

The Vicious Erosion Cycle

Reports of erosion caused by rivers are as numerous as local droughts and flash floods. It is the old problem of Bangladesh being constantly stabbed by that double-edged scimitar of excess of water on one hand and too little of it on the other. Latest reports say 20 thousand people in seven thanas of Pabna district have lost their homes to erosion by both the Padma and the Jamuna. That doesn't seem so significant in a land where lakhs are swept away by an elemental fell swoop or when compared to, as in the present case, the other losses in Pabna such as the 'devouring' by the rivers of 11 government offices, 5000 handloom factories, 12 mosques, five primary schools, three madrasahs and one college. A flood of the size of one that enveloped all of Bangladesh in 1988 or a cyclonic sweep like the April 29 doomsday in '91 has a harrowing spectacularity. But the unrelenting river erosion that goes on and on all around Bangladesh has a far more destructive influence on the physical parameters of the land than those world newsmakers. Erosion of soil which goes into silting of rivers causing floods contributes the most to a kind of inexorable meteorological, hydrological and environmental crunch drawing into its vortex the whole liveability of our dear motherland. It is just not a question of losing some houses and homes that erosion represents.

Erosion is a natural process that goes on and on and as such falls outside the pale of valued judgments like good or bad. But excessive erosion leading to cutting down on the liveability of a thriving millennia-old hub of culture and civilisation, is something that has to be set right — plainly in order to live.

Society's incomprehension of the human actions — or the lack of it — that leads to the drought-flood-erosion-desertification vicious cycle has itself been somewhat eroded in the recent years — thanks to the environment movements. Unfortunately enough the same cannot be said of the government and other collective agencies of power with as much certainty. Both wind and river erosion can very effectively be fought with appropriate afforestation, — the biggest factor contributing to erosion of land is denudation wrought by man. This is the situation when only curbing defoliation wouldn't be enough, — lakhs of hectares of land, specially along the erosion-prone rivers, must be afforested with effective trees.

Another very big factor, but far more controllable, has been the construction activities of the nation. Building of roads and setting up of townships and bazars and construction of bridges have hardly ever been done in a water-friendly manner. The process goes on. The nation is one in wanting a bridge connecting the two parts — north and east. We too are all for it although we are not too sure it would be water-friendly or that it would not impel the Jamuna to throw up more and more of the sand dunes. It has been notoriously doing ever since it took its present course some two hundred years back or that the bridge, when finished, would not end at a point from where another river — the Dakatia — would expand up to the horizon. Our building activities — all conceivable kinds of them — must be made to be hydrologically correct.

The erosion question is in fact another name for the question of geographical existence of Bangladesh. Long before the erosion-drought-flood-desertification cycle would catch Bangladesh in a vice-like grip, the society here will have started on the way of an all-round putrefaction. This grim scenario can of course be reversed by moving the society to address the question of erosion and all that it leads to in a foolproof fruitful way.

Meanwhile, Chandpur is continually being eaten up and there is no way to save Sirajganj — at least in the conventional way. And the Surma has started seriously eroding Mollargaon in Sylhet Sadar thana. It is time government as well as scientists and socially committed people took up in earnest the question of erosion which is a long-drawn-out expression of punchy things like floods and droughts and yet is a picture in summary of the long unending tale of land abuse. How can we save our rivers and our lands? How can we replenish the powers of our lands — towards which nothing has as yet been done?

Environmental Peril

Of late environmental issues have come to the fore front the world over. When the Greenpeace movement took up the issues in right earnest, nobody thought they had any chance. But today, with the end of the cold war, not many will even be generous enough to give them their due credit. In this country no such organised groups made an issue of the environment, but the press has all along been advancing the cause of a greener Bangladesh. Unfortunately not with much success.

Today, we know to our horror, that the northern region of the country has only two per cent of forest cover. Countrywide this figure is as low as eight per cent against an ideally low forest cover of 25 per cent. Evidently, the north of the country is in a particularly precarious situation. The threat of desertification has now become real and the region has already been experiencing a host of unprecedented problems, thanks to the denudation of its tree covers.

Acting representative of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Winston Temple has rightly observed that the serious environmental problem faced by this country owes to the over-size population. This most densely populated country in the world has an equally formidable task to restore its environmental health in the south. But there is at least one good thing that the World Bank has been extending its support for the creation of a green belt along the vast coastal area. If and when this becomes a reality, the government will have done a great service not only for the people of the coastal area but also for the entire country through building a natural shield against natural calamities like cyclones and tidal bores.

