

The Saudi Offer

Some encouraging results have emerged from the Prime Minister's first visit to Saudi Arabia. King Fahd bin Abdel Aziz has assured Khaleida Zia that his government will extend all assistance necessary to help Bangladesh build permanent installations to combat natural disasters. The kingdom has also promised to provide more employment opportunities for Bangladeshis. Coming on top of the US\$ 106 million already pledged for relief and reconstruction work in cyclone-affected areas (although it is yet to be clarified as to how or in what form that amount is to be disbursed), Fahd's assurance is a most welcome one.

The responsibility now rests with us to come up with a comprehensive plan for cyclone-preparedness and disaster management. The need to develop permanent infrastructures to provide safety to people and livestock in danger areas has been felt for several decades, but unfortunately the need has remained a need. Studies have been carried out in the past, not only into cyclone shelters, but also into flood protection, but precious little has ever come to light. The shelter-building programme initiated in 1972 was shelved for a decade between 1976 and 1985, for reasons best known to decision-makers of the time. The price of such inexcusable follies was paid by poor villagers on April 29.

Critical, therefore, is our own approach to the problems of natural disasters. At the technical level, we must draw up a thoroughly-researched plan, based on a worst-case scenario and with a view well into the next century. The plan should naturally take into account the socio-economic factors that influence the behaviour pattern of people living along the coast and on the chars.

The government, instead of implementing the plan in isolation, may well look for ways to integrate it into the overall economic development programme of the region in particular, and the country in general. Such an approach is not only feasible, but eminently desirable. The importance of the issue is such, that it should consciously be kept above petty party politics, and parliament should be actively consulted in order to create a national consensus on the designs as well as the expenditure priorities of the programme. Existence of consensus will go a long way to guarantee against the possibility, seen so often in the past, of a future government abandoning the project simply because it was initiated by the previous regime. A national approach would also enhance the programme's credibility with foreign financiers.

The Saudi offer is merely the beginning, and hopefully, other countries will come forward with pledges. The Saudi offer can prove to be the boost we need to get the process of evaluation and planning underway without delay, using indigenous expertise as much as possible in order to keep costs down as well as to make the end product conform to the particular needs of Bangladesh's socio-economic and geographical realities. With the plan in place, Saudi Arabia and others will have a clear idea of what the requirements are.

Burying the City with Water

The April 29 elemental strike on the south-eastern coastal region was called by some an act of God. The meaning was well-taken to say that it was so only as far as this was not in this nation's technological and organisational process to either wholly prevent or even partially lessen the losses that are inflicted by such visitations. We need to ascribe things to the Almighty only as long as we have not got it in our power to control and manipulate those by out limited but immense capability that has been His endowment to us.

What shall we call this silly thing — this Dhaka becoming overnight a sheet of water with so many vertical things jutting out and a myriad of small things ceaselessly wading throughout the endless expanse? No one is going to call it an act of God for no one believes that this is, even at our present technological level, unpreventable. This should have rather been as preventable or remediable as any breakdown in the gas, power and water distribution systems toppling down with the first swat of a gale force wind. But that has not been the case for so long and things are all the time getting worse and going out of control. The fact of less than two centimeters of rain swamping about half the city and making a lake of it only speaks of unforgivable callousness on the part of those in charge of not only the city's drainage system but of overall physical planning aspects of it.

Yesterday's inundation of city roads and areas presage a very bad, disgustingly bad rainy season for this metropolis. The problem will grow in size and intensity and newer areas would go under water — older ones under deeper water — if a move is not made immediately to stem all that. Not that anything can save us the trouble that's sure to visit us for the next three months — but serious attempts launched not later than now can lessen the problem from the next monsoons.

Where are the roots of this problem and what measures can hopefully remedy them? All this is very patently old hat — miles and miles of columns have been penned and tons after tons of newsprint inked to print out those causes of water-logging which must have been known all the more precisely to the people in charge. All that old talk of filling up all the waterways and outlets and water reservoirs of city — how many times this curse needs must be retold and reminded?

