

Open channel

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of the Bangladesh government to face the kind of disaster that hit the country last week and focussed on the fact that virtually no cyclone shelter had been built along the coastal belt between 1978 and now and that whatever had been built, until 1978, could accommodate no more than three per cent of the people in the affected area.

Facts were not new, but the presentation was. The report was corroborated by an executive of the Red Crescent and commented on, believe it or not, by Hasna Moudud, the wife of the former Vice President in the Ershad regime.

Then, the broadcast took up the broad question of the performance of the present BNP administration. Two more surprise voices. The British High Commissioner to Bangladesh, Colin Inray applauded Begum Khaleda Zia's personal commitment to fight corruption, while Gauhar Rizvi, a London-based Pakistani expert on South Asian affairs spoke, correctly but somewhat patronisingly, on the enormous problems facing the new elected government of Bangladesh.

Govt has failed to tackle post-cyclone situation

By Staff Correspondent
The 5-party Alliance has criticised the Government's 'failure' in tackling the aftermath of the catastrophic cyclone.

"The huge losses suffered by the Chittagong Air Force base, the naval installation, Chittagong Port and Air Port proved that Government's preparations to face the impending disaster was inadequate", A. F. M. Mahbul Haq, Convenor of the Alliance, said at a press conference on Monday.

"If the Government was alert it would be possible to save the naval ships and Air Force planes by moving them elsewhere", he said adding that the country could save four to five thousand crore Taka.

The Government failed again in conducting the relief operations for the millions of survivors who were still passing their days in agony, he said.

Relief materials were not sent to Kutubdia, Chakaria, Nizhumdip, Sandwip, Cox's Bazar, Hatiya and Bhola even after four days of the killer cyclone that ravaged the areas, he said.

He said, "during our visit we were informed about misappropriation of relief materials". Relief materials were being handled by government officials and activists of a particular party; but there should be a national relief committee comprising different political parties, he added.

Khalequzzaman Bhuiyan, Convenor of BSD, Sharif Nurul Ambia, Joint Secretary, JSD (Inu), Bimal Biswas of United Communist League, Naim Jahangir of Otkya Prokriya, Hazera Sultana of Workers Party and Maluiddin Khan Badal of BSD were present at the press conference at BSD (Mahbub) office.

If this is a familiar phenomenon, we must still note one important difference. In the past, BBC capitalised on the failure of the Bangladesh media to report on the crisis, whether it was flood or an agitation against the government, with objectivity.

To a great extent, this is no longer the case. Newspapers are now largely free to report on the aftermath of the catastrophe as well as on the relief operation as they like. If the Press has not yet used this freedom fully — some important developments went unreported during the first week — it is due to its old practice of playing safe.

On the other hand, the electronic media here, which remains totally under the government control, has taken a somewhat sentimental, rather than a professional, approach to the crisis. About its reporting skill, the less said the better.

It is not just the old habit of playing safe that has prevented the local media from providing our people with the fullest possible information on the catastrophe. A major problem lies with the administration.

