

## A tragedy of our own making!

*Blatant disregard for passengers' safety led to so many deaths and injuries*

We are saddened and outraged at the deadliest incident of launch fire in our history that has taken at least 40 lives until now, with over a hundred passengers injured and many more still missing. According to our reports, a few hours after the launch, MV Abhijan-10, left for Barguna with over a thousand passengers on board from Dhaka—at 6pm on Thursday—the staffers of the launch noticed some problems. However, they kept the vessel going while trying to fix them. Many of the passengers noticed that the engine of the launch was acting strange—it was making loud noises from time to time, black smoke was emanating from the engine room and sometimes, flashes of fire were exiting the exhaust pipe. With all the signs of an imminent disaster, the launch, however, kept going. Even when the people on the bottom floor of the vessel felt the deck getting hotter—after it left the Barishal Launch Terminal around 1:30am—the master still kept the launch moving towards its destination. Then, at 2am, there was an explosion which caused the huge fire that engulfed the entire launch.

The questions that we have regarding this deadly fire incident are many: Why didn't the launch master and staffers do the routine check-up of the engine and other machinery before starting the journey? Why did the launch master not cancel the trip when they found out that the engine was giving trouble? Why were barrels of fuel kept in the engine room and on a major portion of the lower deck? Why was there a kitchen right next to the engine room? Why didn't the master stop the vessel at the Barishal launch terminal when the heat at the lower deck was so obvious and could be felt by all? Lastly, why were there more than a thousand passengers on board, when the launch had the capacity of carrying only 420? This fatal fire could have been easily avoided if some basic rules had been followed by the launch master and staffers, and if only they cared a little about the passengers' safety.

It is heartbreaking to see the cries and screams of the relatives of those who died on the spot, being burnt alive or having suffocated to death. Many are still waiting for their loved ones who went missing after they jumped into the river to save themselves from the fatal blaze. The hospitals in Barishal, Jhalakathi and Dhaka that are providing treatment to the burn victims are struggling with so many critically wounded patients. We hope all of them will get the best treatment in the country and that no more lives will be lost.

Apparently, some committees have been formed to investigate the incident and find out the real cause of the fire. Although the fire officials have primarily identified the engine room to be the source of the blaze, we will know for sure when the committees give their reports. And regarding the negligence of the launch master and the staffers, we think all of them should be brought under the law for not playing their due roles. Such blatant disregard for passengers' safety should never be tolerated.

## Bring children back to school

*Govt action needed to make education inclusive and accessible for all*

THE fact that at least 2.5 million children of school-going age are not receiving formal education is deeply concerning. As this daily has recently reported—citing data presented at a CSO Alliance, CAMPE and Dhaka Ahsania Mission webinar titled "Achievement, challenges and way forward in Bangladesh's Golden Jubilee"—the dropout rate for primary education is currently 17.9 percent, but even higher for secondary education. It was also found that the student-teacher ratio remains too high with there being only one teacher for every 46 students. This, coupled with the dropouts and learning loss caused by Covid-19 pandemic-induced school closures of the past nearly two years, certainly casts a shadow on the future of school education in Bangladesh.

Amongst those excluded from education, most belong to vulnerable groups either due to their financial conditions or because of various disabilities. It is unfortunate that our education sector does not cater well enough to children with disabilities, with a uniform education system for those with disabilities still nowhere in sight. What is more disappointing is that teachers, headteachers and managing committees of many schools are apparently unwilling to allow such disadvantaged students to fully integrate into schools. It was also mentioned during the webinar how only 26 percent of teachers had acquired leadership training while very few were proficient in braille. As a country that is in the process of stepping into the category of being "developing", our educators need to be actively working towards accommodating students from all backgrounds instead of doing the opposite.

