

The Flash Flood

Flash floods in the eastern districts have till Sunday claimed 38 lives. Of the more than a crore people affected, about a million have been described as marooned. The floods have to date engulfed vast tracts of land in 35 upazilas belonging to seven districts and are as yet showing no sign of stopping in its sweep. As much as half of the standing crops in the affected areas are feared to have been completely lost and the condition of what remains would be poor even for a consolation. Death, suffering and material loss is the order of the day in those areas of Sylhet, Comilla and Mymensingh — and the situation wouldn't look up for quite some time even if the spread of water stops in a day or two.

That's a very bad outlook for not only those areas but for the nation as a whole. But the fact remains that the whole nation can hardly come and share in the suffering and lessen the distress of those marooned. The cataclysmic elemental strike in the coastal belt and the human and material toll exacted by that are demanding all of the nation's capacity to care — and much more. In other years similar floods — or even lesser inundations — used to engage the full attention of the government as well as the people. This year when that is not simply possible — the floods are fuming with some added disdain for human well-being. As if coming in tandem were not enough of a scare.

Man has been living with such floods in the Ganges-Brahmaputra Bengal Delta for thousands of years. He should have learnt to live with these by now. Not that he hasn't. In any other country such floods would have taken a far greater price. Here people do not perish so easily because of floods. The present floods is something special for it has in a span of a more 72 hours taken 38 lives. These are unfailing indexes to the specially difficult situation in Mouvi Bazar and Brahmanbaria, Netrakona and Habiganj.

How will the government as well as the people react to this extra challenge which, as celebrated by the Bengali proverb involving a stalk of spinach on a regular bundle of load, comes on top of a surfeit of problems — perhaps to test us as never have we been tested, for our fitness to tick on as an independent self-reliant and self-respecting people.

The destruction in the offshore belt that surpassed the effects of nuclear bombings of Japan, the steady draining of the sap that gives life to a nation, namely, the will to stand against odds, by the diarrhoeal sweep, and now the deluge in the eastern districts — the combined impact of this all is beyond the power of comprehension of perhaps all in this country, with a handful of talented exceptions here and there with their hearts in the right place. Wouldn't this trebly confounded catastrophe shake us into giving up our ways of ad hoc responses to questions of physical survival of our society?

The present challenge — the biggest ever for us in centuries — would very much leave an emphatic message for all willing to look for it and heed it. The visitations would continue. In order to live and prosper, both individually and socially, in spite of them, and may be a little because of them — we shall need to effect very many radical changes not only to our habitation and agricultural pattern — but to our overall economic and social aspects of existence. Anything short of that will mean a very poor country getting abysmally poorer with every elemental strike.

Taking the present challenge successfully in our stride and recasting our society for all it will take, we can, on the other hand reach up to newer horizons of civilised social being freed from poverty and illiteracy, avoidable death and suffering.

Many of the groups collecting relief in Dhaka have started thinking of changing direction and heading for the flooded districts. Not at all a bad idea. And surely government wouldn't be found wanting in reaching traditional relief in required quantity and on time to the affected areas. The anti-epidemic precautions will have to be taken here too.

Our sympathies to the victims.

Asking for Help

The famous, or is it not so famous, Bengali subtlety seems to be disappearing from many facets of our social life. The political speeches are no longer that dignified, the debates in the parliament, far from witty and our normal day to day behaviour devoid of the courtesies that we were taught in our younger days.

Recent examples of how crude we have become are the two TV interviews of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif of Pakistan and Prime Minister Chandra Shekhar of India telecast in connection with their recent visits here. The second question, or was it the third, posed to the visiting dignitaries was something on these lines, "Are you considering raising your country's assistance to Bangladesh?" They must be, otherwise why should they, leaving their affairs of the State, be here in the first place? This is not exactly the height of our tourist season, or didn't the interviewer realise that?

Imagine the embarrassment of the visiting leaders. What are they supposed to say in reply to such loaded questions? Isn't it a bit like arm twisting? Surely we can think of more interesting questions to ask these well known figures. As to their assistance to the cyclone affected people, we can leave it to our leaders who, we are sure, must have had detailed discussion on what possible assistance these two countries could give us. It is as if we are forcing them to repeat in public what they must have promised in private to our leaders.

