

Lessons from Cyclone : Preparedness Should be Adequate

by Md Asadullah Khan

It is not important how we reached the disaster zone whether by a helicopter or by an airconditioned jeep. What is important is how much and to what extent we have been able to provide succour and relief to the needy ...

THE most valuable lesson of the Hurricane that swept over Chittagong and Cox's Bazar area on 19th May last was that the cyclonic shelters we had constructed were inadequate in number and/or capacity. People believe that had the fury hit these areas during the high tide the result would have been cataclysmic. The loss of life as reported by all the sources have been considered as minimum, around 107, thanks to the timely warning and sufficient rescue effort undertaken before the onslaught. Reports carried by the media reveal that about 10 lakh people could take shelter in about 1919 cyclone shelters constructed. Reports carried by the media and confirmed by the briefings of the Prime Minister's Press Secretary revealed that about 26 lakh people have suffered losses in property and houses. Structural damages in the housing sector are so severe that these have to be pulled down and built anew. 26 thousand bundles of CI sheets allocated for building houses may not at all be adequate. Reports carried by the media quoting Cox's Bazar correspondent of a certain vernacular daily reveals that the district administration of the Cox's Bazar has placed a demand for 50,000 bundles of CI sheet and two crore taka as post-rehabilitation grant among other things immediately needed. None will dispute that this is a very big amount in comparison with the huge amount of unrecovered loans to the tune of 1300 crores of taka lying with only 20 loan defaulters of the country. Much of the region's transportation infrastructure covering 191 km road links has turned into rubble as reported by the district administration in Cox's Bazar along with collapse of bridges and culverts. The number of bridges and culverts destroyed has been put at 165, in the whole southern region.

What happened in the southern region on 19th May last had been a recurring national nightmare that people were lulled into forgetting since the last devastating one in 1991. A sense of impending catastrophe, convulsive loss of property and security is all that is embedded in people in this region racked by natural disasters since 1970s. With the present

state of economy in the country battered by a series of distress signals like share market scam, non-recovery of loans from the entrepreneurs, loss of production in mills and factories due to power shut down, liquidity crisis in banks, loss of revenue earning due to trade imbalance with India vitiated by illegal border trade and poor show of foreign investment climate, and the loss of foreign currency earning to the tune of hundreds of crores of taka from shrimp export other than the loss of fish culture area and salt bed due to inundation, this devastating hurricane will have a ripple effect on the country's overall economy. This may not be a very minor up tick as people believe that the country's domestic savings are not quite sufficient to handle the ravages left by this tornado.

Complaints of mismanagement of relief efforts, delay in sending relief and succour to the marooned people and allocation of insufficient relief goods have been rife from the mainstream opposition party. While people expect that relief goods should be ferried with all promptness and there should be as little protocol duties of the district administration officials as possible in this hour of crisis, the fact remains that co-ordination and channeling of resources with all promptness sometimes become unassailable just after the onslaught mainly because of lack of preparedness to confront a disaster or its immediate aftermath that involves lakhs of people vis-a-

vis very meagre resources at the disposal of the administration. Media report suggests that so far relief materials made available at the affected places come to 15 paise in terms of cash subsidy and 51 gms of rice per head through allocation of 26 tons of rice in the whole battered Chittagong zone. Allocation, people believe would definitely increase as these reports are made public. Such mismanagement, ineptitude and snags were evident during the January 1995 Kobe earthquake that hit Japan, a nation flush with the world's largest of surplus capital, not to mention more experience than just about any other country in lightning-fast reconstruction. Reports have it that after the Kobe quake a 77-year old Tsuyo Okumura spent four days trapped in the wreckage of her bed room. Luckily she survived because she always kept a snack of boiled eggs and canned fruit juice beside her bed at night. Not long after the quake, some one had heard her cries for help and told her through the rubble that she would have to wait; there weren't enough rescue workers.

Things could go so much awry even in a country like Japan. Tokuzo Okawara, Chuo ward Chief in downtown Kobe said

his office had a manual for every kind of emergency except quakes. "We had been led to believe that an earthquake was not possible here". Even in Kobe people spent the chilly winter nights in the open air because no one could provide them with shelter.

In a disaster of such magnitude that swept the region extending over Cox's Bazar, Kutubdia, Chokoria, St. Martin Island, Sandwip, far upto Teknaf, everything except misery is in short supply. The images may be other worldly, eerie and horrifying as reports pouring from the affected areas suggest. The cyclone shelters could provide them an immediate cover, but who could provide food and supplies for 10 lakh people even for a day?

