

Negligence in exploring gas reserves makes no sense

Govt must plan for future, reduce dependence on gas imports

BAGLADESH'S gas crisis is a cautionary tale of doing nothing and doing too much at the same time: we have, for reasons unknown, ceased exploring our gas reserves, despite being a country with high hydrocarbon potential, and are relying too much on costly imports of liquefied natural gas (LNG) to meet our energy needs. Neither approach is helpful. To be clear, when we talk about building up sufficient gas reserves, we don't mean achieving self-sufficiency which, let's face it, is never going to happen. But there is a good possibility that through exploring and overhauling our gas reserves, both onshore and offshore, Bangladesh may significantly boost its reserves, reduce its dependence on imports, and yield lower and more stable gasoline prices. Why, then, are we not doing that?

A report by this daily brings out a disturbing reality facing this sector: most of the country's 28 gas fields are producing less gas than before, meaning the present crisis may only worsen in the future. While the capacity of any gas field or well may naturally drop over time, it is possible to extract more by overhauling the wells, which is something that hasn't been done in most gas fields. Experts have, therefore, stressed the need for overhauling these fields as well as aggressive exploration to build new reserves. Currently, the country has an estimated gas reserve for 9-10 years, which shows the urgency of shifting focus to finding long-term solutions. While stopgap solutions like importing LNG—which is reportedly 24 times costlier than locally produced gas—may help meet urgent needs, they can't be the mainstay of a future-focused energy policy.

Experts believe the reason for the present uncertainty is the government's refusal to follow the recommendations of "Consultancy Services for Gas Production Augmentation" report of 2011, which emphasised the need for overhauling the wells, adopting a systematic and risk-based approach to best utilise resources, and exploring in coastal areas and hill tracts. Our preference for easy solutions has robbed us of the chance to plan for the future and unlock our exploration potential. The authorities have drilled only 28 exploratory wells in the last 20 years, although, as an expert said, we hit gas in every third well drilled when the global average is one in five. It's a tragedy to leave such potential unexploited. Offshore gas production remains a non-issue even to this day.

The government must understand that as important as meeting present energy needs is securing the future through mid- and long-term initiatives, such as moving to more frontier areas to unlock the full potential of exploration and overhauling the abandoned gas wells. We cannot continue to be held hostage by our overdependence on LNG.

Home for the poor a laudable step

Let no one live under the open sky

THE initiative of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to offer 33,000 new homes to some ultra-poor families is a highly appreciable one. Moving out of extremely vulnerable huts made of leaves, bamboo and plastic sheet, these families will now live in homes made of concrete as their permanent abodes. No doubt, this is a laudable example of a social safety net programme leading to poverty alleviation in the country.

The declaration of ensuring a permanent address for every homeless family started with 66,189 poor families getting homes and 3,715 others rehabilitated in the barracks under the Ashrayan 2 project on the occasion of Mujib Borsho. Each of the houses was built on two decimals of land with two rooms, one corridor and one latrine with electricity and water connections. It is encouraging to know that the new owners of the houses will be given necessary life skill training to ensure their earnings, and may also get a loan from the government. Moreover, the local administration will hand over ownership documents to the beneficiaries, which we believe will discourage fraudsters from grabbing property by conning the poor illiterate people.

While handing over the homes as an Eid gift, the prime minister assured all that every homeless family in the country would get government homes in phases. The government estimates that there are 800,000 homeless and landless people; however, we think a more comprehensive study needs to be conducted to find out the real number. Here, we would like to suggest careful screening while selecting the homeless people, lest the names of some land owners get inserted by mistake or through fraudulence. Moving forward, the government must ensure there is no corruption or irregularity in the process, which can jeopardise the prime minister's goodwill and smear a commendable initiative.

Research studies show there is a sizable number of people who have been living in thatched houses for generations, because of no permanent income source. Yearly floods and seasonal cyclones in the low-lying and coastal areas destroy their homes, thus forcing them to migrate to higher lands like embankments or schools for shelter. Despite steady economic growth, there are still millions of landless people in the country who remain poverty-stricken and chronically food insecure.