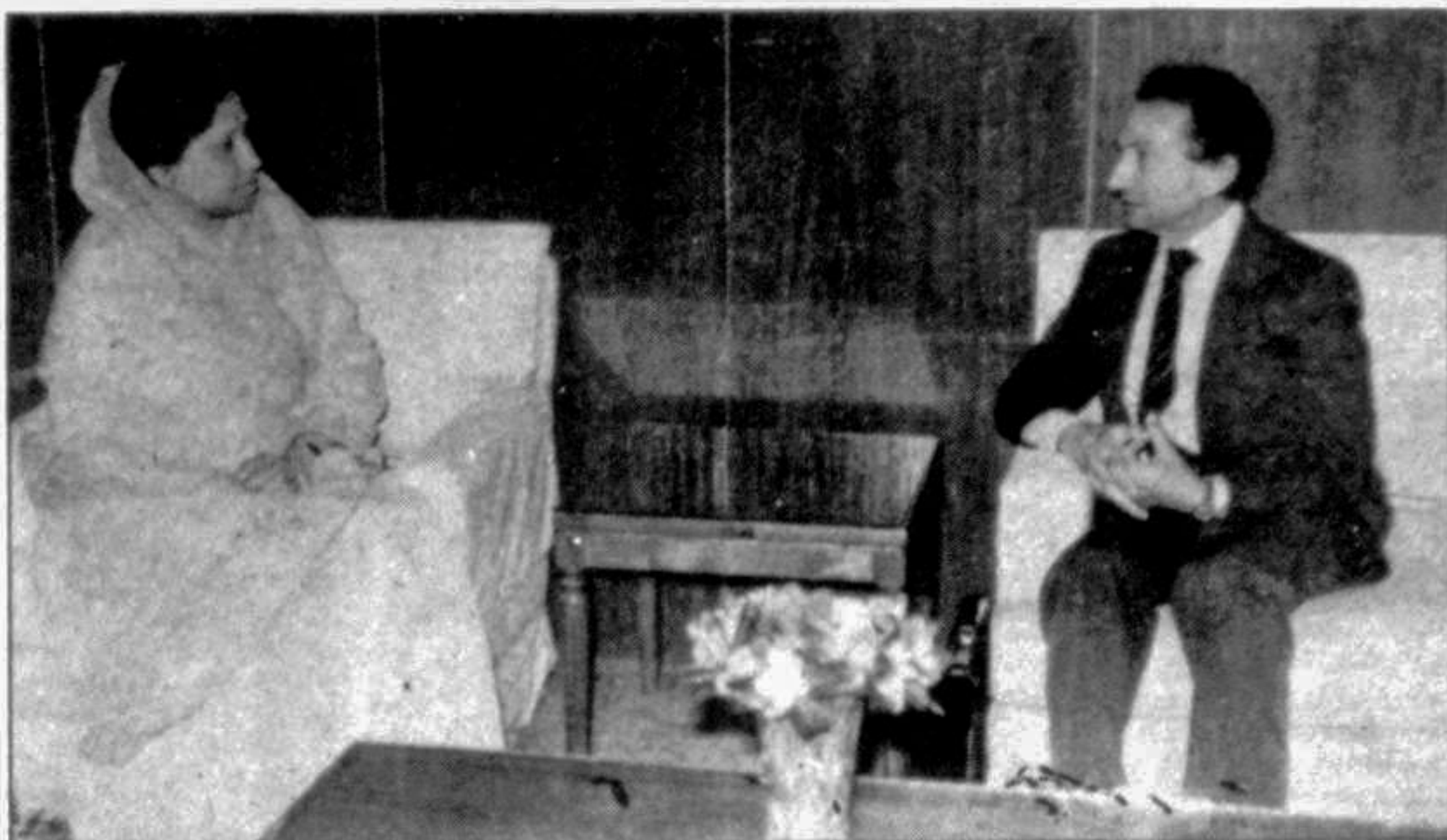
While the government, at different levels, has presented no significant obstacle to our reporters and photographers, it has failed to set up a proper channel for information. So far, there has been no daily coordinated high-level or authoritative briefing, either in Dhaka or Chittagong, with the result that reporters have had different versions of the same report from different sources, without ever obtaining what may be regarded as an official version. They have picked up unsubstantiated rumours and, in many cases, used their own judgement in assessing the damage in a particular area.

The case of the foreign media is somewhat different. Since the administration sees it as a channel for reaching the outside world, it is inclined to give it a preferential treatment. However, in the present crisis, it has taken the government one full week to set up the media centre for foreign news correspondents now in Bangladesh.

It is important for the government to appreciate that the situation calls for improvement. In coming weeks, a number of reports and stories, relating to the disaster, will be getting more and more attention in the local media as well as in the foreign press. At one stage or another, the administration will be obliged to comment on them and state the relevant facts.

Just to give a few examples, people would be asking for a full report on the circumstances leading to the damage or destruction of the Bangladesh Air Force aircraft and helicopters at Patenga; the extent of damage caused to the satellite station at Bethunia and a possible time schedule for its return to minimum operational capacity; and a reliable projection of a threatened emergency crisis in Bangladesh.

These questions may represent no more than a tip of an iceberg. In time, many more difficult ones will be asked. It is important for the administration to face the situation openly and squarely and provide the press with an open channel for information. The failure to do so would hurt the credibility of an administration which enjoys tremendous goodwill among the people, an administration which is entitled to all the support it can generate from the media at home and abroad.



United Nation Disaster Relief Organisation Coordinator Hamed Essafi called on Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia at her office Monday. —PID photo

Teresa offers moving the old to safe places

Mother Teresa, whose concern for the afflicted people has earned her world acclamation and also a Nobel Prize, described the cyclone and tidal surge which had battered the coastal belt of Bangladesh as the worst type of natural calamity, reports BSS.

