

Addressing Floods—An Alternative Approach

by S M Zakaria

THE problem arising out of floods is almost perennial in Bangladesh. There are other natural calamities, such as tidal surges, droughts, excessive rainfall etc. All these create serious economic, social and political problems each year. The problems hit the country not only internally but also externally. There is a general notion abroad that Bangladesh is a poor country frequented by natural calamities of colossal measure, infested by diseases etc. There is also a notion that the country is politically broke, though the image was partly enhanced in 1991, and that corruption in bureaucracy and the society at large is rampant. The notions have been putting up hurdles against the country's efforts to make room in international business and other fields, thereby blocking her progress.

The country has been trying to erase these notions—some improvements have been possible in the 1990's in the field of politics (though recently staid), but improvements in the areas of containing natural calamities still remain far-fetched. Among these calamities, the problem of flood is chronic. Almost every year it hits the country and causes serious economic and other problems.

For decades, successive governments have been trying hard to address this problem but to little result. The negotiations with India have virtually produced nothing though tons of paper have been prepared and thousands of words exchanged. The domestic efforts to check floods by constructing embankments, dams, by trying to train rivers, by trying to stop erosion etc have also failed to produce substantive benefits. The bigger plans of building water reservoirs and other possible flood control

measures involve international initiatives and have thus been remained shelved though much speculations are heard at frequent intervals.

While these things go on, the people of the flood-prone areas continue to suffer. It is quite encouraging that the World Bank and other donor agencies and countries are interested in assisting Bangladesh in her efforts to address floods. Under FAP, big flood control programmes are being chalked out for implementation.

But, it appears that though foreign countries and donors are keen to help, the country must find and pursue some indigenous and innovative ways to address floods side by side the big flood control programmes. There could be two approaches to address the flood-problem:

Escape Approach

It is experienced that floods hit some parts of Bangladesh almost every year. Despite long drawn Control Approach, the country has not been able to check annual visits of floods. It is rather a part of our life. Thus, it appears that if we are to reduce damage caused by floods, we have to learn to live with floods. Here, comes the Escape Approach. This approach seeks to reduce damages by escaping floods. Problems become monumental when large number of peoples are rendered shelterless and are forced to seek refuge elsewhere. In such a situation, they need shelter, food, clothes, medicare, sanitary facilities and so on. It becomes almost impossible for any agency to tackle such needs at a time and for a long period. Floating population create problems of great magnitude and of various dimensions.

But, if people could be saved from being uprooted

and if they could save some of their properties and essentials, we are almost through with the problem. Therefore, the following suggestions, among many others, are advanced under the Escape Approach for consideration of the competent authority. These suggestions are simple cues and lot of researches may be carried out to locate further ways and means, or to improve upon the same. 1. All houses in the low-lying flood-prone areas of Bangladesh may be re-structured and built on long and strong pillars so that the dwelling places remain above the flood waters. Researches may be undertaken by various organizations, specially Housing Research Agency of the government to construct such houses of low costs. Since wood pillars are in scarcity, the government may think of producing iron/steel/RCC pillars from Steel and Engineering or Chemical Industries Corporations. Private enterprises/NGOs may also be encouraged to come forward. Other parts of the houses may be built by research outcomes. The pillars are to be mounted on concrete foundation so that the houses are saved from the soil erosion caused by flood currents. 2. There should be provisions for storage of food grains and other essentials in the houses. Provisions should also be there for accommodating a limited livestock during floods, so the poor people do not lose their ploughing animals, their sources of milk etc. The roofs of the houses may be used for temporary, or permanent poultry farming etc. 3. Each house shall have at least one country boat for communication during floods. There should be provision for a tubewell at the height of the floor of the house so that no problem for want of drinking water arises during floods. Alternatively, one tubewell may be installed in a house to

cover a number of adjacent houses. 4. Schools, colleges, shops, mosques, hospitals and other public places in the low-lying flood-prone areas should be built on pillars with similar facilities as stated under (1) above. This will on one hand make it possible to give shelter to those people who are in absolute poverty and do not have

any property, or can not own any house, and on the other hand will allow continuation of public services. 5. Government/Private companies, NGOs may set up factories in the flood-prone areas for production and distribution/marketing of pillars and other housing materials. 6. There should be massive propaganda and motivational

