

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR
LATE S. M. ALI

DHAKA FRIDAY NOVEMBER 20, 2020, AGRAHAYAN 5, 1427 BS

Govt’s plan to strike off coal power plants appreciable

What about Rampal?

WE welcome the government’s plan to get rid of coal power for cleaner options of energy, such as liquefied natural gas (LNG), petroleum and solar, owing to rising coal import costs and environmental concerns. According to the power, energy and mineral resources ministry, if the plan gets the go-ahead from the highest office, all but five coal-based power projects will be scrapped. Unfortunately, the Rampal power plant is not among the projects that will be cancelled.

Over the last 12 years, the government has approved 18 coal-based power plants, 13 of which could not make any progress or ensure funds to construct the proposed plants. However, the work of the remaining five projects—Payra (1,320MW Bangladesh-China joint venture in Patuakhali), Rampal (1,320MW Bangladesh-India Maitri thermal project in Bagerhat), S Alam (1224MW, at Banshkhali in Chattogram), Barisal Electric Power Company Ltd (307MW, in Barguna), and Matarbari (1200MW Bangladesh-Japan joint venture in Cox’s Bazar)—has been going on.

Of these five coal-based projects, the Rampal power plant touched off an unprecedented uproar among green campaigners as well as the general public at home and abroad, as it is being constructed close to the Sundarbans, the largest mangrove forest in the world. The state minister for power and energy has insisted that there is no chance of the Rampal power plant being cancelled, as 40 percent of its work has already been completed.

Although the government assures us that none of these power plants will cause any harm to the environment as “ultra super critical technology” is being used in constructing the plants, it is common knowledge how coal-based power plants create black smog and pollute the surrounding air and water. The Rampal power plant will definitely destroy the delicate ecosystem of large parts of the Sundarbans as the fleet of ships carrying coal for the power plant will cause air and water pollution, according to environmentalists.

According to Bangladesh Power Development Board, the country’s electricity demand is now a maximum of 12,000-13,000MW against a production capacity of 20,383MW. So, what could be the logic behind building more coal-based power plants, especially Rampal, when they are most likely to be extremely harmful for our environment? While we understand that the government has been working to increase power generation considering future demand, we hope that it will do so by using clean sources of energy and considering the environmental aspects.

Arson attacks on buses demand proper investigation

Politicising the attacks will only let the real perpetrators off the hook

IT is astonishing that Zakir Hossain Siddiqui—a vice-president of Jubo Dal who was admitted to LabAid Hospital between November 10 and 15, and has the documents to prove it—has been charged for torching a bus on November 12. This newspaper obtained those documents, yet the police did not? On what basis would they have filed the case otherwise? And what sort of an investigation did they carry out where such a crucial piece of evidence simply escaped them? Another Jubo Dal member who underwent bypass surgery less than a month before November 12, and was prescribed to be in bed rest for three months by doctors, also claimed to have been falsely accused in relation to the incident.

A previous report published by this newspaper on November 15 unearthed similar cases of BNP leaders and activists being charged over buses getting torched in the capital, despite multiple eyewitnesses confirming that they were in a completely different location at the time. In one particular case, the individual charged was present in a Dhaka court when the arson attack took place—surely it could not have been that difficult for the police to find that out.

All these glaring anomalies do not indicate that the police are going after those who are actually responsible for the attacks—rather it seems that people are being charged based on their political affiliation. In fact, as this newspaper reported yesterday, two individuals who were actually seen setting fire to a bus on a CCTV camera are apparently yet to be identified or apprehended by the police.

While we are not saying whether BNP is involved or not in this incident, we are extremely worried about how these cases are being handled and how impartially the investigations are being carried out. At the end of the day, setting buses on fire is a very serious and dangerous offence. And by politicising the attacks, the police are trivialising the matter and failing to apprehend the criminals behind them—who could potentially launch more such attacks in the future if they are let off the hook. We call on the authorities to conduct proper investigations into the attacks.