The tragedy — shall we call it a tragedy and not a Sisyphean curse — is that the suicidal job of burying all the watery holes and lanes continues unabated — or perhaps with a spurt — goaded by a society gone mad over a new-fledging interest in real estate. It is not very far that these filled places will have to be dug over again to make the city liveable which it is famously not at the present moment.

I felt sad reading the recent Time essay by James Walsh entitled, "Stumbling in Chaos". It suggested that given the Malthusian calculus of exploding population and a ruthless nature, Bangladeshis are doomed to die "Can nature be tamed?" he asked. He came out with an easy and obvious answer. "Not really. But the Bangladeshis of the world can benefit from people who are prepared to deal with nature on its own, exigent terms." If cyclones and tidal bores with demonic fury rise from the Bay to devastate our coastal lands, we can do pitifully little except to pray for the dead and deal with the calamity only on an emergency basis. Bangladesh's best option is to pray and adopt a fire fighting strategy. deal with the emergencies as they come, as best as we can. That after all is our fate!

Many people at this time even inside Bangladesh, would agree with James Walsh. There is an overwhelming sense of helplessness and frustration that one sees particularly amongst the middle class intellectuals, senior bureaucrats, the business community and even the politicians. Most of them still remember the traumatic experience of the 1970 cyclone and the storm surge, which had killed half a million people. Carcasses of animals along with bloated bodies of men, women and children crowded the shores of the Bay of Bengal then, as they did this time in the wake of the storm on the night of 29th April. Then came the floods of the 1980s — the most devastating one of the century, which did an irreparable damage to our already weak infrastructure. The roads, bridges, schools destroyed in 1988, have not yet been fully reconstructed. But the biggest damage so far has been in terms of our national psyche, the broken spirit and a deepening sense of frustration, particularly amongst the urban middle class, the government planners and of course, the James Walshes of the international community.

Relief operations have begun: as always the government

machinery muddling its way through, has slowly moved into some sort of coherent action. Partly, this has been forced by the international donors and pressures of large bilateral aid giving agencies. Probably, the most remarkable response has come not from the big donors like the World Bank, but small voluntary bodies from all over Bangladesh. On report said that the national highway upto Cox's Bazar was literally jammed with all sorts of vehicles carrying relief goods. It was demonstrated once again that the people of this country in spite of dearth of resources, have tremendous national feeling, very strong desire to help

their compatriots in distress, as well as an uncanny ability to mobilise scarce resources. There is still another redeeming feature in the psychology of the people in acute distress. They seem to have a resilience of their own. After the initial trauma, they have managed to muster enough courage and survival skills, in an effort to restore a semblance of normalcy in their lives. Bit by bit, they try to collect whatever is left of their assets and maximise their productive use.

The big question at this moment of national crisis is, can our leadership convert the enterprise of the people and the national sentiments into a meaningful reconstruction programme? Do we have the vision and courage to look beyond a very traditional type of rehabilitation programme? A major part of such a programme will inevitably involve reconstruction and repair of housing. It is obvious that the housing reconstruction programme as well as the cyclone

Towards a Delta Development Plan for Bangladesh

by Ahmed Zaker

shelter strategy adopted after the 1970 cyclone have been inadequate and also ineffective. We need to rethink our strategy and take bold new initiatives. This will be a crucial test for the newly elected political leadership. It needs now to restore people's confidence, give them the vision of a more secure future and assist them in mobilising their resources, the most precious of which is their own enterprise.

Let us draw up plans for a massive delta reconstruction programme to be implemented in phases. It will aim at not only immediate rehabili-

ties of Chittagong, Noakhali, Barisal, Patuakhali and Khulna. Mere repair of thatched houses or construction of cyclone shelters every ten square miles, cannot save the lives of our people. But, pucca dwelling houses can even if 50 to 60 per cent of the people in these areas live below poverty line, a substantial number can still build pucca houses, at reasonable costs. Evidence from places like the ill fated Urrir Char, clearly shows that only dwelling units which have survived the storm surge, were the brick built houses erected after 1985. Subsidised house

and income for the extremely poor and landless people who are in distress.

