

The Indian Tragedy

A tragedy has struck at India again, a tragedy whose impact on the country's national scene is certain to be greater — perhaps awesome and frightening — than that of any other crisis in the past. It will be weeks, probably months, before we have assessed the consequences of the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, with all its implications and ramifications. However, the world may never come to know the full story behind the dastardly act that has robbed India of a potential future Prime Minister. After all, as we have seen in the history of our own country again and again, dark evil forces which seek to change the political destiny of a nation — alas, often with short-term success — through assassinations operate with motives and objectives beyond the pale of civilised political conduct and sometimes alter a status quo beyond all predictable projections. Herein lies the crisis of uncertainties triggered off by the killing of Mr Gandhi. At this moment, while joining the rest of the world in mourning the death of the Congress leader, we pray and hope that the worst fears about the grim prospects facing India may prove groundless.

In immediate terms, the tragedy raises serious doubts as to how the election, now postponed for two weeks, will be completed without further violence and bloodshed and whether the electoral exercise will lead to a stable government at the centre. The first question is essentially one of law and order and the second one touches on the dilemma — it is in effect a crisis of major magnitude — facing the Congress (I), now without a leader, in the election. The power vacuum that exists within the organisation affects the entire political system in the country. It is of course possible that Congress (I), under a new leader whoever he may be, may attract substantial sympathy votes, on the ground of it being the last remaining symbol of stability in India, and be able to form the next government. But, then, anything can go wrong with this optimistic projection. Here, a grim admission made by the slain Congress leader in what has been reported as his last interview, given to the New York Times correspondent, just a few minutes before he was killed is probably a little prophetic. In this interview, he attributed the rise of a pro-Hindu party like BJP to the frustration of the Indian public with the failure of the system in fulfilling its aspirations. Hence, the danger of the Indian voter turning to BJP cannot just be underestimated. Whether the danger increases or decreases with the departure of Mr Gandhi from the scene remains a matter of speculation.

How will other political forces committed to secularism, communal harmony and political stability see the danger posed against the democratic future of India? They either adopt a divisive line and try to grab the votes which were going to Congress (I) or seek a national approach and set up a common front with Congress (I) to give the country a stable government, one that also cuts the BJP to size. After all, the differences between Mr Gandhi and V. P. Singh were largely personal, like those which have marked the relationship between Mr Singh and Chandra Sekhar. If Janata and Congress (I) can reach out to each other to set up such a national coalition, the average Indian will greet such a development with a sigh of relief, and it will be warmly welcomed throughout the region.

Thank You

Following the success of international cooperation in the Gulf, another one is in full swing in Bangladesh. This time, however, the coalition is informal, without the need for a United Nations mandate. Military and voluntary forces have come to Bangladesh from near and far, on a noble mission to help this disaster-prone country of 120 million people recover from one of the most cataclysmic misfortunes ever to befall a nation. They are discharging these responsibilities with a level of sincerity and determination that makes us wonder why such feelings for fellow human beings do not get the better of politics among nations at times other than disasters.

Helicopters of the Indian Air Force were the first to respond to our call for help, just as they did during the devastating flood of 1988. Three left Tuesday, and when the other three take off for home Friday, they will take with them the heartfelt thanks and deep gratitude of the people of Bangladesh for the people of India. Despite all the tragedy and troubles at home, this gesture of India augurs well for the future of Dhaka-New Delhi relations.

The effort now being made by United States marines and British naval men and officers in the relief operation has certainly captured the imagination of the people here. The cooperation between the two traditional Western allies has clicked smoothly into gear, just as it did during World Wars I and II, as well as during the recent conflict in the Gulf. Only this time they are carrying sacks of food and medicine rather than guns and missiles. Soldiers don't only kill, they can work just as hard to save lives. The all-out efforts of the Americans and British in Chittagong and Cox's Bazar is a tribute to what good intentions and good organisation can achieve. Sea angels providing manna may be too hyperbolic a description of the multi-national relief effort, but it certainly is in keeping with the spirit of the times.

