

Can govt meet rising demand for power?

Overdependence on gas imports is putting our energy future at risk

Bangladesh is about enter a period of massive demand for power as it approaches the summer. Between February and June, according to an estimate by the Power Development Board (PDB), the demand is set to increase by more than 50 percent because of summer heat, Boro irrigation and the holy month of Ramadan, when uninterrupted electricity supply is expected. And at least USD 4.45 billion will be needed to cover fuel costs for this period. The amount, we're told, could exceed USD 5 billion if the import bill from the Adani plant and the payment to Chevron, which operates the biggest gas field in the country, are factored in. Naturally, the authorities will be hopeful of securing necessary funds and ensuring adequate power supplies, but it is already apparent that it will not be smooth sailing.

Recent developments call for caution. As per a report by *Prothom Alo*, the Rampal power plant had to be kept shut for a month due to non-import of coal because of dollar shortage; the Payra power plant is struggling with unpaid coal bills; owners of oil-based power plants in the private sector are struggling to import oil due to outstanding bills of five months; Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC) is failing to open letters of credit (LC) regularly; Petrobangla is failing to increase LNG import; all the relevant organisations are asking for dollar provisions from the ministry, etc.

What all this means for the general public is that even after all the hikes in prices of gas and electricity, power outage will increase rather than decrease going forward. Whether or not it will match or surpass the acute level of loadshedding witnessed between August and November last year – due to the crisis of foreign currency reserves – remains to be seen. As of February 8, the reserves stood at USD 32.6 billion. The continued dollar crisis makes it essential that the authorities revise PDB cost estimations and reduce import bills. Apart from making funds available, another challenge is the increasing cost of production by power plants. There is no denying that the cost has increased due to our poor energy policy – which relies heavily on fuel imports and allows for collusive deals – as well as unplanned development in the country. It will increase further in the future. The trouble is, any fiscal burden on the government eventually falls on the citizens.

We, therefore, would like to urge our policymakers to revisit the current energy policy. While challenges like dollar crisis and high import bills require urgent attention, we will continue to be vulnerable to such external factors if we cannot fashion today's responses with an eye on tomorrow. Which is why we must reduce our dependence on gas imports. At the same time, we should focus on increasing gas supply from local sources, as well as boosting the drive for green and renewable energy. This will ensure our energy security in the long run. The government must plan for the future, and heed calls for exploring our gas reserves.

Worrying report from defence ministry

Neutralise security threats at the Rohingya camps through proper measures

We are quite worried about the findings of a report by the defence ministry concerning the security situation in the Rohingya camps of Cox's Bazar. Reportedly, 10 terrorist and dacoit gangs are active in the camps and getting engaged in all kinds of criminal activities there. While the militant outfit Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (Arsa) controls most of the camps, other groups – such as RSO, Master Munna gang, Islami Mahaj, Nabi Hussain dacoit gang, etc. – also operate there. These groups often engage in clashes to establish their dominance over the camps. The defence ministry report mentioned 32 incidents of murder that took place in 2022 alone, some of which were caused by these clashes. Needless to say, the findings are quite alarming. Assessing the causes behind the situation and ensuring security in the area are crucial.

While the ministry's report mentioned lack of surveillance and regular patrolling as one of the reasons for Arsa getting stronger in the camps, we wonder what could possibly be the reason for the rise of other militant groups. Which brings us to the issue of the overall treatment of Rohingyas in the camps. Reportedly, they are being forced to live in cramped conditions without the freedom to move freely, which is also impacting their livelihood opportunities. Then, there is a serious lack of educational opportunities for the Rohingya children and youth. There have also been concerns raised by the Human Rights Watch earlier this year about the abuse of power by Bangladesh's Armed Police Battalion (APBn). Reportedly, many involved with APBn committed extortion, arbitrary arrests, and harassment of Rohingya refugees, which is alarming.

The result of all this is growing frustration among the Rohingya people, particularly the youth, who neither can go back to their home country nor have proper opportunities to lead a dignified life here. Their frustration about and desperation for a better life often results in internal disputes. Sadly, many also get engaged in various criminal activities.