If the south stands to benefit from such an ambitious programme, an equally comprehensive one should be in order soon for the north as well, for that region is all set to embrace a slow but sure disaster. Along with government effort, social movements, like the Greenpeace, should prove to be an effective tool for dealing with the environmental problem in the north. Social forestry then can halt the rapidly deteriorating process of environment across the country. Equally important will be an effective campaign for population control, and still better, if the two issues can be integrated for action.

THE United Nations has taken so very long to tackle the Somalia situation because it is essentially a political organisation. The people who call the shots at the UN are the permanent members of the Security Council.

For ten years the United States was pumping millions and millions of dollars of sophisticated armaments into Somalia. They provided the aid assistance and the diplomatic support that allowed the former dictator, President Siad Barre, to pursue his divisive policies and to stand up to opposition at home and the growing criticism abroad.

Once the Cold War ended they could evacuate their embassies and decrease the number of people working there. When the fighting got bad they turned their backs. American embassy officials in Nairobi suggested the entire turned their backs. American embassy officials in Nairobi suggested the entire country should be paved over and turned into a parking lot.

They don't care. They no longer need Somalia — it's just a problem — this is how a senior American diplomat was quoted, in the Washington Post of all places.

The UN left in January 1991 when Siad Barre was deposed. Nobody was paying any attention to Somalia.

Why did it take so long to act? Well, the incestuous and destructive relationship between the press, TV foreign editors and relief agencies had a lot to do with it.

They all fed on each other in a very unhelpful way. They

A Failure of Leadership

Why Nobody Cares about Somalia



Photo: UNICEF/Roger Lamy

are just interested when they think other people are doing their story. For us it is not a story. It is our lives, you know?

At least four months before the UN fled Somalia the capital in which they were living — never mind the rural areas — was already a killing field with widespread looting. Many embassies had already evacuated their personnel. Most were afraid to go out at night.

They did not flee a lovely little settled town. They fled a place that had already become a nightmare and they knew what would happen. I've seen memos to Perez de Cuellar, the former Secretary General, written at the end of 1990, from people within the UN

If Mitterrand can go to Sarajevo why can't African leaders go to show people of Mogadishu that they care? Many are former soldiers anyway. All these macho men. Well, where are they? It is a failure of Leadership.

by Rakiya Omaar in an interview with Nyta Mann and Charles English.

warning him what would happen in Somalia.

But he was still busy with Iraq and the hostages and El Salvador — things that mattered more to people in the Security Council — and he couldn't care less about Somalia.

The regional blocs to which Somalia belongs — the Organisation of African Unity, the Islamic Conference and the Arab League — don't care. The Islamic conference and the Arab League include some of the richest countries in the world. They are awash with money. Many have also been involved in the wars in Somalia.

I have just returned from along trip to the north of So-



Displaced and dejected Somalis camp out in a church in Kismayo city

malia where dozens of people are killed or maimed by landmines. Where are those landmines from? From Pakistan, from Egypt — the allies of the West.

The thing about the Cold War is that it was not exclusively the USSR and the US, but also their allies — Cuba, East Germany and others on one side, Saudi Arabia, Egypt on the other. All pumping in armaments and following the lead from the superpower.

And where now is the organisation of African Unity? Have you heard them say anything about Somalia? No one is asking that they launch what is required, which is essentially the largest relief operation in

the world. What they are required to do is supply the political and moral leadership which would force the Security Council to take the leadership. But they didn't care.

Somalia is an impoverished country that isn't of interest to anyone. Its neighbours aren't doing anything. The regional organisations aren't doing anything. Foreign editors in New York, London and Paris don't care because it isn't a 'story.' So who the hell cares?

This is almost as much a scandal for the relief agencies as it is for the UN. There were only five relief agencies in Somalia until very recently. Where were all the others? No,

it was too dangerous, too scary, not in the papers.

If you are a white journalist or a white relief worker you are not in much danger. Actually only one has been killed in all this time — and everyone is describing it as the most dangerous place to be.

More white people have been killed in Nairobi where everybody loves to go for their holidays. Only one man — a Belgian foreign worker trying to distributed food himself — was killed directly.

Not to say that it is wonderful and fun and relaxed, but the discomfort hasn't stopped relief workers or journalists or the UN in Sarajevo. And Sarajevo, where UN troops are, is continuously shelled.

Where are the African journalists? Who are the three prominent politicians who have gone to Somalia in the last few weeks?