According to the World Bank and other credible sources, Bangladesh has made substantial progress in reducing poverty, supported by sustained economic growth. But we need social safety net programmes and welfare initiatives like this housing scheme, so that wide-scale poverty and pauperisation cannot jeopardise major development initiatives in the future.

The slur of sanctions



STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

Brig Gen Shahedul Anam Khan, ndc, psc (ret'd) is a former associate editor of The Daily Star.

SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN

THE word is one of the most pejorative terms in the English dictionary; it is the most reviled term, too, as well as an oft-used mechanism handy to the West to twist the tails of those it dislikes. But hardly had we ever expected to see our government institutions brought under the US sanctions.

Not one but two of the US departments, namely the Treasury and the Department of State, have imposed sanctions on a leading law enforcement agency and relevant individuals in Bangladesh—for the first time. On December 10 last year, the US Department of Treasury imposed sanctions on Bangladesh's elite paramilitary force, the Rapid Action Battalion (Rab), as well as seven of its current and former officers for alleged serious human rights violations. Over and above that, the Department of State imposed sanctions on two individuals: a former head of Rab and a former commanding officer of a Rab Unit.

It can never be pleasing news to any Bangladeshi, notwithstanding a heap of reservations on Rab's modus operandi that one might have. It is regrettable, and disgraceful too, to see the name of our elite force along with some of its members bracketed with drug dealers and terrorists on the list of sanctioned individuals. What has added insult to the injury is that these actions came on the last day of the virtual Democracy Summit, in which Bangladesh was conspicuous by its absence. It was a double blow for those who pride themselves on the country's democratic credentials—of the distant past. As citizens, it is our right to ask whether a government agency has the right to incur adverse criticism due to its actions or inactions. For better or worse, in this globalised world, we are not impervious to international scrutiny or criticism for alleged violations of norms of human behaviour.

It is not the intention to engage in discussions on whether the sanctions are justified or not, or on the credentials of the US to question the human rights and democratic credentials of other countries when its own record of performance is questionable, both at home and abroad. One could just as well tell the US: Doctor, heal thyself. But that would in no way reduce the gravity of the allegations

