

Time to explore our own gas

Relying on imports will only burden the consumers

We are concerned by the government's negligence towards gas exploration and our overdependence on imported liquefied natural gas (LNG), which have led to the present gas crisis. According to experts, Bangladesh's gas exploration efforts almost stopped after the Bibiyana gas field was explored in 1999. While the demand for gas increased over the years, the government took no notable initiatives to dig new wells or explore offshore gas reserves. Moreover, many of the existing gas fields have not been maintained or repaired as needed. Instead, the government started importing expensive LNG to meet the domestic demand. As a result, the gas prices increased at the consumer end over the years, despite the subsidies provided by the government.

As the gas crisis has become acute in many areas of the country, and the industries dependent on gas are struggling to continue their operations, the government's strategies to solve the shortage appear counterintuitive. Its plan to import LNG at a higher price is concerning—particularly because the burden will fall on the consumers. Unfortunately, the government is already planning to increase gas prices to reduce its subsidy burden.

Now the question is: Why burden the consumers with high gas prices, when you can explore your own gas reserves, extract gas from there, and supply it to the consumers at cheaper rates?

Being one of the world's largest deltas, Bangladesh is supposed to be a gas-rich country. Yet, the vast plains in the coastal areas of the country remain unexplored for gas reserves. The maritime boundary dispute we had with Myanmar was solved in 2012, but we still did not initiate exploration for offshore gas sources. While a multi-client survey to explore gas in the sea has been in the talks since 2015, it is yet to be done. The Bangladesh Petroleum Exploration and Production Company Limited (Bapex) drilled only one well in the last two years, even though they have the capacity to drill three to four exploration wells in a year. It hasn't taken any big initiative to conduct seismic surveys in the new areas either.

The unwillingness and inefficiency of the authorities concerned in exploring new gas fields is very clear here. Unless the government addresses these issues, solving the gas crisis will become difficult in the future. The government can, of course, import LNG—which is 24 times costlier than locally produced gas—as a stopgap solution, particularly for the sectors where no immediate alternative is available. But for the medium and long terms, there is no alternative to exploring gas reserves in the country.

Good news from Mongla Port

Let this be an example of positive development

The news comes as a breath of fresh air that the second largest seaport of Bangladesh, the Mongla Port, has been seeing a lot of activity recently, with ships from foreign countries coming at regular intervals. A special report in our business section says that the port has made a strong comeback, making it a major gateway for Bangladesh's overseas trade once again. No doubt, this would boost our export trade, thereby the economy as a whole. Senior officials are of the opinion that the port will see even more activities once the Padma Bridge becomes fully functional.

It is encouraging to note that the port has registered 17 percent annual average growth in ship-handling since 2012, while the volume of cargo-handling has grown by 19 percent over the past decade. Our report says that arrivals of ships have increased at Mongla Port as the economic growth has increased domestic demand. The credit for the steady growth in business goes to the completion of dredging at the outer bar of a nearly 140-kilometre channel. This resulted in the improved navigability of vessels that required a higher draft.

In a bid to keep the port running in full steam, the Mongla Port Authority is in the process of buying a good number of equipment and machineries to handle cargoes under a Tk 433-crore project. Furthermore, the port authority is set to purchase six vessels to handle ocean-going ships under another project involving Tk 767 crore.

We are told that at the moment, the port has 25 berthing facilities, including five jetties. But experts say that it needs to increase the draft at the jetty to enable the entry of vessels of more than seven-metres of draft. Understandably, this problem is likely to be solved with the dredging at the inner bar of the Pashur channel. Once done, it will allow ships with more than nine metres' draft to use the jetty.

We believe that the full potential of the Mongla Port is yet to be exploited. With all the development projects in hand completed within the near future, the port, we hope, will be able to get more business and contribute to our economic progress.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Don't make water costlier

I've been reading news reports about the Dhaka Wasa wanting to raise water tariff by 20 percent. In the area where I live, I don't get 24-hour water supply, and I'm already paying a lot of money for it. Why should I pay even more? Will the increased tariff ensure that I will get uninterrupted water supply? I don't think so. Don't put this extra burden on us. People like us are already struggling to make ends meet; we don't need to suffer more.

