

## A Chance to Raise Preparedness Level

Our deepening fright of an impending cyclonic disaster had 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 offshore 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 breath 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 an nature: a few northerners having 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 Baisakh. 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 are 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 immedi-

# The Sangsad: When it Meets Again

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

## PASSING CLOUDS

Zillur Rahman Siddiqui

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

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,

JAPANESE political life, as seen from outside, is no different from anywhere else. Some Japanese have 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 Moritomo 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 Moritomo Hosokawa. The policy differences between the coalition partners emerged as a major obstacle in finding a compromise candidate acceptable to

## Japan: End of the Road for Michio Watanabe

by Monzurul Huq

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 (Shinseito), a splinter from the once powerful Liberal Democratic Party (LDP); and the Moetto, whose main support comes from the Buddhist religious organization Soka Gakkai. Right and left of the centre are Democratic Socialist Party (DSP); Moritomo Hosokawa's Japan New Party (JNP); a second LDP splinter Sakigake-New Party; and rela-

tively small United Social Democratic Party. At the left stands the Social Democratic Party of Japan (SDPJ), the largest single group within the ruling coalition. The glue that binds these seven parties is their sheer determination to prevent LDP from returning to power. The only thing they have so far agreed on is keeping the coalition from falling apart. It was, therefore, the natural assumption of many political analysts that, once a real debate on specific policy issues opens among the coalition partners, the coalition government would immediately collapse.

In fact, such a situation did arise on a number of occasions in recent months. On February 3, 1994, Hosokawa announced that his government would introduce a 7 per cent sales-based national welfare tax to replace the current 3 per cent consumption tax. This decision to increase taxes was made without consulting the Chief Cabinet Secretary, Sakigake leader Masayoshi Takemura or cabinet members from SDPJ.

When Takemura launched an attack on the decision, to increase taxes and SDPJ expressed its desire to leave the coalition if it were implemented. Hosokawa had no other option but to backpedal. In March, Hosokawa was once again forced to abandon his decision to reshuffle the cabinet. Coalition leaders themselves were very much aware of this weakness of the government. Some of the coalition leaders, especially Shinseito power broker Ichiro Ozawa, had long intended to get rid of this impasse within the ruling coalition and sought a new political realignment which would ensure his own and Shinseito's leading role in any new coalition government. The resignation of Moritomo Hosokawa gave him the opportunity of starting backdoor dealing towards achieving this long cherished goal. And it is rather unfortunate that a veteran politician like Michio Watanabe eventually fell a victim to Ozawa's hawkish political gambit.

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

possible new realignment between these two parties. This forced Ozawa to be more cautious about all his calculations. Watanabe, on the other hand, might have assessed that Ozawa's proposal offered him his last chance to become prime minister. He promised Ozawa that about 100 LDP Diet members will side with him. Later he lowered the figure to 50 and eventually it dropped to 20 to 30. He was still willing to defect from LDP and continue his efforts to become prime minister. But highly calculating Ozawa, concluding that Watanabe, with a small number of followers, might create such an embarrassing situation for him and Shinseito, where they may possibly end up as minority, abandoned the former Foreign Minister at that crucial stage. With this disappeared all the hopes for Michio Watanabe to become the Prime Minister of Japan and he was compelled to withdraw his decision to leave the LDP. No doubt all these calculations and eventual outcome reflect the sad end of a long political career of a veteran politician. And a section of Japanese media has already started describing him as an "old clown" forsaken by Ozawa.

Workers would receive a 15-day military training after they join an enterprise to learn discipline. So far, none of the army's enterprises has ever run into a major accident, thus setting a safety record in the province. The enterprises are also popular among the local people because of what they have done for the communities. The Qingxu mine, for instance, has contributed 70,000 yuan (about US\$13,000) for the repair of roads and to provide tap water for the local villagers while employing their surplus manpower. Capt. Gu said they have also provided more than 700 desks and stools for three local schools and their doctors have extended free medical services to local people. The 81 enterprises, ranging from mining, metallurgy to softdrinks, have enriched the army. Their earnings, Senior Col Zhang said, now account for 40 per cent of the army's annual expenditure. And they pay 13 kinds of taxes to the state. — *Depthnews Asia*

## Chinese Army — a Self-sufficient Defence Force

Ma Guihua and Xiong Lei write from Beijing

### 'No other army in the world is producing its own necessities on such a scale'

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.