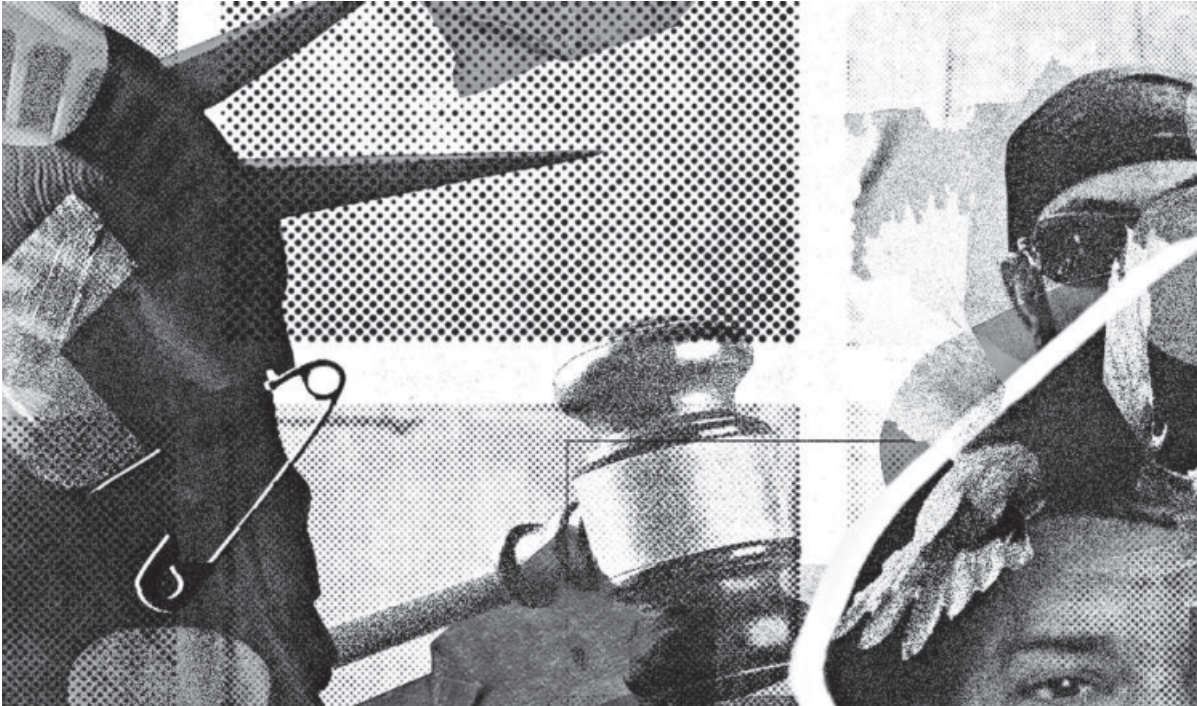


ILLUSTRATION: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

Interestingly, there has been no crossfire death or enforced disappearance since the sanctions were imposed, except for two in the month of April. Is there a correlation between the two? What exactly should we make of it? Are we to believe that all the criminals have reformed themselves overnight and become good boys, or that Rab has modified its operating procedures? We have not seen any widespread deterioration of law and order or spurt in smuggling of drugs and narcotics, for example. Whatever may be the case, what this has demonstrated is that law can be maintained and order upheld without resorting to extrajudicial means or circumventing the legal process. And if there is correlation between the two, then we ask: Why does it require external pressure to compel our agencies to go by the book?

Interestingly, there has been no crossfire death or enforced disappearance since the sanctions were imposed, except for two in the month of April. Is there a correlation between the two? What exactly should we make of it? Are we to believe that all the criminals have reformed themselves overnight and become good boys, or that Rab has modified its operating procedures? We have not seen any widespread deterioration of law and order or spurt in smuggling of drugs and narcotics, for example. Whatever may be the case, what this has demonstrated is that law can be maintained and order upheld without resorting to extrajudicial means or circumventing the legal process. And if there is correlation between the two, then we ask: Why does it require external pressure to compel our agencies to go by the book?

We believe that Rab was formed with the purpose of addressing the law and order problems during the second tenure of the BNP. Its formation was welcomed by all and sundry, and the agencies earned the confidence and respect of the common man. The petty ruffians went off the streets and people could walk out

extrajudicial killings, just the way BNP has done the last 10 years. Contrary to its commitment to end the regime of extrajudicial killings, the number has gone exponentially high during the Awami League period, and things have come to a head.

Admittedly, there is a need to go into the way Rab is being employed. It is a well-trained force which has done extraordinarily well in combatting extremism and terrorism. This is something we all can be proud of. And that is what it should be employed for. However, its resources can be used to go after hardened criminals and tackle extraordinary law and order issues while remaining within the bounds of law. The last thing Rab should do is day-to-day police work. Military officers are not trained to chase common criminals. But once they engage in doing so, most of them lose the qualities of a good military officer, and most of them no longer retain the ability to command and train troops for battle. We believe that the time has come to rethink Rab operations and its manning policy, and to draw a *Lakshman Rekha* for it to restore and preserve its image.

Drowning: Most preventable, most neglected



Juliet Rossette is policy and partnership manager of Project Bhasa at the Centre for Injury Prevention and Research, Bangladesh (CIPRB).

