

An Appeal

The Daily Star appeals to all its readers, advertisers and patrons to contribute generously to the Prime Minister's Relief Fund and offer the fullest co-operation to all relief agencies and help the victims of the natural calamity which has hit Bangladesh.

Helping the Cyclone Victims

In Bangladesh, we are perhaps a little more used to disasters than others. But even for us, the devastation caused by the cyclone last Monday, goes beyond the realm of belief. Miles after miles of human settlements turned into a continuous field of water, thousands of villages washed away in a flicker of moment leaving no trace of human abode. It was a cruel blow to our already weak and fragile economy. However, the sorrow, the anguish and the sense of helplessness must now be turned into an effective rescue operation. What we have to do is help ourselves in setting up an effective relief operation.

Under the initiative of the government the armed forces, para-military forces, the private voluntary organisations and community self-help bodies, have taken the initial measures to send immediate help to the affected areas. But for our relief operation to be effective and to be able to reach all the needy people we will have to organise our efforts well and co-ordinate them so that our efforts produce the optimum impact. The armed forces, the police, BDR, Ansar and all such bodies are being mobilized to face the current disaster. Political parties, with their grassroot workers, are in a vantage position to supply the requisite volunteers to man the relief efforts. The NGOs and other private bodies must also do their very best in helping the distressed people.

Medical teams will have to be sent to take care of the emergency needs and also to take preventive steps to protect the people against the spread of communicable diseases that occur after widespread inundation or flood. We must also make provision for emergency energy supplies, especially diesel and kerosene along with matches to make people able to cook their food.

The Prime Minister's appeal for international help is an indication of the extent of damage that we have suffered. From casual observation it is feared that almost all factories, workshops, industrial units, government facilities — in fact everything — have been washed away or rendered unusable due to inundation. In view of colossal loss of lives and destruction of property, Bangladesh naturally hopes that the international community will come forward with humanitarian aid of such items as food, clothing, medical supplies, etc. It is difficult for Bangladesh to be singly able to meet the emergency needs of the vast number of distressed people. It is true that eastern Europe, more recently the Kurds, are all in great need of emergency relief. Yet the consequences of natural disaster that struck Bangladesh is of a scale and intensity that no country can tackle on its own. International assistance must come forward at this critical moment and it is our hope that the foreign envoys and the heads of aid missions based in Dhaka will send corroborative reports to add to the appeal made by the government.

But, as we have already stated in this column that the most timely and effective relief can and must be organised by ourselves. We must come forward, each of us, with whatever we can spare, to help the victims. Voluntary collection of funds (but authorised by the government or authenticated by private organisations that command public faith) should be organised. Used clothes could be collected from urban areas. Medical firms could sell essential drugs at cost price or even give, to a limited extent, free of charge to help those in need. Community effort can do wonders in moments of crisis.

We look forward to significant help from the international community. But more so, we look forward to a massive self-help effort by ourselves to help our distressed countrymen in this time of trial.

Korean Police

There is something basically — one would say, criminally — wrong with the police in South Korea. It has allowed itself to be used, almost ungrudgingly, by successive dictatorial regimes, starting with the post-war government of Syngman Rhee, in suppressing student protests, usually peaceful ones, with brutal force that can seldom be matched by law-enforcing agencies in other countries.

This has happened again. On Monday, tens of thousands of South Korean students were out on the streets protesting the fatal beating of a demonstrator ten days earlier. A student of Seoul University, Kang Kyung Dae "died after the riot policemen beat him with metal pipes during a campus protest", as reported quite unambiguously by a news agency.

At a time when there is considerable international outcry against the excessive use of water hose and plastic bullets by Israeli security forces in the occupied Arab territories, the use of metal pipes by South Korean police certainly deserves condemnation. Prime Minister Ro Jai Bong has apologised for the death of Mr. Kang. However, judging by press reports, the government of President Roh Tae Woo is yet to lay down new ground rules as to what his police force should or should not do in dealing with political demonstration.