While the government has been taking care of this large group of refugees despite the challenging economic situation, it seems to be not enough, particularly because of decreased funding from the foreign donors. Reportedly, UN humanitarian agencies and the government sought USD 881 million from various donors across the world in 2022, but the latter only disbursed a total of USD 431 million to the Joint Response Plan (JRP) fund. There is also uncertainty over how much funds the government will get this year for supporting the Rohingyas.

Under these circumstances, the criminal groups mentioned by the defence ministry must be neutralised through proper measures, and the overall security in and around the camp areas must be beefed up. Lastly, the living conditions of the refugees must be improved so that they are not tempted to join any terrorist activity or create anarchy in the area.

Our half-life of choking on polluted air

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Did you know that, according to the global air quality watchdog IQAir, Bangladesh ranked as the most polluted country in the world between 2018 to 2021? Dhaka has topped the air pollution index for several weeks in a row this year. It appears to be doing everything it can to cling to that top seat. And, as we all know, “success” comes at a cost, and this is no exception. But who is going to pay for it?

Allow me to take you down memory lane for a moment. According to a recent report from the World Health Organization (WHO), the air quality of Dhaka is 11 times worse than the standard set by the organisation. This is a startling statistic that should be taken seriously. Another peer-reviewed study published in a well-reputed international journal found that long-term exposure to air pollution in Dhaka is linked to an increase in respiratory diseases among adults and children, as well as an increase in the number of deaths due to air pollution-

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related illnesses. Moreover, a survey conducted by the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS) found that air pollution has been linked to an increase in the number of days that people have to take off from work due to illness, as well as a rise in hospital visits due to respiratory illnesses.

Since this year started, Dhaka's position in the Air Quality Index (AQI) has been consistently teetering above the “severe” or “hazardous” conditions. The worst part is that the pollutants here are dominated by forms most detrimental to health: fine particulate

matter 2.5 (PM2.5). PM2.5 particles are small enough that they can bore through our lungs, enter the bloodstream, and damage most of our larger internal organs. Irritation of the eyes, nose, throat, and lungs, as well as coughing, sneezing, a

air action plan (CAAP) in 2019 to reduce air pollution in Dhaka and other major cities. Included in this plan are implementation of traffic management plans, improvement of energy efficiency, investment in renewable energy, introduction of

with high levels of dust and PM2.5, closing down polluting industries and institutes, restricting the use of diesel generators, etc.

Why do we not have a similar emergency response plan addressing the current air pollution issue for



VISUAL: TEENI AND TUNI

runny nose, and shortness of breath are just some of the short-term health impacts associated with exposure to fine particles.

According to the recent study by the World Bank in Bangladesh on air pollution, the average exposure of PM2.5 in major construction sites in Dhaka is 150 percent above the limit standardised by WHO – equivalent to smoking 1.7 cigarettes per day. Consider the irony of this if you are a conscientious non-smoker or an ex-smoker. The same study found that feeling blue was already increasing from the PM2.5 exposure.

Ironically, this topic has been discussed many times before. Since Bangladesh first made its debut on the list of worst offenders with air pollution, many of us ranted, raved, and complained about the poor quality of our air, as well as the underlying causes of air pollution. Slowly, but surely, the government started to take action to address some of the problems.

However, a closer look will tell you that even with meticulous planning and execution, the dividends to be reaped from these actions are likely only in the long-term, leaving us choking in the present.

These include traffic management plans, introduction of cleaner fuels, investment in renewable energy, and the promotion of rapid mass public transit. On the policy front, the government introduced a clean

Euro IV fuel in Dhaka, expansion of access and utilisation of public transportation, establishment of an air quality monitoring network, and establishment of a vehicle emission testing system. But how many of these have been implemented?

While these actions start to have positive effects at some point in the future, do we simply wait, holding our breath? What plans do we have to address the growing public health risks posed by air pollution? Given the government's serious approach towards this issue, what are their plans to bring about immediate relief? How much worse does the air have to get to trigger some corrective action?

Both China and India, like Bangladesh, have a strategy to decrease pollution levels over time. But unlike Bangladesh, for when air pollution levels exceed acceptable thresholds, cities in China and India have a set of emergency response plans in place.

