

## Direct Approach to Water-sharing

The outstanding problem of water-sharing between Bangladesh and India has at last come to the table. It was in May 1991 when Bangladesh Prime Minister visited India that the matter came up for discussion and India assured cooperation in solving the problem. Then when the Indian Prime Minister visited Dhaka in connection with the SAARC summit in April 1993, he promised to get back with a water-sharing formula at the soonest. This did not materialise for two full years. So, the two rounds of talks held on the issue after prime ministers of Bangladesh and India met in Delhi on the occasion of the SAARC summit indeed constitute a positive — and therefore welcome — development.

Indian External Affairs Minister Pranab Kumar Mukherjee has expressed his optimism that a solution to the problem would not be difficult to find out. Without holding such an expression of optimism suspect, we would like to make the point that for the people on this side of the border it is a matter of life and death. The fact is that since after the expiry of the agreement on water sharing in 1988, India has been unilaterally diverting the lean season Ganges water at Farakka, leaving only a meagre 9,000 cubic feet per second for Bangladesh. That is a drastic reduction from the previous flow of 34,000 cusecs. Its cumulative consequences are heavily felt by the people here now.

As it transpires from various sources, including the Indian newspapers, Delhi might like to link the water sharing issue with other matters like transit facilities for India through Bangladesh territory. These are separate issues belonging to different parameters altogether. What we want is a conceptual de-linking of the two issues. These are to be judged on their own merits. This is how justice can be done to them. Since the process of negotiation on water sharing has got under way, there is no scope to make it complex and confuse it with other bilateral problems. Nor will it be wise to stall or delay the process on any plea that the worst for the year — lean period — is about to be over and that the monsoon will soon set in. A solution to this problem is over due. Admit it or not, the fact is that it has strained relations between India and Bangladesh as no other contentious issue has done. We hope the spirit with which the two rounds of talks were held will be further extended to bring out a lasting solution to the problem.

## Sri Lankan Ordeal

The ethnic war in Sri Lanka is back. The re-incarnation has been in a virulent form. The downing of two government military planes last week by Tamil Tigers who used ground-to-air missiles to sprang that dastardly surprise was signal enough of things to come. The total figure of casualties recorded since April 19 when they first mined two gunboats and topped it off later on by attacking military bases, stands now at 240 dead, including 183 soldiers.

The LTTE has chosen the warpath. How long the government forces will be able to remain entirely defensive keeping from retaliatory strikes upon the Tamil rebels is anybody's guess. Some news agency reports dropped hints about Sri Lanka seeking Indian military aid to fight off the Tamil separatists. These speculations found no confirmation in the reported statement of either Indian Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee or that of Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar, closely on the heels of New Delhi SAARC summit. It was suggested in an earlier report that President Kumaratunga who had to cut short her SAARC visit by a day to attend to some pressing preoccupations at home might have sought some kind of Indian assistance to combat Tamil insurrection.

One rules out Delhi's direct military involvement in Sri Lanka following the costly experience it had to entail in the pursuit of the 1987 Indo-Sri Lanka Accord. India can very well wield though considerable influence over the Tamil minority who have had ancestral origins in India, apart from helping Sri Lanka in matters of surveillance as her next-door neighbour.

The sincerity with which president Kumaratunga had made the peace overture to the LTTE and her dogged pursuit of the course of negotiations, often getting into a bind, have all gone down very well with us. We think the LTTE should still find reason to reciprocate. Let the sordid memory of the 12-year war stop it from straying into the blood-spilling of an endless conflict.

## The ADF Chink

ADB's soft lending window, the Asian Development Fund (ADF), is in for a crunch. This is worrisome news for 33 developing countries which have been beneficiaries of this umbrella-like banking institution providing them with loans repayable in forty years. Bangladesh would be the worst-hit if the funding, which has been largely to her social sectors, gets dried up. With increasing demands on ADF, this soft lending fund is now left with 1.6 billion US dollar which can only do up to 1996.

The replenishment has lagged behind largely because of the US' reluctance to meet her commitments. In 1992 the US fulfilled only 35 per cent of \$680m promised by her. At the 28th annual meeting of the ADB in Auckland the US delegate said to the effect that his government would pursue the matter with the Republican-dominated Congress to see what it could do to strengthen the dwindling fund. The risk here is, if a large contributor such as the US should fail to honour its commitments, some other developed countries might follow suit precipitating ADF's collapse.