It is part of history of South Korea that in 1987, a student died after he was hit by a tear-gas cannister fired by the police. This triggered off the wave of mass protests which eventually forced President Chun Doo Hwan out of office.

President Roh is anything but Mr. Chun. A tactful man, with a strong commitment to the rule of law and welfare of his people, he has a reasonable dialogue with different sections of his people, including the student community. It is hoped that he will bring an end to the current wave of student protests through a dialogue, not through violence. The real loser will be the country if the situation turns worse and if, even to a small extent, the history repeats itself.

THE guerrilla war between the rebels of the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) and the Rwanda government still erupts in isolated incidents, despite frequent ceasefire agreements officially approved by both sides.

A final and conclusive agreement was signed in Zaire on March 29 between representatives of the rebels and the Rwanda government. The neighbouring states of Zaire, Uganda, Burundi, and Tanzania promised to establish a multi-lateral peace-keeping force.

The RPF is formed mostly of Rwandan refugees from Uganda (mostly Tutsis) who want to return to their overpopulated homeland. They launched their first invasion from Uganda on October 1 and have continued a ragged campaign since.

Even before the recent ceasefire, the war was fizzling out. The rebels are estimated to have lost between 3,000-5,000 men since their first big push, when their three top commanders, including Gen Fred Rwigyema, were killed.

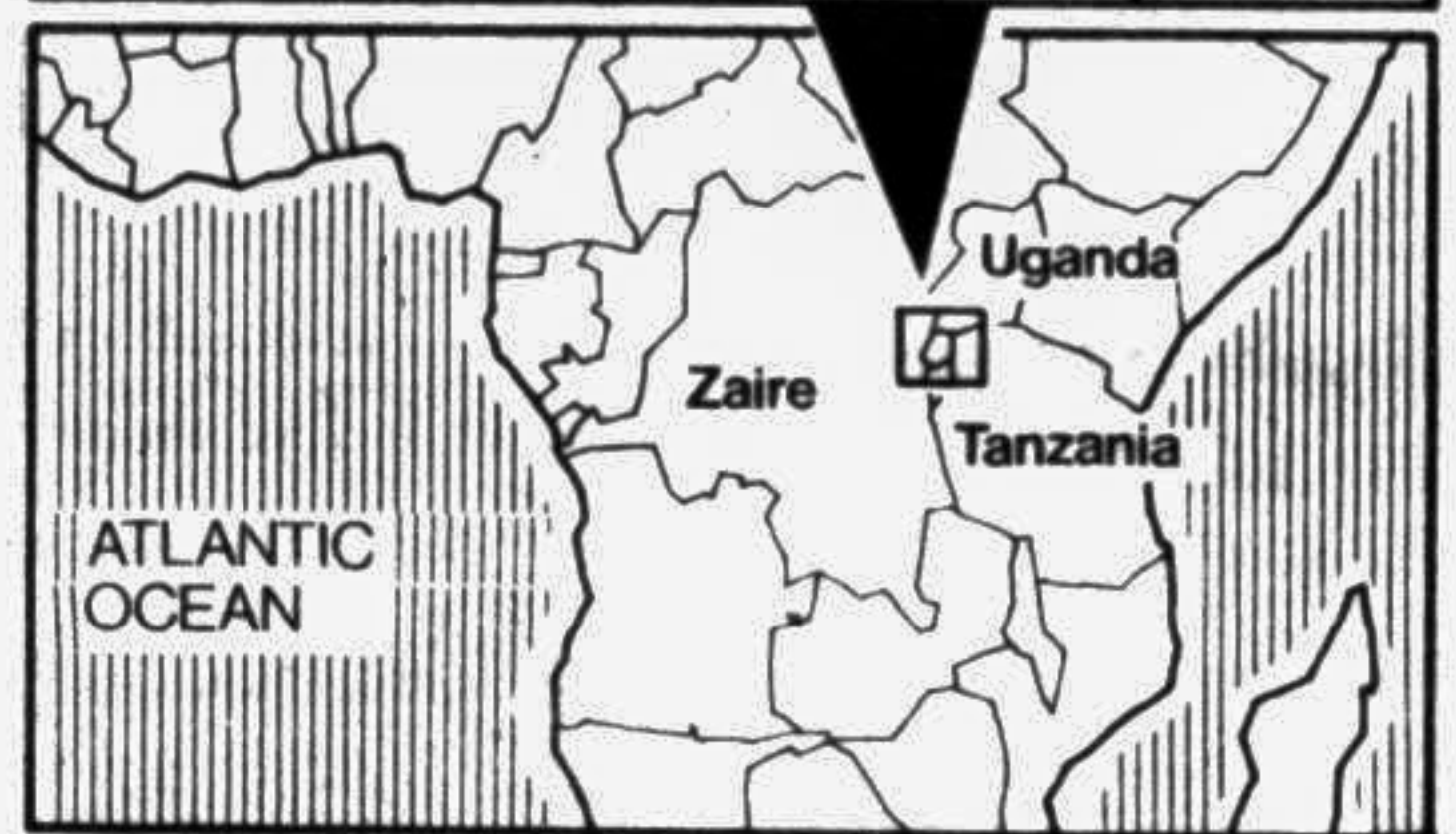
Most of their best-trained men, who had deserted from Uganda President Museveni's National Resistance Army, have either been captured or killed. Lately the RPF has sought support from almost anyone who claims Banyarwanda or Tutsi ancestry.

