

Disaster Preparedness

It's only the beginning of *Jatshtha* and yet the rains are here in full fierce power. And it's not really the rains alone but a regular disaster season seems to have struck the whole of our land. Storms were doing their usual battering business and suddenly there was a spurt. And along came the pervasive inundations in the southern districts and high tides in the coastal regions. Together these are disaster enough. The fact that there is no schedule for the end of such appointment with cataclysm compounds the problem limitlessly.

One bout of such disaster can put back an area by years virtually pauperising it and bringing to nought things that it had built up over decades. And the tally of all the disasters in a year takes a toll of the nation as a whole, computable in terms of tens of billions of Taka. But the imponderable part of the toll — human suffering and social degeneration — does outstrip that. Are we as a nation set to come to grips with this stupendous challenge? An apt appreciation of the true nature and size of it is as yet awaited.

A Disaster Preparedness Programme as also a centre of the same name are already on the job ostensibly denoted by the nomenclature. We are yet to know much about it. When the disasters seem to have been almost institutionalised it was but the fitting thing to have an institutional body to prepare to take on the onslaught. Previously both anti-strike and post-strike exertions used to be of the most ad-hoc type. The present effort is definitely an improvement on that. But we have a hunch that the set-up may not have been charged with going the whole hog over the vast range that the disasters affect. What can such a cell do when the scale of the challenge is truly nation-sized?

Let us ask ourselves, to illustrate the point, are we now prepared to reach any offshore island within hours of an elemental strike of the April 30, '91-size? That time the government of sovereign Bangladesh took more than a week to land succour on Sandwip, which is more a mainland adjunct than a far-flung remote island. Are we prepared not to repeat the fiasco of all our past performances in the matter?

Extending Telecom Service

The observance of the World Telecommunication Day yesterday has marked a closer link of information never known before. While the advanced countries are opening up new frontiers and vistas of information technology, the developing countries are also getting some of its benefits. But that is mostly at the top-level. The rest of the country is mostly left out of this information miracle. The observance of the day here can be meaningful if this aspect is kept in mind and focus is directed to bring more and more of our rural areas under the coverage of telecommunication system.

That the task seems to be highly daunting is not only because of our lack of resource but also because we cannot make the system efficient enough to bring down the cost of the service. Admittedly, telephone service here is one of the costliest in the world. So immediate attention has to be paid to make the service less costly, making the facility available to more and more people. In this connection the Grameen Bank expressed its desire to extend telephonic facility to rural areas. This was not an outlandish expression by ministers who love to be in the limelight by throwing novel ideas. The idea came from an organisation that has practically proved that the poor of the society are most credit-worthy.

So here is one area that the Grameen Bank has drawn our attention to. Now the government can lend a supporting hand by doing its part of the job properly. The government, however, needs to do as much in its own interests. Without an effective telecommunication system efficient governance is out of the question. Our international dialing system has become more or less standardised and stabilised. Now what we need is to improve the quality of service of our internal telecommunication system. So both expansion and improvement are in order if we want to join the international community finding itself in an information explosion.

Safe Latrine for All

A report from Chalan Beel says that people of as many as 600 villages have lost interest in village sanitary latrines. The latrines that were very popular among villagers for its low cost are no longer cheap. According to report, the expenses of manufacturing ring and slab were jointly borne by the UNICEF and the Department of Public Health. After the withdrawal of government assistance, a set of ring and slab now costs Tk 405; whereas its previous price was Tk 250. This sudden rise in price is discouraging people from buying a facility that has virtually revolutionised rural hygiene.

Reportedly, only eight per cent families of the Chalan Beel area are using this type of sanitary latrine and the rest 92 per cent consider the price not much appealing. Tk 405 is not, as such, a high price for this health-giving facility. But the fact that it was available for Tk 250 certainly works as a mental barrier for the village people who are yet to fully appreciate the value of such a facility. Moreover, there are others who cannot truly afford that much money so easily. And it seems it is not a case of Chalan Beel alone, the programme is equally affected in other areas of the country.

We consider the sudden change of mind of the public health department inappropriate. There are areas where the government certainly needs to spend some money, because it is worth doing. People yet to be fully alive to health and hygiene must be assisted — if need be pampered — to avail of the facilities that prove deciding. Safe disposal of human excreta is a major problem in this country. If the lack of government assistance — specially after its introduction once — acts as a disincentive to a healthy habit, we can expect only further perils in the future. Health for all will ring hollow. So, a government contribution should better be considered an investment rather than a subsidy. Because it proves highly paying ultimately as it wards off many of the common diseases.

