

Media Management During Disaster

by Tawfiq Aziz Khan

"A NY occurrence that causes damage, economic disruption, loss of human life and deterioration in health and the health services on a scale sufficient to warrant an extraordinary response from outside the affected community or area."

as regular annual events. The one that hit the country as recently as in 1988 was the worst in living memory claiming huge loss of life and property. Bangladesh also suffers from storm surges from the Bay of Bengal, crashing everything in sight up to 160 kilometres upriver.

The killer cyclone of 1970 took countless lives, drowned millions of livestock, damaged 85 per cent of housing and destroyed most of the fishing fleet, only to be outclassed by the cyclone and tidal surge in April this year which claimed even more loss of life and property. The overall amount of economic damage and loss of human life seems to be directly linked to the level of a country's development.

The less developed countries appear to be disproportionately hit by natural disasters, and it is the have-nots of this world who suffer the most.

The only natural phenomenon to match floods and tropical storms in terms of death tolls and physical damage are earthquakes which — one would say with a sigh or relief — are yet to hit Bangladesh in a big way, although, according to experts, it lies within the earthquake belt of this region.

How can countries and communities respond to these potential threats? Or how to cope with the aftermath of a disaster? One approach is to simply do nothing, surrendering to the fact that disasters are acts of God. Inaction may also be a political choice as governments decide to invest their resources in today's real problems instead of in tomorrow's possible calamities.

Prevention measures are designed to lessen the physical impact of disasters, and consequently, reduce the loss of life. Preparedness, on the other hand, while accepting the inevitability of disasters, focuses on how to lessen their effect on the population. Effective health preparedness measures enable communities and health institutions to provide a quick, organised response to disasters.

As communication mediums radio, television, newspapers and periodicals can best serve the people, the distressed ones as well as the rescue operators, by collecting and disseminating all relevant information before, during and after disaster. Rescue, relief and health operations can be adequately planned and conducted on the basis of correct information provided timely by the media. Disaster management is the most important thing which, duly ensured and executed, can substantially reduce human distress and contain the extent of physical damage.

The importance of the media role notwithstanding, the media itself has its snags and shortcomings in the event of a devastating flood or a cyclone that invariably disrupts air, land or water communication making it nearly impossible to gather correct information or ensure visual coverage of the happenings, especially at the initial stage. In comes the dependence on guess work and on official estimation of damage which, ironically, is almost never correct.

The April cyclone of this

year left the satellite station at Chittagong unworkable as a result of which telelink with the rest of the world remained snapped for days together. Chittagong itself was left in limbo barring the road communication — the only link between Dhaka-Chittagong in the aftermath of the cyclone.

It is only recently that our media has started to pay any attention to the environmental issues. Environmental change does not usually stand out from other developments at the

early stages to attract sufficient attention. Then again, environment is abstract and difficult to comprehend. It is also difficult to tell in the form of a news story, especially when space is limited and the reporter has insufficient knowledge concerning the subject. Above all, the cause and effect in environment is generally not clearly perceptible. Usually there is a considerable lag of time between action and results, between the start and the impact. Moreover, the im-

perceptible impact may occur elsewhere, and very often is not felt by the perpetrator. Those who cut the trees in the mountain cannot see what damage they bring to the environment. It is the people downstream who will face erosion and floods and that too, after a considerable lapse of time. In order to make people understand the real issues, the important things are facts and knowledge which can raise understanding of the process and motivate people to participate in envi-

ronmental actions and, in the event of a catastrophic flood or cyclone, in coping with the situation.

Gradual changes in the quality of soil or river water could be told in terms of changes in the population of species, emission standards, and various implications of direct relevance to different audiences. The problem then, is for media people to have the keen environmental eye needed to detect the implications in terms of news construction, i.e. the angle, news pegs etc. But this means that the media people must be knowledgeable about environmental issues in order to provide coverage which, unfortunately, is not the case with our media.

In fact here in Bangladesh the media practically start functioning after the occurrence of a cyclone or a flood. As a result it becomes very difficult to present a comprehensive or a composite picture of the devastation. Generally the media has to depend on its own logistics, radio and television coverage and special arrangements of its own.