The second component of the proposed delta development plan will be more long term and far more ambitious than any other project in Bangladesh. It will involve, as was done in the Netherlands, reclamation of land from the Bay, construction of dykes, embankments, drainage systems, regulators and sluice gates across the sea, connecting many off shore islands. It has been said that "the problem of water above and water below the level of human habitation is a real and serious one. It will continue to test the

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the courage of the people said to live in a country so low, they have to be dammed to be saved". Like the Dutch, the people of Bangladesh since time immemorial has battled the sea. The country itself has gradually been formed out of alluvial deposits in the delta, a process that has taken thousands of years. The process in still continuing, aided by natural forces. Can this process be accelerated through human effort and ingenuity?

The Dutch experience

The Dutch have demonstrated that this can be done, given the political will and resources. Therefore the saying, "God made the world, but the Dutch made Holland." As much as forty thousand square kilometers have been reclaimed from the North Sea — a result of diligent efforts, application of modern technology and billions of dollars in investments spread over almost three decades. The Dutch project

building loans should be offered to the people of the locality. Government should quickly firm up the financial arrangements through the commercial banks and provide necessary incentives to people to construct brick built houses at a subsidized cost. President Premadasa drew up a bold programme to build a million pucca houses in the villages of Sri Lanka. Given the likely death toll from cyclonic storms in the coastal belt, can the political leaders of Bangladesh, offer to do anything less? In addition government should undertake a programme for construction of pucca primary schools-cum-multipurpose community centers, which was recently suggested by Abdur Rab Chaudhury MP. These pucca houses alone, when built in thousands, can effectively provide protection to the rich and the poor alike living in the villages of coastal districts. A massive civil construction programme can also generate employment

There will be two major components of the massive delta reconstruction programme. The first, which should begin immediately, would aim at large scale construction of pucca or brick built houses in the off shore islands and the coastal dis-

tribution of the infrastructure and productive facilities which have been lost in the recent storm, but at accelerated development of the entire Bay of Bengal estuary and the coastal belt. It will among other things involve reconstruction of a much stronger coastal embankment, construction of a deep sea port, building of new export processing zones on higher grounds, large scale afforestation of the inshore areas, development of private fisheries, building of new roads and even an ambitious programme for development of tourism. Government resources will be scarce, hence all out efforts have to be made to mobilise foreign private investments.

Benin, Cape Verde and Sao Tome have installed truly pluralist regimes.

Other Africa watchers here are pessimistic. With an average annual population growth rate above three percent and a falling gross national product per capita, Africa has no possibility of emerging from underdevelopment, with or without democracy.

New African democracies are soliciting support from Western countries, particularly their former colonial ruler, France for help in recovering from the poverty trap.

But Smith wonders whether Paris can take on the added cost of the supporting democracy. He examines the case of the Ivory Coast, a country to which France granted more than US\$400 million in 1989, US\$800 million the following year, and which this year will get at least US\$1.6 billion.

The aid given so far by the Western countries to Africa has served to perpetuate the backwardness of the continent, because on the one hand it has benefitted local despots, and on the other, has served merely to subsidise the exports of Western industry," says Adda. —IPS

West Africa

Is Democracy a Mirage?

Daniel Gatti writes from Paris

A democracy wave is sweeping several French-speaking West African nations, but can it bring development?

French-speaking Africa, Smith adds. French foreign minister Roland Dumas finally declared that France would support "the wind of liberty which is shaking Africa".

"In Benin, Gabon, Togo and even Zaire, and perhaps now in Mali, there are positive events taking place which demonstrate that on the African continent there is a new awareness of the fact that only democracy can assure development," Dumas added.

But noted Third World agronomist and leader of France's Green Party, Rene Dumont, believes that the cor-

relation between democracy and development is not that clear-cut.

"The multi-party system is not a panacea," Dumont noted. "In Africa there must be a multiplicity of institutions, of counter-powers to balance each other off, to assure respect for human rights, particularly the rights of women."

He says the main thing is to permit Africa to fine its own way toward development, and

the West must stop supporting local governments which oppress their own people, like Houphouet Boigny in the Ivory Coast.

