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Irregularities in govt's flood response must be avoided

Denying they don't exist is not enough

ACCORDING to the agriculture minister, Tk 1,323 crore worth of crops have been damaged on 1.58 lakh hectares of land in 37 districts by floods, and a further deterioration of the situation could deal a severe blow to the country. The minister also claimed that the government has taken ample measures to mitigate the damage and loss that have occurred and unless things take a turn for the worse, food production will not be impacted.

Contradicting the minister, a CPD study on the ongoing flood found a number of problems in the government's response, including delays in repairing embankments and irregularities in relief distribution. The study also revealed that more than four kilometres of embankments have been damaged in 97 unions, two to four kilometres of embankments have been damaged in 53 unions and up to two kilometres have been damaged in 70 unions. While revealing these figures, experts criticised the government's amnesia when it comes to building and repairing embankments, despite the need to do so being discussed year after year. The government starts to repair the embankments just before monsoon or during monsoon, and in a way that leads to a huge amount of public money being wasted.

The government's relief distribution measures were also censured by experts, who said that favouritism and corruption are yet to be neutralised. Surprisingly, the state minister for disaster management for relief and rehabilitation denied any of this, and in a sweeping statement said that: "There is no irregularity or inadequacy in relief distribution."

What about all the newspaper reports last October as well as a TIB survey finding irregularities in the government's flood relief distribution? Did the minister investigate the allegations and find them to be false? If so, would he care to share his findings? And what about the year before, when corruption in relief distribution once again surfaced, particularly in places like Moulvibazar? Is the minister not aware of these allegations? We expect that he must be, so when were these allegations investigated? If the minister is going to say that they are false, he must be doing so based on some facts, which we would also like to know about.

We must caution the government to be careful in its relief distribution and ensure that corruption does not eat away at it—as it so often has this year during the Covid-19 relief distribution drives. Furthermore, we must also remind the government to work on building and repairing embankments in their proper times, in the hopes that this time the authorities will not forget to do so again.

Amendments to Road Transport Act: In whose interest?

Govt should not give in to the pressure of transport lobbies

IN an unfortunate development in the transport sector, a committee formed with three ministers to look into how the Road Transport Act-2018 could be implemented has come up with some suggestions of change to the Act. The committee held a meeting on August 19 with the transport owners and workers associations and came up with these changes. Although it has not yet disclosed the proposed changes, what we have learnt is that changes include reducing the fines for different traffic rules violations while there will also be some changes in the rules of the Act. The National Road Safety Council will take the final decision on the amendments being sought after the committee submits its reports.

The associations of transport owners and workers were demanding amendments to some sections of the Road Transport Act-2018 ever since it was passed in parliament. Amid mounting pressure from these associations, the government could not enforce the law in time. And when the government finally took the initiative to do so in November last year, Bangladesh Road Transport Workers Federation called strikes demanding changes to several sections of the law which included making all offences under the Act bailable, scrapping of the provision for fining a worker Tk 5 lakh for involvement in a road accident, reducing the minimum educational qualification requirement for obtaining a driving licence from class-VIII to class-V, ending harassment by police on roads, etc. Amid their pressure, the government could not yet enforce several sections of the Act—parts of nine out of 126 sections of the law are currently ineffective. And now the transport owners and workers are lobbying for further changes!

Clearly, these changes in the law will only make it weaker and it will hardly help in making our roads safe. We urge the government not to bow down to the pressure from the lobbyists and discuss these legal issues with experts and all the stakeholders concerned before coming to a decision on the amendments. Only holding meetings with the transport owners and workers associations, leaving behind other stakeholders, will not help in disciplining the sector.

Indian foreign secretary's visit and the state of Bangladesh-India relations



SHAMSHEER M CHOWDHURY

HISTORY shows that the strength of relations between states, particularly among neighbouring ones, lies in withstanding tests and, if done right, comes out looking

better, both perceptively and in substance, in the end. The recent sudden and previously unannounced visit by Indian Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla to Dhaka needs to be seen in that context.

Understandably, the format of the visit has raised eyebrows among observers on both sides of the border. Traditionally, and in conventional diplomatic practice, such high-level visits are preceded by visible preparations and a formal announcement of the dates and other details of the visit. All of this was conspicuously missing in this particular instance.

That being said, if one were to focus on the substance of the visit and analyse it from available soundbites, its impact on the current state of our bilateral relations—especially in terms of taking it forward on the basis of mutual benefit and respect—was tangible.

