



PHOTO: RASHED SUMON

The cost of citizenship

OSAMA RAHMAN

The latest power disruption came after different international agencies, which used to provide funds to the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief for the electricity bills, stopped doing so once the Urdu-speaking people were given national identity cards.

Shuttered shops and vacant alleys present quite a different picture of the usually bustling corridors within Geneva Camp, located in the capital's Mohammadpur.

And perhaps it had changed long before the October 6 protests.

On the day, Geneva camp residents took to the streets demanding uninterrupted electricity. While that may sound like something many Dhaka dwellers want, in Geneva camp load shedding had become an altogether different beast.

For over two to three months, load-shedding had been a daily affair, with blackouts lasting up to 8-9 hours.

Having had enough, the residents took to the streets. And that protest brought more problems than anyone could have imagined.

The recent protests boiled down to being one over the demands for free and uninterrupted supply of electricity. After all, that was what the protests were styled to be about.

But ask the Bihari community representatives about their reaction to the move by the government to cut off electricity, and they will allege that this is aimed at eviction. They said as much at a press conference by the Urdu Speaking People's Youth Rehabilitation Movement after the protest.

"There was a Supreme Court order which directed the government to pay the electricity bill of the camp," informs Sadakat Khan Faku, the organisation's president. "The government refusing to give us uninterrupted electricity is a violation of

that." Indeed, there is a court order, but it is only a stay and its time period will expire in a month's time. What happens after is something the camp residents have already been treated to.

But the problem is not so simple. Over the last 45 years, the camps have grown from single-storey, one-roomed residential quarters to multi-storeyed buildings, housing a growing population and many commercial units.

Anisur Rahman, deputy commissioner (Tejgaon division) of the Dhaka Metropolitan Police, told *The Daily Star* that the camp residents did not pay electricity bills, which is said to be around 33 crore taka to Dhaka Power Distribution Company (DPDC).

Khalid Hussain, an activist and the community lawyer, said, "Camp representatives have held meetings to find a solution. But how can camp dwellers pay that much?"

The latest power disruption came after different international agencies, which used to provide funds to the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief for the electricity bills, stopped doing so once the Urdu-speaking people were given national identity cards.

Once naturalised as citizens, their refugee status was lost, and along with it went all the so-called privileges.

The residents are currently negotiating with the authorities, but have still not arrived at any solution. The residents have agreed to having metres installed for each family. But the power authorities have

refused to do that.

"Instead, they suggested that a main metre be installed in the many big shops and sub metres be given to homes. But the residents have disagreed with this because they think this will be used to extort more money from them," argued Khalid. Having the main metre in the shops themselves could open up another venue for corruption, with most of the bills passed on to the dwellers themselves.

There is always a chance that the residents would be billed more, there could be manipulations and the shops, if declared illegal, would mean not only snapping of their electricity but also of the homes that share the main metre with them.

This option, therefore, was deemed unacceptable.

A community divided

Distrust still runs rampant in the camps. Around 52 people of their community were made accused in the case over clashes with police, and law enforcers have been harassing the male residents of the camp since.

Law enforcers are apparently still looking through video footage of the protests to find who else to arrest.

Most of the camp leaders have gone off the radar to evade arrest, leaving the community's cause almost leaderless.

Simon, shopkeeper in the camps, says the arrests have resulted in an atmosphere of absolute fear. "People aren't leaving homes. The police are arresting everyone they can identify," he said.

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