"The economic system which predominates in the world, and for which the west is primarily responsible, is the reason for the spread of misery in Africa," he said.

With the war in the Persian Gulf over, there is talk of a 'new world order', but other French experts say that in Africa this simply means a prolongation of the old order, namely, unequal terms of trade and foreign debt.

"If the West has obvious responsibilities in the under-de-

velopment of Africa, it also must be pointed out that the governing elites on the continent must bear their share of the responsibility," says Africa expert Jacques Adda.

Others point out that the army continues to be the only solid national institution in most African countries.

"The fall or the perpetuation of African dictatorships, especially in francophone Africa, depends on the attitude of the army, because in these countries there does not really exist a truly constituted civil society," says Smith.

Mali is a typical example. Moussa Traore was overthrown by an army which a few days before was severely repressing the people in the name of whom it now says it is acting.

One year into the "democracy wave" which is said to be sweeping the whole of Africa, only small states like

WILL the trend towards democracy taking place in various countries of francophone Africa finally bring development to its impoverished nations? French politicians and researchers have their doubts.

A combination of colonial inheritance, under-development, population explosion and shoddy economic management all serve to brake democratic aspirations and cancel out the promise of economic development, they say.

But the coup d'etat against the dictatorship of Moussa Traore in Mali was a positive event, according to political analyst Stephen Smith who says it was the first military overthrow carried out in francophone Africa with the declared objective of setting up a pluralist political system.

"The installation of democratic regimes is the only way toward development for

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.

The uneasy silence

Sir, The uneasy silence on the part of BNP on the constitutional issue is causing more harm than good to the party and to the country as well. The outcome of BNPPP meet the other day was disappointing to many. It was no good nor it went to their credit announcing three divergent opinions in the party which is not uncommon in a party. What the country wants to know is a clear cut, definite view of BNP on the issue. If BNP favours a particular type or a mixture as a solution, let it come out openly and take the challenge. If some of the honourable members of the party consider the present parliament as "sovereign" as reported in the press, then what was the need for imposing such a high cost election in the country? The uncertainty and tension about country's future still persists and did not end with the fall of autocracy.

The country has the right to know what the government believes in, what are its plans and programmes and how the government wants to proceed with its pronounced welfare policies. Being a people's government the ruling party must take people into confidence. The people would like to know government views on some immediate issues like when will it be in a position to make a positive announcement on constitutional issues, take appropriate measures to cut down or minimise bureaucratic control on country's affairs, save the people from the unscrupulous traders, restore

discipline in offices, financial institutions as well as discipline on roads etc. etc. The present state of affairs do not suggest something to look forward to. The sooner BNP can think and decide on these and other welfare related issues, the better for all. Government's preoccupation with disaster relief management must not allow the present situation to drift beyond a point of no return.

BNP as the ruling party will now have to assume greater responsibilities, and think of broader approach to problems keeping nation's interest and welfare supreme in mind, even if it entailed some changes and sacrifices in its party programme and manifesto. This will enhance the image of BNP as a party capable of taking challenges and meeting the hopes and aspirations of people. How democracy can be given a firm footing in a poor country like Bangladesh, let our learned parliamentarians decide, and decide soon.

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Mogh Bazar, Dhaka.

Cyclone relief

Sir, This unfortunate country of ours, has faced a number of disasters in the last few years. It seems now that natural calamity has very much become a part of our life.

It is, however, a healthy sign, that as soon as we are hit by any such tragedy, global response to it is very large and extensive. A number of countries, all over the world im-

mediately extend their helping hand to us, in whatever form they can.

We often notice that the bulks of relief materials which come have such items as blankets, or baby food. Now this is totally useless in certain cases. For, e.g. what will the affected people do with blankets in hot summer? Often we see these blankets and baby foods (as in cases eyewitnesses identify) being sold in city markets.

So my suggestion would be to store the unused non-perishable items, and use them when need be. For this we may require to have a separate ministry to deal with, and keep an account of and, most of all, to be responsible for. So that when we need it next time, not only we have them but reach them to the victims at the earliest.