It is the Irish Foreign Minister. It is the French Minister of Humanitarian Affairs Bernard Kouchner, and Nancy Kassebaum, a US Republican senator.

What on earth is preventing an African leader from going? If Mitterrand can go to Sarajevo to show that the world cares about what is happening there — there are more than 52 African leaders — why can't they go and show the people of Mogadishu that they care?

Many of them are former soldiers anyway — all these macho men, well, where are they? It is a failure of leadership.

— GEMINI NEWS
RAKIYA OMAAR, a Somali, is director of the human rights organisation, African Watch.

On History and Selective Amnesia

by Qazi M Fazal

DURING the height of the Cold War, in the mid '80s, I had a discussion on global atrocities and injustices with some American friends of mine. The Soviet Union had recently shot down a Korean Airline aircraft with over 350 civilians on the suspicion that it was on a spying mission. 'Barbaric, inhuman' my American friends proclaimed. And indeed the total disregard for innocent human lives is barbaric.

In the spirit of the conversation, I brought up how Israel in the early '70s had shot down a Jordanian civilian airplane with over 200 people — and claimed the occurrence — on a similar suspicion that there were terrorists on board. My comment met with disbelief among my friends. 'That's impossible,' they contended. I checked up the information in an almanac and I had not misrepresented my case. My friends were not unintelligent or uninformed, nor were they myopic individuals. Their cultural programming simply prevented them from remembering certain facts.

Sadly, just like my American friends, the whole of the

Western world and its government, although I am sure they are full of the best intentions, have a selective memory of history. Japan and Germany continue to pay reparations for their brutality in World War II. Rightly so. But does anyone remember the few million American Indians killed by the European Americans in the 19th century? Certainly, an 'ethnic cleansing' of sorts in the much denounced Serbian style. Any reparations for them? How about some compensation for the victims of American slavery? Colonialism?

In all fairness, perhaps the Western world really does its best to be humane, egalitarian and just. It aids the Third World in poverty alleviation (although 20% of America's official development assistance goes to catering to only Israel, a country of five million already pretty well-off people). Western universities provide scholarship for non-Western students. Usually, the West tries to save the environment. Sometimes, it shares its new technologies and medicine almost quite freely. The West beats up the bad guys like Iraq

from bullying their smaller neighbours since each country's sovereignty must be insured from foreign invasion.

However, when it comes to clearing up the issue of sovereignty in Yugoslavia, the Western world turns the other way. The reason? In the Gulf, there were clear-cut borders to push back the Iraqis. In Yugoslavia, there are no such things between the Serbs and Croats and Bosnians; apparently, the Western criterion is not cease human suffering at all costs, but to avoid getting tangled in a touchy problem. It is all too easy for the West to forget the role of the oil that Kuwait possessed which Muslim Bosnians don't. It is also easy to forget that there have always been border disputes between Kuwait and Iraq ever since the West arbitrarily divided up the countries after World War I. I wonder what excuse my American friends would have for the continual defiance of Lebanese sovereignty by the Israeli Army. Now-a-days, national sovereignty is not a strong enough concept to prevent the West from

reinvading Iraq.

Selective memory breeds a double standard and a certain bit of hypocrisy. Take terrorism for example. Israel, and its Western supporters, refused to deal with the Palestinian Liberation Organization because it is an organization that condones, and perhaps perpetuates, terrorism. Let's take a look at history a few decades ago. In 1937, a faction of the World Zionist Organization, the Irgun Zvai Leumi, and another organization known as the Stern Gang, were convinced that the British were abandoning the Zionist cause, so they began resorting to terror to remind the British of their commitment to Zionism, and started a guerilla war. The Stern Gang, under the leadership of the Israeli hero Begin, at one point blew up the King David hotel in Jerusalem because they knew of some British citizens in it. Who cares for the other innocent lives in the hotel? I wonder if the British government remembers this. Shamir, ex-prime minister of Israel and Begin's disciple, ironically, refused to

negotiate with Palestinian 'terrorists.'

In 1948, after the declaration of an Israeli state, the Jews still did not have a majority to form a cohesive Israeli government. The Encyclopedia Britannica writes: 'the Irgun stormed and captured the village of Dar Yasin and massacred much of the population, terrorizing the Arab villagers, who began a mass exodus from Palestine.' By 1949, the departure of 1,000,000 Palestinian Arabs finally gave Israel the Jewish majority it required to form a government. Does all this sound similar to what the Palestinians have been trying to do in their hopes of having a state of their own? One people's terrorists are other people's freedom fighters and soldiers against injustices.