I talked freely to prisoners, among them students, schoolboys, shopkeepers and other civilians, who had been forced into the war or bribed with false promises.

But the RPF campaign has shaken the Rwanda government and has caused a rethink in policy, not just concerning the hundreds of thousands of refugees living abroad in neighbouring territories, but the political future of the country.

President Juvenal Habyarimana was at pains to point out in an interview that

he had established a commission of national synthesis to produce a charter on a multi-party system on September 21 1990, more than a week before the RPF invasion plunged.



Alan Rake writes from Kigali

In a bold move President Habyarimana of Rwanda has signed a ceasefire with the rebels who invaded his country from Uganda. He has invited them to come home and contest new-style democratic, multi-party elections. But he has to rebuild an impoverished economy shattered by war.

"Multi-party government has been the aim of my philosophy since 1985," the President told me. "Our priority now is a ceasefire and then an opening of political dialogue."

The commission has completed its work and will recommend a full-blown multi-party system which will allow parties to compete freely. The monopoly of the single party will be abolished. The Presidency will lose some of its power to the newly created post of Prime Minister, who will be responsible for running day-to-day government.

The new set-up will then either be referred to the public by referendum or at elections, after new parties have had time to form themselves and run electoral campaigns. Habyarimana explained: "They (the RPF) said they want to take power. Now, with the opening towards multi-party government, anyone who wants to form their own party can do so. They can explain their politics to the people."

That is the theory. The realities of Rwanda politics suggest difficulties ahead. The vast bulk of the population is Hutu. The rebels come from the Tutsi minority, which once numbered about 13 per cent of the population but is now below 10 per cent. An estimated 250,000 are now living in exile.

The rebels attacks have made the Hutu majority more antagonistic towards the Tutsi. The war, with its wanton killing, destruction of property, economic dislocation, and strictly enforced curfews has united most Rwandans more firmly behind their leaders than ever before.

Many think that

Habyarimana is too liberal. They would prefer a tough anti-Tutsi policy rather than multi-party concessions and forgiveness towards returning refugees.

It is still expected that a basically Tutsi party will be formed based on the survivors from the Rwanda Patriotic Front and their sympathisers.