The hurricane disaster in the Chittagong region has shaken a lot of people in the country once more. Leaders in the mainstream opposition party are accusing the government as inept and slow in handling this disaster. On the other hand, people have got to feel happy that the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina had cancelled her scheduled tour to Spain, and she has already toured the ravaged areas and has been monitoring relief efforts all the

time. But this is a colossal job to be fought with courage and fortitude and with plenty of resources available nearer the disaster zone. The country, especially the southern zone obsessed as it is with the threat of natural calamities like cyclone, hurricane and tidal bore with almost a sickening regularity must keep substantial amount of money and resources in its annual budgetary allocation. If nature spares us in a particular year, this allocated amount would just be spilled over to the next year's allocation allowing the government a good grip to

handle the disaster that might loom up in future. People feel that the ruling party, instead of handling the crisis all by itself, should form an all-party relief committee to monitor and co-ordinate relief measures that need to be taken. This offers the ruling party a grand opportunity to bury all divisiveness, squabbling and hatred for each other and rise against a disaster that no single individual or a particular group can handle alone. At least, we must shun politics with natural disaster. It has been revealed in the Sura Baqarah of the Holy Koran wherein Allah commands, "Be

sure, we shall test you with something of fear and hunger and loss in goods or lives or the fruits of your toil, but give glad tidings to those who patiently persevere". Surely, such catastrophes and disasters loom up as a test of the solidarity in the rank and file of a nation.

It is not important how we reached the disaster zone whether by a helicopter or by an airconditioned jeep. What is important is how much and to what extent we have been able to provide succour and relief to the needy not by rhetoric but through concrete actions and substances.

It is worth noting the amount of disaster preparedness that Tokyo, an earthquake-prone zone has, in the event of a major calamity hitting it and creating a catastrophic situation. In Tokyo, emergency underground reser-

voirs are in place and special vehicles are ready to deliver clean water if the water mains rupture. A computerised command centre stands ready and portable toilets have been stockpiled. Ward offices have three-day supplies of rice, biscuits and miso-paste on hand to prevent the kind of hunger that the people of Kobe suffered.

That is the sort of lesson and preparedness we might take, may be in a smaller scale as our resources permit, to tide over a crisis situation especially in the southern zone. Understandably, global warming caused by loss of ozone layer shield gives such tell-tale indications that this part of our country would continue to be subjected to precarious weather conditions portending disasters like cyclone, flood and tidal bore with ominous frequency.

Global warming theory, makes ominous predictions for this part of the James Hansen, head of NASA's Goddard Institute for space studies warns that the earth warming effect of excess carbon dioxide (CO₂) and other gases generated by industry and agriculture had crossed the line from theory into fact. Hansen asserts that heat waves, droughts, floods and hurricanes may be previews of what could happen with ever increasing frequency if the atmosphere warms 3°F to 8°F more by the middle of the next century, as some scientists predict it would do. That could cause the oceans to rise by several feet flooding coastal areas and huge tracts of farmland through salinization. Changing weather patterns could make huge areas infertile or uninhabitable, touching off refugee movements unprecedented in history. Already the process seems to have started in Bangladesh.



The devastation

— Star photo by Mohsin



The destitutes

— Star photo by Enamul

SAFE MOTHERHOOD DAY

Reaching the Facilities to Mothers

by Abu Imran

THERE is no second opinion about 'safe motherhood' since safety of mother ensures safety of the child, both before and after birth. But the pregnant women are the most neglected ones in the Third World countries in general, and Bangladesh, in particular.

Some of the main causes of this situation are social taboos, lack of awareness, lack of proper facilities, lack of information with regard to available facilities, apathy towards the use of those facilities, malnutrition due to poverty, inadequate attention and care of pregnant women etc. Some discussions on the above may be helpful in comprehending the problem. Social taboos among some people some superstitions still exist.

They do not want the pregnant women to see doctor rather consider it proper to have the baby born at home lest some evil spirit cast its spell on the mother and the baby. This is not confined to the belief of the poor and uneducated but even very highly educated people have developed such belief.

A top-ranking officer recently narrated that a university professor did not take his wife to a clinic even when she had developed the symptom of pain signalling childbirth. It has so happened that the lady died without being attended to by a doctor. If this is the mindset of the person from the highest seat of learning, then the ordinary people's attitude can be better understood than described.

To ensure minimum safety of pregnant women, change in attitude and behaviour are the need of the hour.

