

Dhaka, Sunday, May 3, 1992

A Fruitful visit

By all accounts the just concluded two days' visit by the Executive Director of Unicef, Mr James P Grant was a very useful one. Not only was he able to give a boost to the national education programme of Bangladesh through the holding of the one-day conference on "Education for All" but also further promote the very useful programme of Unicef that deals with the two most vulnerable groups in our country, namely the children and women. During the visit the most important message that he conveyed to us was that regardless of the enormity of our problems, we could solve them all only if we put our mind to it. He recalled that few at the time believed that the child immunization programme would achieve the extent of success that it did in Bangladesh or that the tube-well programme could supply more than eighty per cent of our rural population with fresh drinking water that it does now. So he emphasized over and over again that our goals of universal primary education for all is not as insurmountable as it may appear. All we need is the nation's political will behind it. In connection with his visit, this journal would like to express the appreciation of our people to both Mr Grant and to his colleagues in Bangladesh for running what must be one of Unicef's biggest country programmes in the world and one that has earned our respect for its effectiveness in helping the most needy and the vulnerable.

Mr Grant very correctly pointed out that the wind of change towards democracy and freedom that has been blowing throughout the world for the last few years—one that inspired us in sweeping away our own autocracy—has opened up the prospects of enormous changes in our societies. The most important aspect of these changes was the shifting of power from the centre to the periphery, from a coterie to the people, from an arbitrary to an accountable government. This shift occurred through a process of change that was mainly peaceful. This shifting of power meant that the voiceless had acquired a say in the development process. This automatically provided a better chance for a policy shift towards the most vulnerable groups in society. We share Mr Grant's optimism and hope that our own government would reflect that global trend.

Following the success of the Child Summit in 1990 which led to the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of Children by the biggest gathering of the Heads of States and Government ever, the indefatigable Mr Grant has brought a new Summit proposal to Bangladesh. He suggests that ten countries with the highest number of illiterate children in the world should meet to chalk out their own special strategy and programmes with the aim of providing basic education to them before the turn of the Century. Given the fact that more than 45 per cent of our population is under the age of 15 and that three out of the ten countries concerned belong to the SAARC region—Bangladesh, Pakistan and India—the idea of the Summit is indeed most relevant for us. We also see a lot of merit in the suggestion by the Unicef Chief to set up a mechanism at the thana and district level to monitor monthly the enrollment and drop-out of children at the primary schools and for the greater involvement of community leaders in the education and healthcare programmes.

Love for animals

This newspaper recently carried a picture of a giant porpoise that was caught by fishermen in Bogra from the river Jamuna. But there is just a single message with the picture which, though apparently looks innocuous, is too serious a business to be lightly dealt with. The message is that the porpoise was sold to a man named Butu Mia who was ingenious enough to put the hapless fish on public display. Whether for gate money or free of charge is however not known. The missing point is that nobody is particularly bothered about the legal side of displaying a fish that has been listed as an endangered species.

The porpoise so exhibited is going to die soon, no doubt about that. And those responsible for the porpoise's death will not even know if they have committed a crime punishable by the country's law. This points to the fact that laws are totally ineffective where the level of consciousness is still very low. The fact that a caring society is also highly sensitive to the needs and demands of animal species proves — rather than disproving — the survival theory of Darwin. But this is just one side of the story. Paradoxically, in far less enlightened societies people sometimes develop a naturally enduring relationship with the flora and fauna around them.

Such happy co-existence is being disturbed for a number of reasons, chief among them being the excessive pressure on the natural resources due to the phenomenal increase in world's population. The feeling that all lives are unique and therefore deserve to be treated with respect is missing from an unusually preoccupied — almost to the point of morbidity — society. It is because of this that children are often found to cruelly behave with puppies and kittens, which is anti-nature. When such children grow up to take social responsibilities, theirs is a commitment—either to man or animal — that contradicts with the principles of life itself.