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 modernisation 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-

tence 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.

## 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.**

### Retirement age of Govt servants

Sir, There was a proposal which the Government is understood to have been seriously considering — extension of retirement age of Govt. servants. The issue opened a debate with protagonists and opponents taking up cudgels against each other. Nothing is heard anymore. The young officers feared that in case retirement age is extended beyond present 57 years they will be deprived of future promotions. The seniors insisted that experience and expertise acquired over many years would be denied to the experience hungry Govt. machinery. So on and so forth.

Before long, the young officers themselves entered mellowed years and started having second thoughts of the earlier logic. Each one group had its own justification. The fact remains, after all why is a certain age fixed for retirement? It is the capability and alertness of

The conclusion that only the henchmen are doled out favour becomes inevitable.

Incidentally, retirement age of Govt. servants at 57 in Bangladesh is the lowest in this subcontinent which has similar environment tracing back to identical background. Sooner than later this issue needs to be addressed boldly and objectively in the greater interest of the nation.

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### NGOs and fatwabah

Sir, I would like to draw the attention of the government to a serious issue pertaining to the activities of the NGOs and so-called fatwabahs. It is often alleged that certain NGOs in exchange of job and financial assistance are motivating people to convert to Christianity. On the other hand, a section of people in the name of Islamic values are allegedly passing fatwas which are causing tremendous sufferings to the rural womanfolk.

Under these circumstances, I would request the government to constitute a high-powered committee to review the activities of the NGOs and to bring the fatwabahs to book. The Islamic Foundation, Bangladesh should send delegations comprising of Ulemas to different villages to disseminate

the true messages of Islam and to let the people know the fundamentals of the Islamic law.

M Zahidul Haque  
Assist Prof., BAI, Dhaka

### Road sense and accidents

Sir, Much has been said in the recent past regarding road accidents; many are the suggestions for curbing losses out of such accidents, yet road jams and accidents are as regular and often as that have been. We also express our sympathy with those who loss their near and dear ones at the hands of people having little regard for road rules and safe driving. Finally, in our efforts to pinpoint the causes and remedies we now go deep into the background and psychology of road users in our country and the state of policing.

In my opinion, road accidents normally occur due to reasons of impatience in road users. First, we suffer from frustration of being caught behind a slow-moving vehicle. Second, angered at being cut off overtaken by another driver, and finally due to our (apparently) desperate bid to be somewhere else immediately. Emotions such as these can easily explode into lethal ma-

noeuvring without any regard to road safety/rules and the results are normally fatal.

Again, highway drivers are apt to move in a bunch — which results into multiple accidents, where speed is one of the other factors. However, there are exceptions to rule which an experienced driver needs to make to ensure against mechanical failures.

Take the case of brake riding — in situations when you are passing through an extremely heavy rain or driving through flooded areas, you are required to keep the brakes linings heated and dry; wet brakes would not stop anything and many drivers have learned the lesson rather too late.

Our public, the ultimate road-users, are typically ill-disciplined and whimsical. Instead of regulating the traffic and asking the drivers to follow road rules, they are invariably causing traffic jams and thereby accidents. Take the bus-stops for example. Successive governments have taken keen interest to develop the bus-stops with stalls, seats etc. But who uses these! The waiting passengers crowd the road away from the stops and near the road-crossing, making a mess of everything.

We have a big mix of vehicular traffic plying on the roads — mechanical transports, rickshaws, push carts etc. We wish her all success and a happy life in her new home-land.

O H Kabir

Dhaka-1203

Rickshaw pullers, have a peculiar mentality of flouting all road rules and avail the road for themselves. And most of the passengers travelling by somehow or other carry the same attitude. Hardly any citizen can or would ever stop a rickshaw-puller from doing wrong or taking risks.

Finally, much is expected of our police force engaged in traffic duties. Unless they are effective on road, until they cause the wrong-doers fear and they come up with an effective system of crime checking with deterrent punishment, no road would be safe. The police do not need the 'rod of confidence' but, perhaps, discipline and incentive. And, above all, their image is required to be greatly improved.

Col Mirza Shafi (Rtd)

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### Congratulations

Sir, We congratulate and warmly welcome Ms Leung Lai Ching of Hong Kong being the first foreign national becoming a citizen of Bangladesh under provision of Bangladesh Citizenship Order, 1992.

We wish her all success and a happy life in her new home-land.

O H Kabir

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