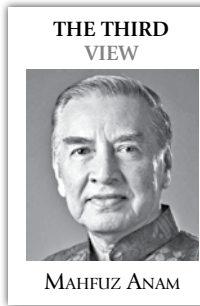
LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Be ready for a second wave

Experts have predicted the possibility of a second wave of coronavirus in Bangladesh starting this winter. Yet, all warnings seem to be falling on deaf ears. That’s what I feel every time I step out of my house and notice the total disregard for health safety. Recently, the highest daily casualties in around two months were recorded: 39 reported in a day! What more proof do we need to take this pandemic seriously? However, I appreciate the initiative of the authorities to conduct mobile court drives and fine those not wearing masks. We must all be alert and make sure we carry out all precautionary measures.

Zahid Alom, *Khulna*



Sangsad, trying to protect herself from police assault while protesting against the then BNP government. A few years later, we published a photo of Sadeque Hossain Khoka, a BNP leader later to become Mayor of Dhaka, with blood streaming down his forehead after facing a brutal police attack at nearly the same spot. The two photos showing police behaviour at two different junctures of our history when two different parties were in power (namely BNP and AL) tell one single story: how the police, as they are presently used, are not enforcers of law but rather implementers of the politics of the day, including and especially its vengeful aspects.

The above story acquires new relevance as we see how the police are handling the case of the torching of nearly a dozen buses in Dhaka city and how opposition party members are being picked up indiscriminately, even when they were far away from the scene of the occurrence. This paper ran two reports, on November 15 and 19, detailing how people are being indiscriminately arrested or put in wanted lists that include people who are most unlikely to be able to torch buses, either because they are too old, too sick (some have been in hospital during the occurrence) or too far away from the scene of the crime. We can’t say whether BNP was involved or not—it is for the investigation to reveal. We are merely pointing out that the political nature of the arrests is greatly corroding the credibility of the process.

One would perhaps shrug their shoulders and say this is hardly unusual in our part of the world. The question is, why should it be so? Why should it happen at all if we believe in the supremacy of our constitution and the sanctity of our laws? Not only does it continue to happen, we also consider this trend natural and inevitable. This is where the problem begins: our readiness to accept that the police will be a handmaiden of the government and not a protector of the people. Maybe its roots lie in the colonial times. But how long are we going to sing that song? Are we never going to have a modern, neutral and professional police force fully



while the International Monetary Fund estimates that global GDP will shrink by 4.4 percent in 2020. But, strange as it may seem, the current crisis could offer developing countries a path toward greater economic self-reliance.

This is partly because developed countries have in general borne the brunt of the pandemic’s health effects so far. Many advanced Western economies have experienced more Covid-19 cases and deaths relative to their populations than have developing countries of the Global South, despite their superior health-care systems and stronger social safety nets. For example, India’s health system ranks 112th globally, while that of the United States ranks 37th. But whereas India has so far reported about 6,467 Covid-19 cases per million population, America’s tally is more than five times higher.

Some developing countries like Vietnam combated the coronavirus effectively by introducing strict testing, tracing, and quarantine measures at a very early stage—something most developed countries failed to do. Even after allowing for possible underreporting and data inaccuracies in poorer countries, the relative performance of developed economies remains a paradox.

Moreover, development financing has already started to plummet as richer countries focus on engineering domestic post-pandemic recoveries. The OECD estimates that external private finance inflows to developing economies could decrease by USD 700 billion year on year

From a pro-party to pro-people police force

Political use has prevented its growth into a neutral professional institution

committed to the people, whose taxes pay for their service? Not even now when we are about to celebrate 50 years of our independence?

It has been 30 years since we toppled autocracy, and yet instead of moving forward with a neutral professional police force, we have, in fact, moved backwards. The political use of this essential institution constitutes the central reality of today and it is also perhaps the most important law and order issue. They are now a part of the apparatus. That law is “blind” is belied by the fact that police look at almost everything wearing politically coloured glasses. Just as they are looked upon as an integral part of ruling-party politics, they too look upon themselves as servants of the party

is ever asked.