Out of the tragedy Bangladesh finds itself fortunate to have so many friends in the world at large, a result of 20 years of efforts by leaders at various stages to project an image of a poverty-stricken country trying its best to get ahead, but being repeatedly thrown back by forces beyond its control. That image is, of course, not the whole truth, but a major part of the truth. We have to work out solutions to other problems inherent in our society in due course. But at present, our economic, infrastructural and logistical capacity do not allow us to cope with devastation wrought by nature, which is why we need and appreciate all the help we get. We hope the outstretched hand of assistance will remain until a permanent defence against natural disasters is in place, so that we are able to cope by ourselves in the not-too-distant future. The best "thank you" we can give our foreign friends is the assurance that they won't have to come again.

CURTAIN has been drawn on the most illustrious political family in India — at least for the moment.

Rajiv's death had given a severe jolt not only to the Indian political scene but to this region and to the entire world. Political observers across the world were keeping their fingers crossed about the shape of the things to come in India as the country was going through an important election. But Rajiv died even before the polls process was over. His political future, if he had not been killed, was perhaps decided in May 20 polling, first of three days, when elections would take place. Not unexpectedly, elections for next two phases have been postponed. The news of his death by a powerful bomb blast shook not only India but the entire world. Wailing people thronged street corners all over the country as streams of people were jostling in Number 10 Janpath, Rajiv's residence in New Delhi, to have a glimpse of their leader's body. The death of Rajiv Gandhi has come as a bolt from the blue even though such deaths of political figures are not uncommon. The impact of the death will be severe for world's largest democracy, whose current democratic phase for a new government would come under severe strain because of a development that would have wide ranging repercussions in political and other areas.

I had the occasion of meeting late Rajiv Gandhi several times during my posting in the Indian capital as Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha (BSS) corre-

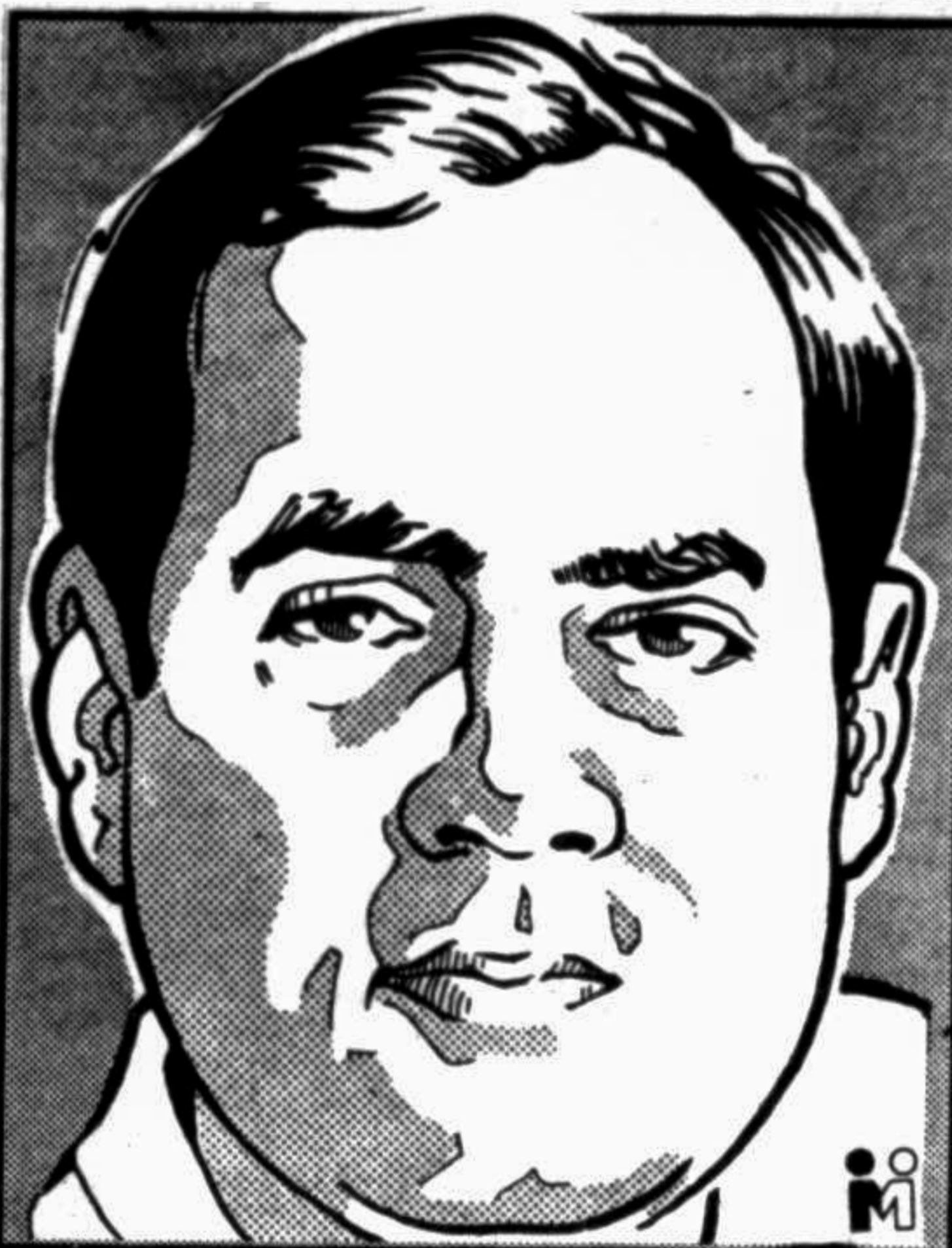
spondent. I saw him first just before the 1980 Lok Sabha elections which saw Mrs. Indira Gandhi making a triumphal return to power. As I went to Mrs. Gandhi's resi-

