

In the heart of darkness

Load-shedding should be equally distributed among all areas

How are people supposed to live and do their daily work with electricity going out every alternate hour? That is exactly what the people of 21 Dhaka neighbourhoods are having to experience. According to a report by this newspaper from Wednesday, people living in the capital's Shyampur, Nandalalpur, Kajla and Matuail areas experienced load-shedding every alternate hour on Tuesday. And if that wasn't bad enough, they had to endure four hours of load shedding between midnight and 8am, making it impossible for them to get any proper sleep.

Because of this grave situation, families are having to spend their nights crammed into one room with a single rechargeable table fan. Young mothers are having to spend their nights fanning their babies by hand. And all these are happening at a time when temperatures are going up to 34 degrees Celsius during the day.

Businesses are also suffering huge losses due to the regular power outages. Customers have been reluctant to visit markets when there is load-shedding. Production is being hampered tremendously, as many factories and industries rely on electricity for their production. And even though they have generators as backup, power outages are occurring so frequently that even the generators are failing to provide enough backup, leading to lost work hours.

Even though there is no denying that global factors have had a big impact on our power sector, the fact remains that corruption and mismanagement are also responsible for its poor state. And it is a grave injustice that the government, instead of taking action against those responsible for such corruption and mismanagement, is making the people pay via frequent power cuts. And that, in turn, is damaging the national economy even further – as well as causing huge sufferings for ordinary people.

Had the government paid proper heed to the past warnings of the experts, and taken appropriate measures, it is quite possible that we would not be in this terrible shape that we are in now. Be that as it may, even the experts have said that there is still time for the government to turn things around. However, for that, the government must now be open to taking advice from experts, and be willing to conduct its activities far more transparently, as well as hold the concerned authorities who were involved with all the irregularities in the sector to account.

In the meanwhile, since right now there is no way for us to avoid load-shedding, we hope that the authorities will be far more conscious and thoughtful about how to conduct it. Load-shedding should be equally divided amongst different areas – none should get preference over others, unless they have a higher volume of schools, hospitals, and other emergency service providers. And power cuts should be avoided as much as possible at night, so that people can get some proper sleep.

What explains the delay in processing donations?

No justification for emergency medical supplies being stuck at port for months

Can government authorities really be so inefficient and inept they can't even process much needed medical equipment and medications they received as donations from international organisations and through various funds for months on end? Unfortunately, in Bangladesh, such a situation is not only possible but almost inevitable, given the lack of foresight, planning and coordination of concerned authorities.

According to a report in *Prothom Alo*, donations from the various organisations has been lying in the Chittagong port for five months, which, by the admission of the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) itself, is disrupting the ongoing Covid vaccination programme and malaria and worm prevention activities across the country.

What is particularly astonishing is the reason cited for the delay in releasing these donations. Apparently, the DGHS needs to pay Tk 20 crore as customs duty and port fees to get these goods out – money which it does not have in its budget. While DGHS officials say that donations and essential items should get duty exemption in public interest, NBR and port authorities maintain that there are no provisions for such exemptions and that in order to waive the duty on special consideration, separate paperwork must be filed seeking permission (which has not yet been filed). As things stand now, the DGHS has reportedly asked the Finance Ministry to provide them the additional funds needed to get the goods released from the port, but is yet to resolve the issue.

What we fail to understand is why it should take so long for the agencies to sort out the confusion. Is it the first time that such donations are coming into Bangladesh? It seems bizarre that there should be no established protocol or precedent for how to process them, given that over the decades the country has received billions of dollars' worth of donations in goods and equipment from different countries and global institutions. Besides, even if there is no precedent, one would expect the concerned agencies to move at a fast speed, particularly as such unnecessary delay at the port risks damaging the effectiveness of emergency health supplies. Most importantly, it sends a wrong message to our development partners about our sincerity in making use of the donations.

It is unacceptable that such bureaucratic delays and inefficiencies are holding hostage important interventions serving the public. The government must revisit its policy and ensure a common understanding among all government bodies. In the meantime, we urge the concerned authorities to process the supplies with the urgency they deserve, instead of spending another few months sending letters from department to department without making any headway.

The primacy of police accountability



STRAIGHT LINE

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In recent times, we have seen disconcerting media reports of police delinquencies and an equally disturbing scenario of a lack of accountability in countering such deviations. An impression is slowly gaining ground that police malfeasance goes on unabated and that preventive and curative measures to halt and check such aberrations are in very short supply. The question is: are countermeasures to deal with police delinquencies absent or not effectively used in public interest?

Ground realities would indicate that our police have multilevel accountability for their actions as well as inactions. They are answerable to departmental superiors; the "Reward and Punishment" chapter in 1943 police regulations elaborately detail the major and minor punishments to be awarded for different kinds of delinquencies and also lays down the procedural requirements in resorting to such action. In addition, there is the Police Officers (Special Provisions) Ordinance, 1976, which includes a summary procedure to take care of serious delinquencies committed by our police members. The complaint herein can be disposed of within 45 days with no provision of appeal; this



It is imperative to bring the police under a system of accountability that earns public confidence. FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

The need, quite clearly, is to sanitise the recruitment process by appointing officers with proven integrity to deal with recruitment, and stop the alleged extraneous influence and pressure from interfering in the appointment process.

in addition to the option of instituting criminal charges, when appropriate, in a court of law. And supervisory police officers are subject to the Government Servants (Discipline and Appeal) Rules, 1985 in the event of delinquent activities. Errant officials can be let go under this rule.