Rehnuma Akand, Jurain

Let's not consign our RTI law to cold storage

Shamsul Bari and Ruhi Naz are chairman and RTI coordinator, respectively, of the Research Initiatives, Bangladesh (RIB).

SHAMSUL BARI and RUHI NAZ

THE title of our column today is inspired by an editorial in *Prothom Alo*, a popular Bangla national daily in Bangladesh, published on February 5, 2022. Titled "Right to Information: Don't send the law into a cold storage," it raised concern about the use of exemption clauses in the RTI law by a public authority to deny information sought by a citizen.

It is reassuring that such an issue was raised by a widely read national daily, bringing into focus one of the most important laws of the land, which has largely been neglected both by the media and the civil society in general. Such neglect has contributed to the failure of the law to attract many users, despite its immense potential in monitoring government work. The reasons for such a failure are not far to seek. Users of the law often encounter many hurdles, as identified in these columns before. The editorial in question hit upon another—perhaps more formidable—barrier. It is of a more recent origin and relates to the increasing number of RTI requests for information that the authorities concerned find too sensitive to disclose and hence resort to using the exemption clauses.

The story begins with a citizen asking the police authorities for statistics on the number of cases registered in the country every year since the enactment of the Digital Security Act (DSA), 2018, and the number of people arrested and indicted under the law. The request was denied both at the primary and appeal stages, citing a few exemption clauses in the RTI Act. Subsequently, the applicant registered a complaint with the Information Commission, which heard both sides on January 11, and set February 22 for the announcement of its decision.

While we await that decision, a quick recapitulation of the three exemption clauses stated under Section 7 of the RTI Act is in order. Clause 7 (f) permits denial of disclosing information if such disclosure would "obstruct the enforcement of law or incite any offence." Clause 7 (g) allows denial if such disclosure would "endanger public security or impede the due judicial process of a pending case." And Clause 7 (m) allows denial if such disclosure would "affect any investigation process of an offence and the arrest and prosecution of the offender."

We leave it up to the readers to decide if these exemption clauses apply to the given case. Based on the information

obtained from news reports, it is difficult to understand how disclosure of mere statistics may lead to the obstruction of justice and increase of offence. Moreover, we don't know how the police authorities justified their use of the exemption clauses.

This case provides us with an opportunity to reflect on the subject of

absolute. Some are qualified by what is known as the "public interest override," meaning some exempted information can nevertheless be disclosed if public interest for disclosure overrides the interest of the state to keep them secret. The RTI Act in Bangladesh does not specifically include such a provision, but it may be subsumed to be inherent



ILLUSTRATION: COLLECTED

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exemption clauses generally, and the rationale behind their inclusion in the RTI Act. The exemptions make it clear that the rights of individual citizens recognised in the law are not absolute and are circumscribed by the collective rights of others. They recognise the need for balance between citizens' rights to monitor the work of the government and, at the same time, the legitimate right of the government to undertake measures to protect public interest. The harmonisation of the two, often conflicting, interests is paramount to preserving the principles and efficacy of participatory democracy.

There is, thus, little controversy about the need for limiting the citizens' right to information in relation to certain critical issues of governance. No one would challenge the state's need to protect any information affecting Bangladesh's sovereignty, integrity and security from unauthorised disclosure. Equally sacrosanct are the protection of personal information of individuals and the need for upholding the laws of the land and protecting due process. It is not difficult, therefore, to understand the decision of an authority to deny disclosure of any information that clearly falls within the purview of the exemptions. The problem arises if they are not so clear.

In some countries, not all items listed as exempt from disclosure are considered

within the objectives of the law.

What is more important for us is to focus on the proper interpretation of the existing exemption clauses, and ensure that they are not applied inappropriately. There is a clear need for vigilance in this regard. Because we have no such vigilance now in the country, there are instances where information-seekers find themselves in a quandary when the Information Commission itself concurs with the denial of information by the authorities concerned. Since the Information Commission's decisions are final and cannot be challenged in the courts, except in regard to the law's application, the matter normally ends there. Very few have the means to file a writ petition with the High Court to obtain a directive from it under Section 102 of the constitution. And among the few that are filed, many are not followed up properly. Such a state of affairs doesn't augur well for the fate of the RTI regime in the country.