In order for progress to take place, it is crucial that such issues in our education sector are remedied on a priority basis. We would urge the government to work on recruiting and training teachers in a manner which would help make education completely accessible for all primary and secondary school-aged students. As experts have suggested, there also needs to be a comprehensive set of national education targets, the progress towards which would be monitored regularly by teachers, NGOs and government bodies. Specialised education materials should be produced for children with disabilities. It should also be ensured that, not only urban students, but children in remote areas and those from underprivileged families are also being taught with up-to-date educational techniques. The government must buckle up now to bring back to school those students who have dropped out due to pandemic-related reasons, and to also make sure the enrolment rate does not decline further. Otherwise, the nation may be set back by years' worth of educational and socioeconomic progress.

# Let us not become dependent on LNG import



BADRUL IMAM

A decreasing volume of annual natural gas production from the gas fields of Bangladesh means that the country is moving towards joining the net energy importers club sooner than one would have liked to think. Import dependency for oil and coal are well set as major primary energy sources in the country and imports of natural gas, in the form of LNG, has begun to fill the shortfall of supply from local gas fields. The annual production of indigenous natural gas has decreased from a peak of 973 bcf (billion cubic feet) in FY2016 to 882 bcf in FY2020, according to Petrobangla. It is forecasted that the volume of local production will continue to decrease further into the future. Bangladesh started LNG imports in late 2018 and since then, has faced the uphill task of procuring the fuel from an unstable and volatile market.



The Bibiyana gas field in Sylhet may reasonably be referred to as the jewel in the crown of Bangladesh's local gas supply.

FILE PHOTO: STAR

With no new discovery of any significant gas reserves over the last two decades, the decreasing rate of gas production has set alarm bells to ring in earnest. Most of the major gas fields show signs of aging in forms of reservoir pressure drop and a downward trend in gas output. Titas, the largest gas field in the country, has had its production rate reduced from a peak of 500 mmcf (million cubic feet per day) in 2016 to 384 mmcf in December 2021. Similar or even larger drops in production rate have been recorded in other major gas fields such as in Habiganj, Kailashitla, Rashidpur and Bakhrabad. Generally speaking, a gas field runs with robust production at an initial stage and gradually becomes less productive, before it eventually "waters out"—meaning it produces water rather than gas. A

quicker way of demise for a gas field is often noticed as in the Sangu offshore gas field, which had its production rate slashed over a much shorter period of time before being abandoned. Reasons for such quicker demise may be varied, but is usually due to a sudden drop of reservoir pressure, engaging in over-production and/or disregarding of healthy reservoir management.

There are, at present, 20 producing gas fields in the country. The Bibiyana gas field in Sylhet, operated by Chevron Oil company, may reasonably be referred to as the jewel in the crown, for this gas field alone supplies 1200 mmcf, which is about 51 percent of the total 2310 mmcf from all gas fields in the country. For how long Bibiyana can sustain its present level of production is of paramount importance. The daily gas production reports of Petrobangla showed the production rate of the field exceeding its capacity for several years in the past. How it is translated in terms of reservoir management is perhaps better judged by Chevron personnel. But sceptics wonder if this is a case of over-production, a possibility suspected by many in the offshore Sangu gas field. Whatever may

March, Bangladesh bought LNG at USD 7 per mmBtu from the spot market. In October, Bangladesh had to pay USD 36 per mmBtu for the same LNG. The fivefold increase in the LNG price within months put Bangladesh's gas import plans in disarray. The government had to stop buying LNG from the spot market due to this high price, which led to a fall in gas supply—forcing some power plants to run on oil in place of gas. The government has two long-term contracts for LNG supply, one with Qatar and the other with Oman, to procure the fuel at a stable price of about USD 10 per mmBtu, cheaper than if bought off the spot market. But even long-term suppliers have decided, as per media reports, to reduce their supply in 2022 by resorting to supplying only the minimum contractual obligation amount to Bangladesh. Apparently, the suppliers are more interested to trade LNG in the high-priced spot market than through long-term lower and stable price contracts.