The news has not been abjectly as bad. Delegates from Japan, Canada, Switzerland, Netherlands and Denmark waxed supportive of the soft-lending operation for poor developing countries at the Auckland conference with an obvious good omen that they would maintain an active interest in ADF. The world's poor total one billion in number, of whom 700m live in the Asia-Pacific region. As many as 500m people among that 700m are absolute poor. To add poignance to all this, the WHO annual report says that poverty has been the worst killer in Asia. The biggest rationale behind the ADF lending lies in the need for continuity of the social development programmes undertaken in the developing world.

# FAP Final Report: A Case of Rediscovering the Wheel?

by Dr Saleemul Huq and Dr A Atiq Rahman

*The need for environmental and social issues to be considered and the need for people's participation were all recommendations made by the critics at the beginning of FAP and were the basis of their advocacy campaign. It is indeed unfortunate that it has taken five years and US\$ 150 million and a lot of energy wasted in confrontation to re-discover these needs.*

THE Flood Action Plan (FAP) is the biggest and most expensive planning exercise in the natural resource sector in Bangladesh having started in 1989 with a five-year initial planning phase consisting of twenty-six main components (and a number of sub-components) at an estimated cost of over US\$150 million (which included studies as well as some pilot projects). The Draft Final Report prepared by the Flood Plan Coordination Organization (FPCO) was presented by the Minister for Water Resources in November 1994 amid much fanfare. The FPCO draft document contained thirteen chapters of which the first six described the background, planning approach, management, physical and socio-economic environment, water management alternatives and social, economic and environmental considerations. Chapters seven to eleven described the regional studies, pilot projects, supporting studies (e.g. fisheries and environment) and data collection while chapter twelve presented the plan as a list of sixty-five projects involving a total investment of over US dollars two and a half billion over the next 10 years. Finally chapter thirteen dealt with institutional issues.

The distribution of projects in terms of investment value were 9 per cent for rehabilitation, 13 per cent for river training, 22 per cent for urban protection, 20 per cent for flood management, 20 per cent for the Ganges Barrage, 12 per cent for

drainage and irrigation, 3 per cent for environment and fisheries and 2 per cent for studies and modelling. The single largest proposed investment of about US\$ 500 million was for the Ganges Barrage in the South-West region representing 20 per cent of the total outlay.

The November Draft Final Report of the FPCO was given to other government agencies, donors, NGOs and others for comments. After the release of the report many donors, including the World Bank and UNDP undertook their own evaluation of the report which they fed back to FPCO and the government of Bangladesh.

### Revised Final Report

Subsequently in April 1995, another newer, much shorter (only 22 printed pages), multi-colour, attractively produced, Draft Final Report entitled "Bangladesh Water and Flood Management Study" dated March 1995, was circulated by FPCO for further comments by the end of April for incorporation in the Final Report to be discussed at a conference with donors to be held at the end of May 1995.

The much shorter March 1995 version compared to the November 1994 version is so different that it hardly seems possible that the two reports were written by the same organi-

sation. Indeed the latest report bears an uncanny resemblance to a paper called "Next Steps" recently prepared by the World Bank. It has been alleged the FPCO and the Government of Bangladesh were made to swallow it by the donors. If this is true then it would indeed be very sad, even if many of the things it says are sound and have been proposed by FAP critics for years. This raises the fundamental question of ownership, since the efficacy of any policy or plan depends on the commitment of the proponents of that policy. It is not for the donors, however well-intentioned, to force the government to accept any particular set of views, even if we advocated for them. We would much rather have an open and informed public debate with FAP proponents and try to convince them of the soundness of our ideas. Even if we do not agree on everything, it is the process of debate that is important and not the imposition of one side's ideas on the other by force. To us, this is a case where the ends do not justify the means.

However, assuming that there has been a genuine change of heart and that the March 1995 Report in fact reflects the latest thinking of FPCO it is indeed a remarkable document and represents a sea change in terms of priorities and perceptions. First

of all it does away with the nomenclature of "Flood Action Plan" and adopts the title "Water and Flood Management Strategy". Secondly it drops the list of sixty-five projects prioritized by FPCO in the previous report and "recommends a further five-year programme involving (a) preparation of a national water management plan, (b) strengthening of water sector organizations responsible for planning, construction, operation and maintenance, and (c) implementation of a compact portfolio of high priority projects." It envisages a further five years period up to 2000 AD of planning, studies to develop a National Water Plan as well as some priority projects at a total cost of US\$ 350 million. A high priority is given to institutionalization of the planning capacity in the water sector with a recommendation to merge FPCO with WARPO to take on water sector planning with BWDB to undertake their detailed feasibility studies and implementation. This process is expected to lead to possible investment programmes to be implemented over the first 25 years of the next century.