In the police headquarters, there is a security cell – an in-house arrangement – to deal with police delinquencies,

particularly corruption, and this cell can recommend departmental action and criminal proceedings whenever appropriate. In addition, there is an internal police oversight committee to deal with police aberrations and failings. Both these arrangements contain mechanisms mandating reporting to the police chief.

Police personnel are also accountable to the subordinate and apex judiciary, as laid out in police regulations, the criminal procedural code, judicial directives, and the standing departmental orders. They are also answerable to the home ministry, the parliamentary standing committee pertaining to home affairs, and the council committee on law and order.

In view of the above deterrent measures to check police delinquencies, one would wonder why such deviations are still occurring in such blatant manner. Surveys have indicated that there is corruption in police recruitment and training. It is, therefore, strongly likely that such victims of corruption resort to illegal and extortionist acts at the very first

of losing their jobs, there would be lesser incentives to be corrupt. If the cost of losing one's job is very low as compared to losing the corruption-related money, then the rational choice would obviously be to accept bribes. Police's pay and perks should, therefore, be under constant review so that the incentive to get involved with corrupt activities does not become irresistible. We have to remember that policemen's actions hinge significantly on human liberty, and in the business of law and order, it is primarily an interaction between the powerful and the powerless.

It is also crucial to render police politically neutral. Other countries have achieved such neutrality by placing the police under apolitical control, thus creating a cushion between political expediency and law enforcement. In the absence of such a cushion, people of influence will simply not let the police do their mandated duties. Simultaneously, police will not be able to perform their functions efficiently and effectively without enjoying a high degree of public support for the integrity of its

Authority in Britain or the Public Safety Commission System in Japan, is thus urgent. One of the most important functions of the Public Safety Commission System in Japan is to ensure that police operations are not influenced by the party in power. Being in charge of the administration of the police force in their respective jurisdiction, the apolitical public safety commission at national and prefecture levels are meant to ensure that police are insulated from the day-to-day debilitating influences of political power.

There has been a tendency to hide behind the complexity of policing as a means to excuse poor management and leadership. The police organisation will, therefore, have to evolve to have a shared vision and understanding of a common mission that will increasingly be focused on meeting the community expectations. An overt commitment to enhance the standards of both public safety and police accountability will require the police leadership to lead and manage, not simply run, the force to get results consistent with the mission.

Lackadaisical lifestyle is hardly liberty



CHINTITO SINCE 1995

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Mask usage has come down to five percent, my guess, well below the rate of infection. That is the case in the big cities. In towns and villages, you are a man out of touch with history. Covid was here almost three years ago, man!

One stand-up comedian explained how he left the city because no one was bothered about wearing a mask. Worried and frustrated, he travelled to his village, where he found the situation even worse. As evening fell, deeply concerned as he was, he took interest in a man, wearing a mask, standing in the distance. When he went closer, the stranger said in a thick voice, "Hands up!"

The mouth gear works well if one is desirous of concealing one's ID. Or, conversely, it provides an excuse to squirm out of a situation when you clearly could not identify a friend (in a mask) whom you are meeting after a long time. So, you blame it on the mask, until he un.masks, and you realise you were right the first time.

The few who still wear the mask have various reasons. They are at the highpoint of individual awareness, or

are following strict workplace rules. A few others have gotten so used to wearing one that it has now become a habit.

Masks, as with all products, soon became a business commodity. They started appearing in various models and colours, some useless against the virus. Designer masks developed into a symbol of prestige in the corporate world. Almost any organisation worth its CEO had an exclusive mask with its logo stamped on the face. This location for branding was unthinkable before Covid.

The mask that amused me most was worn by an elderly male Indian politician, which had bloated red lips drawn where his lips were. Besides appearing like a character from a circus, he looked unrecognisable except for his portly body that gave him away.

Then there was the mask with a hole for a cigarette so that the "health-conscious nagorik" could carry on with his habit while others could very well die around him. This is a rude definition of self-liberty.

No mask, no service. No mask, no

entry. After a while these were relaxed until they became a joke, as the service providers themselves weren't wearing any. Either the authority forgot to remove the signage from the office/shop front, or are saving on the cost of a new one in anticipation of a recurrence of the pandemic in the near future.

Reminded on a lift about the

While we are not out of the woods, the government should use the media outlets more to convey its position on mask protection. Although the rate of infection is now below 10, the numbers have fluctuated. We have been here before, only to rise to 30 in a few weeks.

mandatory government mask instruction in force, an unmasked one kept quiet until he reached his floor. While exiting in a huff, he said for all to hear, "It would be good for this country if five lakh people died". I assume he did not include his own corpse in the count.

In my workplace, I launched the practice of No mask, no *salaam*. It works well with those who are aware about my pronouncement, but to the uninformed you are being snooty, because not replying to a *salaam* is considered impolite. Ironically, most of them don their mask when they enter my office, or hurriedly so when we come across each other elsewhere.

In the hay days of masking, a number of positive behavioural patterns had emerged. Spitting on the road had reduced. Swearing in public had significantly decreased. *Paan* chewers cut down their habit for fear of smudging their face cover.

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We all want to be free from the shackles of authoritative codes even if it means endangering ourselves, our families and entire communities. We are doing it on the road and the railway, on riverine vessels, in running so-called hospitals and diagnostic centres, in disposing waste, in killing our waterways, through noise pollution...

In every call, let us all abide by the respective protocols and proprieties. "To save mankind" sounds like a cliché. Rather, let us say, we shall do our best to save ourselves, and our immediate family. That should cover the entire humanity.