The first news that starts arriving may be delayed by hours and in some cases by days because of lack of communication facilities. Road, river and wireless connections may be seriously disrupted as a result of the onslaught. These may take time to restore to a working condition. In many cases the newspapers have to depend on passengers and transport drivers who could manage to make their journey to Dhaka. After the catastrophe many newspapers make their own arrangements to send reporters and photographers to the affected areas once the roads and riverways are clear. Occasionally, a photographer or a reporter may get a chance

to board a Govt. helicopter to make a tour of the affected areas and take pictures and gather news from the survivors. In many cases the stories given by the survivors are hyperbolic and incongruous. The reporter has to reconfirm his story by interviewing local authority and public figures or elected representatives. But the photographs normally do not lie.

Local correspondents of newspapers have a vital role to play on such occasions because they are for all practical purposes the contact people for the newspapers. In our country it is a normal practice for all governments to try to play down the damages in terms of human lives and property because somehow or other they think that they were responsible for the calamity which is bunkum. Therefore, there is always a gap between the figures printed in newspapers and government controlled radio and television. During such emergencies the media normally marshalls all its logistics to gather and cater news for the people. But it is not always possible to do justice to all people and all areas at the same time.

There may be thousand and one problem for the affected people. Each one of them has a different story to tell of their woes and anxieties. Each one of them would like his misfortune to be vindicated and redressed. It is here that the media has a responsibility to perform most judiciously apart from bringing to fore the overall picture of the disaster.

Besides pointing out the sufferings of the affected people the media have a definite role to play in helping the authority find out the most affected areas and people and in matters of distribution of relief materials. On top of it the media must create an atmosphere by which human sympathy is aroused throughout the world so that the international community takes timely and adequate steps to redress the sufferings of the affected people.



CRY FOR HELP: An elderly survivor of the April cyclone that razed everything down to the ground in her area come forward for help when relief people start to arrive.

Star Photo by Mohsin

Crusader Fights on in the Name of Peace

HILDA Lini, the first woman member of parliament in the South Pacific island nation of Vanuatu, has been a political activist since she began working for the fledgling Vanua'aku Party (VP) as a high school teacher two decades ago.

She has established a reputation as an outspoken parliamentarian, journalist and crusader for peace, despite facing discrimination both as a woman and as the sister of the Prime Minister. Her brother is Father Walter Lini, who led the youngest Pacific nation into independence in 1980 but is now fighting for his own political survival.

In the 1979 elections before independence the discrimination pressured her into abandoning her candidacy for parliament.

"Similar reasons have kept me out of government posts," she says. "It is a problem faced by women throughout the world. In powerful places, they always want to give it to the men."

"I felt in the 1979 elections we did not have enough qualified people to stand. It was a case of discrimination and excuses not to have a woman. Even today discrimination continues — not just with me, but also other women."

After becoming well known throughout the Pacific, she returned to the Vanuatu capital Port Vila to contest the 1987 general election, and topped the poll ahead of three other male candidates elected in the

capital. Her popularity and rapport with ordinary people is expected to keep her a seat in the elections due in November.

She could be one of the few Vanua'aku Pati members who survive the political upheaval presently troubling Vanuatu.

During the past two years there has been a mounting mood for change within the Vanua'aku Pati, with growing concern over Walter Lini's increasingly autocratic, arbitrary and isolated leadership. He had been condemned for being heavily "influenced" by wealthy Vietnamese businessman Dihn Van Tan and an American millionaire, Jack Scantlin.

Finally, after widespread sackings of ministers and officials in recent months, Lini went too far in firing Foreign Minister Donald Kalpokas, one of the founders of the VP, and three other ministers. The party voted at a special congress August 7 to dump Lini and replace him with Kalpokas as party president.

Traditionally, the party leader automatically becomes prime minister. Although Lini is fighting through the courts to remain in office, it is unlikely that he will be able to fend off his demise for long.

However, Hilda Lini does not believe that the leader change will compromise the country's anti-nuclear policy and support for Pacific independence movements, such as the Kanaks, East Timorese and West Papuans. Vanuatu banned two US warships and declared

itself nuclear-free in 1982, two years before New Zealand's Labour government introduced such policy.

"Vanuatu has always stood firm on the issue of colonialism and nuclear-free," she says. "They go together, and Vanuatu has not changed its position. But sometimes there are misunderstandings from outside our country."

"The party which supports that stand is in power in Vanuatu. But when our government has relations with the colonial countries (such as France) some people think wrongly that this might jeopardise our stand."

Hilda comes from a gifted Pentecost Island family of 10 children, several of whom have also had important roles in Vanuatu. Her sister Heather became the first ni-Vanuatu lawyer, and another sister, Jeanette, is secretary in the Home Affairs Ministry.