work in the concerned areas with the help of community leaders, government agencies, NGOs, private bodies, individuals so that people understand the necessity and go for that. The programme should be turned into a Social Movement like the family planning activities to achieve the goal over a period of say 5 to 10 years. Activities should be purely participatory. All people in concerned areas should be mobilized to take part in the programme. 7. The houses will be built by the public themselves. However, there are people who will not be able to do so out of their own sources. So, programmes shall have to be taken to encourage and motivate the well-off people to restructure and build their houses on pillars. For the poor people, government may take measures to supply subsidized housing materials and where necessary help directly on the basis of need. For this, necessary funds may be diverted or allocated under government flood action plan. It appears that a small portion of funds planned to be expended on flood control purposes shall be sufficient to construct such houses in the flood-prone areas. Banks may also be encouraged to provide low-cost housing loans to needy people. Grameen Bank is already engaged in housing credit. Their experience may be highly useful and be emulated. Great work may be done by Grameen Bank and NGOs in this respect. 8. The government should strengthen its capacity in terms of communication, storage etc. There should be enough marine vehicles like speed boats, small launches in possession of the government for facing emergency situations. Food grains and other essentials should remain stored above flood waters in the areas so that those can be despatched as and when necessary. 9. A Special

Flood Medical Corps has to be created for serving the flood hit people. They should be equipped with marine vehicles and other materials to cover flood hit areas. 10. A special Flood Volunteer Corps with support and equipments shall also have to be built to assist the flood hit people. 11. The Medical Corps and the Volunteer Corps may be carved out of the Army who are already partially equipped to face emergencies and are a disciplined people. Such work will enhance credibility, prestige and acceptability of the Army. 12. Civil Defence training should be re-introduced and made mandatory for students. Besides, normal Civil Defence training this programme should cover training for facing floods and cyclones so that help of the student community can be taken by including them in the Flood Volunteer Corps, if necessary. Civil Defence training may also include training in family planning, protection of women and children against violence, anti-drug campaign, maintenance of social peace etc. This will help to raise awareness, utilize students for maintaining social order, above all build a congenial social environment by rearing up the future citizenry well informed of social problems and sensitised to respond positively.

Benefits of Escape Approach:

1. It will save people from being uprooted by floods and seeking refuge elsewhere. 2. It will save almost all properties and essentials of flood hit people. 3. People will not become wholly relief-dependent. Some bare necessary assistance will help them sustain. 4. Houses built on pillars will save huge space in a country where a great number of people are landless. 5. It will save costs sub-

stantially and the involvement will come to insignificant amount after few years.

Control Approach

The Control Approach may include the activities under FAP. It appears that this Control Approach involves huge costs quite unbearable by a poor country like Bangladesh. But, we have little choice but to continue the activities under the Control Approach. However, our emphasis, at this point in time, should be more on Escape Approach than on Control Approach. While the Control Approach activities go on, some suggestions, as follows, may be considered: 1. Round-the-year dredging should go on for some specified rivers which over-flow regularly. Government's capacity to do so should be enhanced immediately without fail. 2. Instead of indiscriminate digging as done earlier, planned initiatives may be taken to dig a few canals in specified spots to drain out and/or hold flood waters. National and if necessary, international experts may take part in planning these canals and supervising implementation activities.

Fund for Addressing Flood Problem

The international community has so far been found fairly generous in arranging funds for our flood control programmes. But, this is very much our problem and we must have some special arrangements to meet at least a portion of our requirement. This will help us pursue our own plans and programmes more independently and constantly. To raise funds, a Flood Levy may be introduced realizable at source, say, on imports, vehicles, cinema tickets, some Bank Accounts etc.

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Social Mobilization — a Way to Promote Health Care

by Jerome Sarkar

IN Bangladesh, every year deadly diseases claim a significant number of lives of children and mothers, and the surviving victims suffer lifelong from the effects of the inflicting diseases. Malnourished mothers give birth to under-weight babies and for obvious reasons cause energy depletion of mothers and nutritional deficiency of babies leading to various diseases. The available medical facility in the rural area is a drop in the ocean.

In order to cut down the number of deaths and to assuage the suffering of the people, the Government has initiated an intensive social mobilization for immunisation and the activities to ensure continued supply of nutritional succour to the mass towards materialisation of the goal — 'Health for all by 2000'.

The Government has drawn up Expanded Programme of Immunisation (EPI) for achieving the mid-decade goal — 85 per cent immunization, 50 per cent sanitation, 90 per cent safe drinking water and retention of immunisation card upto 75 per cent.

UNICEF has extended support to the expanded immunisation Programme notably in greater Rangpur and Dinajpur region in collaboration with RDRS. Nearly 1,50,000 families in 2,700 villages in 248 Unions of Thakurgaon, Panchagarh, Nilphamari, Lalmonirhat, Kurigram Districts will be benefited.

The volunteers have been trained on the importance of immunisation and its activities, particularly on general health care package which includes safe drinking water, use of sanitary latrines, cleanliness etc. They will work at grassroots level. One volunteer will cover all the families in a ward. They will be responsible for social mobilisation and dissemination of motivational messages by visiting families from door to door. Efforts are being made to reach the immunisation target up to 85 per cent by the end of 1995.