This brief peak into history and current events would not be published in an American newspaper because it would be considered anti-Semitic. Therefore, I hastily add that I am not supporting Iraq's aggressions and disrespect for human lives nor am I condoning any Arab terrorism. I propose that the resentment be-

tween the West and non-West will not end with a Middle-East peace settlement. The Hizbollah will not stop its bellicosity. Israel in itself does not represent a threat to the non-Western world. The West's double standard and selective memory does.

Of course, the non-Western world is no better in its amnesia. Sadly, we are all only biased and dogmatic products of our cultural upbringing. A good solution to selective memory would be to forget and forgive all of history. Arabs and Muslims, forget Western hypocrisy. West, forget Arab terrorism and past persecution of Jews. Of course, this solution does not work. History will continue to haunt us. There is a saying: 'History is written by the victors'. Therefore, Serbs, who will eventually lose, will always be correctly labelled racist 'ethnic cleansers' who don't see Bosnian women and children as people, and Zionists who terrorized Palestinians back in 1948 and did not recognize the Palestinians as human beings will remain heroes and patriots, not ethnocentric nor racist. Such is life.

The Dragon Kingdom's Dark Secret

A world away from Sarajevo and Somalia, truck loads of refugees are arriving at overcrowded and disease-ridden camps at the foothills of the Himalayas in Nepal.

They are Nepali-speaking Bhutanese, who have been displaced two years after Bhutan passed laws requiring all citizens to wear the traditional Buddhist dress and speak the Dzongkha language.

Since then, relief officials here say the number of Nepali-speaking Bhutanese who have fled the tiny 'Dragon Kingdom' to neighbouring Nepal and India is nearing 100,000. About 20 trucks packed with 50 Bhutanese each crosses Nepal's eastern border to arrive at six refugee camps here every day.

The refugees recount horrifying tales of torture and harassment from the Bhutanese authorities, and relief workers here say it is South Asia's own version of 'ethnic cleansing'.

Bhogendra Sharma, of the Centre of Victims of Torture, summed up the stories: 'Whole communities are being turned into battlefields. Schools have been turned into barracks, houses are razed,

women are raped by soldiers.'

Bhutan's Buddhist Drukpa rulers, worried that their identity is about to be swamped by a growing majority of Nepali-speakers, appears to have launched a well-planned programme of depopulation.

Government data show the Buddhist Drukpas form 57 per cent of the population and the mainly-Hindu Nepalis 30 per cent. The government in Thimpu has officially reduced the country's population from the previous 1.4 million to 700,000, and many relief officials say the difference reflects ethnic Nepalis.

The Bhutanese government is willing to recognise only Nepalis who arrived before 1988 as citizens. But refugees say villages where Nepali speakers have been living for generations are being emptied.

'My family has been living in Bhutan 86 years. I was put in jail for having funded militants, and under torture I was forced to say yes. Within one week, was told to leave,' recounts Pushpa Raj Dahal, who is now living in a thatch hut in

The Bhutanese government has started systematically evicting its Nepali-speaking people. Thousands are arriving in crowded camps in Nepal, creating yet another refugee emergency clamouring for international attention. Mana Man Singh reports from Goldhap, Nepal.

the Goldhap camp.

Bhutan's Foreign Minister Dawa Tsering said in a recent interview the Nepali Bhutanese had left of their own free will, and instead blamed 'anti-national terrorists' of murder and atrocities within Bhutan.

Thimpu claims most of the Nepali-speakers in the south are illegal migrants — labourers from work gangs brought in for the Bhutanese roads who stayed back, or those brought in privately to man the orange groves and cardamom plantations in the south.

But exiles here say the Bhutanese government has always been strict about immigration and ensures there is complete

ment has actually destroyed the Bhutanisation process by its harsh measures of cultural assimilation.

The departure is carefully choreographed. A Nepali-speaker is led in to a room full of officials sitting before voluminous records to prove his or her pre-1958 status.

When families are declared illegal, they are forced to sign a 'voluntary leaving certificate'. Each family is then asked to stand up for a black and white group photograph and a statement tape-recorded.

Bhutanese exiles here blame India for not pressuring the Thimpu on the refugee question. They say India is passing on its own refugee problem to Nepal, which does not share a border with Bhutan. A treaty between Bhutan and India gives New Delhi a major say over the Himalayan kingdom's defence and foreign policy, and India may feel it is expedient to preserve the status quo.