On the night of Wednesday May 10, 1995 when Eid was being celebrated in Pakistan (and Kashmir), Indian security forces surrounding the small group of Mujahideen encamped inside the holy shrine of Charar-e-Sharif and attempted to expel the occupants by force of arms. Eye witnesses have testified that the fire which destroyed the shrine was a deliberate act of wanton arson on the part of the attacking troops to gain their objective.

Quick of the mark, Indian Internal Security Minister Rajesh Pilot, immediately put the blame "squarely" on Pakistan and threatened that India "would complete the unfinished business of taking over (Azad) Kashmir" or words to that effect. In an outstanding display of rank calumny, Indian High Commissioner in UK appeared live on BBC last Thursday morning and labelled Charar-e-Sharif as a Hindu shrine that "Pakistanis had desecrated." That statement set the tone for Indian propaganda machine in a sustained attempt at "damage control." It was not till Saturday when foreign correspondents reached the vicinity of the outrage that details of Indian perfidy were sifted by the world media.

Since Rajesh Pilot has explicitly threatened Pakistan with war (as no incursion in Azad Kashmir could be confined to that region), Pakistan's Foreign Minister, Sardar Assef Ali, issued a denial about Pakistan's supposed involvement in the incident. He also made it clear that Pakistan would defend itself if attacked. Consequently, alarm bells have started to go off all over the world as the threat of a possible "Fourth Round" between Pakistan and India a distinct possibility.

India put its security forces on its borders in a state of high alert and Prime Minister

Narasimha Rao had called an all parties conference at short notice in New Delhi on Sunday May 14, 1995.

On her part Pakistan's PM Ms Benazir Bhutto has strongly castigated India for the atrocity and called an emergency meeting of the Federal Cabinet the same evening to consider the situation and Pakistan's options. In the face of accelerating escalation, the first steps leading to an all out war between Pakistan and India seem to have been taken and as the long, hot summer gets into its stride, tensions will increase till we cross a mutually recognisable fail-safe line. But we in Pakistan must seriously ask ourselves, is war the answer to the Kashmir solution or for that matter other simmering disputes between Pakistan and India? For many reasons that need to be analysed in some detail, it is in Pakistan's interest not to go to war while it is in India's interest to force the issue at this time.

The situation inside Indian held Kashmir, is that despite overwhelming numbers, Indian security forces have not been able to stop the various Mujahideen groups from proliferating while the guerilla activity has increased in a manner that has stopped economic and routine activity in the Valley. Indians have tightened security all along the Line of Control (LOC) in Kashmir to avoid material help from Pakistan and they were given a surprise gift by the closure of the logistics route which the Sikh militants provided to the Kashmiri Mujahideen through

Flashpoint Kashmir

by Ikram Sehgal

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Indian Punjab when PM Ms Benazir Bhutto "helped" Rajiv Gandhi (by her own admission) in the tackling of the Sikh question during her first tenure as PM.

In the face of such sanitisation, any movement that is not indigenous is bound to fail. There is no way that any outside force can sustain guerilla movement inside Indian-held Kashmir for so long without the people of Kashmir themselves being inherently involved in the forefront of free-

common knowledge. This withdrawal of traditional support has led to Congress losing many state elections.

India may well feel that Pakistan is diplomatically isolated with only lukewarm support possible from its traditional allies Iran and China. With Saudi support emasculated because of US-Iran diplomatic confrontation, India would possibly believe that Pakistan would be hard put to depend upon outside help to counter overwhelming Indian

countries cannot be controlled. Our infrastructure facilities such as railways, roads, dams, etc. are not able to pay for themselves because of revenue shortages due to leakages. Without drawing the private sector into the country's socio-economic development, we cannot hope for economic emancipation. On the other hand, what we are achieving by ruing them financially? GDP is increasingly going to rely on General Sales Tax (GST) to make up for its revenues, a Herculean effort steeped in frustration in a society that shuns documentation for the most part.

The blizzard of MOUs signed by the present regime with foreign companies, primarily in the energy sector, have become the subject of macabre humour, nothing more expressive than MAXIM's cartoon about a beggar asking a passerby to "at least give an MOU" if not some money.