### Rediscovering the Wheel

The revised report also lays significant emphasis on participation of local communities as well as environment and social

issues. It also envisages a greater role for NGOs and the private sector in future water resource planning. The most remarkable thing about the main elements of this revised report, namely the need for a National Water Plan, the need for a multi-disciplinary planning, the need for environmental and social issues to be considered and the need for people's participation were all recommendations made by the critics at the beginning of FAP and were the basis of their advocacy campaign. It is indeed unfortunate that it has taken five years and US\$ 150 million and a lot of energy wasted in confrontation to re-discover these needs. However, now that the lessons have been learnt we should try to move on from here in a spirit of maintaining the momentum of this new thinking. We therefore feel that roles of the critics of FAP (both amongst the NGOs and academics) need to evolve from general opposition (although still maintaining reservations about any pilot construction and intense scrutiny and monitoring at every stage) to insisting, and if necessary, assisting the government to stick to the commitments it has now made and to improve on them for betterment of the people and ecosystems of Bangladesh. If this is done as promised it is possible to develop a National

Water Plan that is truly environmentally sound, socially acceptable and multi-sectoral to meet the needs of the nation.

### Lessons learnt

The main lessons that seem to have been learnt as reflected in the revised Final Report of March 1995, we would argue, come more from the critics of FAP than from the studies carried out over the last five years.

We would consider that this is the contribution of civil society to the issue and shows the extremely valuable (at practically no monetary cost) role played by elements of society outside the FAP community (both government as well as consultants and engineers). To us the main lesson, therefore, is that a vitally important natural resource sector such as water is the legitimate domain of discussion, debate and reflection by all elements of society including government, academics, NGOs, politicians, parliamentarians, the media and above all, people at large. If the future National Water Planning exercise can be truly broadened to include these elements of society then we would be able to learn the right lessons from the exercise so far. The way forward is a genuinely open and candid public debate on all aspects of National Water Planning.

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## On Attending Official Meetings in Bangladesh

*Some meetings are definitely held to avoid responsibility, and to rope in as many people as possible so that when the hour of reckoning will strike, no one in particular may be held accountable for the decision taken.*

DURING my years in government service, I have acquired what may be described as "meeting phobia." If I could find an excuse, I would invariably avoid attending an official meeting. And if I had to attend one, I would switch off at least half the capacity of my mental faculties, while pretending to be attentive. I am certain I am not the only civil servant in Bangladesh who has developed such an allergy to official meetings.

Indeed, I resent the manner in which these meetings are conducted nowadays, and I have my reasons. Firstly, most meetings are long and useless, leading to more meetings (despite "meeting-less days"), so that at the end of the day there is no concrete output. On meeting days, no schedule can be maintained because meetings are not only too long but unpredictable long, defying all prior estimates and predictions of the time that may be taken. Particularly, this becomes inevitable when one has to hop from one meeting to another.

Some meetings are definitely held to avoid responsibility, and to rope in as many people as possible so that when the hour of reckoning will strike, no one in particular may be held accountable for the decision taken. In such a scheme of things, decisions are generally taken well in advance by the high-ups, with meetings serving the purpose of legitimisation. "Purchase meetings," in particular, tend to fall

into this category. In a hierarchy-ridden society, meetings may mean simply incoherent haranguing and monologues from the chair, with others, at best, allowed to nod in agreement. In such circumstances, I have often spent my time counting the number of times the boss utters his favourite expressions and swear words.

One disgusting aspect of official meetings in our country is that people turn up thoroughly unprepared, even when enough warning has been given. Some will quite shamelessly claim that because they are so busy they could not find the time to go through the agenda and the working paper. But the agony does not stop there. Then, based on either hearsay or their concocted assumptions, they will make some wild comments which should enrage even the coolest of human beings. Unfortunately, no one dares to talk back at them, which they richly deserve (for example, I have often wanted to say, "If you are so unprepared, why the hell have you come to the meeting and why are you now talking through your hat?") because it is a formal occasion and they are high-ups. Others will say, "I am sorry, in the Ministry, I do not deal with this subject. I am here only as substitute." In other words, that person can neither contribute nor commit anything on behalf of

his/her organisation.

The organisers of meetings in Bangladesh are no less to blame for all that goes wrong. The agenda and the working paper will generally be poorly drafted and will be going out at the eleventh hour, followed by amendments in the next half-hour. The same is true of minutes of the meetings. It is at times difficult for a reader to separate decisions from the account of long-winded discussions in the minutes, and that can be quite

at the same time, leading to an impasse. Some of them must speak compulsively even if no intervention is required and the comments are quite irrelevant. The subject matter, purpose and the final outcome of the meetings are of no consequence to these categories of officials. Finally, some meetings can turn really sour with accusations, counter accusations, swear words, innuendos, etc flying all over the place.