The refugees coming down to the roadheads in eastern India, are told to head for Nepal. Agents arrange for

trucks, and the families make the roughly US\$150 payment for the day-long journey to Nepal, a land most regard as their country of origin, but have never visited.

The UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates there are already about 90,000 refugees in the Nepal camps and some 40,000 outside. It is expected that more refugees staying in India will also make for the camps.

Faced with a relentless tide of refugees, Nepal fears it may lead to tensions among the local population in the politically volatile eastern region where the Bhutanese refugee camps are situated. The camps are now being administered by the Lutheran World Service while Save the Children (UK) take care of the refugees' health and nutritional needs.

Nepali has been trying to urge Bhutan to take back the refugees. Prime Minister Gijra Prasad Koirala has pursued what he calls 'quiet diplomacy', but despite several meetings with the Bhutanese monarch and the Indian Prime Minister, the crisis remains unresolved.

— IPS

To the Editor...

"My World"

Sir, Mr S M Ali certainly deserves thanks for his eloquent tribute to Dr Anisuzzaman in his captivating 'My World' published on August 28. Such strokes of genuine appreciation are always expected from editors who should do their level best to 'cheer up' contributors and raise the standard of the daily. Hats off to S M Ali! There should also be a word of appreciation for the renowned Islamic scholar, Dr Syed Ashraf Ali, who was the first in Bangladesh to bring to light the essay on Tagore by Shahid Suhrawardy. It was through his painstaking efforts that 'Tagore at Oxford' saw the light of the day through 'The New Nation' in 1989. Incidentally, Dr Ali was also the first to project the 'Pir Ali Brahmin' episode of Tagore's

illustrious family through a Bangladeshi Television programme entitled 'Ujjibon.'

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Sir, The 'My World' by S M Ali in the issue dated 28 August 1992 of 'The Daily Star' has indeed been of interest to me. I would like to assure him that, I am still free but still a prisoner of the film industry and also of Rotary's world of selfless service.

It is always refreshing to find that a friend like Mr Ali remembers me. It is even inspiring because he does so in an extraordinary manner.

I and millions of others in Bangladesh look forward to have continued pleasure of enjoying the fruits of his pen. (Jehkharul Alam (Kitchlew) Gulshan, Dhaka

Principal for agricultural colleges

Sir, At present there are three agricultural colleges in the country which are functioning under the academic and administrative control of Bangladesh Agricultural University, Mymensingh and Bangladesh Agricultural Research Institute (BARI), Gazipur respectively. Unfortunately none of these colleges has a permanent Principal; some senior-most Professors are discharging duties as Principals-in-Charge.

It may be mentioned here that Bangladesh Agricultural Institute (BAI), Dhaka is the country's oldest agricultural educational institution which has already completed its 53 years of successful services to the nation. The Teachers' Association and Students' Union of BAI had several times

urged the relevant authority to appoint a permanent Principal to the college. Despite repeated assurances from the Agriculture Minister, Secretary of Agriculture, DG, BARI, the file relating to the appointment of Principals to the agricultural colleges is yet to get momentum. We would honestly call upon the authorities concerned to expedite the appointment of permanent Principals to all the three agricultural colleges including BAI.

M Zahidul Haque
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State of women

Sir, Based on the criteria age and sex, the entire nation, or for that matter, the mankind as a whole, can be divided into men, women, children and old people, of them the later three strata are most vulnerable to socio-economic

injustices. Again, women top the list if the intensities of susceptibility are rank-ordered.

The regional pages of the national dailies are filled with news items entitled: 'housewife beaten to death', 'commit suicide' and the like, vividly portraying the pitiable state of women in our society. Those among the women who relentlessly strive for physical survival ploddingly evading the above fates have always not necessarily been fortunate enough to get jobs ensuring security; rather young women are very often entrapped by the wicked. Prostitution, women-trafficking, illicit activities in massage parlours are several other dimensions of helplessness of women in our society.

Intricately intertwined vices have gripped the nation, the major one of them being

inhuman sufferings of the women. Being physically weaker and enticing to the lecherous, the young cohorts of them are subjected to untold grievances. Ostensibly, to give them jobs, iniquitous of us have been trafficking them to other countries for the debauches. Hundreds of these hapless women have now been languishing in those foreign jails. Weak family ties, material dependence on others inter alia have been the factors driving them to this apparently unending hole.

A microscopic minority of the women of our society have been in a good state. The plights of others call for concrete measures aiming at ameliorating the intensity of their grievances.

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