

A Chance to Raise Preparedness Level

Our deepening fright of an impending cyclonic disaster has turned into a nationwide panic that came to be shared by those around the world who followed its path — thanks to the high tech weather satellite visuals over the television sets. The velocity at the core and the speed of the spiral advance could all be measured and projected. In spite of all that pre-science however, worst of fears mounted as to what direction the cyclone would eventually take when it veered to the coastal belt.

Fortunately, the nature's caprice worked, to a great extent, our way and we have had some sense of relief that it swerved tangentially towards the south-western tips and islets of the off-shore region and weakened before crossing into the adjoining Arakan province of Myanmar. It hit us alright but not with a severity comparable with that of the 1991 cyclone whose full blast had cost us the lives of one hundred and fifty thousand people, let alone the huge loss in terms of national wealth including standing crops, private property and livestock. So, by virtue of a change of direction and the lessening of the intensity of the cyclonic storm we have been spared the cataclysm of 1991. Besides, the lessons of 1991 helped us in some respects. At least we were able to tone up the early warning system somewhat and move people to relative safety before the cyclone hit us.

Even though the 1994 cyclone may have passed off without causing the dreaded damages, it has nonetheless spelled out its own messages to heed. For instance, a glaring inadequacy in the number of shelter centres has been underlined sharply. We shudder to think what would have happened — given the ratio of cyclone shelters to people in the vulnerable areas — had a tidal surge and gale force on the scale of 1991 had actually engulfed us. For 2 lakh 19 thousand people at Maheshkhali thana we have shelter berths for 28,403 only. Similarly 3,51,674 persons of Bhola Sadar have cyclone accommodation for 14,762 only.

The early warning may have been aided by the long response time afforded by the brewing cyclone this time around. What we imply thereby is the last-minute confusion that raged in the Cox's Bazar area as the cyclone changed course and the warning signals had to be varied. The scaling up and down of the warning signals should be more organised and flexible in keeping with the changing course of a storm.

By all accounts, the trails of damage left in Cox's Bazar, Teknaf, St. Martin's Island, Maheshkhali, Kutubdia and Sandwip are quite substantial. Compensatory agricultural activities need to be set in motion without loss of time. And, relief management ought to be at its best through unrelenting coordination between the government agencies and the non-government organisations. Taking a lesson from the past, the sorties for distribution of food and medicines across the affected areas should be to ensure soft-landing of the relief goods on the ground by loosening the ropes from the slings attached to the helicopters rather than randomly throwing these out of the crafts — and perhaps beyond the reach of the target groups.

We have got a providential respite to plug the holes in cyclone preparedness and disaster management — the lacunae that have been clearly brought to focus by our latest brush with what could be a full-scale disaster.

Mandela and His New South Africa

South Africa is making history. And what an inspiring history that is. On Friday with Nelson Mandela taking over from president F W de Klerk, the South Africans — blacks, whites and coloured — start a new journey in their effort to shape the nation's destiny. With more than half of the votes counted, de Klerk has already conceded victory to the African National Congress and is making way for Mandela to get into the office he has held. So far the indication is that S Africa has come through the test in a much better shape than was expected. The pre-election violence gave cause for all kinds of anticipations. Belying all those, the election has been peaceful, free and fair.

It is on this count that the country has made a giant leap, no doubt. For a country that was divided on racial barrier, ethnic animosity, this sudden transformation of psychic make-up and initiation to democracy can be treated as a most wondrous thing to happen. Racial discriminations as a phenomenon has haunted the human race for long. In South Africa the demon continued to breathe its poisonous fires only a short time ago. It is all because of the official sanction for this abhorrent system of apartheid.

So the onus fell on the people of South Africa to fight the final battle against this system and deliver a fatal blow to it. Thank God, the South African people have at last succeeded to do what was expected of them. Today the whole world must bow to the fighting spirit of the black people there, their courage and dedication to a just cause. Indeed, the black people in South Africa have earned the triumph through unlimited sacrifices. The moment of glory beacons the man who has led them through the racial and turbulent time. But the man himself, Nelson Mandela, is humble and saintly. He gives credits to all for their contributions to making it possible for S Africa to chart a new course. A tribute must also be paid to the white electorate (save the extremists) who saw the writings on the wall, and welcomed the future with open arms.

If Mandela is the chief architect of the South Africa in the making, de Klerk must also be given his due place in the history of the country. After all, it was he who took the momentous decision to set Mandela free and make easier the process of dismantling apartheid. Also important is the fact that he has kept all his commitments and turned a racially bent white population to one that sees the virtues of racial equality. F W de Klerk goes even further in that he has assured of his sincere co-operation to Mandela in the new government.

