fact that it was doomed to failure? Or did someone stand to profit? Public projects are only as good as the benefit they bring to people; this project not only failed in that aspect, but also incurred a cost going into thousands of crores of taka.

We hope that the ministry acts on the investigation report to hold those responsible accountable. But more importantly, our administration needs to take a deeper look at our failures in project implementation—from delays, increasing costs, and now, completion without any benefit.

The curse of child marriage

Why are we failing to curb it?

A UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund) study has given us the shocking news that 59 percent of all marriages that took place in Bangladesh between 2006 and 2017 were in fact child marriage—the brides were all under 18. In fact, we have surpassed other countries in the region by quite a margin; the percentage of child marriage in India was found to be 27 percent, 40 percent in Nepal, 21 percent in Pakistan, and 26 percent in Bhutan. Needless to say, this makes the attainment of our Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030 next to impossible. The ill effects of child marriage are widely known and acknowledged, which is why we have a law that prohibits it. So where are we going wrong?

One of the biggest factors that encourage child marriage is the lack of security of young girls and a high incidence of violence against women. According to our police, last year there were 16,253 incidents of violence against women and children. Every day, we read reports of girls becoming victims of rape and other forms of violence with many of the perpetrators going scot-free. Stalking is a major problem in both rural and urban areas. The threat to a girl's physical security and the social stigma associated with rape or other forms of sexual violence prompt many parents to marry their daughters off as early as possible. Add to that the special provision in the Child Marriage Restraint Act 2017 which allows parents to marry their daughters off before age 18 by a court order. Thus we have all the conditions necessary to promote child marriage rather than deter it.

We know how child marriage holds us back as a nation. Early marriage means girls dropping out of secondary school, being forced into sexual relations that they may not be ready for, having babies when they themselves are children, being malnourished, and giving birth to premature babies and even dying because of birth-related complications. The government must work extra hard to rid the country of this curse by creating a safe environment for girls to grow up in and reach their full potential. They must also scrap the special provision that contradicts the premise that child marriage is an age-old malaise that we must permanently get rid of.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

How many govt. buildings adhere to fire safety?

After the devastating fire at the capital's FR Tower, the issue of fire safety in high-rise buildings in Dhaka has become a focal point of discussion for quite some time now. The good thing is that at least we have begun to talk about it. Maybe, we should also begin checking how many government buildings adhere to fire safety regulations. Because if even government institutions cannot maintain fire safety precautions, then how can we expect government bodies to take on the regulatory role of overseeing other private buildings? A few days ago, *Prothom Alo* carried out a news report on Dhaka North City Corporation where it had disclosed that the DNCC does not have adequate fire safety measures.

If government buildings cannot maintain fire safety regulations, and cannot set an example to building owners, then we cannot realistically expect people to adhere to safety precautions when constructing or designing buildings.

Md Zillur Rahaman

Satish Sarker Road, Gandaria, Dhaka

BNP'S HARD CHOICE

To join or not to join?

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING



BRIG GEN SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN NDC, PSC (RETD)

UNDERSTANDABLY, the local leaders of the BNP are finding themselves in Hamlet's shoes having to decide on the next course of action as regards the five of its party men who created a unique record of getting elected, i.e. to join or not to join the parliament? The party is indeed in a sea of "outrageous misfortune" (some of it of its own making though).

And it all depends on how the BNP acts to end their misfortune.

Very few would take issue with the view that politically BNP is in the doldrums, willy-nilly becoming politically inconsequential, if not a non-entity. For that, the BNP has to blame the lack of political acumen of its decision-maker, given the absence in the party of the collective decision-making culture that is the hallmark of any political party with democratic credentials. And it is not the chairman though but the aspirant to the highest post of the

The BNP must choose between becoming completely irrelevant politically, if not a non-entity, and validating an election. For the BNP, that is a hard choice, but most often, a hard choice turns out to be the right choice.

party who must bear, in good part, the responsibility for the state that the BNP finds itself in. Because it is to the virtual absentee landlord that the senior leaders in Dhaka have always turned to, seeking the final decision from a person who has been detached for a decade by thousands of kilometres from home and from the grassroots leaders and workers of the party, and unable to feel their pulse. And they have done the same this time too.

In fact, almost all the political decisions taken by the BNP in the last 10 years, except perhaps to participate in the eleventh parliamentary elections, have backfired badly on the party. Perhaps the single most injurious decision for the party was not that it boycotted the 2014 national polls but that it outsourced the violence, in most parts to the Jamaat, that was perpetrated on the hapless public.