There is method to the Federal Govt's seeming madness, not the least being its publicity potential. The general cynicism among the knowledgeable notwithstanding, the real target is the mass perception and the proven gullibility of the general public when their aspirations are utilised by expansive rhetoric. None of the US\$ 80 billion in MOUs promised to the Soviet Union during the Gorbachev era ever saw the light of day. The Soviet masses were given a glimpse of Heaven as their country was led to systematic destruction

even as Gorbachev's ego was being stroked by the western media as an "outstanding" leader of his time.

The Soviet Union paid the price for Mr Gorbachev's self propagation which lasted till the nation he led became economically bankrupt and thereafter the union self-destructed.

Thereafter Gorbachev, having served his purpose, became history. The popular (and unfulfilled) "Roti, Kapra and Makaan" slogan of the 70s given by the PM's late father is another case in point. On the other hand, even if 15-20 per cent of the MOUs come to fruition it would constitute substantial progress in overcoming the present India's interest to stop its hemorrhaging. It is in Pakistan's supreme interest to let the Indians bleed without going to war.

In the meantime, we cannot afford to put our guard down as India will certainly use this opportunity to try and Balkanize us, incidentally an interest that western nations (and Israel) who are apprehensive of our nuclear potential share. Indians may launch a limited incursion in Kashmir, possibly heliborne operations to try and cut off Pakistani forces in Azad Kashmir or launch an air strike against suspected nuclear facilities in mainland Pakistan. Already Neelum Valley has been more or less cut off by the Indians for regular supplies, with about 50-60000 people affected but we have kept our patience.

We rushed into war in 1948 and 1965 and into a self-created no-win situation in 1971.

This time let's keep our heads. In the end, one can only advise our leaders to keep their cool and not to succumb to grave provocation. We should not rush in, where even angels fear to tread.

AS I SEE IT

Ikram Sehgal writes from Karachi

dom struggle. Given that this armed struggle has now attracted adverse international pressure for India, intense diplomatic activity has intensified to solve the Kashmir dispute. Above all, the Indian armed forces have been drawn into a debilitating struggle that is sapping morale and equipment. As an endless black hole for hard-earned revenues, the Indians see their "economic miracle" in jeopardy if there is no end to the budgetary revenues being drawn into supporting a no-win situation. At the same time the Congress Party has seen its support from Indian Muslims, who were attracted by its secular nature, gradually erode and transferred to other parties as atrocities and miseries of Kashmiri Muslim have become

numbers and sophisticated weaponry. With Pakistan's economy in shambles and the armed forces bereft of induction of new equipment and spares for some time, India may surmise that Pakistan would be at its lowest ebb in successfully sustaining a war environment. This is further jeopardised by the unnecessary civil strife in Pakistan's only port city of Karachi.

Whereas our struggle in Afghanistan should have created favourable conditions that would have ensured Afghanistan's help in any future war with India, a short-sighted policy has seen India reap the dividends of a war she opposed tooth and nail in the 80s as a dependable Soviet ally a tacit acceptance that smuggling of foodgrains to neighbouring

Let More Fruit Trees Enhance Our Wealth, Health and Environment

by Dr Noazesh Ahmed

ABINDRANATH Tagore glorified the fruit tree in his poems and songs

O, mango grove
We come to rest
In your tranquil blue-green
shade to take
Into our souls life rich, life
ever juvenescent.
Life true to earth.....

Tagore not only honoured the fruit trees in words, but he had envisioned their importance in our daily life and environment. In any occasion he patronized plantation and nurturing of fruit bearing trees. Today we see and feel his far-sightedness. Fruits enrich our food with providing vitamins, minerals, useful fibre and enzymes. Fruits trees also provide us with common man's timber, fuel wood, shade and protection to our homes. As a whole, they offer us sustainable income and food for good health more than any other groups of trees.

The other day I witnessed a magnificent scene in southern Vietnam and Laos — a Government sponsored massive tree plantation programme. Those saplings were of fruit-trees like mango, mangosteen, litchi, pomelo, guava, carambola, tamarind and many others. There the government placed first priority to fruit trees for national health and harmonious environment for human habitat. Per capita annual intake of fruit in those two countries is over 60 kg.