We need help, but do we have to forget our dignity and our well known tradition of courtesy? Can't we be a bit subtle?

While on the subject, we would like to express our appreciation to both India and Pakistan — our partners in SAARC — for the generous help they have promised to our people at this critical time. The Indian Prime Minister's offer of sending rice within two days time from the stock in West Bengal is indeed a most warm and timely gesture. It is not only the aid, but also its immediate availability that makes this gesture especially valuable.

INDIAN election for the tenth Lok Sabha is seen by many as a referendum for the survival of world's biggest democracy. It does not mean that after the election polls there will be no democracy for the Indians again vote for a hung parliament. But in the event of a hung parliament the democracy will have a tough going in India.

The politicians take the tenth Lok Sabha elections as a referendum for their survival. The Congress (I) led by Rajiv Gandhi sees the election as a referendum for stability while Lal Krishna Advani of Bharatiya Janata Party looks at it as a fight to establish Ram Rajya in India. VP Singh seeks a mandate to bring the "Garibs in Delhi Masnad" by implementing Mandal Commission report. The Mandir-Mandal issue is now dominating the Indian elections. Advani and VP Singh are playing the Mandir and Mandal cards while Rajiv is playing the card of stability. The Indians have not yet responded positively to any one except a swing for Hindu revivalism in parts of India.

There is a strong belief in India that "he who rules Aryavarta, rules India." The Aryavarta is the Hindi heartland of Uttar Pradesh. No edge for any party in Uttar Pradesh is yet established. However, Congress which got only 15 out of 85 seats in 1989 elections may increase the tally marginally. But Congress will lose at least 35 seats in southern states and in Maharashtra, according to opinion polls. Traditionally, when Congress gains in Aryavarta it loses in Deccan.

There will be a triangular fight in the elections among Congress (I), BJP and Janata Dal-Left combine. In Uttar Pradesh fourth element has been added and that is Janata Dal (Socialist) led by Prime Minister Chandra Shekhar. Chandra Shekhar will have to remain satisfied with few seats in UP and Haryana. But even with smaller number of seats he aspires to become the Prime Minister again with the support of some big parties. But it may remain a dream this time for Chandra Shekhar.

Vishwanath Pratap Singh who symbolised the hopes and aspirations of Indian people only a year-and-half ago is now blamed for reintroducing caste system in Indian politics. He accepted the Mandal Commission report which reserved government quotas for the Harijan (lower caste Hindus). This sparked off a countrywide demonstration by the students many of whom died of self-immolation. Then came the issue of construction of Ram-Janambhumi Mandir in Ayodhya by coalition partner BJP. Both Mandal and Mandir issues compelled VP Singh to leave power. These two issues have got prominence in the manifestos of all the political parties. BJP has played well with Hindu passion. BJP made an

INDIAN ELECTION SCENE

Congress, BJP, Janata Dal-Left Poised for Triangular Fight

Reazuddin Ahmed writes from Calcutta

Rajiv Gandhi's Congress sees the election as a referendum for stability. L. K. Advani of BJP looks at it as a fight to establish Ram Rajya in India. VP Singh seeks a mandate to bring "Garibs in Delhi Masnad."

trood both in upper and lower caste Hindus. Advani's Rathjatra and promise to make India a Ramrajya divided the votes among the Harijans too. Harijans are more Ram devotees. So VP Singh's hope to play with the backward people seems to have failed. But VP Singh will gain in Bihar which is a caste ridden society. BJP is doing well in Rajasthan, Gujarat, parts of UP and in Madhya Pradesh. In Madhya Pradesh BJP is likely to lose some seats, but it will gain in Maharashtra where BJP made adjustment in 14 seats with Shiv Sena. In Karnataka the Maharaja of Mysore has joined BJP and he is likely to return. In West Bengal BJP has made an inroad but is unlikely to get any seat.

But Advani is facing the popular film star Rajesh Khanna. People say that Advani is contesting the second seat in Gujarat maybe to avoid the risk of defeat by Rajesh Khanna.