Walter became an Anglican priest after religious studies at St John's Theological College in Auckland, New Zealand, in the late Sixties. When he founded the New Hebridean Cultural Association (as the Vanua'aku Pati was then called) along with Kalpokas and Peter Taurakoto in 1971, Hilda Lini was among the first supporters.

"I used to help out Walter putting the pages together for the party newspaper," she recalls. "It was my earliest awakening in politics. I was just 17 then."

After succeeding Walter Lini

as editor of the party newspaper, Vanua'aku Viewpoints, in 1982, Hilda established the South Pacific Commission's Women's Bureau in Noumea, New Caledonia.

"When I got to Noumea I found the French were not very happy about my recruitment," she says. "I had been active in the independence movement against the French in Vanuatu. I had supported the Kanaks and I was against nuclear testing."

"On my arrival, the local French newspaper ran a story describing me with hostility. It said that I was like a worm and if I got into the South Pacific commission apple it would go rotten. The paper made me more important than I really was."

Hilda stayed in Noumea for four years and established a high profile Women's Bureau. The turning point came in 1986 when she found herself in the middle of a controversy at the United Nations Decade for Women NGO Forum in Nairobi, Kenya.

The following year Hilda returned to Port Vila and was elected to Parliament. She also became editor of a news magazine, Pacific Island Profile.

She is married to Jean-Marie Vaagahu, a Wallis Islander, and the names of their two children truly reflect Hilda's beliefs. Five-year-old Eloi was named after Kanak leader Eloi Machoro (shot by French police in 1985) and his second name, Ure-Tamata, means Peace in the World. Their three-year-old child is Waga-Tamata, which means Transporter of Peace.

Last November, Hilda led Vanuatu's delegation to the 6th Nuclear-Free and Independent Pacific conference in New Zealand. She offered Vanuatu as host country for the NFIP movement's secretariat, currently in Auckland.

Hilda laments the lack of knowledge among ni-Vanuatu about her country's struggle against colonialism. Vanuatu gained its independence in 1980 from the joint British and French colonial rule — known as the condominium, but often described as "pandemonium."

"People don't know what we fought for," she said. "We need writers to record our struggle so our people know their history. It needs to be documented while we still have leaders alive who took part in the struggle."

Perhaps that might be her next challenge. — GEMINI NEWS

Natural Calamities and Their Remedies-II

Maj. Gen. Mohammad Wajhiullah (Retd.)

ABOUT 70% of people have no land of their own and are living on the plots owned by the rich, either simply on humanitarian ground or for looking after the land or cultivating the lands owned by the same land-lords. Why and for what gain these people will plant trees? So, in order to make afforestation and plantation of trees a success, the rich people should come forward and encourage the landless by giving them shares, for the sake of their own as well as national interests. Besides, they may be encouraged to cultivate trees in the government plots on share or lease basis. If this greater part of population does not participate in these programmes, or in any other economic activities for that matter, no initiative of the government will be successful.

One important point. It will be wise to conduct these programmes, from the family to the national level, in a well thought-out way. To discourage felling of trees for fuel, people should be pursued to use improved woven and biogas plant. They must be urged to grow a habit of eating rice from non-boiled, rather than boiled, paddy. This will require less fuel. It should be noted here that both kind of rice possess same food value.

Arranging for Drinking Water

Paucity of drinking water becomes acute in cyclone-affected areas. Want of pure drinking water compels people to take dirty water. Consequently, water-borne diseases break out in epidemic form and take a heavy toll of lives, out-numbering those who are killed in the incidence of cyclone. To overcome the situation, following measures can be adopted:

a) In proportionate with the population of the coastal areas and island, hand tubewells for drinking water and deep and shallow tubewells for irrigation should be installed. Before the incidence of cyclone, the pump sets of the tubewells should be taken off and kept in the underground cellar. Open mouths of the pipes should then be tied firmly with polythene papers and be covered with 2 to 3 feet thick earth. After the calamity is over, the pump sets should be set again. Few strokes will pump out the saline water that somehow might have oozed in, and then fresh water will come out. The same can be done on the shallow and deep tubewells too.

b) Crisis of water can also be done away with by collecting pure rainy water. After the first shower, the rainy water can be collected as distilled water through the bark of banana trees, 'toas', curved up tins or by installing a four-cornered piece of cloth with a bowl underneath it. There are some other methods, too.

c) Pond water can be purified through distillation process. If necessary coal is not available, sandy soil can be used instead. Moreover, there are water-purifying tablets. Alum is also a useful disinfectant.