Such supports and co-operation are going to prove crucial in the coming days. The black people will be expecting Mandela to deliver goods soon and plentifully. Mandela's second phase of struggle begins on Friday next as he assumes state power. Instances of great leaders failing their peoples are not few. We will, therefore, join in the hope and prayer for Mandela's crowning glory as the head of the government.

UNLESS I am hopelessly mistaken, we are passing through uneasy times. No, I am not thinking of the world of today. The global situation remains as muddled as ever. Amidst gloom and persistent confusion in different theatres of the world drama, we see something extraordinary happening in South Africa. If ever thing goes well and South Africa emerges as a state truly ruled by South Africans, it will go down as one of the positive achievements of the outgoing century. In our own small world, Bangladesh, world's most densely populated country, the climate is both sultry and suffocating. I am not talking of the season. The season has been true to its name: a nature: a few nor-westerly winds have already struck, and a few more in a striking pose, and we, cottage-dwellers, girding up our loins to receive the blow. No, I was not thinking of the rigours of *Baishakh*. The social scene, the way it has been unfolding itself, the political stalemate, the unsolved problems, the unattended issues, apathy on the one side, obstinacy on the other, all this an more have led to a situation full of foreboding. Particularly on the eve of the next Sangsad scheduled to meet within the next few days.

Every body will remember the way the last session ended. The boycott drew virtually the entire Opposition to a common platform. Beyond the immediate APANESE political life, as seen from outside, is no different from anywhere else. Some Japanese love power, and some achieve it. But in this ruthless backdoor game of power-grabbing, not all eventually become successful. Some have to pay very high price and gradually fade away into the oblivion, only to be remembered later on as those who had also tried very hard. That is exactly what recently happened to one of the most experienced Japanese politicians Michio Watanabe. It is still rather premature to say how soon he would finally join the group of forgotten politicians. But no doubt the process has already begun.

It all started on the afternoon of 8 April, soon after Prime Minister Morihiro Hosokawa abruptly announced his decision to step down. The present coalition government that came to power last August, could not decide with promptitude whom they would like to see as the immediate replacement of Morihiro Hosokawa. The policy differences between the coalition partners emerged as a major obstacle in finding a compromise candidate acceptable to

THE three-million-strong People's Liberation Army (PLA) of China is striving to spruce up its image which has been tarnished mainly because of associations with the bloody 1989 Tiananmen Square short-lived revolt.

Slowly, the PLA is trying to recast itself into a more professional and a political army — one that is working toward self-sufficiency, able to fend for its own and to help shoulder part of the country's economic burden. The Chinese army is now engaged in agricultural production to make it self-sufficient in non-staple food.

Usually, only four per cent of the army's entire force, including 44 officers, are actively engaged in production.

"But during the busy seasons, such as the time for transplanting or harvesting, the whole troops, commanders and men alike, may turn out to work in the fields," said Col Zhang Shigang.

The "PLA Daily" reported that each year, the army turns out 600 million kilograms of grain and 150 million kg of vegetables, which amount to

ate cause — an offensive remark made by the Minister of Information which piqued the main opposition, leading to a demand for apology that went unheeded — lay a deeper, a more general apprehension shared practically by all the sections of the Opposition. The apprehension concerned the future conduct of elections. The recently held Magura-2 by-election had shattered all hopes that election as an institution of democracy was safe in the hands of the party in power.

The boycott of the Sangsad by the Opposition has not been called off, nor has the backlash of a fouled election fully erased. Though the procedure was challenged in unison by all the opposition parties, there was a clumsy end of the whole thing, with the stamp of legitimacy given to it rather in questionable haste by the Election Commission. A lot of bickering between the parties has gone on since the Sangsad was prorogued. The Opposition is still undecided about joining the next session due to start on the fourth of May. Further, the component groups are reported to be busy with drafting a bill, a proposed amendment of the Constitution, that would require three successive national elections to be held under a caretaker government.

all the parties. This is not for the first time that the coalition partners openly expressed their differences on certain policy issues. But this obviously represented a unique instance in which some of their leaders started backdoor manoeuvring for a possible re-alignment of the coalition. And this prompted Michio Watanabe to step into the game.

The present coalition government is stitched together from seven different parties. This is for the first time in Japan's parliamentary history that such a large number of parties converged on a single platform to form a cabinet. They brought together a variety of political philosophies and principles. At the far right are the Japan Renewal Party (Shinsei to), a splinter from the once powerful Liberal Democratic Party (LDP); and the Meitoku, whose main support comes from the Buddhist religious organization Soka Gakkai. Right and left of the centre are Democratic Socialist Party (DSP); Morihiro Hosokawa's Japan New Party (JNP); a second LDP splinter Sakigake New Party; and rela-

half of the meat, eggs, and vegetables the PLA consumes. To ensure the supply of enough provisions to his army stationed in North China's province of Shanxi, Col Zhang and his colleagues supervise 33 rice farms and several poultry and pig farms.