Indian political commentators view that the four major south Indian states of Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Kerala always behave differently from the northern states. They never vote the way the northern states do. Tamil Nadu has a unique political culture which brings film stars in political prominence. In Andhra Pradesh also N.T. Rama Rao is dominating the politics.

In Tamil Nadu AIDMK led by Ms. Jayalalita sides with Congress while DMK led by Karunanidhi may support Janata Dal-Left coalition. In Karnataka Congress may not improve position and there is

chance of losing some seats. In Kerala Left Front may do well this time. Indians will vote for electing 510 members out of 543 on May 20, 23 and 26. The three-day elections are looked as crucial for Indian democracy and political stability. The Indian political culture over last 44 years is: one party government provides stability while the coalition fails. Congress is trying to score

over this point. The Congress slogans include political stability during the forty years' Congress rule. There were four prime ministers — Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru, Lal Bahadur Shastri, Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi — while during the four years rule of Janata coalition the country got four prime ministers. They are Morarji Desai, Charan Singh, VP Singh and Chandra Shekhar. But Congress's appeal could make

little dent among the voters. This is mainly, as the Indian political analysts look, because Rajiv Gandhi's inability to earn the confidence of the people. As a ruler he has failed miserably, says the opposition. The Indian elections lack usual excitement this time maybe mainly because the voters are not ready to go to polls within 15 months again.

Some of the Indian newspapers have raised the ques-

tion of justification of continuing with the Westminster type democracy in India. The columnists in some of the prestigious papers propose that India should develop its own political culture which suggests to go for coalition with like minded parties or even presidential system to give a viable government to India. The Left Front leaders claim that the example of West Bengal should be followed in the centre. The Left Front — a combine of the like minded parties — have been successfully ruling West Bengal for 14 years. A combine of such nature with commitments to people can give viable alternative to Congress in the centre.

But all the political parties are seemingly worried at the rise of BJP as a national alternative to Congress. BJP has taken this as a make or break election for the party. But the other political parties may at certain stage take a united stand against BJP to halt communal politics in secular India.

The Man with the Toughest Job

India is in the throes of its massive general election operation. The voters number 521 million and the polling stations 1.64 million. No one will have to walk more than two kilometres to vote. The man in charge of the complete organisation, the Chief Election Commissioner, is a highly efficient former secretary to prime minister Rajiv Gandhi.

D.K. Joshi and A.J. Singh writes from New Delhi and Dharmasala

THE man with the most daunting task in India today is undoubtedly Trirunel Narayanantyer Seshan, the 56-year-old Chief Election Commissioner. Under his command for the forthcoming general election will be three million civil servants manning 600,000 polling stations and an adequate paramilitary force to prevent violence at the booths.

He has to shepherd 521 million voters, handle 1.64 million ballot boxes and make sure he has ordered up 10,000 metric tonnes of paper for ballots and 150,000 cc of indelible ink.

To ensure that in rural areas hartjans and weaker sections

are not intimidated by the dominant castes he has to set up polling stations to cater for even as few as 500 voters. No voter in the vast country will walk more than two kilometres to vote, even if he or she lives in remote hill and forest areas.

The short-tempered and sharp-tongued Seshan is a thorough and efficient bureaucrat. To ensure the elections are free and fair he believes it is not enough to make certain the polling is peaceful.

In the past there have been innumerable cases of police and other officials stamping the ballot papers or obstructing democracy in other ways.

Seshan has taken steps to see that there is no subversion by state governments. He objected to large-scale transfers of officers by some state governments after March 25 and he warned against announcement of new welfare schemes by central and state governments as a way of distributing largesse.

Ministers were told not to use government vehicles during campaigning and the Prime Minister was reminded that air force planes should not be used unless they are paid for.

Most importantly, Seshan warned political parties and candidates "indulging in election propaganda based on reli-

gion and caste, creed and language" that "they could be prosecuted and disqualified for six years."

Never before has the Indian electoral air been so filled with heavy clouds of caste and communal emotionalism as on the eve of the country's tenth general election since independence in 1947.

Criminals have been inducted into politics over the years and muscle and money have been increasingly relied on by all major parties to secure favourable results at the polls.