The awful treatment meted out to the porpoise, a member of the dolphin family, in the north of the country therefore illustrates the point of insensitivity. Making fun of animal's misery is moreover something to be viewed as sadistic. Leaving a lesson in sadism by the elders for their young ones can by no means be an ideal situation for a society. Both at homes and in schools, children should therefore be given lessons in the natural sciences to develop in the budding minds love and compassion for animals and birds most of whom are highly integral to maintaining the ecological balance.

THE floods of 1987 and 1988 in Bangladesh have had a profound impact on our psyche, and as a nation we have resolved to do something about it. We have decided that we do not want to 'live with the floods', notwithstanding the advice of a section of donors and their friends who think we should. In concrete terms, we have embarked upon the Flood Action Plan (FAP), which consists of a number of studies, both socio-economic and engineering, intended to pave the way for an integrated plan that gives sufficient weight to social, environmental and distributional aspects, in addition to economic and engineering ones.

There appears to be a great deal of misunderstanding and ignorance about FAP in the popular mind, some of which is shared even by those whose job it is to be slightly better informed. Thus one is repeatedly confronted by statements of the sort, 'we have floods and we have plans, but where is the action?' The failure of course is not one sided, and lies heavily with the Government, and in particular, with the Flood Plan Coordination Office (FPCO), whose job should certainly have been to inform the public about FAP, to allay fears and doubts.

The source of the misunderstanding about Flood Action Plan (FAP) probably stems from the very name, which seems to emphasize action to solve the flood problem, and clearly, action in the lay mind refers not to studies and supporting activities needed before a plan is finalised and implemented, but to actual, physical structures, protective devices, etc. The current status of FAP however, is still tentative. A fully developed plan does not yet exist, and current endeavour is basically geared to ultimately come up with an integrated and coherent plan. What exists of FAP on the ground, consists of flood control and drainage (FCD) projects that have already been executed and are a fait accompli. This article reports on the findings of a just concluded evaluation of FCD projects, and in particular on the impacts of such investments. Its objective is to inform and promote public debate. Flood control is much too important an area of activity to be left entirely to policy mak-

Whither Flood Control?

by Firdous Murshid

The source of the misunderstanding about Flood Action Plan (FAP) probably stems from the very name, which seems to emphasize action to solve the flood problem, and clearly, action in the lay mind refers not to studies and supporting activities needed before a plan is finalised and implemented, but to actual, physical structures, protective devices, etc. The current status of FAP however, is still tentative.

ers and planners, because of the complex impacts associated with it. However, the debate about FAP and flood control is rapidly degenerating towards an ideologically based polarisation and hardening of positions, with the 'structuralists' (i.e. the engineers and their supporters who tend to favour structural solutions — embankments, sluice gates and so on, particularly if the investment involved is large) and the non-structuralists (i.e. those who oppose structural solutions, primarily of environmental and equity grounds — the green imperialists). This is an undesirable and unproductive tendency, because what is needed is dialogue and debate, and the willingness to learn. Let me be quite emphatic about one point: no one has all the answers, neither the greens, nor the engineers or indeed the donors. There is nevertheless a wealth of knowledge in the country, including knowledge that ordinary people as well as experts have accumulated over the years in dealing with and adjusting to floods. It is imperative to harness this knowledge and to generate new knowledge, and can best be done through dialogue and retaining a genuinely open mind to new ideas and solutions.

Economic Evaluation

Investments in flood control have to be appraised before implementation, to determine whether a project is desirable. In economic terms this means that a project should only be taken up if a taka invested yields more than its opportunity cost or alternative use, which usually means an economic return of at least around 10-15 per cent. Project benefits are normally measured in terms of the impact on agricultural output, more specifically on paddy output, reflecting the obsession of planners with foodgrain self-

sufficiency. However, the impact of FCD projects is much more complex and far-reaching and not limited to foodgrain production alone. While there is increasing recognition of such complexity, this is yet to be reflected in the planning and design stages, and perhaps FAP will be able to make a contribution in this area. There is also an urgent need to incorporate the non-agricultural effects, both positive and negative, in economic evaluation — a task that is made doubly difficult because of the problems of quantifying some of these impacts.