Flash flood in Sylhet remains unchanged

The flash flood in the Sylhet district, caused by significant rise of the Khowai, the Kushiara and the Manu during the last two days, remained unchanged Monday, reports UNB.

The Khowai at Habiganj marked an abrupt rise of 2.5 meters in the 24 hours Monday and was flowing 60 cm above its danger level. The river is likely to rise further, the Centre said.

River Kushiara at Sheola, which crossed its danger mark Sunday, receded slightly but was still flowing 20 cm above the flood level.

caused by the catastrophe, was shocking. She was upset at the scale of the devastation. The Nobel laureate made these remarks when she met the Acting President Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed at President's Secretariat Monday morning. She said the number of the dead in the ravaged areas were so many.

Meets Khaleda

Mother Teresa also called on Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia at her Secretariat office Monday. Mother Teresa expressed her deepest concern and sympathy for the cyclone affected millions living in the coastal belt of the country. She said "we are here to help the distressed humanity in every way we can".

Begum Zia wished long life of Mother Teresa and thanked her for coming to Bangladesh to serve the distressed humanity of the country. This, she said, would certainly boost

the moral strength of those who were rendering services to the affected people. Meanwhile, UNB reports, Mother Teresa said the survivors of last week's cyclone in the country now need many hands and hearts to love. The octogenarian Roman Catholic nun was giving her views to newsmen in Dhaka on the havoc wrought by the April 29 calamity before she left for Calcutta Monday evening.

Moudud for all-party relief body

By Staff Correspondent
Acting Chairman of Jatiya Party and former Vice-President Moudud Ahmed has demanded the formation of an all-party relief committee to help the cyclone victims because he said it would not be possible for the government to handle the situation alone.

Addressing a press conference Monday at the residence of Mizan Chowdhury, Moudud Ahmed said the cyclone affected areas should immediately be declared as 'distressed area' and all out efforts should be made to mitigate miseries of the survivors. He also suggested the formation of national disasters resistance committee which was set up by the former government after the flood of 1988.

Moudud reminded that his party when in power took initiative to mobilise world opinion after the flood of 1988 and there was an UN resolution in which seven industrialised states agreed in principle to help Bangladesh in case of natural disasters. Moudud Ahmed suggested continuation of the initiative to persuade world community to extend their helping hand to mitigate the woes of the distressed humanity.

Moudud Ahmed also demanded the release of former President Ershad and other leaders of the Jatiya Party. Harassment of Jatiya Party workers should be stopped so that they could come forward to help the cyclone affected people, he said. He said the BNP government "could not face the disaster" as they had no comprehensive plan but time has not come yet to say that "the government has failed". There was a lack of experience, he said.

Moudud Ahmed said experience of ousted President Ershad in crisis management could be helpful at this critical moment. Moudud also demanded withdrawal of cases against Mizanur Rahman Chowdhury, Kazi Zafar Ahmed and Shah Moazzem Hossain.

Moudud Ahmed who recently visited the cyclone affected areas said there were many small islands like Char Moulavi where marooned people were yet to get any help. How could the air base and the naval base in Chittagong be affected by cyclone when there was ample time to take precautionary steps, he questioned. He also urged upon concerned quarter not to use relief materials for political purposes. Moudud said the Jatiya Party had formed a central relief committee and a relief fund for helping the cyclone victims.

A party central relief team headed by Major General (ret) Shamsul Huq and Mrs. Razia Fatz will soon visit the affected areas. Besides, a relief team of the Jatiya Party Parliamentary Party will leave Dhaka on Thursday.

Central Jatiya Party leaders Tajul Islam Chowdhury, MP, AEM Shahjahan, Mish Musa Hossain, Shah Mohammad Abu Zafar, MA Gafur were present at the press conference. The hinterland of Chittagong

Edn sector incurs loss of Tk 462 cr

Country's education sector alone incurred damages estimated at Tk 462 crore inflicted by the April 29 cyclone coupled with tidal surge, reports UNB.

The natural calamity, rated century's worst in the region, which might have taken a human toll of over 2 lakh people, also wrecked every other sector in coastal areas and isles. Total loss of property in the cyclone is primarily estimated at about Tk 5,000 crore.

Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics (BANBEIS) in an unofficial report to the Education Ministry has mentioned the Tk 462 crore loss in the education sector in the affected areas.

Meanwhile, the Education Ministry has directed district administrations concerned to submit reports showing actual loss of property of educational institutions. Teams from the Ministry and the Education Directorate will also visit the affected areas to take a first-hand stock of the disaster losses.