Seshan says: "The degree of violence has been building up during the last several elections. And violence does not necessarily mean the violence of the weapon — a gun, knife or stick."

Even violence to the principles has been building up. The total atmosphere in which the political system is working is one of violence.

The illicit arms trade in India has grown greatly in the last few years and gun-running is big business in states such as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh.

"Booth capturing" has become a feature of parliamentary elections. Bihar reported the first instance of it 33 years ago and it has spread to other states.

Plans are laid long in advance. Politicians offer protection and patronage to crimi-

nals belonging to their own caste. Arms are procured and officials influenced to locate polling booths in the "right places."

Low caste people or hartjans, afraid of getting killed by hired criminals of high caste, do not go to the polls and their votes are polled by hired people. When booth-capturers move to areas with mixed influence a bomb or two is hurled and a few shots fired to scare people away.

Ballot papers are snatched and officials forced to initial them. These are then stamped and put into the ballot box. All this is done within an hour and then the gang moves to the next booth.

In Bihar the problem has increased 14-fold in the last 22 years. In 1989 the Election Commission had to order a re-poll in 1,239 booths.

Thus Seshan has a tough job on his hands. He is to be Rajiv Gandhi's cabinet secretary and acquired a reputation of being close to his political boss. All major parties have accused him of being a Congress sympathiser.

But Seshan is a stickler for the rules and has a fetish about perfection. It would be against his work culture and administrative background to betray his office. As a bureaucrat, he says, he will fulfil his constitutional responsibility. — GEMINI

India: the great democracy

THE BIG BALLOT

- 1991: 10th election since independence in 1947
- 545 seats in Lok Sabha (lower house)
- 521 million voters
- 1,640,000 ballot boxes, 600,000 polling stations
- A polling station within 2km of every voter
- 10,000 metric tonnes of ballot papers
- 150,000cc of indelible ink
- 3 million civil servants
- 291 parties contested last election in 1989

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World Population Hits 5.4 Billion

ONLY a few countries with large populations have good records on civil and political rights.

A study by the Population Crisis Committee of 120 countries with serious population pressures shows that only a handful had managed to maintain stable constitutional governments.

High population growth has also made it more difficult for most governments to keep pace with development services, like health and education.

Low-income countries (excluding India and China) have seen primary school enrolments fall from an average annual rate of 5.6 per cent in 1975-80 to 2.7 per cent for 1980-87.

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), about 105 million children 6-11 years old were not in school in 1985. Of these, over 70 per cent were in the least developed nations. By the year 2000 — if present trends continue — the number of out-of-school children will almost double to about 200 million.

These are only some of the consequences of high population growth, the world popula-

tion projected to be 5.4 billion in mid-1991. By 2001, the total will be 6.4 billion.

Nearly all (95 per cent) of this growth will be in developing countries. The largest relative increase will be in Africa but the largest numerical increases will be in Southern Asia.

The number of people in South Asia will increase from 1.2 billion today to 1.5 billion by the end of the century. East Asia — including China and Japan — has over a fifth of total world population but is growing much more slowly.

Japan has reached below "replacement level" fertility — meaning an average family size of less than two children. China will probably reach this level by the year 2000 with South Korea and Thailand close behind.

These projections are made in the State of World Population 1991 released by the UN Population Fund (UNFPA).

There are hopeful signs. "The most recent evidence shows that for the first time, fertility is declining in all major regions of the world," the UNFPA report says. "Even in high-fertility, low-contraceptive areas such as South Asia and Africa, today's women are having fewer children com-

pared to those in 1960-65." Projections for South Asia suggest that fertility is now declining at an accelerating rate and will reach four children per woman in 1995-2000.

Contraceptive use is growing. In East Asia, fertility rates have more than halved over the past 25 years. Contraceptive prevalence rates have also increased from 13 per cent to 70 per cent.

Through family planning programmes, China and India, respectively, claim 200 and 106 million "births averted." For India, this meant a saving since 1979 of US\$742 billion (calculated at US\$7,000 per child. The cost of providing education and health care in India, from infancy to adulthood).