In Beijing, the city may issue a “red alert,” which requires factories to suspend operations and schools to close. If necessary, the city may also implement a “blue alert,” which requires additional factories to close and further restricts the use of private cars. Likewise, New Delhi has the Graded Response Action Plan, which mandates swift action on days when air pollution is severe, including shutting down all construction activities and brick kilns, spraying water in areas

Dhaka? Air quality in Bangladesh is constantly monitored by a network of stations. Cities including Dhaka, Chattogram, Khulna, Rajshahi, and Sylhet all have air quality monitoring stations set up by the Department of Environment (DoE). These stations keep tabs on a wide range of toxins, including PM2.5. The air quality in various regions of the country is evaluated using the data provided by these stations.

But when was the last time you heard a public service announcement warning us about how dangerous the air quality is and what you can do to protect yourself? Do I not have the right as a citizen to make an informed decision about whether I want to leave my house when the air is worse than usual? Should I take my asthmatic mother for a walk in the park as prescribed by the doctor? Should I send my child, who is severely allergic to dust, to school?

You, at this point, may be thinking, “I know it's horrible, but this is hardly a shocking revelation.” That, if anything, is our biggest issue.

People become so acclimated to an issue that they no longer recognise it as a problem and, as a result, cease trying to solve it. This phenomenon is known as the normalisation of deviance. But if this piece elicited any thoughts, before you think it over, take a deep breath... or maybe don't?

Educate lawyers to uphold the court's dignity



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While the government looks to improve the quality of subordinate judiciary by providing its judges with domestic and foreign training, it is surprising that no such initiatives have been taken to educate lawyers on ethical issues. As a result, they generally lack the understanding of the dignity of the court and the legal profession. District Judge Mohammad Faruk, who was subjected to verbal abuse by lawyers led by the president and general secretary of Brahmanbaria District Bar Association in January this year, sheds fresh light on this issue.

The goal, apparently, was to teach the judge a lesson for not following a resolution of court boycott declared by the lawyers, and make the local court subservient to their one-sided decision.

In a Facebook post, many users saw a group of lawyers forcing the learned judge to leave his bench. Following the incident, the judge alleged before the Supreme Court that he had faced serious harassment by the lawyers for questioning their court boycott and other illegal activities, including the filing of cases after hours. However,

members of the Brahmanbaria District Bar Association also alleged that the judges behaved rudely with them, which eventually fuelled the flames against the district judiciary in Brahmanbaria.

The very nature of the allegation in which the district judges of Brahmanbaria are implicated – for corruption and misbehaviour with the lawyers – is not linked to the incident. In the hearing of a ruling recorded suo motu by the Supreme Court, the attorney general was expected to appeal to the court on behalf of the judiciary to take action against the lawyers involved in the incident, and also demand that they be punished for contempt of court.

One side effect of this incident is that an important issue like the necessity of ongoing training for lawyers has been pushed to the background. This could rather be a point of reference for why professional training is important for such a noble career. This could also be an example of how lawyers' out-of-pocket expenses are rising in the competitive profession, while their ethical standards are declining

dramatically – despite promises made by the government to increase the capacity of the subordinate judiciary. Instead, the legal profession has become mired in power abuse and intimidation, where lawyers are using their professional capacity to control the judiciary.

The fact is, despite significant efforts made by the government

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and the higher judiciary to paint a picture of accountability within the subordinate judiciary, lawyers (who are an important part of it) remain largely unaccountable – especially when it comes to violations of ethical standards, including the basic duty to follow a court's instruction.

Lawyers must understand that their

duty to the court is paramount, and when there is conflict between their duty to the client or other lawyers and to the court, the court should get priority – which is the only way they can claim that they are serving the administration of justice. While one may use the excuse that the dispute between the lawyers and the court is an internal one, and it is between the bench and bar to minimise tension between the parties, the truth is, lawyers in Bangladesh don't fully understand their basic duty to the administration of justice and, notably, the government has done very little to educate them.

It goes without saying that when illegitimate claims are not addressed properly, it only leads to further violence on court premises. It leads to further frustration among judicial officers.

While lawyers are expected to uphold professionalism on their own, a training module run by prominent figures who have served the judiciary with dignity would definitely improve the situation. Hence, the authorities concerned should take quick steps to provide said training to lawyers. It is also important to prioritise addressing a court issue that could lead to such violence.

The authorities must ensure that no such misconduct occurs in handling the matters of courts, especially when Bangladesh is trying to improve its global image in addressing the lack of capacity of democratic institutions.