Monwara Begum, a volunteer has undergone 6 days training on 'Immunization and General Knowledge on Health Care'. Her working area is in Ward No 3 under Panchagarh Union. She first carried out a baseline survey

to identify the number of children under 0-1 year, 1-6 years, number of school going/non-going children, number of women under 15-45 years, number of expectant mothers, follow up on vaccinations and the drop-outs. The mothers are made aware of six deadly diseases like poliomyelitis, tetanus, measles, diphtheria, whooping cough and tuberculosis. And they are duly advised to immunise their children against these preventable diseases.

Goitre is one of the endemic diseases. The people now know the causes and effects of iodine deficiency i.e. deformation of limbs, mental retardation, goitre etc. She advises them to take iodised salt to replenish iodine deficiency. She pays special attention to 0-1 year old children, the expectant mothers and women of productive age. She keeps touch with government health workers for their cooperation and coordination. She traces out the existing EPI Centres and facilitates access of the disadvantaged people to such centres. Besides, the women are being made aware of the causes of different communi-



table diseases. Rural people generally suffer due to lack of knowledge. They are advised to drink water from the tubewells, use hygienic latrine, wash hands after defecation.

Night blindness is caused due to deficiency of vitamin 'A'. They are encouraged to grow vegetables and consume more and more green/leafy vegetables to build up resistance against anti-body elements. Women are encouraged to establish home gardens for growing different vegetables specially for their family consumption.

The volunteers arrange gatherings and discuss issues on health promotion. The main cause of ill-health is the ignorance, wrong food habits and social taboos. They hold discussions in smaller groups for feed-back. The identified persons are being advised and guided to follow the instructions and take the advantage of the available facilities.

The ultimate goal of the Government is to ensure safe drinking water for 90 per cent, latrine for 50 per cent, immunisation for 80 per cent, (measles 75 per cent) and retention of card for 75 per cent, and no-incidence of Vitamin 'A' deficiency for 70 per cent by the end of the century. The organisations continue to work at the micro-level to promote and strengthen government's efforts for spreading immunisation facilities, particularly in the outreach EPI centres and keep contact with EPI technicians.

The social mobilisation has been identified as a mechanism to accelerate the coverage and establishment of the sustainability of immunisation. Once emboldened with the proper knowledge of health care and preventive means of neonatal diseases with access to the EPI centres, the mortality rate of children and mothers will

remarkably and the community will be free of preventable disease. If the endeavours sustain in the aforesaid manners, the Government will be able to achieve the desired result.

An integrated effort is advancing. So far, the sincerity and devotion of the Government health care workers with the support from the development agencies has been trail blazing. These concerted efforts will produce very positive impact. This will confirm environmental sanitation, maintenance of standard of personal hygiene, prevention of neonatal diseases. Thus mortality of children and mothers will significantly decline. The people will learn to change their food habits by establishing home gardens and switching over to available items of adequate food value. We can hope for a community of health people in near future.

A Far-sighted Shorthand School

by Shahjahan Mian

NATURAL ability for creativity coupled with earnest endeavours can bring crowning glory to inventive pursuit. Abdul Mannan Sarker, director of the National Training and Research Academy for Multilingual Shorthand (NTRAMS) in Bogra is one such person whose years of intensive research and hard work combined with creative skill helped him bring about a revolution in the domain of shorthand and invent its multilingual version in Bengali, English and Arabic.

His unique invention stemming from the needs of creating a skilled manpower by imparting technical education to a vast multitude of the populous Bangladesh has been widely acclaimed at home and abroad.

In 1982, he started teaching his invented method of shorthand to some students and journalists first and built the multilingual training centre on a small-scale which formed the nucleus of the present-day.

Extensive coverage and publicity of his feat by the national and international media drew everybody's attention. After examining the pros and cons and considering the needs of technical

education, the government accorded recognition to the institution on September 24, 1983.

After carrying on with the activities of the training centre temporarily at Bogra Titu Auditorium, Mr Sarker realised that the organisation can play an important role in giving technical education to the people.

With a view to opening up new prospect and potentiality, he plunged himself into materialising his task, and three acres of land was taken for the construction of a building at the southern end of Bogra town, near Jahangrabad cantonment.

Prime Minister Khaleda Zia laid the foundation stone of the NTRAMS building on February 15, 1992. The government sanctioned Taka five crore and fifty lakh for smooth completion of the academy building under the Fourth Five-Year Plan.

The NTRAMS came into being at a time when computer and software technology have conquered the whole world and the sophisticated technology has made its way into every office and even every house of the affluent people in Bangladesh.

Mr Sarker turned his eyes towards computer. He then took the software system as his main means of producing skilled manpower, so vitally needed for a country like ours.