There will be no ban on predominantly tribal parties under the new charter, but the RPF will find it difficult to run an effective campaign in the face of the Hutu majority.

The Hutu tribe is not monolithic, however. Already another Hutu party, the Mouvement Democratique Republicain (MDR) has been formed and is winning support.

Its sponsors are largely sympathisers of the first Rwandan President Gregoire Kayibanda, and his Parmehutu-MDR, which in 1958 fought to rid the country of Tutsi kings and feudalism. The MDR attracts those who have come into conflict with the Habyarimana government since it banned Parmehutu-MDR in July 1973.

Habyarimana refuses to say publicly whether he will stand again as a new-style President but almost certainly he will contest the office. He still enjoys widespread popular support and the war against the rebels has further united people behind him.

Whoever emerges as the new leader will inherit a nation divided by tribal animosity. The 1,500 mainly Tutsi political prisoners will have to

be tried or amnestied soon if bitter feelings are not to linger.

Habyarimana has promised that he will forgive and resettle any refugees who want to return, but the land is desperately overpopulated already and relief agencies do not see much chance of finding new land for those returned.

A few might be squeezed into existing settlement schemes, but the numbers of most must be restricted to hundreds, not thousands, of those who want to return home.

The war against the rebels has ravaged the Rwanda economy. The fighting has ruined the tourist industry. Two luxury hotels in the national park of Akagera were the centre of fierce battles and are now occupied by the military. Much of the game in the park has been slaughtered by hungry rebels.

Even the world famous gorillas in the Virungus mountains have been disturbed by rebel activity. The rebels took Rwandan troops by surprise when they forced their way across the saddle between the lofty mountains near the gorilla habitats. Since then they have been hiding in the area.

Elizabeth McPhee, head of the veterinary centre and successor to Dian Fossey, said at least one gorilla group disappeared from its normal haunts.

She estimated that there were only 110 mountain gorillas left, all in the Virungus. When Fossey wrote her book Gorillas in the Mist in 1980 there were an estimated 240. This number has more than halved in a decade.

Rwanda will need world sympathy and assistance if it is to resettle its people and restore a lasting peace.

GEMINI NEWS  
ALAN RAKE is managing editor of New African and Africa Business. He has worked in the African field for more than 30 years. He broadcasts regularly on the BBC.

Absurd Row on 'Islamic Bomb'

by Babar Ayaz

SELF-reliance is no doubt a sacrosanct term and has an element of nationalist sentimentality attached to it.

This follows the American decision to stop financial and defence assistance to Pakistan.

Even those who were traditionally close allies of the Americans in the politics of Pakistan have criticised the American action.

There seems to be a consensus among political parties and the establishment that Pakistan will not bargain on its nuclear programme come what may and would work hard to build a self-reliant economy.

The Americans are considered unpredictable. They made a horrible example out of the late Prime Minister Z.A. Bhutto who had vowed that "the nation will eat grass but will make a bomb". His daughter, Pakistan's erstwhile head, declared it a "Bhutto's Bomb" and "Islamic Bomb" a few months

after the death of her father.

And now the new Prime Minister, supported by the entire establishment, has also claimed that he would not compromise on a "peaceful nuclear programme."

The whole logic of both the American and Pakistani governments is absurd and has nothing to do with the economic development and the material well-being of the common man.

The Americans, who have stopped the aid and are now sending mixed signals about its restoration, have no sincere urge to stop nuclear proliferation. They gave the whole issue a blind eye when Pakistan was needed for harbouring the Afghan Mujahideens and Iranian dissidents.

Now that interest in Afghanistan has worn off, the Americans are reminded of the nuclear bomb issue and have cut off the assistance when it was most required.

The Pakistan establishment which has managed to build considerable support among the common men on this issue is also making contradictory statements and sending confused signals. On the one hand they claim that the programme is completely peaceful and

Pakistan will eat grass but will make the bomb?

then on the other hand they talk about nuclear deterrent for India.