Lack of awareness about pregnancy is rather rampant. This is considered something like a natural phenomenon which needs little care or attention. Even if the woman is profusely bleeding, some older people in command in the house brush aside the idea of taking the patient to a hospital. In one case it was also observed by the same top official that with a little bit of imagination and positive outlook, a lady was helped substantially. She had developed complications, i.e. severe pain etc., needing immediate EOC (emergency obstetric care), which was not available around and nor there was any arrangement for taking the patient to the thana health complex. Not even a stretcher was there, not to speak of an ambulance or any mobile transport. The husband knocked down the door, turned it into a stretcher and on this make-shift stretcher, he took her to the nearest thana health complex where she was attended to and managed so much so that a healthy baby was born and the mother was also safe.

Lack of facilities like that of doctors, nurses, mid-wives, trained health workers to deal with pregnant women are far inadequate besides the poor number of hospitals/clinics etc.

Of late, there has been a mushroom growth of nursing homes primarily in the cities and towns. But these are so prohibitive that only the rich can avail of such facilities. Of course, there are thana health complexes, but these are not properly equipped in terms of manpower and machines, medicines etc.

Further, lack of mobile

transports like ambulances etc., aggravates the situation since people living in unions and villages can hardly travel all the way to THCs particularly in time of emergencies.

However, it is an irony that whatever facilities are there, these are also not properly availed of to reduce the incidences of deprivation and inconvenience. For instance, at the THCs and District level hospitals, people at risk can have the expert advice, prenatal/post-natal treatment and care, some medications etc.

For lack of information and even lethargy and apathy people suffer. It is not difficult to overcome this barrier.

It is also observed that at least in some cases, from the facility centres, people return disappointed because of lack of sympathy and presence of apathy on the part of health workers. They send people from one counter to another and sometimes even refuse to admit patients, which with a little bit of extended care could be managed.

These create negative impact on the patients who then decide not to visit such centres and resign to their lots. This may not be present everywhere, but of course in most of the places which needs no elaboration. Misappropriation or selective dispensation of available medicines etc., are not unfounded allegations. A healthy morale perhaps can be helpful.

Malnutrition among the pregnant women is there for reason of poverty. This by and large is prevalent among the general masses because of low-calorie intake. In Bangladesh, around 15-10 per cent low-cal-

orie intake is common. The vicious circle of poverty of course cannot be broken over-night.

But a humane approach towards pregnant mothers may help them. As they are persons in need, a re-appropriation in family food can be judiciously made. More food be given to her. This won't cost much but pay rich dividends in the form of better health of pregnant mother and the would-be child. A less problematic childbirth means less medical intervention and cost.

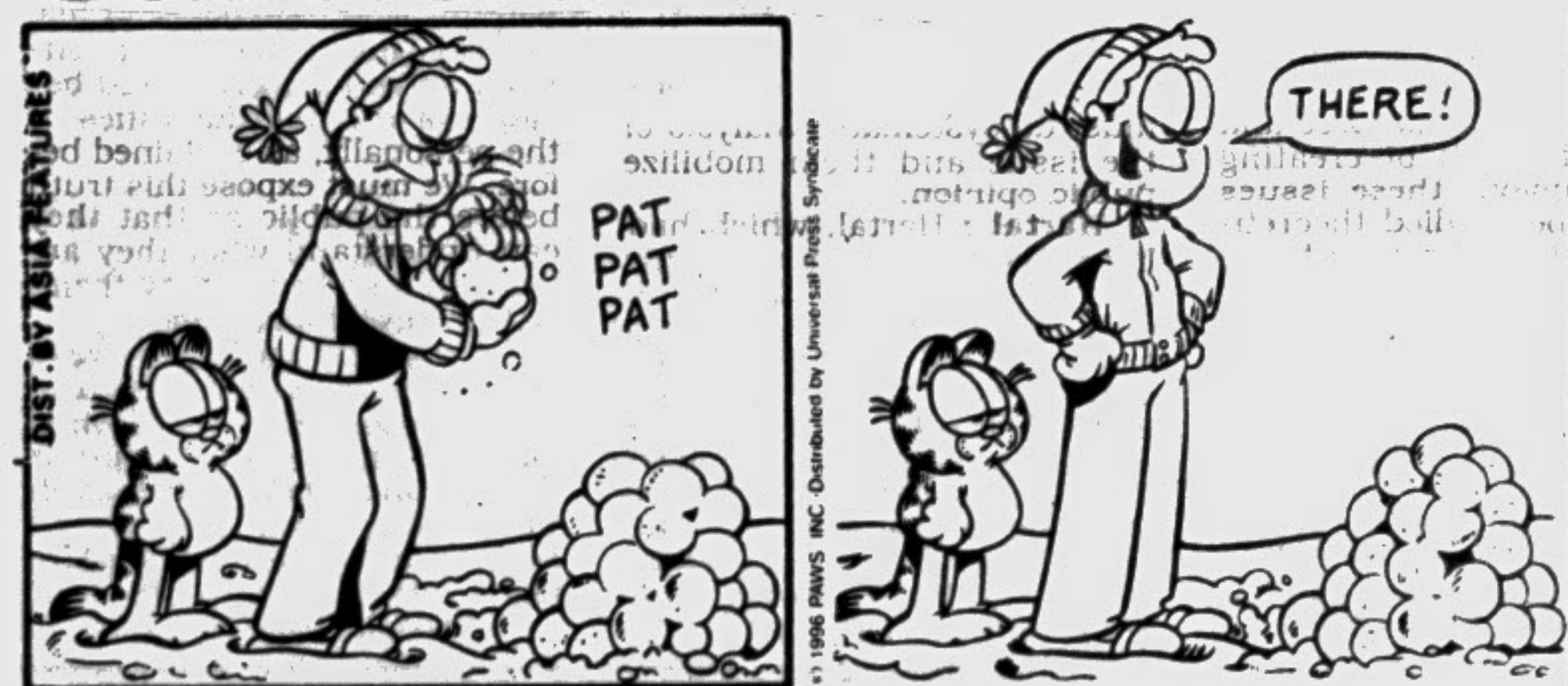
Thus the end result is also an invisible monetary gain. Hence this is highly desirable in the greater family interest. Last but not the least, the pregnant women should also grow the habit of self-management and avoid bad habits like smoking, alcohol, drugs etc. — the use of which may be harmful to the baby in the womb.