The level at which meetings

meeting visitors. They complain that they are sick and tired of being constantly told by the Personal Assistant that the boss is busy in the other room holding a meeting, while he may in fact be having tea and "adda" with his buddies. Coming late to meetings is another common problem encountered in our country. Traffic jams, being held up by bosses, a clash with another sudden meeting, etc are the common excuses, and for bosses there need not be any excuse at all. Sometimes, this causes others to wait hours on end with all schedules for the day thrown to the winds.

Meetings with foreigners is another painful experience in Bangladesh. Since competence in using English has gone down drastically in our country, one has to be careful in choosing who should meet whom, and at what level. To give an extreme example, if you tell a foreign lady in the opening sentence, "Madam, how is your body?" (literal translation of "Apar Sharir Kemon Achey?"), it will certainly sour up the subsequent discussion. Another sordid sight is that when holding formal meetings with foreign delegations, the Bangladesh side is at least twice as large. This is because everyone would like to be included in the delegation, so that his or her presence maybe displayed on TV, or at least, in

the next morning's newspaper. Unfortunately, very few realise that this kind of asymmetry gives a terrible kind of impression of the country to outsiders. There are, of course, the usual problems of being unprepared and unstructured against a determined, disciplined and well-prepared group of people, so that nothing concrete comes out of these meetings with the foreigners.

Finally, one need not elaborate on the time and money wasted on food and drinks served in the meetings. But like it or not, some people attend certain meetings only because of the quality of food and drinks being served there, and would loudly complain if for some reason the food on some occasions is a little less tasty than usual.

Now where do we go from here? I do not think that the "meeting" problems are beyond redemption, provided we develop a realistic code for meetings and strictly adhere to it at all levels. Unfortunately, there has never been any concerted effort to address this "minor" problem, the attention being always diverted to larger issues such as pay rise, inter-service parity, etc. Cannot the Cabinet Secretary, with the permission of the PM, set up a small committee to examine this issue and come up with specific recommendations in a month's time? If we can then formulate a rational code for meetings, we should also be able to disseminate the same through training and wide publicity.

## Making Government Work

annoying to a busy executive pressed for time. The time of the meetings will invariably clash with other engagements of the boss, so he will ask someone else at the last moment to preside on his behalf, and this puts others off attending the meeting, because the new guy probably has not the slightest clue about the purpose of the meeting. Too many people, and the wrong kind of people, will be invited to meetings, leading to confusions and indecisions.

Then there is the tendency of some people to show off their knowledge and expertise mostly in order to impress the boss. They would like to speak out all

are held is also of great importance in Bangladesh. Given the poor degree of delegation, junior level meetings are generally worse than talk shops. People can only report back to their respective bosses but not take any decision. Then, there is the rigid pecking order to consider in deciding who would preside, and at what level representatives would be sent to a meeting presided by so and so. This means that in meetings form is always more important than substance.

The public take a dim view of official meetings. Many members of the public genuinely believe that official meetings are an excuse to avoid work and

## 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.**

### Save Dhaka

Sir, Surrounded and also criss-crossed by rivers, rivulets, canals and low lying areas vulnerable to flood Dhaka with a small area but vast population of eight million people which is expected to exceed ten million by the year 2000, and beset with water scarcity, erratic power supply, nasty sewage system, continuous road-digging, occupation of busy and important roads by hawkers and political parties (holding public meetings), haphazard parking of rickshaws, buses, cars and trucks, acute traffic jam and housing problem, awkward and crowded transportation system and thousand and one other problems, is perhaps the most disorderly metropolitan city in the world.

Unfortunately there seems no authority, whatsoever, in existence in Dhaka which is responsible to look after the problems and difficulties of the city dwellers and to ensure their welfare.

We strongly feel that due allegedly to dereliction, lapses and omissions of the Ministry of Home Affairs, Ministry of Works, Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development, Ministry of Communications, Dhaka District

Administration, DCC, RAJUK, WASA, DESA, Dhaka Metropolitan Police and many other organisations, Dhaka is moving fast towards a catastrophe.