Hundreds of schools, colleges and madrasahs were battered and washed away from the coastal belt by the violent storm and Bay surge.

Foreign help co-ordination cell opened

A foreign assistance co-ordination cell has been opened in Dhaka Monday at the Economic Relations Division of the Ministry of Finance aimed at monitoring and co-ordinating the possible foreign assistance for the cyclone affected people, reports BSS.

The cell will remain open from 8 am to 8 pm everyday without any break and its emergency telephone numbers are 812685, 318394 and 310219.

An emergency meeting will be held today under the auspices of the Economic Relations Division to determine the nature and requirement of foreign assistance in the light of the loss and destruction of the devastating cyclone.

The visiting Under Secretary General of the United Nations and the co-ordination of UNDRD Hamed Essafi, the Ambassador and High Commissioners of all foreign missions, the representatives of World Bank, International Monetary Fund and United Nations and international organisations here and senior officials of the concerned ministries will attend the meeting.

UNDRO

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told the Prime Minister that the affiliated bodies of the United Nations including World Food Programme (WFP), Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) and UNICEF would provide all help to Bangladesh at this hour of its distress. He said the United Nations would do its best to mobilise international support to aid the cyclone victims of Bangladesh.

Essafi said that long term programmes for rehabilitation of cyclone battered areas of Bangladesh would be discussed in the ECOSOC meeting in July next.

He said that the United Nations would provide extensive help to reinstall the disrupted telecommunication system of the country and repair the damage in the industrial sector.

The Midnight File

OIC appeal to help Bangladesh

JEDDAH, Saudi Arabia, May 6 : The Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) today appealed to the international community to provide cyclone-stricken Bangladesh with urgent humanitarian assistance. OIC Secretary General Hamid Algabidi urged Islamic relief organisations to make donations to help "alleviate the sufferings of victims of the catastrophe," statement said.

Major urged to help Dhaka

LONDON, May 6 : Bangladeshis living in Britain today urged Prime Minister John Major, to help end the cycle of disasters in their homeland. They took a memorandum to Downing Street calling for Britain to step up immediate aid and to work for permanent flood protection for the 115 million people living in Bangladesh, reports BSS.

Y'slav army on combat alert

BELGRADE, May 6 : The Yugoslav army went on combat alert Monday after thousands of Croatian protesters attacked soldiers guarding the national naval command in the Adriatic port of Split, killing one soldier and wounding another. The federal Defence Ministry declared its soldiers would act on 'combat rules' if military personnel or installations were exposed to further assault, reports AP.

Benazir returns home

KARACHI, May 6 : Pakistan's former Prime Benazir Bhutto returned home today from a trip abroad, a day after a special court here acquitted her husband in a bank fraud case. Benazir Bhutto, who had left here late last month for private visits to Makkah, London and Sweden was warmly welcomed by workers of her Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), at the Quaid-e-Azam international airport, reports AFP.

Bush returns to White House

WASHINGTON, May 6 : President George Bush returned to the White House today saying it was great to be back after being hospitalised over the weekend for an irregular heartbeat, reports Reuter. "It's great to be back," Bush told reporters and White House staff gathered to welcome him home.

Thai General arrives tomorrow

BANGKOK, May 6 : Chairman of National Peace Council General Sunthorn Kongsompon will visit Bangladesh on Wednesday to hand over rice to people affected by last week's cyclone, army officials said Monday, reports Reuter. It will be Sunthorn's first overseas visit since the military toppled Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhavan's government in a bloodless coup in February. He is the supreme commander of the armed forces.

The officials said Sunthorn's plane would carry 20 tonnes of rice, part of the 5,000 tonnes of supplies Thailand has promised Bangladesh in the wake of the cyclone that killed 125,000 people and made 10 million homeless.

Doomsday

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bald bald spread of mud running a nightmare horizon littered with bodies and carcasses, none that your know of. Or is that child your daughter. You feel spent. Your are thirsty. And hungry. You haven't a shred of cloth on you. You slowly discover you can not walk. But move you must to look for your wife or husband and children-food water, for food, for something to cover your shame from you. You move on all fours. It could all have been a page from The Day After-Only this has, unlike the imaginary nuclear holocaust aftermath really happened and in a way far crueler than any nuclear disaster would be. And how many died in the two nuclear strikes on Hiroshima and Nagasaki? Less than the tally of the Doomsday strike on the eastern offshore islands of Bangladesh. O brother O my Sister! You survived the elements, are you surviving the shafts of human inepness and indifference. Pray keep yourself for a while longer—if you have not already given in to hunger and exposure injury and thirst. The milk of human kindness flows and feebly but it is some to reach you. It cannot give you back any of what you have lost excepting a renewal of hope in humanity.