China, Colombia, Fiji, South Korea, Indonesia, Mexico, Thailand, Sri Lanka and several Indian states (including Kerala) have seen dramatic declines in population growth. It took Thailand only eight years to reduce total fertility rates

from 6.5 to 3.5 live births per woman.

"For the first time in history, more than half the world's couples have the means of choosing the timing and spacing of their families," the UNFPA report notes. "Fertility rates are falling in all regions of the world."

Still, the UNFPA notes that "population growth and migration are contributing to changes in key ecosystems in developing countries with unknown but potentially serious effects on food supply in the immediate area, and on global climate change."

About 580 million people are now living in absolute poverty on marginal or fragile land. One of the results has been mass migration from subsistence farming to the cities. By the year 2000, the urban population of the developing world will be almost double that of the developed world.

The report notes that developing countries as a whole have suffered a serious decline in food self-sufficiency. Their

cereal imports in 1969-71 were only 20 million tons. By 1983-85, they had risen to 69 million tons, a figure expected to hit 112 million tons by the year 2000.

The UNFPA report cites an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development study which show that the strongest migratory pressures — within countries and internationally — always appear in countries with rapid population growth and a slow pace of development.

In developing countries, the total fertility rate (a national measure of the average number of births per woman) is now about 3.8 per cent. About 51 per cent of couples regularly use some means of contraception.

The United Nations has targeted the increase of "contraceptive prevalence" to 59 per cent. Maintaining the present contraceptive prevalence of 51 per cent already means an additional 108 million contraceptive users. To reach the modest 59 per cent target will require 186 million more users. Most of these will be in Asia, with the rest divided more or less evenly between Africa, Latin America, the Caribbeans and Arab states.

"Meeting the targets means awarding a higher priority to population in development programmes, and extending family planning information and services to perhaps 2 billion people," the UNFPA says. Overall, the target implies that the number of couples using family planning will rise by 50 per cent, from 381 million in 1991 to 567 million by the year 2000. The report says the "overall cost of meeting the targets — to governments, contraceptive users and the international community — will be about US\$9 billion a year by the end of the century; double today's expenditures, but far smaller than the cost of failure."

Today, only four of the world's 170 countries limit access to family planning services and 144 provide either direct or indirect support to family planning programmes. "The experience of the last 20 years shows that strong, well-managed family planning programmes are highly effective," the UNFPA report notes. "By purely voluntary means, they have achieved smaller family size, healthier mothers and children and more balanced rates of population growth in developing countries." — *Depthnews*.

To the Editor...

Relief to the affected

Sir, In response to the Premier's appeal to the international community, relief materials both in cash and kind are pouring in from abroad. Affluent persons as well as those who are magnanimous inside the country, are also extending help to the people affected by the catastrophic cyclone and tidal surge. According to a report in some national dailies (May 5) assistance worth Taka 555 crore has so far been committed by different countries and agencies. Further assistance is supposed to come. With such a magnitude of help we have

Scientific feat

Sir, A recent news item says that doctors at John Hopkins have been able to successfully remove an ovarian cyst from a forty-year-old woman. The striking point is that the tumour weighed about one hundred pounds. The patient is said to be doing well. Now in an age and time when scientists all over the world, mostly in the developed countries which have the resources and the technology, are carrying on their crusade against a number of diseases, it is no doubt a victory worth celebrating. If the patient sur-

Kris Aquino in films

Sir, A recent news item says that Kris Aquino, daughter of the President of Philippines, is at present busy with shooting of her first international movie: "Happy Ghost 5". Apparently, she has travelled to Hong Kong to work for the shooting of the movie. This is undoubtedly a good news. But the point is that generally, children of politicians aspire to be politicians one day. Since it is almost next nature for them to be trained in the art of politics, just as it is a very easy affair for children

Relief to the affected

reasons to believe that the sufferings of the survivors will certainly be alleviated. We wonder if death has at all caused from starvation. If the answer is yes, then we'll urge the concerned authorities to check it with all out effort. With past experience still haunting us, we cannot but shudder at the thought of relief materials being misappropriated. A little steep though, we shall expect the officials of this government to reach the distressed all sort of help available for the sake of their very existence. A M M Tarik Middle Hall Shahar, Chittagong.

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