Regularly we read reports, articles, features, editorials and readers' letters opinions and also see photographs published in the dailies and weeklies on aspects of sufferings and problems of the city dwellers but of no avail. Time to time some of our authorities concerned asseverate their good intention to solve the sufferings of the people but their inaction belie them. We wonder what the freedom of press is meant for? The members of the public would go on crying and the authorities concerned would simply keep mum and sit idle? Is it the accountability and responsibility of the authorities concerned? We do not know whether Dhaka has a master plan or not. If yes, why hundreds of houses and multistoried buildings have sprang up on narrow roads at Mohakhali and continue to be built along many a narrow road in new Dhaka?

A bridge across the Buriganga river has been built near Pagla, another bridge is being constructed at Badamtoli. We do not know to

which side Dhaka city is supposed to be expanded more — north, south, east or west? But let the authorities concerned announce provision for basic civic amenities and facilities, road, electricity, gas, telephone, sewage, water supply, school and colleges safety and security of life and property of the people for a planned development of any area, east or west, south or north.

We once again urge the authorities concerned to kindly take the following steps, phase-wise, to save Dhaka from chaos, confusion and future degradation.

- 1) shift the Central Jail from Nazimuddin Road to Ghazipur or the other side of the river Buriganga.
- 2) shift Bangabhaban from Gulistan-Motijheel Commercial Area to Baridhara or Old Tejgaon Airport area.
- 3) shift Bangladesh Secretariat from Topkhana to Sher-e-Bangla Nagar and Dhaka District Courts from Nawabpur to Bangladesh Secretariat Building area.
- 4) remove all unlicensed rickshaws from the city.
- 5) stop hawkers and vendors using roads and pavements and build multi-storied markets for them in different areas.
- 6) select roads for introducing and plying of circular bus service round the clock in the city where buses should not stop at any bus stop for more than a minute.
- 7) make parts of Surahwardy Uddyan, Manik Mia Avenue and Municipal Shishu Park opposite Bangabhaban as venues for holding public meetings.
- 8) construct some flyovers and underground tunnels to avoid

traffic jams at different crowded points.

10) coordinate works among Dhaka District Administration, DCC, RAJUK, Traffic Police, WASA, DESA, Titas Gas, T&T and other bodies concerned.

Let the BNP, AL, Jamaat, JP political leaders and the concerned government officials sit together, discuss and decide the future courses of action and save Dhaka before it is too late.

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### Be kind to patients

Sir, "Dacter shahab, amar ma ki moira gachey?" "Na, morbo kan, kintu onek roketar daker".

The above dialogues have been uttered in a motivational ad released by 'Shandhawni' for donation of blood. A poor girl (must be poor as it has been visualized and it is in a Govt hospital) asks the Professor coming out of the operation theatre after attending her mother undergoing a surgery — "Dr Shahab, has my mother already died?" "No, why should she, but a huge quantity of blood is needed" replies the doctor.

Almost every evening when one watches this ad on the TV screen, a question strikes one's mind — is there really any senior doctor who speaks so sympathetically to such a poor girl and attends a poor patient with so much care in a Govt hospital? Perhaps there is hardly a few but majority would not consider the human aspects while attending such poor patients. Unfortunately but

true, a patient has to buy a doctor's attention in exchange of huge money like he has to spend for medicines and clinical tests!

I have referred the above situation only to bring the fact to the kind notice of our learned senior as well as junior doctors that a caring voice and some words of consolation and assurance often provides much more healing to the patient which a costly medicine may not ensure.

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### Off to shorter travel

Sir, The decision of Bangladesh aviation authority to open up her domestic sky to (foreign) private air services is a pragmatic step toward faster transportation to and from possible off-line areas of the country.

The purposive STOL routes interlinking the border urbanised places in particular and other important spots in general will fill a void in this delta travel field.

Since STOL services will provide easy access to remote destinations otherwise difficult for surface transports, every nook and corner of the land should be explored for probable connection.

STOL services should also be extended to commercially viable centers of the republic having little or no convenient traffic facilities.

For low cost transportation,

STOL freight should be well networked with other cargo services nationwide.

Alongwith other national travel means STOL flight schedule should flexibly connect international carriers toward more efficient travels worldwide.

Standard safety measures before, during, and after the flights should be secured.

To meet any emergency besides regular services, STOL flights should be readily available in each principal administrative center of the state.

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### On political crisis

Sir, Demand for caretaker government is not acceptable to the government on the ground that it is unconstitutional as there is no such provision in the constitution. Press report has it that government had made an offer (to the Opposition) to step down 30 days ahead of the general election. Unfortunately, there is no such provision in the constitution. Rather the constitution provides for dissolving the Parliament 90 days before general election.

It is interesting to note how a government so vocal to safeguard the constitutional provision could make an offer not provided for in the constitution. And if it is intended to amend the constitution subsequently why not then provide for caretaker government by amendment?

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