The BNP should not rue the fact that it participated



FILE PHOTO

Jatiya Sangsad

in the 2018 Jatiya Sangsad elections. In fact, that is one sensible decision that BNP has taken in a long time. It is another matter though that the expectations of the party and the hopes of the general people were blunted by the way the elections were held. There is, however, a qualitative difference between the conduct of the tenth and the eleventh parliamentary elections. In the former case, people abstained from voting in the remaining 147 seats that were not taken up "uncontested", some out of fear, but most out of their own volition. The actual percentage of votes cast in the tenth parliamentary elections may have just touched five, although the EC, after several days of trying to determine a plausible number, came up with a figure of around 51 percent to give the election a modicum of credibility. That did not fool the people. However, in the 11th parliamentary elections, voters in many centres were prevented from voting by various intriguing and innovative methods. The outcome of the elections, one understands, confronted even the senior leaders of the AL.

Since then, the BNP has been in a fix over whether or not its elected MPs should join the parliament. The matter has become more pressing since two Oikyafront candidates joined the parliament recently which the BNP denounced strongly, describing the act as cheating the nation.

Now that the ball is in Tarique Rahman's court, one would have to wait for the final pronouncement. Given the inflexibility displayed in the past on such issues, it would be interesting to see if he chooses to climb down from his high horse and decides on a rational approach. But it would do him well to consider certain ground realities.

Firstly, although nobody can or should write the BNP off, one cannot deny that it is in a moribund

state. Except for some odd comments here and there, it has not come out strongly on any national issue that one expects from the second largest political party in the country.

Secondly, two of its senior personages are out of the political scene, a very unhappy situation for any political party. And such a situation may compel some of its members, in particular those who are politically committed, to choose to move away and towards other parties. It is quite likely too that they would find welcome arms of the other major party which may be only too eager to take them into its fold. We saw that happen just before the polls in 2018 when a large number of BNP members joined the AL, and that included a longtime presidium member.

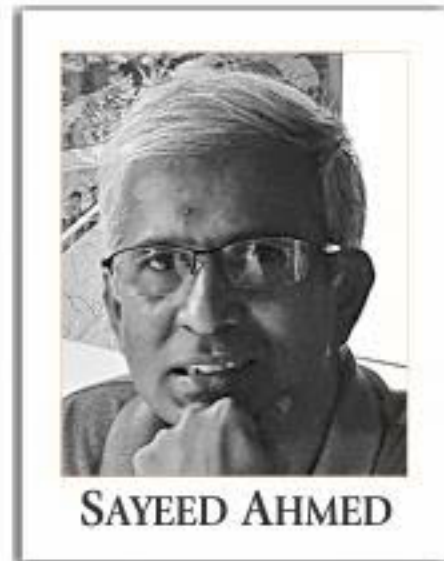
Thirdly, and most importantly, given all of the above, a prolonged state of suspended animation or political limbo carries a serious prospect of the party becoming a political non-entity. And that is perhaps what some political parties would like to see happen.

What may possibly be playing in the minds of the BNP leadership is the fact that their joining the parliament might validate the election, the results of which the Oikyafront has rejected. That may well be true, but the BNP cannot overlook the fact that one's destiny cannot be left to chance; it is a matter of hard choice that will determine the future of the party. The BNP must choose between becoming completely irrelevant politically, if not a non-entity, and validating an election. For the BNP, that is a hard choice, but most often, a hard choice turns out to be the right choice.

Brig Gen Shahedul Anam Khan, ndc, psc (retd) is Associate Editor, *The Daily Star*.

Why Suu Kyi is silent on the Rohingya issue

The Nobel Peace Prize winner stood up against the ruthless military regime as she fought for democracy, but not when it came to defending the persecuted Rohingya people. Why?



SAYEED AHMED

AUNG San Suu Kyi's inability to speak up for the Rohingya in Myanmar has been a riddle. The Western world had elevated her almost to the status of sainthood, only to find that she is actually a politician, happy to switch sides as convenient. In the process, it is the Myanmar regime that benefited most from her celebrity status, as they legitimised their hold on power. Suu Kyi, however, defended her government's actions, saying that it cannot solve the Rohingya issue within a short time as the "...situation in Rakhine has been such since many decades."

To understand what Suu Kyi means, we have to go back many years.

Just like the original inhabitants' claim on Jerusalem, there is a debate on who the first settlers were in Arakan (or Rakhine, as it is presently known). Burmese nationalists claim Rakhine people have lived in Arakan since 3000 BCE although there is no archaeological evidence to support this. By the fourth century, India's influence began to come into play in Southeast Asia, Arakan being among the first. The Chandra dynasty of the Samatata region of Bengal ruled northern Arakan between the tenth and eleventh centuries. It was a Buddhist stronghold and played an important role in the spread of Mahayana Buddhism to Southeast Asia. Islam reached the shores of Arakan during the late eighth century with Arab sailors and missionaries. Rakhines began migrating from upper Burma to Arakan in the ninth century.