In appreciation of the problem, the government has decided to observe May 28 (today), as the Safe Motherhood Day primarily to create greater awareness among the people in this regard so that the pregnant mothers are adequately helped by adopting available facilities, extending humane approach to them and reducing the breakable barriers and then march onwards to remove the bigger ones in due course.

Let this day be a stepping stone in achieving the goal towards safe-motherhood which ultimately would lead to healthy babies and a healthier nation. Further taking care of mothers is even a religious duty.

There is saying, "The heaven lies under the feet of mother". Napoleon said, "give me good mothers, I will give you a good nation".

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IAN FLEMING'S

James Bond



by Jim Davis



JIM DAVIS 2-6



DRAWN BY JOHN McLUSKY

More donations to PM's relief fund

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday received over Tk 77 lakh in donations for cyclone victims from organisations and individuals, reports UNB.

People in groups and individually went to the PM's office and handed over donation in cash and kind, worth Tk 77,10,290, for the relief fund.

Home Minister Rafiqul Islam, accompanied by Inspector General of Police Azizul Huq, donated Tk 40 lakh on behalf of his ministry and Bangladesh Police to the PM's relief fund.

Among other donors, Rajuk officials and employees gave Tk 10,44,416, Ministry of Social Welfare Tk 6,57,761, Ministry of Information Tk 2,34,279, Dhaka Bank Limited Tk 5 lakh and its officials and employees Tk 61,560 and Duncan Brothers Tk 3 lakh.

Besides, Bata Shoe Company and Summit Corporation donated Tk 2 lakh each while Roads and Highways, Banarupa Housing and Dhaka Bidrut Sarbahara Samik League gave Tk one lakh each. Bangladesh Pharmaceutical Society donated medicine worth Tk one lakh.

Jahangirnagar University Teachers Association, Agrani Bank, BSCIC, Rotary Club of Metropolitan Dhaka, City Awami League, disabled freedom fighter Mujahid Ali Khan, freedom fighter Abdul Kashem Bhuiyan, and two school children Al-Amin and Swarnali Mahmud were also among the donors.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina will receive donation for the 7th consecutive day (today) at her office from 6 pm to 7 pm.



Prof A Q M Badruddoza Chowdhury, Deputy Leader of the Opposition, speaking at a discussion meet to mark the 16th death anniversary of Ziaur Rahman organised by 'Amra Bangladeshi', in the city yesterday. —Star photo

Parliamentary team meets Australian senate president

A parliamentary delegation from Bangladesh met with President of Australian Senate Ms Margaret in Canberra and discussed with her parliamentary practices of the two countries, according to a message received here yesterday, reports UNB.

During the meeting, the Senate President appreciated the efforts of Bangladesh government for reforms in parliamentary practice and procedure. The delegation led by Prime Minister's Adviser on Parliamentary Affairs Suranjit Sengupta MP also had a meeting with the Parliamentary Secretary to the Australian Foreign Minister.

Matia visits cyclone-hit villages

Food and Agriculture Minister Begum Matia Chowdhury yesterday visited all the cyclone-affected villages in Chittagong district, reports UNB.