The absurd situation of allegations of torture against police being investigated by officers from the same units, or within the same official hierarchy, is a commonplace occurrence. In almost all cases, such investigations, while taking an unnecessarily long time, more often than not exonerate accused police officials from the charges. In this regard, the UN Committee Against Torture (CAT) recommends that Bangladesh establishes an investigation mechanism to handle complaints regarding torture and ill-treatment by law enforcement officials that is independent of law enforcement agencies. The CAT also urges empowering the National Human Rights Commission of Bangladesh by making necessary



The way the police are handling the case of torching of nine buses in Dhaka city on November 12, 2020 raises questions about their neutrality as a law enforcement agency.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

rather than of the public. Otherwise, how can one explain that Officers in Charge (OCs) of police stations routinely refuse to accept citizens’ complaints without ensuring that the complaints are politically koshered?

Today, there is practically no accountability of police behaviour, the most glaring proof of which is that no serious investigation has ever been undertaken for custodial deaths. People have been picked up by individuals claiming to be police from their houses, who later turned up dead in hospitals or whose bodies were discovered lying by the road side, and yet no investigation was done to ascertain how it happened. Routinely, the wrong people are made accused in terrorism, arson and political cases and later released, allegedly after hidden transactions, and yet no question

amendments to its Act so that it can investigate all alleged acts of torture and ill-treatment committed by law enforcement agencies directly. But who listens?

Another reason behind the impunity of police officers is that the victims of torture are extremely reluctant to file complaints fearing reprisals. Here, the enactment of a victim and witness protection law could serve a useful purpose.

The use made of the police in the last general election and subsequent by-elections, and in suppressing road safety, quota reforms and other movements, shows how police have been made an integral part of the political power structure, which has further removed any possibility of their accountability. What is of further concern is how even laws have been changed to make such police action

not only legal but also inevitable. Before, citizens used to be victimised by the misuse of law. Now, they are victimised by its use, done very much by the book.

In making new laws it is generally expected that we follow the spirit of the 17th-century English philosopher and political theorist, John Locke, that “the end of law is not to abolish or restrain but to preserve and enlarge freedom.” Ours are on the opposite trajectory. We have made laws whose clear purpose is to “restrain”, if not “abolish” freedom outright. The Digital Security Act (DSA) is a law that is structured—from beginning to end—to curb freedom of expression. Made in the name of restraining cybercrimes, it has become the very symbol of the most oppressive law that Bangladesh has enacted in the recent past.

Instead of protecting people’s fundamental rights, police are now the preferred instrument for curbing them. The most common feeling among the people is that “I don’t need any protection. Just leave me alone.” For, once drawn into a legal tangle, it usually takes years, if not a lifetime, to see the light at the end of a never-ending legal tunnel. Being left alone, by the law, is the earnest desire of the majority of the citizens.

But that’s not how “laws” were meant to be viewed. They were meant to be embraced, not feared. The story of the shifting of power from the sovereign monarch to the sovereign people is the most edifying and uplifting—and not-so-often-told—story of our civilisation.

Where power should reside, who should exercise it and how, and how its use will be monitored are essential questions that have engaged the best and brightest of minds throughout history, and have triggered struggles between the rulers and the ruled. Bringing power into the hands of the people has been the stuff of most revolutions, ultimately flowering into democracy and, in Abraham Lincoln’s words, into governments “of the people, by the people and for the people.”

With the shrinking democratic space for the people and with law enforcement acquiring a deeper political hue, while enjoying complete impunity for their actions, what is the future of our dream for a pro-people law enforcement? The power, the privilege, the “exceptionality” that they have been made used to will be something they will be reluctant to part with. How the police will turn, if ever, from being pro-party to being a pro-people law enforcement force is a question that only the future can answer.

But it should definitely be one of our immediate goals as we celebrate the 50 years of our independence.