"No other army in the world is producing its own necessities on such a scale," he claimed. Theoretically, the army is entitled to "eat royal grain," that is, enjoy full supply from the state.

"Yet the country is already short of funds in its economic construction and modernization drive," Col Zhang explained. "It cannot spare more money to compensate our shortage. We must rely on ourselves."

China's defence budget of 32.5 billion yuan (US\$3.74) is barely two per cent of that of the United States. Such a tight budget is enough only to sustain the army at a very low standard, with the daily subsis-

Ma Guihua and Xiong Lei write from Beijing

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tence for each soldier averaging two yuan (about 38 US cents), or a little more than a quarter kilo of pork, plus 0.8 kg of staple food.

"PLA is the lowest paid army in the world," said Senior Colonel Zhang Zimin, who oversees industrial production of the army in Shanxi.

Senior Col Zhang said the defence budget manges and annual allowance of merely 1,200 yuan (less than US\$240) for each soldier. This is not even sufficient for training and for upgrading equipment and facilities, he added.

The PLA's production campaign dates back to the early '40s when it was launched by the Communist-led Eight Route Army (the PLA's predecessor), to break the Kuomintang's economic blockade. But it was only after 1985 that the army's production was

carried out in a regular way. At present, the army and all its divisions have their own farms to grow rice and vegetables, and produce their own meat, eggs and fish. Most of the army farms have been built by reclaiming virgin land, Col Zhang said. Since they have pursued scientific farming, their per unit area yield is 10 to 15 per cent higher than the localities' average, he added. Aside from agricultural production which ensures its food supply, the army is engaged in other productive activities which help ease the country's economic burden. While managing to feed itself with its efficient agricultural production, the army has also endeavoured to make up for its shortage in funds by operating its own business enterprises.

The exercise is on, and the details are being worked out. I mentioned the situation being full of foreboding. Are we going to see an understanding or a confrontation, a settlement or a head on collision? While politicians are busy, on both sides of the fence, devising future action plans, the nation remains in suspense. A collision or a show-down will

not be relished by most people who want the experiment with democracy to continue, the Sangsad to assemble in its full strength, and the unresolved issues to be talked out on the floor of the House. The nation has learnt to be more patient than many of the politicians.

Two things have happened which may help in removing some of the doubts regarding the usefulness of going to the House. One: The Speaker has resigned his membership of his party's Central Committee, and two: Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia has come out with a call to the Opposition to end the boycott and make the Sangsad a going concern, the supreme arena of nation's politics. One would like to think that she means

what she says. The Opposition must be studying her statement with all the seriousness it deserves. The Speaker's action, too, should prove a positive step toward restoring his image of one who has divested himself of party-obligations. Such things are not easily done, and it certainly speaks of his courage and his good sense.

Both these gestures have their value but much more remains to be done before the shaken confidence of the Opposition can be restored. The Prime Minister must show by her conduct that she believes in the Parliament. Her conduct so far has created an impression, to the contrary.

One doesn't know how the Opposition is going to respond to the gestures just mentioned. Is it going to put stiff conditionalities, like cancelling the results of Magura-2 by-election and/or acceptance of the Opposition demand for the constitutional amendment featuring a provision for a caretaker government at the time of national elections? The issue is not constitutional, as an opposition leader has said,

it is political, born of a political situation, and reflecting a political will. It is no use saying that 1994 is not 1990, that the two governments are on entirely different footing. What is being proposed is a temporary solution, an arrangement valid for three successive elections only, to lapse automatically after the expiry of the stated period. Still, granting every thing that can be said in favour of the proposal, it is a bitter pill for any government to swallow. Before pressing it too hard, the Opposition must give the nation some time to decide for itself. The next two by-elections can be fought on this issue. The Election Commission may be given a last chance to prove itself. The Dapunia election will not be enough. It will be a hard job for the Election Commission to regain the confidence that has been eroded so badly.

Not being a politician myself, I can offer a suggestion for the consideration of all the parties, a sort of a truce to be effective during the next session and the one after. — the all important budget session. During these two sessions, let the House take up in all sincerity the issues over which it got bogged down, including the charge of corruption against the Minister of Irrigation Water Development

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Shinseito leader must have calculated that if Watanabe joins the coalition, a great majority of SDPJ members would leave the government, which might create a situation where they would be left a minority in the Diet. To overcome this difficulty, he would need between 50 and 80 LDP defectors to constitute a majority.

Watanabe's immediate positive response prompted SDPJ to start negotiations with the remaining factions of LDP on a

The strategy for realign