The basic impact of an FCD project is hydrological, i.e. it alters the volume, depth of flooding and its timing, and consequently, the area under temporary and permanent water bodies. Such a fundamental change in hydro-ecological conditions is bound to lead to numerous repercussions; the main ones are discussed below.

Positive Impacts

Perhaps the most important impact of an FCD project is on crops, especially the Aman paddy crop. Reduction in inundation levels means that deeply flooded lands are converted to shallow flooded lands, permitting a shift from low yielding deep water Aman to the much more productive transplanted variety. Further, areas that are prone to early flash floods in April-May, eg. in the Sylhet basin, are now protected, enabling the Boro crop to be safely harvested.

An effective FCD project will contain the damage to life and property associated with unusual floods. This effect will be particularly important in the flood plains of the more active rivers, eg. the Brahmaputra and the Teesta, where the problem of erosion can assume very grave proportions, as well as projects de-

signed to protect urban areas (Kurigram, Sirajganj). Apart from providing protection, embankments also serve as roads, enabling more rapid transport of goods and people, as well as generating employment in this sector.

Embankments also provide scope for development of forestry projects — an area that has received some attention from NGOs. By and large this potential remains largely untapped.

Protection of an area allows fish culture to take place, as annual floods will not wash away the fish stock. Again, this is a potential that has remained largely untapped.

Negative Impacts

These are less well understood and rarely taken account of in project feasibility. However, for some projects, these effects could be sufficiently high to offset any benefits.

FCD is unquestionably implicated in the decline in fish stocks because of the physical barriers to migration, spawning and reduction in the flood-plain area and areas under beels and other water bodies. In general, submersible embankment schemes (projects that prevent early flooding but allow the more intense monsoon floods to occur) do less harm than projects that provide full protection.

Wherever FCD projects have led to an increase in cropped areas, this has led to reduced livestock activities, due to the loss of grazing area. This loss is not offset by the increased availability of crop residue used as feed. Smallstock (goat, poultry) however usually tends to increase because of the better feed situation.

In areas where this was important, boat transport has been seriously impeded.

The overall distributional impact is complex. There is no

doubt that most projects involve losses and gains to identifiable groups, eg. farmers benefit, fishermen and boatmen lose out; those outside the project suffer more acute flooding. In many cases, FCD projects lead to increased social disharmony, especially between those inside and outside the project. A symptom of this is the frequency of public cuts in the embankments to relieve flooding of homesteads outside the project. Nevertheless, at many projects the perceived reduction in flood hazard had a clear "psychological" impact, leading to greater confidence in the security of housing and other assets and presumably to a greater willingness to invest within the project area. This raises the risk of a false sense of security. In many areas, embankments have either already breached or been overtopped, and on others this appears likely, given the state of repair. In such circumstances, there is greater need for advance warning and emergency planning to avert disaster.

Important Findings

All the impacts identified need to be quantified and valued before economic evaluation can be conducted. This is a formidable task, and in many cases impacts can only be assessed in qualitative terms. Most analysts stick to the easily quantifiable aspects, namely the impact on crop agriculture. This is inadequate. FAP 12 (Agricultural Study) made an attempt to incorporate fish losses in their evaluation of 17 projects. The broad findings are reported below.

A striking inverse relationship was found between the economic rate of return and the period of project implementation, suggesting that frequent delays in implementation have often rendered a project non-viable.

Projects with a high rate

of return are generally small, conceptually simple projects. This is not to say that all large projects perform poorly.

Capital costs per hectare are small by international standards, and do not vary greatly from project to project.

Operation and maintenance costs have tended to vary between 3 and 5 per cent of the capital cost, which is higher than is generally assumed in feasibility studies.

Fisheries losses have been very significant in many projects, but were generally not high enough to destroy project viability.

Lack of public participation in project design and implementation means that considerable local knowledge (eg. about local hydrology, relief) is not made use of. This can spell the difference between a successful project and an unsuccessful one. The high frequency of public cuts experienced in most projects could be greatly reduced if public participation could be ensured.