In 1406, Arakan King Nareameikhla Min Saw Mon ran away to the Bengal Sultanate, as he lost out to rival groups. After 23 years of exile, he reclaimed his kingdom with the help of the Sultan of Bengal. Thereafter, Arakan remained independent until the eighteenth century. During its heydays, it controlled most of southeastern Bangladesh which they lost to the Mughals in 1766 after a series of land

and naval battles. They ceased to be a sovereign country altogether when the Burmese Konbaung dynasty conquered them in 1784.

Burmese scholars agree that Buddhism spread to Arakan and beyond during the rule of the Chandra dynasty, but maintain that Islam arrived there much later, and only with the British colonial rulers, when Muslims from Chattogram started settling there. What happened after that is more to the point.

British colonial power conquered Arakan in 1826, and the rest of Burma in 1885. They brought Indians to assist in its colonisation efforts who received preferential treatment over the locals—a

Burmese leaders for the concession of two townships to Pakistan. Such events are deeply etched in the collective memory of the Burmese rulers, and mistrust and suspicion linger.

Post-1948 saw the independence of Burma and its gradual sliding down to a military regime, under the tight control of the Barmars, leading to its isolation from the rest of the world. They continued their policy of discrimination against Indians, especially Muslims, declaring them non-citizens in 1982, and eventually the "illegal immigrants from Bangladesh". In early 1990s, the international community imposed economic sanctions on Burma (renamed



PHOTO: REUTERS/CATHAL MCNAUGHTON

Aung San Suu Kyi, General Aung San's daughter, rose to prominence during her 15 years of imprisonment over a period of 21 years from 1989 to 2010.

signature British tactic. Local Barmars bitterly resented it.

Second World War. Japanese forces marched into Burma. Barmars supported the Japanese (their "saviour") and the Indians sided with the British. The crack in the society became wide open. 1942 witnessed a large-scale massacre in Arakan, perpetrated by both sides. Each lost tens of thousands; many were raped, tortured and maimed. In 1946, Arakanese Muslim leaders approached Pakistan's founding father Muhammad Ali Jinnah and offered to join Pakistan. Jinnah declined. They then requested

Myanmar in 1989). The military regime politicised religion to such an extent that it gave rise to the so-called militant Buddhism, an ideology poles apart from the very foundations of Buddha's teachings, making Muslims their worst enemy, craftily utilising the global wave of Islamophobia.

Aung San Suu Kyi, General Aung San's daughter, rose to prominence during her 15 years of imprisonment over a period of 21 years from 1989 to 2010. The legacy of her father was too strong for the Burmese generals to ignore her, as she steadfastly fought for democracy. The government placed her

under house arrest and made her an offer saying she could leave the country. But she refused repeatedly, even when her husband was terminally ill. In 1996, Suu Kyi's motorcade came under attack in Yangon, almost killing her. She turned down offers for roles in interim governments, saying "the future of the opposition would be decided by masses of the people."

Suu Kyi has demonstrated loyalty towards her people, but the people are vehemently against conceding any rights to the Rohingya. Despite her liberal Western upbringing, she won't do anything to jeopardise her support base. Without their support, the charisma will be gone, making her valueless both to the generals and the Western world.

The stakes are much higher than they appear. Suu Kyi has provided legitimacy to the military regime of Myanmar, as Sebastian Strangio explains in his article titled "The Fall of Aung San Suu Kyi, Democracy Icon". The regime neatly orchestrated a stage-managed election in which Suu Kyi-led NLD won a landslide victory. Western nations lifted sanctions with great satisfaction, big corporations scrambled to Myanmar to grab a share of the new market, but real power remained with the Tatmadaw. Of course, she knew this, but Suu Kyi still complied while the regime utilised her beatified image to get out of isolation. The lesson here is that a murderous regime can get away with genocide if they can play the right game. Suu Kyi is now complicit in the horrendous abuse of human rights in Myanmar.

It's quite natural for one to expect more from Suu Kyi. Unfortunately, her position on the Rohingya issue has been extremely disappointing, and of late, most appalling. Only time will tell if she will ever change her stance on the Rohingya issue. As of now, it is not just her silence, but also her vocal support for the murderous regime in Myanmar that risks putting all our accepted values and norms on the line.

Sayed Ahmed is a consulting engineer with experience in infrastructure project management in South Asia, South East Asia and the Pacific. His interest includes broad-based development and inclusive growth.