End of an Era

by Zaglul A. Chowdhury

handsome young man dressed in western style. I was told he was Rajiv, a pilot of Indian Airlines, who was taking time off in his personal capacity to look into the electioneering of his

Games, he was sitting next to film star Amitabh Bachchan. Rajiv would come every day to the stadium and we would talk to him on different matters of the games. Rajiv subsequently



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mother while his younger brother Sanjay was away to Uttar Pradesh campaigning for a seat from the Amethi constituency. Rajiv was bashful and reticent in talking much about politics. Later I saw him several times in different places in New Delhi but I really got to know him during the Asian Games in New Delhi in 1982. It was the time when his brother had died and a reluctant Rajiv finally agreed to join politics, won a bye-election from his brother's area and had become a member of parliament.

As a member of parliament, he was given a key responsibility to conduct the Asian Games and he would come and spend hours in the Jawaharal Nehru Stadium, the main venue of the Games. On the opening day of the

became general secretary of the Congress Party and we would meet him on occasional briefings by the party for the journalists. Since he was already in politics, it was no wonder that he would have a meteoric rise under the guidance of his mother and it came as no surprise when he was made the Prime Minister soon after his mother's assassination.

As the life of any politician is marked by ups and downs, Rajiv Gandhi was no exception and he had to weather many a storm during his Prime Ministership. On one hand, he had to provide the Congress an able leadership and on the other an efficient government in a country whose problems were also manifold, the crucial being the separatist movements. Rajiv won the Lok

Sabha polls soon after the death of his mother riding the crest of a sympathy wave but lost the 1989 elections. He began as "Mr Clean", an euphemism for his honest life but saw his image mauled by the Bofors scandals. He faced extreme rightists like the BJP on one hand and the leftists like the CPI and CPM on the other.

Centrists like the Janata Dal also gave him a tough time as it formed the government after 1989 polls with support from others.

It is not possibly an appropriate moment to assess the successes and failures of Rajiv Gandhi in political field as the people are now yet to overcome the shock of his death.