In the prevailing global coronavirus situation, the issue of combatting this scourge through an effective and beneficial mechanism of collaboration between countries, using scientists and medical experts, has come to the fore. This

is now a global phenomenon in which countries with known and perceived scientific and technical knowhow are rushing against time to come up with vaccines to prevent the spread of the virus and cure those infected. In fact, the word "vaccine diplomacy" has been firmly injected into the lexicon of global diplomacy, as the numbers of infections and deaths keep mounting exponentially. From his comments at a brief informal

fact, President Xi Jinping of China, in a phone conversation with Sheikh Hasina as early as May this year, reassured her that China would stand by Bangladesh as a "truest friend" in this all-out war against Covid-19.

Bangladesh Foreign Secretary Masud Bin Momen, in his comments to the media before his meeting with his Indian counterpart, had said that Bangladesh would explore all the avenues to get

visit by the Indian foreign secretary, given the history, nature and spread of bilateral relations between the two South Asian neighbours, it would be safe to assume that the visit was aimed to give greater boost to these relations. This was indicated in a statement from the Indian High Commission in Dhaka soon after his arrival on Tuesday, which said: "He is currently on a visit to Dhaka to discuss and take forward cooperation on matters of mutual interest."

In comments to the media by the foreign secretary of Bangladesh, made after the bilateral discussions, he highlighted two issues that found prominence from Bangladesh: the killing of Bangladeshis on the border by BSF firing and an expectation from Bangladesh of a more positive role by India on the Rohingya repatriation issue at the United Nations, especially now that India is a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council. Apparently, on the former issue, a follow-up meeting between the relevant players of both sides is expected to be scheduled in the coming days. India also proposed the creation of an "Air bubble" to restart air travels between the two countries. There was, however, no mention of Teesta, or the sharing of any other common river. In a departure from traditions, there was no meeting between the Bangladesh foreign minister and the Indian foreign secretary.

Relations between neighbours are usually characterised by undulations in their form and content. The ties between Bangladesh and India are no exception. However, placed on a broader canvass, an upward curve in their relations is visible. The disbursement of India's credit line, of which Bangladesh is the biggest recipient, has gained momentum. Recently, ten locomotives have been procured for Bangladesh Railway from India as a grant. Bilateral connectivity has also seen visible forward movement.

The visit of Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla, dramatic as it might have been, also had a great symbolic value. This was his first visit to any country in the era of Covid-19-enforced global travel restrictions. It was also well-timed, from an Indian perspective, coming as it did in the backdrop of misgivings among the people of Bangladesh because of certain domestic developments in India and a flurry of speculative and bizarre media activities—mostly emanating from India—touching on unfounded domestic issues in Bangladesh. Of late, sections of India's civil society have been urging New Delhi to be conscious of the sensitivities in its most trusted ally in the neighbourhood. The foreign secretary's visit would, whether by design or default, go a long way in addressing that.

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Indian Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

interaction with some Bangladeshi media personalities on Wednesday morning, the Indian foreign secretary, a person who is well-known here, indicated that he had delivered a message to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina from her counterpart Narendra Modi—that on the issue of combatting Covid-19, India is not only going to stand by Bangladesh but, importantly, will also give priority to Bangladesh when it comes to getting access to the vaccine once it becomes available and is considered fit for use. He also reiterated this message while answering questions from the media after his meeting with his Bangladeshi counterpart in the afternoon. This is indeed reassuring to hear, as we continue to grapple for ways to save our people from this menace that still shows no sign of letting up. It is not known what else was discussed at the hour-long meeting at Ganabhaban.

One may recall that similar offers have come from China as well, where the virus was first detected and whose pharmaceutical lab Sinovac has already carried out substantial research and trials on a vaccine. It is waiting for clearance from Bangladesh authorities to conduct its Phase III trials here. In

a quick access to a Covid-19 vaccine and choose the one that will be safer and useful for Bangladesh. "As part of discussions with others, we'll discuss the issue (vaccine) with India. We should have all options and we'll head for that one which'll be safer and useful for us," he had told reporters at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs the day before the meeting. The question that may follow from his comments is if he was pre-empting what Mr Shringla would be saying, indicating that Bangladesh would keep its options open and, wisely, not rely on one source only.

It is known that the King Edward Memorial (KEM) and Nair hospitals in Mumbai are all set to start Phase II/III clinical trials of the Oxford's coronavirus vaccine candidate. This is backed by British-Swedish pharmaceutical AstraZeneca and will be launched under the brand name COVISHIELD in India. The vaccine candidate was formulated by researchers of Oxford's Jenner Institute and developed in a record-breaking time of just three months. It is already in the last stages of clinical trials in Brazil, South Africa and the UK.