Bosnian FM condoles deaths in cyclone

Foreign Minister of Bosnia-Herzegovina Dr Jadranko Prlic condoled the deaths in the recent cyclone in the coastal areas of Bangladesh, reports UNB. In a message to his Bangladesh counterpart, Abdus Samad Azad, the Bosnian minister conveyed his sincere sympathies and heartfelt condolences. He also prayed to Almighty for eternal peace of the departed souls.

CIDA-Proshika 20-yr of partnership celebrated 'Canada close development partner of Bangladesh'

Canadian High Commissioner to Bangladesh Nicholas Etheridge said yesterday that Canada was a close development partner of Bangladesh despite having long geographical, physical and cultural distance, reports BSS.

The high commissioner was addressing as the chief guest a programme to celebrate the twenty years of partnership between CIDA and Proshika at Proshika Bhaban at Mirpur.

Presided over by executive director of Proshika Dr Kazi Faruque Ahmed the function was also addressed by Mahbubul Karim, director (programme), Proshika group members Kulsom and Azharul Islam while director (finance) David William Biswas gave the vote of thanks.

Termining the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and Proshika as an enduring partnership over 20 years, the Canadian High Commissioner said that so many Canadians have learned and benefitted from this relationship.

The high commissioner said this has not been a one-sided donor-recipient relationship. Canadians have counted themselves proud to have participated in the development and maturation of Proshika and with the consequent benefits to the people of Bangladesh.

The envoy said after the liberation in 1971, many foreign governments and non-governmental organisations set up offices in Bangladesh to adminis-

ter the huge amount of aid flowing into this country.

Etheridge said 'very few of these (aid organisations) were staffed and controlled by Bangladeshi nationals. However, three indigenous organisations did emerge which felt that national solutions and leadership were needed to solve national problems. These were BRAC, Grameen Bank and Proshika and CIDA has worked in partnership with each other.

BN passing-out parade held

KHULNA, May 27: The passing-out parade of a batch of the newly inducted sailors of the Bangladesh Navy was held at BNS Titumir in Khulna today, an ISPR press release said, reports BSS.

Defence Secretary Quazi Md Munzur-i-Mowla attended the ceremony as the chief guest. He reviewed the parade and took salute at the marchpast. He also distributed trophies among the outstanding new sailors.

MN Alam DE/UC was adjudged the best all-round new entry sailor in SSC group and was awarded the Cup of the Chief of Naval Staff, while M R Islam DE/MUS received the Titumir Cup for his achievements in non-SSC group.

Earlier, the defence secretary, on his arrival at the parade ground, was received by Commodore Mohammad Khurshed Alam and Commanding Officer of BNS Titumir.



Students of Mirpur Govt Girls' High School brought out a procession demanding the eviction of illegal occupants from school land in the city yesterday. —Star photo

HERE and THERE

DCC Karmachary Sangsad

Mayor of Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) Mohammad Hanif yesterday called upon the officials and employees of the corporation to carry out their duties with sincerity to make the capital city a beautiful abode for the future generation, reports BSS.

The main responsibility of the DCC officials and employees is to provide comfort and welfare to the city dwellers he said while addressing the installation ceremony of the newly-elected office bearers of the DCC Karmachary Sangsad.

Held at the Nagar Bhaban the function was also addressed by Shahabuddin Ahmed and

Bangladeshiyo Cha Sangsad

The 37th annual general meeting of the Bangladeshiyo Cha Sangsad (Tea Association of Bangladesh) was held in the office of the association at Chittagong yesterday, says a press release.

A Q I Chowdhury, chairman of the association, presided over the meeting and read out a report, highlighting the major activities and achievements of the sangsad during the year 1996-97 and outlining future action plans for 1997-98.

Supply relief to cyclone-hit areas, Khaleda asks partymen

Leader of the Opposition Begum Khaleda Zia yesterday had a busy schedule coordinating relief for cyclone victims and meeting party leaders and workers at her 29 Minto Road residence, reports UNB.

Party sources said a good number of people came with various relief materials for providing succour to the cyclone victims.

The BNP chairperson thanked the benevolent for coming forward to help the calamity-stricken people of Chittagong and Cox's Bazar districts.

She enquired about the relief operation of her party and asked the concerned partymen to reach the relief supplies to the worst-affected people in remote coastal areas.

Relief programme of armed forces continuing

CHITTAGONG, May 27: Bangladesh armed forces are continuing their relief, reconstruction and medical assistance programme in coordination with the local administration and other concerned agencies in the coastal areas and offshore islands, an ISPR press release said today, reports BSS.

Two navy ships — Shah Amanat and Shapla — with relief goods and construction materials reached Kutubdia and Maheshkhali today.