T. Ahmed  
Barani, Dhaka.

Pity and sympathy

Sir, I was walking by a side street in Paris where people buy fish, vegetable and other daily necessities in an open market. While passing a vendor who was selling cheap imitations asked me whether I was an Indian. I replied "No, I am a Bangladeshi". The man (who was a citizen of Senegal) reaction was remarkable. "O La La! What a pity! What an unlucky nation you are!" His attitude towards me and my country was uncalled for and I was not prepared to take pity out of all other attitudes towards us, from anybody, and certainly not from a man from Senegal or even from a highly placed citizen of any rich country.

When would we be able to differentiate the meaning of the word pity and sympathy?

Munira Khan  
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OPINION

Chittagong Airport—Points to Ponder

Bangladesh is prone to regular disasters with cyclones and tidal surges occurring almost every alternate year. The Patenga airport (now under plans for conversion into an international standard one), and all air-service facilities are surrounded in a crescent form by the Bay of Bengal and invariably fall victim to great natural disasters specially cyclones and tidal surges. Any slight rising of sea-level above normal (when the fear vis-a-vis the Green House warming is there!) the fate of present Patenga air-strip can well be imagined as doomed. Besides this global warning effect, our immediate past experiences of cyclonic and tidal ravages in 1960, 1970, 1988-89, and the worst of the century on 29th April should now alert our national planners. It will be sheer wasting away of huge funds and energy for the poor nation to further invest in a project too close to Bay of Bengal.

During October, 1970 Air-Vice Marshall M.A. Kader, the then Joint Secretary of Defence, Pakistan, as well as head of my Department of Tourism, came to Dhaka and took me on a flight to guide him to the exact sea beach at Unoni on the Cox's Bazar-Teknaf shore. He told that he used to land his 2nd World War (1939-45) airforce plane there as a hide-out from the Japanese bombers and for night sorties to Burma then under occupation of the Japanese.

Our plane was circling over north-south hilly ranges which run parallel to Chittagong-

Dhaka highway and north of Chittagong town. When the plane took some low dives on the hinter-land of these hilly ranges in the east, and almost between present day Cantonment in Nutun Para and Chittagong University and a little further north to Bhatiani, I could not help but ask him why he was scaring me with so low flights and circling around deep forested hills. AVM Kader then laughed and told me that the government had a plan under preparation for the future civil airport and air-strip of Chittagong there and abandon the cyclone and tidal surge prone low area of Patenga to save millions of rupees facilities from the frequent ravages.

His conception was that the eastern hinter-land slopes and hills would be bulldozed to an average level of about 30 ft height from the general ground level and the landing strip would be built while taxi-way both on south and north would be sloped to ground level to the airport terminal buildings and all other civil aviation facilities would be on the ground level.

In order to meet the longer international aircraft flights in future there would be two inlet roads (four-lane) from the Bayazid Bostan-Rangamati road and two out-let roads (also four-lane) out across the hills to join the Dhaka-Chittagong highway. The benefit of this scheme, he said, would be as follows:—

- (a) A permanent safety from cyclonic havoos and natural calamities.
- (b) No recurrence of million-dollar foreign-tied loans

for maintenance and reconstruction of air-strip and airport facilities.

(c) Fully safe from explosions and fire hazards if spreading out from nearby oil refinery and reservoir tanks, and partially safe from enemy action.

(d) More easily accessible, with less obstruction to fast traffic, than that with the present narrow Patenga Road.

(e) The initial cost of building a safe air-strip with all the civil aviation facilities of an international standard airport, will far out-weigh the frequent million-dollar losses in ravages by nature.

Recently I had just thought of talking out this memorable experience. Why we cannot think of going for this idea and carry out a survey and get a feasibility report from the international experts and donor countries like USA, Japan etc. and international financing agencies, now when our pangs and pains are most loud?

I hope this may be of some food for thoughts to our national leaders and prompt them even to get in touch with Pakistan Government to search out the blueprint from their national archives, if felt necessary, and help us with the same. I hope after the current good-will visit by the Prime Minister of Pakistan it won't be hard to know if M.A. Kader is still alive to render his valuable idea and plan to us.

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