In many countries projects are required to pass an environmental test as well as an economic one. There is however an increasing tendency amongst some environmentalists to subsume everything under the rubric of environmental evaluation, including economic, ecological and social aspects of a project. While the aim is quite noble, the required methodology is inadequate. The methodology of environmental impact assessment is still at a very rudimentary stage. At best, this yields a list of different types of project impact, often unquantified, which are not explicitly weighted and which cannot be reduced to a single number (like the rate of return). This makes it very difficult to compare between projects. Until the methodology of environmental assessment improves very significantly, it should take a back seat to economic assessment, basically complementing the economic analysis by drawing attention to any serious environmental impacts not taken into account.

The author is a Senior Research Fellow at BIDS and has been involved in the FAP 12 Agricultural Study as the Senior Economist in the team. Views expressed in this article need not reflect those of BIDS or of FAP.

Botswana Tries to Put the Screws on its Free Press

by Marx Garekwe writes from Gaborone

In democratic Botswana the private media have a difficult time practicing their profession freely. The systematic gagging of journalists coupled with continuing state harassment of the independent press belies the claim that Botswana is the custodian of the free press in Africa. Despite restrictions the media is active as a safeguard against the abuse of power.



FRONT PAGE NEWS
Botswana's biggest independent newspaper

owned newspapers in 1982 at least six journalists have been expelled for outspoken reporting.

Most recently, in January, police arrested a journalist for publishing the contents of a supposedly secret document. The story, written last year, was about striking industrial workers demanding a 154 per cent raise in minimum wages.

He was arrested after the police searched the offices of Mmegi (The Reporter) newspaper and left with the so-called "secret document".

However, the same document was read in Parliament by the Minister for Presidential Affairs and Public Administration explaining why the government could not meet the rise. The contents of

the document were later published by the state-owned Botswana Daily News.

The government was angry at the exposure of corruption rather than by corruption itself. Instead of investigating irregularities by civil servants the authorities were so furious with the private media that the police were told to "question" journalists who had covered the story.

The Minister for Presidential Affairs and Public Administration and the deputy director or DIBS, Samuel Moribame, both lashed out at the private press and journalists. They said if journalists wanted to be critical of government officers and ministers they should leave Botswana.

This shows how intolerant the government is towards journalists who deviate from the image-building of the government media.

The last journalist expelled from Botswana was Samu Sulu, an internationally respected Zambian journalist. Sulu fled to Botswana after being mistreated by the government of Kenneth Kaunda for writing

critically about his regime. Ironically, Sulu was expelled from Botswana for writing articles considered too harsh on Kaunda and his government. The Kaunda government has now been voted out of power.

Government journalists belonging to the Botswana Journalists Association (BOJA) are muzzled by the government. They are not allowed to endorse any association resolution interpreted by the government as being critical or against the state.

Last year top officials reprimanded a government jour-

nalist endorsing a strongly-worded letter addressed to the Minister of Presidential Affairs and Public Administration. The letter was attacking the government for harassing journalists, especially private ones.

Some government-trained journalists are transferred to insignificant posts if they do not subscribe to the ruling party or are thought to be critical of government policies. Botswana has been a peaceful democratic country in a region characterised by civil strife and liberation wars. Yet the government does not seem to realise that meaningful democracy is unattainable without a free and vigilant media. Recent actions against the media do not bode well for the future of free expression here.

— GEMINI NEWS
MARX GAREKWE is a freelance journalist in Botswana.

OPINION

"Aid with a Warning"

Shahabuddin Mahtab

Your first editorial (April 29th) regarding the launching of the Fourth Population and Health Project, indicated the possible future position, which may occur if there is a half-hearted, unmotivated or a less than totally committed work force. This is a project on which the welfare of the whole nation is involved. It has therefore to be a multi-sectoral and multi-pronged attack on the number one problem of the nation, where we cannot, and must not fail. It is true, that we have achieved a quantifiable success in the area of family planning, but this is far from enough. Furthermore, the three fourth of our population, who live below the poverty line have not been caught fully in the family planning net, as a result of which, we will not be able to attain the net reproductive rate of 1 in the remaining years of this century.