If the programme is peaceful why is Pakistan so secretive about it? And if it is not, what's the point in not saying it so once and for all?

What is ironic is that even the small class of pacifist in this country are afraid to talk

about the fact that the people here need better education, more health facilities and other basic amenities than a bomb or a nuclear programme. Another question which was overlooked by the pacifist and our economist is that if we have rally the nuclear deter-

rent then why expenditure on our traditional defence forces is not being slashed. The logic of having a nuclear weapon for a small developing country like us is that the heavy expenditure on defence be cut down, without which we cannot move on the path to self-reliance.

Under the present economic system, the burden of self-reliance is obviously going

to crush the poor for they have already no waist to tighten the belt around. The direct impact of the suspension of the US economic assistance is not very big, as the aid in pipeline may bridge the gap. Its total effect on the annual development programme projects was only around 6 per cent.

But what would be the situation like if other major donors will start following the leader? The whole 61 per cent of the country's public sector development programme is funded by foreign assistance, much of it coming from the Aid to Pakistan consortium and international multilateral lending agencies.

At the same time, the adverse impact made by the suspension of foreign assistance will further expand the country's negative balance of payments. Already its impact is

being felt and has become severe because the national oil bill has almost doubled following the Gulf crisis.

To meet immediate needs, the country is borrowing heavily from commercial banks. This would further add to its debt burden and to debt servicing which has already become so heavy that net inflow of capital foreign assistance this year was estimated to be only 24 per cent of the total. These estimates were made before the country started borrowing short-term expensive loans.

It is painful, but one cannot forget that Pakistan reached this situation of indebtedness and inequitable distribution of resources in spite of all the talk about self-reliance and Islamic economic justice during the last decade.

— Dephneus Asia

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Drought Situation

Sir, Drought situation in a number of districts has taken a turn towards the worse. Due to persisting spell of dry weather, the buds of seasonal fruits like mangoes, liches, and jack-fruits are drying up.

Now this is indeed bad news for all of us. A country already stricken with poverty, does not want a bout of drought to add to its already deteriorating economy.

It is most unfortunate, that a country like ours which can hardly afford to provide four square meals to the majority of its populace, should face one or the other calamity every other time of the year. These calamities in the form of cyclone, flood, drought, or famine cause immense miseries to a large number of people and endless sufferings to millions. (Not to speak of loss in terms of financial debts).

Drought means less or absolutely no growth of crops, and if such a condition does occur, it means starvation for those who are at the lowest rung of our social strata. It is always the poor and the helpless who are the victims. And in a

country like ours, there is no dearth of such people.

So drought this year means less food or maybe no food for the poor and thus means loss of life. Now loss of life for whatever reason is something which no one desires. So have mercy on us oh, those who control nature! Ponder over cures and remedies!

Syed Momen Huq  
Dhanmondi, Dhaka.

Reshuffle in administration

Sir, The reshuffle needed to streamline the administration and root out corruption is yet to begin. The changes those have been made by the newly-elected government were routine transfers. Mere palliatives cannot cure a deep-rooted disease.

BNP is pledge-bound to cleanse the government machinery to usher in an era of justice and welfare for the people. The fair and democratic election has created a favourable impression among the donor countries and agencies. Consequently, the donors are showing interest in rehabilitation of Bangladesh

economy.

The Economic Relations Division of the Ministry of Finance is the aid management wing. There has not been any significant change after the change-over from the autocratic regime. If the same person who presided over alleged squandering of aid during the last nine years appears before the donors representing the present government what will be the impression?