While "vaccine diplomacy" may have been a major thrust of the just-concluded

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

How cash transfers prevent lockdown tragedies



SANIA NISHHTAR

IN 2017, I was a candidate to become the next Director-General of the World Health Organization. At the 70th World Health Assembly, I stood before health ministers from around the world and warned that three things could destroy the planet: a celestial event, a third world war, or a pandemic.

The Covid-19 pandemic may not have destroyed the planet, but it is certainly putting public and private institutions to a harsh test. In addition to its dire health consequences, the pandemic has decimated livelihoods worldwide, squeezing the middle class and pushing low-income households into abject poverty.

In Pakistan—the world's fifth-largest country by population—24 million breadwinners rely on daily wages or are self-employed in the informal economy. For them, life came to a standstill with the implementation of a lockdown in March, causing a widespread loss of income that began fuelling civil unrest and rioting.

To mitigate the pandemic's socioeconomic damage, Pakistan's government created the Ehsaas Emergency Cash programme, the largest social-protection programme in the country's history. Rolled out ten days after the lockdown began, it is delivering one-time cash grants totalling more than USD 1.2 billion to more than 16.9 million households, covering around 109 million people—approximately 50 percent of the country's population. Recipient families are given Rs 12,000 (USD 75) to cover their immediate subsistence needs.

Prior to the delivery of Ehsaas cash, I saw unspeakable suffering among people from many walks of life. There were day labourers and hawkers, hotel and restaurant staff, and domestic servants, security guards, and drivers. There were also laid-off public-transport employees, fishermen and miners, beauticians and barbers, and millions of shopkeepers—all

on the verge of hunger, with their savings used up. They, along with private-school teachers, electricians, welders, painters, carpenters, plumbers, car mechanics, taxi drivers, and construction workers, did not know where their next meal would come from.

These stories were repeated across industries and regions, with even those used to earning a decent living suddenly wondering if their finances would ever add up again. But the handouts brought stability and comfort to millions of families, and the whole country watched as countless tragedies were averted.

Beyond the immediate crisis, the success of Ehsaas Emergency Cash offers Pakistan and other middle- and low-income countries invaluable experience in speedily delivering a massive national programme in a complex and uncertain

into its design, offers lessons about how to leverage personal identification systems. By combining phones, Internet connectivity, and national IDs, a digital, demand-based social-protection system can be created to enable those in distress to seek support during crises. And it demonstrates how cash transfer programmes can be deployed to counter the adverse socioeconomic consequences of external shocks such as Covid-19.

For Pakistan, this was a watershed moment in terms of government functioning. The crisis compelled the government to be more responsive, data-driven, experimental, and ambitious. Cost-effective digital methods of working, new ways to coordinate the activities of multiple stakeholders, and a whole-of-government approach have been institutionalised. These measures



Cash transfer programmes are an effective way to counter the adverse socioeconomic consequences of external shocks like Covid-19.

PHOTO: REUTERS/ADNAN ABIDI

context. In order to share this knowledge, the government recently released a report describing the knowhow we gained through the programme's design and implementation, as well as the operational challenges we encountered and how they were addressed.

The programme's end-to-end digital approach, with transparency hardwired

will transform policymaking in a post-Covid-19 world.

Finally, the legacy of the programme goes beyond short-term relief. Built into its design are long-term goals to strengthen the safety net and increase financial inclusion, both of which will bring lasting benefits to recipients and to Pakistan as a whole. Alongside this

History shows that disasters and their tragic consequences can be a catalyst for large-scale social change. Covid-19 has presented Pakistan with an urgent and unprecedented challenge, which could be met only by a programme with the scale and ambition of Ehsaas Emergency Cash.

is a commitment to transparency and accountability, which is the underlying motivation for the publication of the report. In order for democracies to ensure progress, a culture of integrity and openness must be ingrained in government institutions and processes.

History shows that disasters and their tragic consequences can be a catalyst for large-scale social change. Covid-19 has presented Pakistan with an urgent and unprecedented challenge, which could be met only by a programme with the scale and ambition of Ehsaas Emergency Cash.

In the wake of the pandemic, we must embrace the once-in-a-generation chance to replicate this ambition globally and build a fairer world that overcomes poverty, inequality, and the climate crisis, with social protection as a core pillar of that effort.

The world has not faced a more difficult challenge since the end of World War II. But in our darkest hour, we can find a way forward by collectively deciding to move toward a fairer, greener, and more sustainable world for all.

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