The top one fourth of our population who are better educated, and live a less deprived life, need not be targeted now. Our area of operation must now be to reach the 'hard core' couples who are totally illiterate and the most deprived. Our efforts must start with full force from the very poor, and gradually on to the lower middle class people, and thereafter the better educated groups.

The 'Buns' (domestic helps) of Dhaka in most cases have five, six and seven children of more. The family welfare workers have to reach such

core groups of people immediately. All the workers in the public and private sector enterprises can be reached, with the active collaboration of the owners and the managers. The organised groups, wherever they are, can be tackled more easily. It is difficult to reach the widely spread out agricultural workers. We have therefore to evolve a strategy for reaching the active couples in this area. Our repeated thrusts should be in the difficult zones, rather than choosing the soft options.

In view of our widespread poverty and illiteracy, we would urge the adoption of the permanent and easier methods of birth control such as vasectomy, tubectomy, the use of norplant and the IUD.

A great name in the application of human communication technology, in family planning is Mr. Virabaidya Machal of Thailand. His innovative and unconventional methods and ideas have done much in containing the burgeoning population in Thailand; and many of his ideas can be replicated in Bangladesh, with modifications, keeping in view the religious sentiments of the people.

Given the massive political support, and the will of the people, we can limit the size of our population, given the honesty, integrity and the total commitment of the people, inclusive of the family welfare workers at all levels. Let us not fail here, as this means our survival as a nation with dignity.

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.

Enquiry on CHT incidents

Sir, On 23 April a Foreign Ministry spokesman was reported as claiming that articles in the foreign press about the killings at Lougong, Khagrachhari on 10 April were "highly exaggerated, false and mischievous." He said that only 10 people were killed and 10 injured by Bengali settlers in retaliation for a terrorist attack earlier in the day. However, on 11 April the Brigadier of Khagrachhari Cantonment, who visited the site about 11 pm on the day of the incidents, reported that 12 had been killed by the Shanti Bahini, 11 of them tribals.

There is an easy way to learn the truth, the same way that the Indonesian public learned about the massacre of

more than 50 defenseless people in East Timor last November — by appointing an impartial judicial enquiry commission to look into all aspects of the occurrences and to publish their report publicly within a short time. Previous governments have appointed enquiry commissions but their reports, if ever completed, were never made public. One can hope for better results from a democratic government.

Father Timm
Justice and Peace Commission
Dhaka.

Expensive JS

Sir, Can we afford a 6-day parliament session?
A Mawaz
Dhaka.

"BTV : Is ghost of Ershad still there?"

Sir, Thanks to Sultana Faizun Nahar for her nicely written opinion piece "BTV : Is ghost of Ershad still there?" in the Daily Star on April 21. Endorsing the views expressed by the writer I would like to add a few lines of my own.

It is a matter of record that all governments, since independence of Bangladesh, used Radio and TV as their own propaganda machines and no government ever allowed any focus of any political party except the party in power.

The present government is not a total exception to the former governments. But we must accept that Radio and TV now recognise political parties other than the ruling one.

To come out of this stalemate, we may ask the government to allow Radio-TV stations in private sector so that there could be a healthy competition between the government owned Radio-TV station and that in the private sector. Like government-owned newspapers and newspapers under private ownership, the former may be run by more govern-

ment advertisements while the later will be financed more by its subscribers.

If this works, we may allow private sector T & T company, Electricity, WASA etc.

M Saleem Ullah, Advocate
Motijheel, Dhaka.

Hats off to Windies

Sir, Through this esteemed daily of yours, I would like to congratulate the West Indian cricket team on their spectacular successes against South Africa especially for the first Test between the two countries at Bridgetown, Barbados.

Although it seemed like a fairy-tale, they did win the Test and no doubt no other country could have done so, in such a manner. Hats off to Courtney Walsh, who off to West Indian sportsmanship spirit.

The West Indians have again proved themselves to be the true kings of cricket. May they carry on to show us more 'magic' in the future.

Asrarul Islam Chowdhury
(Ronnie)
JLI, Savar, Dhaka.