There is an avalanche of sympathy and expression of grief in many places of India. It also remains to be seen how the events in India in the post-Rajiv period unfold. But one thing is certain that the Indian political scene — without Rajiv Gandhi, last of the politician scions of the Nehru family — would not be the same and it may take a long time for India, world's second most populated nation and biggest democracy, to cope with the situation caused by the premature and cruel death of Rajiv Gandhi.

The author is a well known journalist and is the Diplomatic Correspondent of BSS. He came to know Rajiv Gandhi very well during his posting in New Delhi during 1979-84.

THE Gulf War and its aftermath offer a number of lessons. First, it showed, that, with the ending of the cold war, aggressors can no longer rely upon divisions within the international community to prevent retribution. The involvement of over 30 countries, including 13 in frontline roles, in the liberation of Kuwait showed a strong and widespread will to strengthen the international rule of law and to punish aggression.

Second, it underlined the folly of allowing a country to amass an arsenal massively larger than it could possibly need for its own defence. At the time of the invasion of Kuwait, Iraq had the fourth largest army in the world, a burgeoning stockpile of missiles and chemical and biological weapons and twice as many tanks as Britain and France together. A number of countries contributed to building the Iraqi war machine. None was prepared to recognise that they were creating a monster. We made no such mistake in Iraq and had in the recent past turned away a large order for Hawk jets. We will renew our push, especially among the five permanent members of the Security Council, for a register of arms sales. We want also to engage major suppliers in discussing restraining the supply of arms to countries whose purchases go well beyond what is needed for defensive purposes. The need for restraint is especially strong in regard to the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

Third, it showed how vulnerable the Gulf states are to aggression. In the aftermath of the rape of Kuwait, they well understand the importance of

The Middle East

Lessons to be Learnt from the Gulf War

by Douglas Hurd
Secretary of Foreign Affairs, United Kingdom
Special to the Star

strengthening arrangements for their collective defence. Fellow Arab states, like Egypt and Syria, are prepared to join with them in strengthening Gulf security. Britain is willing, if needed, to play a part in underpinning arrangements which are devised locally. But we have been consistent and explicit that this cannot involve the stationing of ground troops in the area. We do not plan a permanent military presence east of Suez.

Fourth, the plight of the Kurdish and Shia refugees from Saddam Hussein's vengeance has shown that the internal affairs of a country cannot always be divorced from their external impact — for example, when they involve the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people. We were anxious to prevent the Kurds from being driven into exile forming another large and permanent refugee problem in the Middle East. There should be no Gaza Strips on Iraq's frontiers.

We were right to resist the blandishments of those who would have US intervene militarily in the quagmire of Iraqi politics. But we have helped to push forward the boundaries of normal international practice through our promotion of

Resolution 688 at the United Nations. This established the right of the international community to make a humanitarian intervention to protect a minority from possible extermination.

A massive relief effort is now underway to help the Kurdish refugees in Turkey, in Iran and in Iraq itself. To date the great majority of our aid has gone to Turkey. Following Lynda Chalker's visit we aim to increase our effort in Iran. The Iraqis have done a fine job in coping with the flood of refugees. I welcome Iran's increasing emergence from isolation. We re-established diplomatic relations with Iran last year. Thankfully, Roger Cooper has recently been given his freedom. But our relations cannot develop fully while John McCarthy, Terry Waite and Jackie Mann remain as hostages in Lebanon. These men have lost five years of their lives while bringing no benefit to their captors. We condemn the holding of hostages by any country or group in the Middle East. We

shall continue to work hard for the release of the Britons held and look to Iran to use her influence to that end.

The relief effort for the Kurds is involving an increasing number of western countries along side Britain, America and France. We cannot be certain at this stage how long our troops will be required. But it is our intention both to promote stable conditions in Iraq in which the Kurds can return to their towns and villages and to transfer the safe havens operation as soon as possible to United Nations authority.