Abu Zafar  
Bara Maghbazar, Dhaka

Ward No. 24: major problems

Sir, Sheikh Saheb Bazar Road, Bisnu Charan Das Street, Haramohan Sheel Street and Pusparaj Shaha Lane of Ward No. 24 of the city of Dhaka are densely populated, important areas. But these are facing a host of problems. Roads without light and manholes without cover among those. Many accidents happen very often as there are no covers on the manholes. Specially at night we face much of inconvenience. Filthy fluids from the open manholes overflow the roads. Pungent odour comes out and disturbs the atmosphere. The filth and odour on the street sometimes even disrupt communication. Besides the tube lights remain off during the night time. Some tubes seem to have been stolen in the darkness of the night. Much has been said regarding this before, but

the authorities concerned failed to respond.

So, we appeal again to the authorities concerned to for replacing the tube-lights already disordered and supplying covers for the open manholes, at their earliest.

Md. Aamir Shamsi  
127, Lalbagh Road,  
Sheikh Saheb Bazar, Dhaka.

Shocking mistake

Sir, 'Shananda' published from Calcutta, is a magazine which the ladies of Bangladesh love to read. We can always find some reference, news about Bangladesh and Bangladeshi people in that fortnightly, where sometimes we find spelling mistakes in names, of persons or some colloquial terms. But where Aparna Sen, the editor herself does the mistake of writing 'Daod' for the word 'Dawat' which means 'invitation', we are shocked!

Munira Khan  
23, Green Road,  
Dhaka.

Public nuisance

Sir, What has happened to our civic authorities? Are they blunt? Otherwise, while they preach for clean environment and a beautified Dhaka, how can they allow the public nuisance in the heart of the city? People continue to urinate along the sidewalk opposite Gulistan! Annoyed citizen  
Dhaka

OPINION

Solar Power in Bangladesh

It was interesting to read the Star report (April 21) on the activities of the Renewable Energy Research Centre (RERC) of Dhaka University on the potentialities of using solar energy for power in the rural areas and various other fields. Some diagrams or illustrations would have helped the laymen.

The report whetted the appetite of the readers for more information, which were not forthcoming in the brief report. Perhaps BCSIR (Bangladesh Council of Scientific and Industrial Research) have also some pilot projects on similar or allied activities. Is the Planning Commission also involved in any 5-year or long-term project? Which agency is co-ordinating the solar cell projects for feasibility, mass production or implementation? The potential users would be the various Ministries in the public sector; and the private sector might come in for fabrication, production, and installation works.

Transmission and distribution of conventional electric power in the rural areas is costly due to use of transmission and distribution wires running into thousands of kilometres (the risk of pilferage is proportional). The Rural Electricity Board is doing a good job. The senior research students on solar energy devices in the Universities might carry out field research in the rural areas through attachments with the relevant power agencies.

Lately, at international level, options on the conventional grid systems are being debated: central or localized generation, or a mix of both. In Bangladesh, emergency power switching/transfer systems have not yet reached maturity level due to various known reasons. Plans for corrective

measures have been drawn up for implementation in various phases, with the co-operation of donor agencies. But high system loss is causing headache.

In tropical regions (where most of the LDCs are located), the average number of sunny days per year is high. With 70-85 per cent of the people living in the rural areas, taking supply there is costly. Although solar cell efficiency has risen from 9 to only 13 per cent during last decade, the unit cost is coming down rapidly. If solar cells could provide about 20 per cent of the rural low power supplies, that would be a great achievement. The advantages are low capital, operational, and maintenance costs; long life, and mobility, as also non-dependence on wire-distribution.

We need to undertake some initial surveys, followed by pre-feasibility report for a couple of pilot projects. The economics during the critical monsoon period has to be watched. It is likely that Unesco and some other UN agencies have done some work in some developing countries. However, considerable data and documentation are available with ITU. Some countries, such as France, are quite advance in this field. In marketing, the psychological barrier has to be overcome to get the industrial countries interested in the developing countries. Mass application of modern power systems generate huge turnovers.

It is encouraging to find that the potentialities of applications are being studied in Bangladesh, and stray installations are seen in the rural areas (Sandwip, etc.). A review of current priorities would be a timely exercise.

A. Mawaz  
Dhaka