So what makes LNG price surge in the international market? It is the increase in LNG demand worldwide due to renewed economic growth, and following recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic, that is the main cause of this surge. In addition, a colder winter in the northern hemisphere and a disruption in LNG production by major producers have both helped the price go up. How the LNG price will behave in the future also depends on several of these factors.

In case the LNG price remains volatile, the immediate to near future seems bleak for Bangladesh's gas supply scenario. A long-term contract of a USD 10 per mmBtu price means Bangladesh is paying more than three times the price of the local gas (USD 3 per mmBtu or less), and buying LNG at USD 35 per mmBtu was perhaps not in the calculation of policy agencies.

Whatever may be the case, future energy supply in Bangladesh is forecasted to be increasingly dependent on imported LNG. If the present trend of decreasing supply from own gas fields continues, volume LNG import may one day outweigh indigenous gas supply. How the economy would face such a precarious situation is anybody's guess. If the above situation occurs, a temporary halt of LNG import due to fund crunches will certainly put a lot of gas-powered plants in the dark.

The solution to this problem is simple. Bangladesh has for a long time ignored its gas exploration activities and let the gas demand-supply mismatch grow. The deltaic build of mainland Bangladesh and its offshore, for all geoscientific reasons, have been rated as highly prospective areas for natural gas. Proof of such rating is evidenced in the adjacent areas bordering Bangladesh, notably the offshore Rakhaine basin in Myanmar where large-scale gas fields have been discovered since the maritime dispute with Bangladesh was settled in 2012. Bangladesh, on the other hand, has hardly taken any steps to explore its offshore since that time. As such, Bangladesh should move faster with its exploration activities to lift its gas out of the ground. A quick fix of the gas supply problem with imported LNG may work out in the short-term, but in the long-run, the price volatility and economic uncertainty would make import unsustainable. It will be much more rational for Bangladesh to depend on its own gas resources rather than on the import of expensive LNG as long as such a resource base is scientifically reckoned.

Dr Badrul Imam is Honorary Professor (retired) at the Department of Geology, University of Dhaka.

## New variant, same old travel woes



ABDULLAH SHIBLI

AN OPEN DIALOGUE  
 COVID-19 has taken a big toll on the tourism industry in countries that rely on foreign visitors. As new waves of infections take hold and ever-changing rules to curtail the spread of the disease are put in place, the overall effect is increased uncertainty—which undoubtedly is harming global tourism. "I'm so frustrated that they keep changing the travel rules," Cath Colbridge of the UK told a reporter. "It's got to the point now that we've given up planning holidays abroad and bought a camper van, so we can at least get away for a few days."

In this piece, I will offer tidbits of news, some bad and some good. The bad ones pertain to how the Covid-19 variants have been endlessly eating away at the travel and tourism (T&T) industry. The good news is about how, in the midst of the busy travel season, the valiant workers at the Dhaka Airport are making every effort to give the weary travelers a helping hand.

As if the T&T sector hasn't had enough, on December 20 many nations announced new rules on gatherings and travel ahead of the busy holiday season. With the Omicron variant spreading fast across the globe, governments and health organisations, including the WHO, are now advising travelers to exercise caution, and if necessary, to postpone their trips within their respective countries and abroad. Aircraft passengers have been twice or even three times more likely to catch Covid-19 during a flight since the emergence of the Omicron variant.

One hardly needs to be reminded that last summer, as people got vaccinated and started to move about after more than a year of "confinement", the Delta variant put a damper on the travel plans for many, and as governments tried to cope with a resurgence of illnesses, infections, and spread of Covid-19, the initial optimism soon gave way to another round of frustrations.

We are now in the midst of winter and the holidays, which is a busy travel season in the northern hemisphere. The tourism industry is trying to get back on its feet. While talking with many of my associates in Bangladesh, I have gathered that the average tourism revenue is low except for

a few large and resourceful resorts. Locals are travelling, but visitors from abroad have dwindled to a trickle. Eco-tourism is almost nil, and the Hospitality and Tourism Sector (HTS) has been crying out, unsuccessfully, for government support since the pandemic started in March 2020.