Canal Digging

Canal digging should be conducted according to the local plan in commensurate with the national one. The objectives here should be to control, conserve and extract water and ensure its flow, when, where are in whatever measure necessary, to facilitate cultivation and traffic of boats round the year. In doing so, only extra water of the locality should be allowed to let out and pass into the adjacent water bodies for its planned use in cultivation and navigation of vessels. Existing canals and rivers should be re-excavated and their routes straightened. At present, embankments are erected by excavating unscrupulously, somewhere at either side and somewhere on both the sides, since the objective here is erecting embankments, not digging canals. However, in both the cases the objective appears to be somewhat other than what it should be. But if things are done in a planned way, roads, embankments, reclamation and development of lands, protection centres etc. can be made while digging canals. Moreover, afforestation and fish cultivation may also be done on either side of the roads and embankment. Thus two purposes can be served at one go. (There may be exceptions, but exception is exception always).

While developing road communication with the embankments, canals should be dug according to well thought-out plan so that irrigation for farming is ensured. In the coastal districts, flood damages growing crops while lowering feature of agricultural lands hinders the cultivation of HYVs, stretches of land remain fallow while in some neighbouring areas farming undergoes setbacks due to shortage of water. For example, most of the areas in Rangajon, Chatkhil, Begumgonj and Senbagh experience flood in the rainy season, lands re-

main fallow, low-variety crops are cultivated, while in dry season, shortage of water is a common feature. On the other hand, is Sadar upazila, Comapanygonj, Sonagazi, Lux-mipur and char lands improved farming in dry season is a far cry due to want of water, while in wet season, agriculture is completely dependent on rainy water and vulnerable to the whims of nature. But should there have been a systematic water management, Bangladesh would have become a blessing, not a curse, of nature.

Erection of Embankment

To resist tidal bore in the coastal areas and islands, it is necessary to erect embankments with a minimum height of 30' feet. These embankments should be judiciously designed and strongly built so that water could not enter inside during the incidence of cyclone and tidal bore, the people in their homes remain safe with their crops, cattle and poultry. If necessary, the people living near the embankments may also take shelter on the embankments with their belongings during the disaster. There should be provision of transportation on the embankments. At places adjoining the embankments, there should be bazaars, madrasahs, schools, colleges, helipads, mosques, temples, resthouses, improved variety cattle and poultry farms, cottage industries, fish and mild processing enterprises, fodder industries etc.

This education, business and industrial centres can be built at the inner side of the embankments, i.e., on the slopes, on an elevated earth foundation. The height of these houses/buildings should be equal to the level of embankments or 5' feet at the most. These structures can be used as shelter or protection centres, if need there be. To make the soil compact and strong, it is necessary to grow grass and trees whose roots can hold the earth together, both at the middle and deep layers of the embankments. After these trees are cut, new sprouts will grow from their roots.

This is a difficult job, more laborious than planting the traditional babla trees. But wisdom and sweat will save lives. Plantation in this manner is applicable to any embankments, roads in islands and coastal areas, cyclone protection centres, etc. Outer side of the embankment should be prohibited for human settlements and, instead, afforestation should be done there.

Construction of Roads

It is necessary to improve road communication network in the islands and coastal areas to facilitate vehicular traffic, easy access to affected areas and conduction of speedy relief and rehabilitation works. The Upazila headquarters should be linked with all its unions and ferryghats. Communication between Bhola and Laxmipur must be improved. A railroad from Sonapur (Noakhali) to Char Jabbar Ferryghat can serve the vast coastal areas of Grater Noakhali and the Southern part of Bhola, invigorating the economic activities of the region. If this railroad is constructed along the present embankment, the cost will be minimum. And for the sake of all-round development of the chars, islands and coastal areas, developments boards should be established as is the case with the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