Starting its journey with only few Apple computers, the NTRAMS computer section is now recognised as the largest computer training centre in the country. It has now 120 computer sets of different types, including multi-media network.

Government will soon introduce Internet system through V-Sat. Internet gives one the option of communicating with any Internet user in the world. One has the choice of selecting the required software from an array of softwares around the world. To link up with Internet means entering the vast global computer network with one's tiny computer set.

"Keep the computers cool to ensure their safety is a misconception," said Mr Sarker. Computers do not require a very cool atmosphere, they require a dust-free condition, he stressed. Besides imparting training to the educated unemployed

and unskilled people, the aim and purpose of the academy is to confer Diploma in Commerce degree (equivalent to HSC) in multilingual shorthand as a technical education and upgrade the academy into a university in phases.

The objectives of the academy, among others, are: To train up government and non-government officials and employees for increasing their efficiency and quality of work.

To develop secretarial science including multilingual shorthand through research and training and help acquire wide knowledge on computer science.

To ensure wider participation of women in the programme and make the country self-sufficient in secretarial science by establishing training centres at regional levels.

Expansion of high-tech and help acquire wider knowledge and efficiency in computer science and earn the much-needed foreign exchange through skilled manpower export.

employees, bank and police officials and educated unemployed youths. By now, 320 university and college teachers, 90 senior police officials and 170 officials of the BCS Administration cadre have received training from the academy. A total of 1200 employees from military service, non government offices, directorates and ministries were also given training.

Born in 1953 in Ramshahar of Bogra Sadar Thana, Mr Abdul Mannan Sarker actively participated in the Liberation War and served under Mujibnagar Government. He had his Diploma-in-Commerce in 1970 and also did his graduation later from the Rajshahi University. He was once private secretary to Dr Akhter Hamid Khan, Bangladesh Government also arranged higher education for this gifted man from abroad to help him in his research work.

Talking about NTRAMS, a proud creation in the country, Mr Sarker said: "My aim is to bring in technological development in shorthand and computer science. I believe, I will succeed in my mission facing all odds coming in its way."

Dreams of Leaving

by Naheed Kamal

I don't know when I first felt like leaving but I do remember waking up one morning and remembering... which is by no means the same as nostalgia. Nostalgia is a wistful sad feeling you get when the past is gone and you somehow wish to relive the sweeter bits of it. Remembering is "recalling": it is trying to bring back a part of yourself you thought was lost because something in the present is missing. I remembered the distinct feeling of care-freeness which I had once possessed, before I reached that point in my life when nothing pleased me any more.

Every now and then when things start to go wrong, like others around me, I get an incredible urge to run away. Along with many of my friends I have often expressed a desire to just go away. It's as though if we went to another place life would be easier or better. We have become like characters in search of a novel, dreaming of a place which will create the perfect setting for our own peculiar existence. The idea probably originated with having read too many books about exotic people in exotic surroundings. When you are sixteen the desire to run away from home comes regularly like seasons, but when you are older it no longer seems that easy or

simple. In fact it takes a lot of courage to really leave for good.

Once I left home (not of my own free will but because my parents decided I needed to broaden my horizon) I slowly but surely began to realize the significance of "belonging", i.e. what it means to be in a place where you recognise the streets, the people, sights, sounds and smells. I felt like a self imposed exile and realized I had become, like others I knew, a professional drifter living out of a suitcase. The question then arises where do we belong anyway? Like so many others I needed to be culturally displaced before I could find my way back home. Initially you either miss home tremendously or are too occupied to miss anything or anybody. So it happened to me, after years of being a stranger/foreigner it suddenly struck me that the perfect setting for me was back home. Besides didn't it take a lot of money to just pack up and leave every few days for exotic places? I doubt many people have that kind of money to spend unless it's on a holiday of some sort. Talking to others I have realized that we tend to do our rounds of foreign lands but after a while the urge to run, this time homewards

overtakes the urge to stay.

Then again once home, after the initial thrill is gone we feel it's time to move on. And move on we do, only to return. I am not the only one who feels like a visitor in my own home. Although the tendency to escape is strong it's not easy to really leave home and it is stupid to leave just because one is fed up. The same way, the same old places and faces often drives us away, the same things draw us back. Perhaps the pettiness gets to us more than anything else. None of us wants to live a life restricted by small minded attitudes and snobbery, few of us like to conform to other people's set standards for life. Nor do we want to rebel against the establishment and the family to behave like sulky adolescents for the rest of our lives. When the negative aspects of metropolitan life overtake me, the idea of life on a remote island seems to be less absurd.

What keeps us from going away are the friends and family. Home after all is where the heart is.

Given the choice to live in exile, none of us would really seize upon the opportunity because our dreams of leaving are no more than that... dreams and fantasies. Besides, reality is perhaps harsher but nonetheless colourful and entertaining.