Relief godown

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The services of the PSO to the Supreme Commander has also been placed at the disposal of the Prime Minister as far as the relief coordination work is concerned. The Relief Coordination Cell is conducting all the coordination of the relief work and from now on will organise a regular evening briefing about the daily relief and rescue operations.

Meanwhile, the Acting President while visiting the Operation Room of the Relief Coordination Cell Tuesday instructed that there should not be any gap in relief and rescue operation.

The wind wrought havoc on the dwellings, uprooted trees, electric poles. Schools, colleges, madrasahs and other public and private facilities were also razed. This correspondent during his visit to these places did not find a single semi half puca or kutcha house unaffacted. The damage in these areas was colossal. The ponds and wells of these areas which are the main sources of water for the people were completely contaminated. Fallen leaves are rotting in the ponds and wells leading to the contamination and the destruction of fish.

The people of these areas also need help from the government to mitigate their problems. The educational institutions which were damaged should be given immediate attention and reconstructed on a priority basis.

Embankment

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Patenga can now be submerged in a little above average high tide. The coastal areas of the country are generally hit by cyclones at an average of eleven times a year and the absence of the protection embankment has left the Patenga to Sitakundi belt totally susceptible to the hazards of the sea.

This correspondent also saw the naval and air bases damaged during his visit. Trees still standing somewhere in Chittagong city and its adjoining areas have become reddish due to the effects of salinity, the green completely absent.

With the embankment destroyed investors in the industrial sector have lost the eagerness to take any initiative for further investment. The EPZ, fully devastated may not attract any investor from home or abroad unless the city is protected immediately.

Chittagong Chamber sources said that the government should take up the matter on a priority basis to ensure investment in the Export Processing Zone. The hinterland of Chittagong

Relief measures

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President various measures taken by the government for reaching succour to the cyclone affected people of the coastal belt.

Threadbare discussion was also held for further accelerating the pace of relief activities in the affected areas. The senior members of the Cabinet and the Chief Whip of the Jatiya Sangsad were present.

Court of inquiry

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Commodore, an Air Commodore and a Brigadier, says a spokesman of the President's Secretariat. The court of inquiry is to find out the causes of damage to aircraft and vessels at the Chittagong Air Force and Naval bases during last week's cyclone and fix responsibility for it.

It will start inquiry today (Tuesday) and submit its report within three days.

1.5 cr affected

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returning from Bhola to Dhaka yesterday, claimed that relief was quite inadequate and that hundreds of people are starving since the last few days.

Deputy Commissioner of Bhola left for those offshore islands only yesterday accompanying district relief coordinator from the government and former ambassador to Japan Hedayetul Haque. They carried some food, old clothes, orsarine and medicines. But, because of the bad weather in the Shabbajpur channel, it is not yet known whether they could reach those places at all.

Shortage of relief materials and necessary funds for arranging temporary shelters for the cyclone victims is compounding their miseries. So far the government has sanctioned only 15 lakh Taka for the eight lakh cyclone affected people of this island

Petrol

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are allowing ten litres of petrol or octane for a motor vehicle.

A Meghna Petroleum Company source told The Daily Star damage of jetties of oil depots of all the three oil companies at Chittagong has forced the authorities to rely on tank lorries for supply of oil to Dhaka and rest of the country.

Two oil tankers each carrying 500 tonnes of oil capsized during the cyclone, the source said. The authorities could not take any step for about a week as the port city of Chittagong remained out off from the rest of the country following the cyclone.

A good number of tank lorries, out of 200 belonging to the three companies — Padma, Meghna and Jamuna — were sent to Chittagong Sunday to replenish supply.

The source said they had sufficient stock of oil and there was no cause for panic. As of May 1 there was a stock of 11 thousand tonnes of petrol, four thousand tonnes of octane, 79 tonnes of diesel, five thousand tonnes of aviation fuel and 42 thousand tonnes of kerosene.

A Formation Commanders' Conference of Bangladesh Army was held Monday at the Army HQs with Chief of Army Staff Lt. General Muhammad Noor Uddin Khan in the chair to coordinate and gear up the relief operations being carried out by Army Jawans.