The fifth lesson of the Gulf War was to remind us of how fragile is peace in the Middle East. The Iraqi invasion showed that not all the travails of the region can be blamed upon the Arab/Israel dispute. Nor was there any connection between Saddam Hussein's seizure of Kuwait and the Palestinian question. However, the Arab/Israel dispute is destabilising and its settlement is central to establishing the regions security within in-

ternationally recognised borders. The past experiences of the Jewish people, the ambiguity of many Arabs about her right to exist within secure boundaries and the behaviour of the PLO leadership during the Gulf War make Israel understandably cautious. But there can be no lasting security for Israel based upon holding the occupied territories in the face of a sustained revolt by the Palestinians, the bitterness of her neighbours and the consternation of her friends.

As Saddam Hussein showed, even cynical and spurious claims to be acting on behalf of the Palestinians can strike a chord throughout the Muslim world. While there is no resolution of the Arab/Israel conflict the Palestinian issue will be misused as a rallying point for radical Arab leaders, causing periodic eruptions of violence in a strategically vital part of the world. A lasting settlement must provide for the Palestinians to exercise

their right to self-determination.

The Gulf War has left the more pragmatic elements in the Arab world in the ascendant. It has shaken up the established pattern of alliances in the region. The United States is the only outside power with the influence to bring the major parties together. Britain together with our European community partners, has given full backing to the process which Secretary Baker is seeking, with great persistence and sincerity, to get under way. The problem has proved intractable for too long. We may now see the most important opening for peace for many years. I hope that all the potential participants in the peace process will show their commitment to it by refraining from destabilising or provocative acts. I regret the recent actions of the Israeli government in pushing forward with its settlements programme when the emphasis on both sides should be on measures which build rather than destroy confidence.

The Gulf conflict has again brought the Middle East back to the centre of world attention. The agenda of issues to be addressed, and their importance for international peace and prosperity, mean that we intend to keep it there.

[By arrangement with 'The House' magazine of the British Parliament]

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.

Break this uneasy silence

Sir, Your editorial on the captioned subject (May-15, 1991) is an instance of bold journalism and indicative of your total commitment to the cause of democracy in Bangladesh.

The questions you have raised have been for some time now agitating the minds of those (irrespective of party affiliations) who have actively participated in the mass movement to overthrow the autocratic regime with the hope of establishing parliamentary democracy in the country.

We sincerely hope that the Prime Minister would take note of it, and put the agitated minds at rest with an immediate, unambiguous pronouncement on the issue of the form of government in compliance with the joint declaration of the opposition parties to which the ruling party is a signatory.

Hasan Shaheed
Dhaka.

Reckless driving

Sir, These days it is a common feature to come across a driver, of any public vehicle, say, or even three-wheeler hauler, driving extremely carelessly. Besides, the drivers of auto-

rickshaws too turn out to be careless drivers. They hardly ever care to wait for the proper traffic signal, or for that matter direction from the police.

They care little, if the passengers they are carrying may be women and children. Often they take a sudden turn, which results in the vehicle overturning. Thus, often causing a serious accident. Even though the passengers repeatedly keep reminding them that they should drive cautiously, they pay little heed to it.

Thus I often wonder, if these people, the so-called drivers, had minimum compassion for the human beings they haul from one place to another! They keep in mind that it is not any kind of cargo they are carrying, but human beings, who have but only one life to live!

S. Tofael
Kolabagan, Dhaka.

Shark meat

Sir, A news item in the print media warns that shark meat is not a healthy food to take.

The reason, they say, is that shark meat contains a high calorie of mercury, which might result in mercury poisoning, if consumed directly. Thus those who love seafood, should reduce their intake of shark meat.

However, authorities opine that they are still not sure as of the fact that mercury content is limited to certain types of sharks or specific waters. Thus they say that grown-up people should eat shark meat only once a week at best, and women of childbearing age once perhaps in a month.

This information is more for the western consumers, as in our country, this is not a very popular food. However, there might be some shark quisine lovers here too, and they may heed the warning!

T. Ahmed,
Fakrapool, Dhaka.

Cyclones and causes

Sir, Experts opine that there will be more and more of the kind of cyclone, which hit and devastated the coastal areas of Bangladesh on April 29.