Mahfuz Anam is Editor and Publisher, The Daily Star.

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

The Global South’s Pandemic Path to Self-Reliance

in 2020, exceeding the impact of the 2008 global financial crisis by 60 percent. Non-resident portfolio outflows from emerging markets totalled USD 83.3 billion in March 2020 alone, according to the Institute of International Finance. And the OECD thinks global foreign direct investment (FDI) will drop by at least 30 percent this year, with flows to developing economies likely to fall even more. Such trends imply a grim outlook for Global South countries that historically have largely relied on development aid from the Global North.

But studies have shown that development aid and humanitarian assistance do not necessarily foster economic empowerment. A recent OECD survey found that between 48 percent and 94 percent of respondents in developing countries do not believe that humanitarian assistance helps them to become economically self-reliant. People want financial autonomy, not prolonged assistance.

The debate over the effectiveness of development aid is an old one, with critics claiming that rich countries use aid as a tool to exploit developing economies’ resources, and often attach conditions to ensure that donors reap the bulk of the export receipts. But many developed countries have lost much of their soft power because of their shambolic pandemic responses.

Even before Covid-19 struck, many developing economies had been looking for ways to make a sustainable shift from aid dependency to self-reliance. In 2018, Rwanda banned second-hand clothes imports with the aim of encouraging its domestic textile industry to produce higher value-added garments; the US responded by ending the country’s duty-free export privileges. And last year, the United Kingdom’s government allocated part of its 14 billion pound (USD 18.5 billion) aid budget to capacity-building projects intended to help developing countries increase their international trade and attract FDI.

Today, developing countries have more opportunities to become self-reliant. For starters, trade in developing East Asia has declined less sharply than in the West during the pandemic, according to the World Trade Organization. A key reason for this is that industries producing high value-added goods usually suffer more during downturns. Developing countries’ greater resilience, stemming from their reliance on low value-added manufacturing, is evident in Vietnam’s textile and garments sector, which has

The debate over the effectiveness of development aid is an old one, with critics claiming that rich countries use aid as a tool to exploit developing economies’ resources, and often attach conditions to ensure that donors reap the bulk of the export receipts.

remained operational throughout the pandemic and is expected to have a swifter recovery in 2021 compared to their regional competitors.

Second, digitisation will play a crucial role in the post-pandemic recovery by significantly boosting e-commerce, which implies a fairer competitive playing field for producers around the world. Bangladesh’s e-commerce sector grew by 26 percent year on year by August, and other South Asian countries show a similar trend.

Third, the health-care and

pharmaceuticals sectors are expected to thrive in the post-pandemic economy as people become more aware of the importance of health and fitness. Least developed countries can take advantage of World Trade Organization provisions by producing more generic drugs, which face no patent-related obstacles.

Finally, governments in the Global South can mobilise domestic resources to offset the decline in external development finance—in particular by transforming their tax policies to generate revenue from fast-growing digital economic activities. Currently, developing countries’ low levels of tax revenue as a share of GDP—typically between 10-20 percent, compared to 40 percent in high-income countries—hinder development by constraining governments’ ability to invest in public goods like health, infrastructure, and education.

Developing countries face several hurdles on the path to self-reliance, not least poor governance, unfavourable business climates, and civil conflicts. But they also must break with the post-1945 paradigm of external development finance, which has been primarily driven by the Global North and shaped by its geopolitical agenda. For far too long, developing countries have had to listen to lectures from those who think they know better. Today, developing-country governments must chart a development agenda that is free from donor conditionality.

Every crisis contains great opportunities, and the Covid-19 pandemic is no different. It offers developing countries nothing less than the chance to reinvent and reboot their economies—and to shake off the disabling legacy of external aid dependency.

Syed Munir Khasru is Chairman of the Institute for Policy, Advocacy, and Governance (IPAG).
Copyright: Project Syndicate, 2020.
www.project-syndicate.org
(Exclusive to The Daily Star)