Let us now look at our country's scenario. Our per capita consumption of fruits is about 12 kg, very low indeed compared with our neighbouring countries. This insufficiency augments the misery of our overall poor diet vis-a-vis protein, vitamins and minerals. As a consequence, blindness among children, skin and oral diseases due to deficiency of vitamins A, B and C are common. Anemia, goiter, dental diseases are due to insufficiency of minerals like iron, iodine and calcium. Fresh fruits and vegetables are rich in these nutrients.

But when we start scanning through fact sheets we are amazed to find some alarming facts. They convey the message of gross negligence in developing our horticultural crops — fruits, vegetables, spices, flowers. In 1992, the contribution of the agriculture sector to the GDP was about 35 per cent. Crops contribute 30 per cent while the rest comes from for-



A taste of luscious mango: Healthy habit (above) and the century-old mango tree at Kallyanpur, Chapal Nawabganj. — Photos by the author.

est products, livestock and fisheries. In relation to crops, cereals account for 73 per cent and horticultural crops, only 12 per cent — fruits 6.0 per cent, vegetables 3.7 per cent and spices 2.3 per cent. The contribution of other crops are as follows: jute 3.2 per cent, sugarcane 3.3 per cent, tea 2.3 per cent, pulses 2.8 per cent and oilseeds 2.3 per cent. In other words, after rice still, horticultural crops' contribution is the most significant.

Unfortunately, despite their importance in general nutrition and their contribution to the national income, public investment in research and development for horticultural crops is insignificant compared to other crops. Jute, sugarcane, tea, fishery, livestock have their own research, training and development institutes.

Let us now talk about another limitation to horticulture development. We all know that Bangladesh is one of the most densely populated countries in the world. Land/man ratio is accordingly the lowest. About 58 per cent of the land is used for crop husbandry. Very small piece of land is available around the homestead, roadside and other places as cultivable waste for meaningful tree plantation outside forest land. It is also unfortunate, that in the last few decades, tree plantation programme had been launched on those non-forest areas mostly with forest

and semiforest plant species. Those species have some importance, but cannot surpass the fruit species in terms of national importance vis-a-vis general nutrition and other utilities. On the other hand, forest areas which amount to only 14 per cent of the country's total land area are not fully covered by trees. A recent survey shows that about 25 per cent of the area is not covered in the Sundarbans and 50 per cent in protected forest areas are not covered. The forest department should concentrate on the consolidation of forest by replanting forest species to improve the forest resources of the country.

Now what are the options open to us for better utilization of those available lands outside the forest area? Should we go for all-purpose fruit trees or forest species? We can now draw a conclusion from the above discussion that horticultural crops, particularly fruit trees, are very important for our nation's general health, homestead environment and sustainable income generation. Now comes the question of priority. Isn't the nation's health comes first, important, or are we just interested in quality timber? Considering the whole situation, the following observations and recommendations are put forward for the overall development of horticultural crops in the country:

Institution: Research on

the horticultural crops is being carried out by a division of the Bangladesh Agricultural Research Institute (BARI). Extension and development are being executed by the Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE), and BADC.

Horticultural crops comprise only a component of the Food Crops Wing of DAE and a division of BADC. Viewing the nutritional importance and economic contribution of fruit crops, horticultural science, however, demands an independent organization fully responsible for its development and extension. The Government should give serious consideration to such organization regarding its structure and functions. Many Asian countries have such exclusive organizations for horticulture development.

Planting Materials: Quality planting materials (seed, vegetative materials) are rather scarce at present. Quality planting materials are particularly important in case of fruit crops because of their long term existence. High yielding and disease and pest resistant varieties in fruits, vegetables and spices are paramount for horticulture development. So our research organizations and private agencies should give priority to developing these materials through both conventional methods and advanced techniques like tissue culture and genetic engineering. Tree crops require much

longer time for the development of improved germplasm or cultivars than annual plant crops. For a significant development in horticulture, superior planting materials and their improved production techniques must be available at reasonable cost throughout the country.

Survey: The potential locations for horticultural development are not yet well defined in consideration of the country's agro-ecological zones. The potential areas specific to particular crops must be identified. This is a prerequisite for planning the horticulture development. The government should make necessary amendments in the land policy for horticultural development. The hilly and high land areas of the country have potential for fruit cultivation. What we need is a master plan for horticulture development complete with crop specific locations, production policy, post-harvest technology for individual crops, facilities for processing, storage and marketing.