Though scientists had often predicted that there would be a cyclone or a tidal surge in Bangladesh in such and such year, it often happened that their calculation was not correct by 100%.

Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the main reason cited is the global warming up and its aftermath. Although this may be one of the major causes of the natural disasters taking place in Bangladesh, but perhaps not the only one.

One of our cyclone experts' opinion is that this phenomenon is connected with the global-scale sea temperature, which in turn is linked with solar radiation. Thus according to this mathematics, cyclones may occur here every 10 years, 22 years, and 78 years.

Thus it is the growing opin-

ion in our country that since nothing is yet definitely known about the repeated occurrence of these holocausts the Bay which is often the source of disaster should be studied very carefully. This might give us the answer and perhaps help us to prepare against the oncoming tragedy.

M. Majid
Dhanmondi, Dhaka.

Medicine prices

Sir, It is a common phenomenon that the same medicine, either with different brand name or not, is sold at different prices at various pharmacies or drug stores of our country. And when we want to know from the salesmen about this peculiarity they have nothing substantial to say about it. Often when very much pressed for an answer by a customer, some would mention that different companies have different prices for the same medicine.

Well, we the ordinary consumers, who are not at all connected with this trade, find it very strange, and often a pinch for our pocket. For many a times it happens that we have to buy a medicine on an emergency, and we have to rush to the nearest clinic or pharmacy, just to pay them what they demand.

Will, those in this business be a little more kind to us and relieve us from this everyday torture of fluctuating price? The most common victims are those who have small children, and older people at their homes, and may require medicine at a moment's notice.

Aftab Ahmed
Malibagh, Dhaka.

OPINION
Calamities and NGOs

A natural calamity not only damages our economy but it pushes the development process twenty years behind.

Everytime a disaster occurs, Bangladesh sets out with its begging bowl, further in debting itself to the donors and moving away from any efforts for self-reliance. This happens because we as a nation lack commitment. Seldom do we make efforts to make use of the limited resources available within the country. For instance, if even 5% of the population (affluent) and the private companies in the country contributed materials/assistance required in a disaster-hit area then we would not have to comply to the wishes of the donors to the extent that we have to today. In addition there would be a sense of participation and commitment among the masses. Instead, we rush to the donors for more and more aid. Even NGOs which claim themselves as pioneers in the field of poverty alleviation, do not hesitate to make use of such situations. If one takes this April cyclone as a case in point one can see that within few days of the occurrence hundreds of NGOs from all corners of the country were busy writing and sending project proposals to different donors; everyone of them wants to work in the cyclone-hit areas irrespective of the fact whether it is within or not within their working area and surprisingly many of them got the money/commitment from the donors. Many NGOs were seen to be vying with each other as to who reaches an affected area first and who distributes more materials than the other.

There is hardly any NGO which has considered channeling the money/goods through

local NGOs operating in the cyclone-hit areas. As a matter of fact many of these local NGOs did not even get any assistance from the donors, whereas, donors with a little responsibility could have given priority to the NGOs in the local areas than to the ones, say, coming from Rangpur, Mymensingh, Kushtia, Manikgonj etc. who have no knowledge of the affected areas. Moreover, they should have given assistance in kind instead of cash and verified the credibility of recipient organisations before making commitments. It is worth speculating what percentage of an amount of money by most NGOs will actually be spent on the cyclone victims. A report accounting for their activity submitted to donors at the end of the "project" hardly proves anything. No matter how vehemently NGOs and donors may deny such allegations both the parties are well aware of such facts.

One wonders how many development organisations have gone forward to help the flood victims in greater Sylhet. Since donors at present are not focusing on that area most NGOs might state that Sylhet is not within their area of operation. Once again, why do we need to rely on donors for everything? We can depend on our own people; request them to come forward with their limited resources. The concept of popular participation should not remain confined to targeted project or programme of an NGO or government.

Unless we change this attitude of begging and filling our basket it will simply retrench development.

Abu M. Faiz
Dhaka.