JULIET ROSSETTE

IN 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO) Global Report on Drowning said the most recent figure on annual global drowning toll stood at 235,000, with more than 90 percent of deaths by drowning occurring in low- and middle-income countries, and with Asia carrying the highest burden. The WHO report also placed drowning in the top 10 leading causes of death by unintentional injuries among children and young people worldwide, with children aged under five years disproportionately at risk, and males being twice as likely to drown as females. Drowning has cost the world over 2.5 million lives over the past decade. The vast majority of these deaths could and should have been prevented.

On April 28, 2021, for the first time ever, the United Nations (UN) adopted a resolution on drowning prevention during the 75th session of the UN General Assembly. Initiated by Bangladesh and Ireland, and co-sponsored by 79 countries, the resolution recognised the devastating effect of drowning across the world and declared July 25 as World Drowning Prevention Day (WDPPD). The aim of WDPPD is to promote facts and raise awareness about drowning, and what governments, life-saving organisations and those in the field of drowning prevention can do to help improve water safety to reduce preventable deaths.

Recognising that drowning is preventable, and that scalable, low-cost interventions exist, the resolution encouraged member states, on a voluntary basis, to undertake a range of coordinated interventions relevant to national circumstances. The resolution requested all 193 UN member states to develop national drowning prevention plans in line with WHO recommendations, ensure enactment and effective enforcement of water safety laws, encourage the registration of drowning

deaths, and promote drowning prevention public awareness.

Action on drowning prevention presents an important opportunity to make progress towards targets within different UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). There are clear links between drowning and other global agreements relevant to sustainable

issues. Bangladesh has recognised drowning as an important public health issue with major impacts on children and youth. However, despite the magnitude of drowning incidents in the country, limited attention has been paid by the government to develop a national strategy on preventive measures. Government initiatives regarding drowning are still at the policy level.

Recently, Ecneec approved the "Integrated Community Based Centre for Child Care, Protection and Swimsafe Facilities Project" to establish 8,000 community day care centres to provide supervision of 200,000 under-five children in 45 upazilas under 16 districts, and to teach swimming to children aged 6-10 years through primary schools. Bangladesh Shishu Academy will implement this project in line with the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs, with technical support from the Centre for Injury Prevention and Research, Bangladesh (CIPRB). Besides, the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) has taken awareness-raising initiatives. The Non-Communicable Disease Control (NCDC) of the DGHS has been working on a draft national drowning prevention strategy since 2015, with technical support from the CIPRB. The strategy is focused on priority action areas—community-based actions, effective policies and legislation, surveillance and research, capacity-building and intersectoral collaboration.

A series of consultative workshops with relevant ministries and other stakeholders were held from 2017 to 2022 to make the draft more precise. After the UN resolution on drowning prevention, the line director of NCDC formed a nine-member committee to expedite the approval process. Keeping in line with the committee recommendations and stakeholder review comments from consultative workshops, the draft was updated with relevant facts and figures and is now in the process of submission.

In light of all this, it is high time to implement such a national strategy envisioning a drowning-free Bangladesh. Aiming to cut down drowning deaths by half by 2030, this strategy will provide the direction to prevent these unwanted and avoidable deaths.



▲ Bangladesh has recognised drowning as an important public health issue with major impacts on children and youth.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

development, community resilience to climate change, and disaster risk reduction.

In Bangladesh, drowning is a regular phenomenon; people, especially rural inhabitants, perceive the cause of fatal or non-fatal drowning to be the "act of God." The main reasons of drowning, in fact, include lack of physical barriers between people and water; lack of supervision; lack of life-saving skills, including swimming and cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR); uncovered or unprotected water bodies and a lack of safe water crossings; lack of water safety awareness; travelling on waterways on overcrowded or poorly maintained vessels; and floods from extreme rainfall, storm surges or cyclones. Urgent, coordinated and multisectoral action on proven measures are needed, such as installing barriers to control access to water, teaching swimming, water safety and safe rescue skills, training bystanders in safe rescue and resuscitation, setting and enforcing safe boating, shipping and ferry regulations, and improving flood risk management, among others.

According to the WHO, drowning is one of the world's most preventable, neglected and persistent public health