Tree Plantation: A tree plantation campaign has been launched in the country since the sixties without a definite objective and philosophy. In many cases, fancy and decorative plants were being planted by the country's dignitaries. For a country like Bangladesh where fruits are urgently required for general health and where potential land is so lim-

ited, the question of priority comes naturally. Here the common wisdom tells us that plantation of fruit trees should get first priority. If that is the case, we should develop programmes for planting fruit tree on a national emergency basis and we should offer appropriate guidance for planting the trees.

In the future tree planting programmes, the government should take appropriate measures so that fruit trees get top priority. In this way Korea, Thailand, India and Vietnam now are not only producing sufficient fruits for their citizens, but have also gained lucrative export markets for their fruit products.

Investment and Marketing:

Traditionally, perennial fruit culture got little priority in the country because of its vast flood plains, land fragmentation and food habit of the people. Quality fruits used to come from other parts of the sub-continent during the British and Pakistan periods. Even after 1971 very little investment in fruit culture has been made by the public or the private sector. Given the recent advancement of horticulture research in the region, quality fruits can be grown now in Bangladesh with the introduction of appropriate cultivars and production techniques. Investment in fruit cultivation by both the public and the private sector would be required as a catalyst to break the present stagnancy. Appropriate marketing facilities and improved post-harvest handling techniques should be rendered by the government agencies to growers, traders, seed producers and private nurseries.

In conclusion, we may say that the potentiality of fruit culture in the country should be manipulated wisely with strong scientific support. Above all the government's firm commitment and prudent programmes are a necessary prerequisites to underpin such development thrust.

Let us take note Tagore's wisdom again, from his address on Rural Reconstruction:

..... Fruits of a tree allure us not just for a lump of raw nutrition, tempt us for their taste, colour and flavour. Their calls are the invitations of amity and affection.....

The writer is an eminent agricultural scientist and a photographer of international repute.

To the Editor...

Bangladesh Shipping Corporation

Sir, Bangladesh Shipping Corporation was set up in 1972 as a national flag carrier to facilitate the country's import and export trade. It started from a scratch and went on acquiring new ships and vessels. It incurred losses, but hoped that after a few years it would be a viable organisation. But that was not to be. As years passed by, it failed to gain strength and vigour and its losses instead of going down, is gradually mounting. There is no sign that it will ever become a viable organisation.

A number of reasons may be attributed to its failure. The

principal among them are unhealthy trade unionism, mismanagement, corruption and lethargy. The taxpayers can't afford to spoon-feed this white elephant year after year. Most of the ships of the corporation were acquired new. Private shipping companies are earning handsome profit by acquiring old, junk and second-hand ships. This is due to good management, hardwork and proper accountability.

Hence, it is felt that the Corporation should be disinvested in national interest without further delay and the existing fleet sold by public auction. Why should the general public pay for say, misdeeds and inefficiency of a few

thousand staff of an organisation. Its manpower may be brought under golden handshake scheme and sent home batch by batch. Will the Parliamentary Committee on Ministry of Shipping rise to the occasion and do something in this regard?

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Attention Milk Vita

Sir, The other day I purchased a 450 gm container of Milk Vita Ghee which did not carry any manufacturing or expiry date. Moreover, the price was not also mentioned on the container. Still the BDSTI seal was marked on it. I would request the Milk

Vita authority to give Manu/Expiry mark (with dates) and the price on the container.

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Market economy

Sir, In this space age we are many many years behind developed and advanced countries.

We import almost everything from condensed milk to railway engine equipment and machineries, automobile, ships and aeroplanes and military hardware.

We go to foreign countries for training to learn as to how to handle, operate, repair and maintain those equipment, machineries.

If we want to manufacture some goods and articles of our own even tooth paste, textiles, crockeries, cosmetics, plastic bucket or jug we are required to import foreign machineries and equipment and also raw materials.

Can we think about competing with developed and industrialised countries?

Market economy is a curse for the under-developed and poor countries like us. But it is a great blessing for G-7, EU and NAFTA countries for capturing world market and exporting their goods and commodities without any restriction and limitation.

In ancient and mediaeval periods some countries con-

quested land and territories of other countries to establish their power and supremacy. Today no country needs to commit such heinous act. The market economy is amiable and sufficient enough to serve the purpose. Survival of the fittest has been the slogan of the world for all the times.

We are not against market economy. But we strongly feel that smuggling and import of certain goods and commodities should be totally banned so as to enable us to stand on our own feet and thus help grow a market economy in our own country for our own survival and not to make our country a safe haven for foreign goods.

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