### Tourism takes another hit

The new Omicron variant, the changing rules for travel, and the continuing uncertainty are adversely affecting tourism once again. The rules for traveling to each country are different. The quarantine do's and don'ts, the tests, the vaccination

Omicron variant. Even if infections prove mild, the variant's speed will have grave consequences. The big reason is that Omicron appears to spread far more readily than the delta variant that has been dominant worldwide since the summer—Omicron is 25 to 50 percent more transmissible, according to some UK estimates.

The protection offered by the Chinese vaccines will not be enough to prevent Omicron from causing global disruption, said J. Stephen Morrison, director of the Global Health Policy Center at the Center for International and Strategic Studies.

"The sheer scale of infection will



Aircraft passengers have been twice or even three times more likely to catch Covid-19 during a flight since the emergence of the Omicron variant.

PHOTO: REUTERS

requirements, and other protocols and practices have created a chaotic situation. Also at different airports, the local rules are varied. For example, at some locations, you can eat freely and not have your masks on. At others, you need to prove you are vaccinated, and so on.

One of my relatives travelled from Dhaka to Bangkok with his family. The next few days while in quarantine were chaotic for them. There were tests every day, self-isolation, and food was delivered to the hotel room. And all this at your own expense!

Coming back to the plight of the T&T industry in developing countries, research suggests the Covid vaccines used in many parts of the world offer almost no defense against the highly contagious

overwhelm health systems, simply because the denominator will be potentially so big," he said. "If you have a burst of infection worldwide, a shock, what does the world look like on the other side of it? Is it, 'The war is over,' or, 'The war has just entered another phase?' We haven't begun thinking about any of that."

Getting a PCR test in Dhaka Earlier this month, I was in Dhaka when the American government announced that, effective from December 6, all passengers traveling to the USA would need to have a PCR test done one calendar day before travel.

When I contacted the testing clinic in Dhaka operated by PRAAVA, I was told

that if I was travelling, say, on December 15, that I *could not* get my test on December 14. So, I inquired about taking the test on the evening of December 14 to be within the 24-hour window. But I was informed that PRAAVA did not take any samples after 12 noon. Therefore, I had to take the test on the morning of December 15. When I told them that I planned to fly out on the night of December 15, a staff member asked me to stop by the clinic at Banani to pick up the result at 5pm, just before I was to head out for the airport.

The reason I mention all this in great detail is to relay my belief that the average Bangladeshi (and I later learned many foreign travelers) would be misled by the wrong information that the clinic was operating under. On the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website, it was announced that the new Global Testing Order shortens the timeline for required testing for all international air travelers to one day before departure to the United States. But, there is a big difference between 24 hours and the one calendar day requirement, as the CDC itself clarifies, "A passenger whose flight to the United States is at any time on a Sunday would need to have a negative test taken at any time on Saturday."

At Dhaka airport, a fellow passenger mentioned that we needed to get a stamp from a DGHS official in one remote cubicle. We then realised that the counselor at PRAAVA had failed to inform us of two important steps after the results (in PDF form) were available: 1) Unlike in the USA, a hard copy of every test result must be printed from a government database, and 2) The printout had to be stamped at the DGHS counter in the airport.

There was a long queue at the departure lounge with almost 50 people ahead of me waiting to get a seal on their printout. Compounding our problem, PRAAVA failed to upload our results on the official database. A DGHS staff member directed us to Room 2 at the end of the departure lounge. There, Ashiq and his co-workers were very eager to help, but could not find our test results using either our passport numbers or phone numbers. Ashiq made calls to PRAAVA, and after two hours of running around, we finally got the documentation we needed.

Dr Abdullah Shibli is an economist. Two of his new books, "A Fairy Tale" and "Economic Crosscurrents", are available on rokomari.com