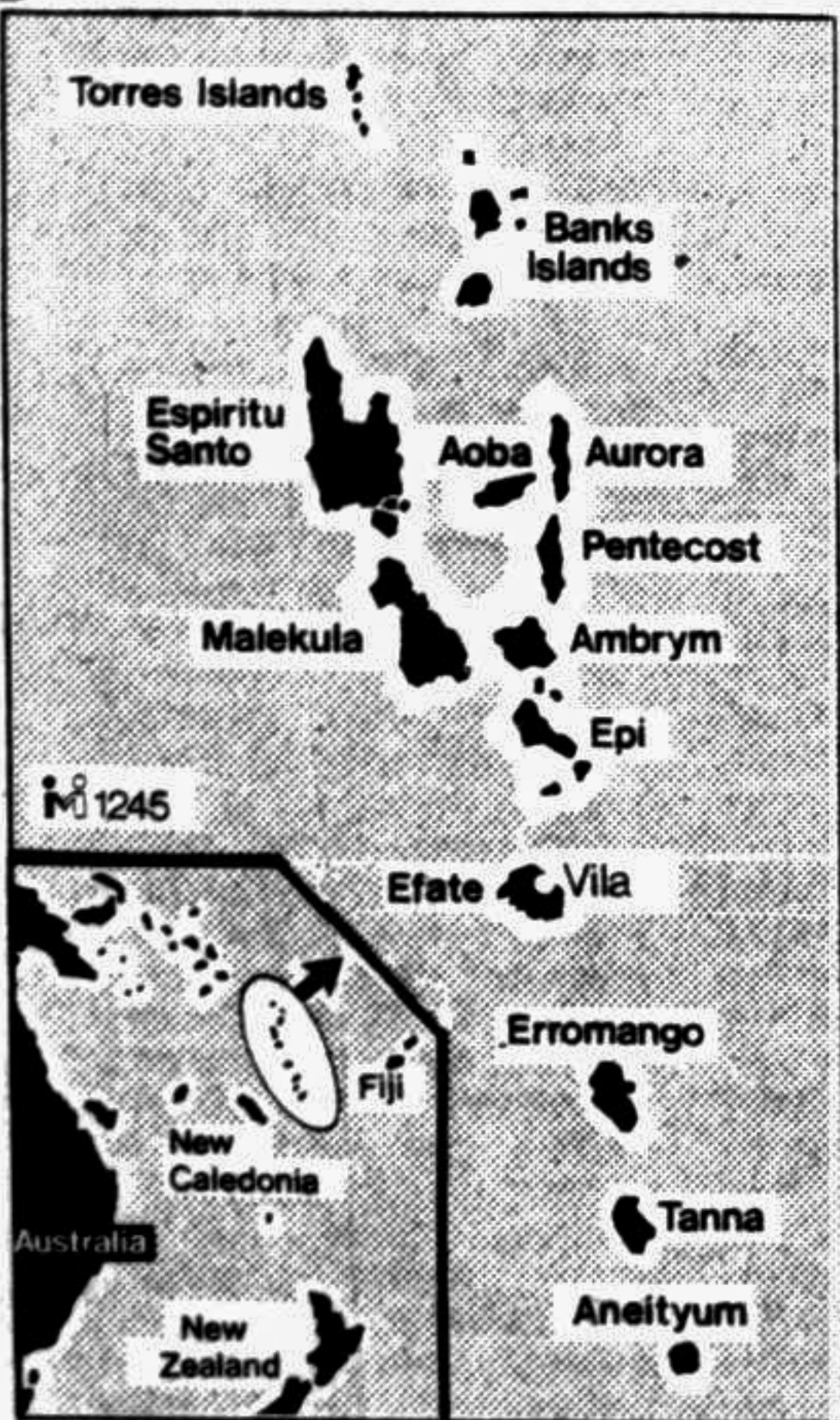
Other Communications

Besides the improvement of road links, radio and telecommunication network should also be developed, and in doing so, the devastating nature of the 1991 cyclone should be taken into consideration. There must be a central communication system to co-ordinate the activities of police and other agencies.

Conclusion

Understanding and solidarity of all political parties irrespective of convictions, people in general, officers and employees and NGOs to face the challenge of dealing with natural disasters will be beneficial for the nation. Decisions should be taken considering national interests, particularly the interests of the poor who constitute the majority of our population. If political parties or influential elites are favoured, the have-nots will have nowhere to go.

To sum up, I like to stress again that it possible to turn any national disaster into an opportunity of working jointly for the greater cause of national interest, only if we have the sincerity, willingness to cooperate, honesty, conviction, scrupulousness and above all, patriotism. It also calls for moral integrity and dynamic leadership. But first of all, we must get down to work, leadership will automatically grow. And one day, this one of the poorest and problem-ridden countries of the world will emerge on the global scene as a model of development, to be followed by others.



HILDA LINI Crusader for peace