Unless we find a way to ensure that exemption clauses are properly applied, there is a danger that the cynical view held by many about the RTI Act—that if a public authority wishes to refuse an RTI request, it is able to do so without much difficulty—will indeed be confirmed. And that would be tantamount to consigning the RTI Act to a cold storage.

What is at the core of the Ukraine crisis?



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MAHADEV GHOSH

MANY may remember the dramatic call between US President Ronald Reagan and his Soviet Union counterpart Mikhail Gorbachev in 1987. "Mr Gorbachev, tear down this wall," President Reagan said, referring to the Berlin Wall, which had separated West and East Berlin since 1961. Thirty-two years since the end of the Cold War, here we are again, with the Russian advancement into Ukraine feared to be imminent. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (Nato) has been aiding Ukrainian efforts to protect its sovereignty, but that too has seen mixed response from allies such as France and Germany. Could these developments presage a geopolitical disaster? Will Ukraine be annexed? Will the "defenders of democracy" really intervene? With both sides sticking to their guns, it is difficult to find justifications for these rather emotionally-charged developments—the Russian threat of an invasion, or a Nato expansion at the cost of risking war. So why are they still doing it?

Actors in the Ukrainian drama are taking action that produces tangible costs for an intangible benefit. Daniel Markey, a senior research professor of international relations at Johns Hopkins University, explains this with the human need to be perceived as superior which, he says, applies to states as well. He underlined the role of "prestige motives"

in the origins of wars, contrasting the neo-realistic analysis of foreign policy. Psychological reasoning in explaining foreign policy is not new. D Larson was credited in Yuen Khong's *"Analogies at War"* for highlighting the influence of psychological concepts in foreign policy decisions.

Russian President Vladimir Putin's rise to power was fuelled by his well-documented disdain for weak leadership responsible for what he believes to be the "disintegration of historical Russia." His views on Ukraine have been thoroughly clarified in his nine-page article from last year, where he blamed the West for "...[applying] divide and rule," and how Ukraine was being turned into "a springboard against Russia... [requiring the need] for the 'anti-Russia' concept which we will never accept."

The dissolution of the USSR was a devastating blow to Soviet pride. With the lowering of the red banner went nearly half its population and its glorious ownership of a sixth of the Earth's land. A 2018 Levada Centre poll showed that 66 percent of Russians regretted the fall of the USSR. China's rise relegated Russia to the back seat of international relations, where their only relevance was militaristic and belligerent acts. Many may have loved them; the West may have hated them. But the Russians cannot bear becoming the subject of indifference.

Since the dissolution and the subsequent decline of Russia's economy, Putin's takeover from Boris Yeltsin yielded favourable results, taking its GDP to unseen heights. But what also saw new "heights" were corruption, lack of freedom and democratic backsliding. The crackdowns worsened after Putin faced his greatest opposition: Alexei Navalny.

Putin's approval rating, according to the Levada Centre, was always above

62 percent, but reached 89 percent during the EU/US sanctions following the annexation of Crimea. However, with the birth of a strong opposition coupled with protests, his trustworthiness in 2018 was only 39 percent, with some blaming him for all of Russia's problems. The protection of his power in his country is predicated on another glory, which—topped with his deep-seated dream of a greater Russia—provides sufficient resolve. Success in Crimea proves means and credibility. The farcical negotiations with Nato provide sufficient cover of diplomacy.

France and Germany's conciliatory tone is well-founded, but the US cannot afford to look weak—nor can it afford a fight. The disaster in Afghanistan was debilitating enough for the Democrats, a party which cannot afford to have Trump back. The US cannot let Ukraine go undefended as it will severely harm its credibility with its allies as well. Deterrence theory has been long prescribed as the principal pillar of US foreign policy. Reputation is central to the deterrence theory, as stated by Jonathan Mercer, as threats need to be credible—a mixture of resolve, capability and interests. He also emphasised the reputation of loyalty, which the US claims to be of paramount importance. Kurds and Afghans would surely disagree.

Failing to stop the Russian advancement will give leeway to other states, such as China in the South China Sea. In a metaphorical chess breakdown with Nato and Russia on the opposite sides, the board is Ukraine. But it has real people with real needs, with 64 percent wanting to join Nato, according to a poll by UNIAN, a Ukrainian news agency. The real victims in this game will continue to be the Ukrainian citizens.

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