

On Their Own They Start Life Again

by Morshed Ali Khan back from Bhola

The September 27 cyclone probably did not take as many human lives as it happened in 1991, but it left behind a trail of devastation inflicting irreparable damages to human properties. The local administration showed some activities only when PM Sheikh Hasina and her ministers visited some affected areas in the mainland Bhola. Otherwise the nature-hardened people of these coastal areas have taken their own initiative to start life again.

THE sky had been grey and drizzles fell accompanied with mild gusty wind all day-long on September 26. Radios and TVs in the bazaars repeatedly relayed red alert. An unnamed cyclone storm packing winds up to 150kmph with tidal surges of up to four metres was heading for the coastal areas.

Just after midnight, early Saturday morning, the velocity of the wind increased. The cyclone struck. It lashed through the trees and houses smashing many to the ground. Fortunate ones found their way to the rare cyclone centres of the area but thousands stood under the open sky and fought for their lives. Many remained buried under the piles of their own huts which they did not abandon because of love for their cattle. Others who headed for the cyclone shelters in a last bid to escape from the ravage were either swept away by the five-feet high surge and a ferocious wind or got badly injured by the falling trees.

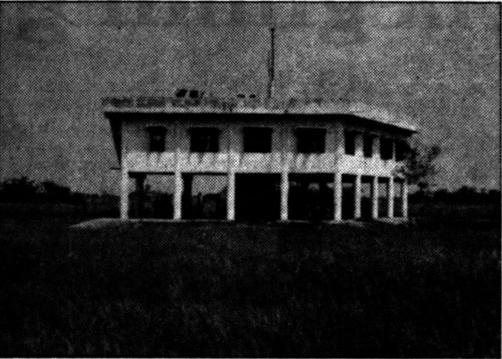
Fishing boats anchored in the 30km-wide river Meghna flowing into the Bay of Bengal only miles away, were tossed in the air and then were dragged miles into the shore. Tales of hundreds of missing hilsa fishermen who held on to save their boats from being swept away were still told in the bazaars of Choukighata, Hasan Nagar, Niz Khamar and Char Zahiruddin, visited by this correspondent.

Fifty beds (boat people) families at Choukighata under Daulatkhana thana begged of every passers-by near the main road to rescue them from the strange situation. The boats were swept from the Meghna river by the surge and were grounded two kilometres inside the main land. "We thought we were going to die," said Mala Bain, a female clan member in a rag. "The wind and the tide lifted the cluster of boats, we on board, and threw us here. Please help us to get back to the river," Mala added that the clan had come to Meghna to catch hilsa in the current peak season. The beds were not allowed to take their boats back into the river because the local farmers prevented them. It would damage the remaining crops of the paddy field!

Nearly, ten huge ocean-going ships lay tilted on the beach with their huge propellers becoming a play-thing for local naked children. Three days after the carnage, Choukighata fishermen traded fresh hilsa catches amid wreckage of the muddy marketplace. Hilsa in large baskets were brought in from the boats arriving at frequent intervals. Huge piles of the silver fish built up on the muddy ground. A half (bunch of four) of large hilsa cost the broker Tk 250. Bare-chest men picked through the rubbles of the market and piled broken planks, bamboo and corrugated



Rescue: Fishermen sing in chorus to bring a stranded boat down to the river at Hasan Nagar.



Sole cyclone shelter: Built in '92 cracks occurred in the wall during Sept. 27 cyclone

tins separately. They would build the market again.

The Assistant Deputy Commissioner (Land), Sharif Murtaza of Daulat Khan thana was seen on a motor bike nearby. He said he had come to Choukighata to note down the names of the grounded ships. When asked about what the administration was doing to help the affected people, he replied they did not have enough resources to help. The young ADC sweated under a scorching sun and said he was

in a hurry to get back to his station to report about the ships. The cries of the stranded beds families nearby remained unheard as Murtaza sped off in his new 100CC two-wheeler.

At Niz Khamar, under Borhanuddin, thana, Shilpu, Chandar Saaha shed tears sitting on the ruins of his house. Shilpu and his family had taken shelter in another house in the market during the cyclone. The three-member Shilpu family returned in the morning to find the hut in ruins. A huge boat,

swept in from elsewhere, lay upside-down on his kitchen. His cattle and poultry were nowhere to be found. "I am a poor man, I have nothing left in this world to build the house again, the wicked wind has taken away everything" a tearful Shilpu said. In the background Shilpu's young son scavenged the wreckage of the house to find red chillies which he carefully spread over a sheet of polythene to be dried. None from the local administration came to see the trail of devastation left by the cyclone.

Along the shore of Meghna no houses were intact. Families starved because they had nothing left. Children cried for food while mothers tried in vain to light soaked earthen cookers with wet firewood. The area looked as if a monster had stampeded everything to the ground. Fallen trees — twisted and uprooted — were everywhere.

In the market nearby — usually a centre for hilsa trade — most tin-shed shops were spared by the cyclone. But no trace of the makeshift godowns at the ghat could be seen. Near the marketplace about 50 fishing boats were piled up in a ditch. About 200 fishermen sang in chorus as they pulled the boats, one by one, to the river from 500 metres away.

"Hundreds of boats have been washed away in the sea



Char Zahiruddin: The horizon is visible from any direction

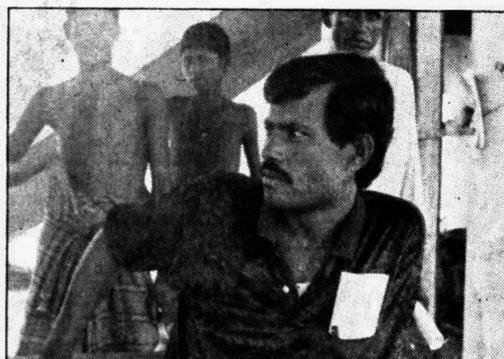
and we can never know how many fishermen have been swept away by the surge, some have their families living in other districts," said Mia Bhai, a hilsa fisherman of the area.

Red Crescent workers at Hasan Nagar, in brand new overalls and plastic safety helmets were preparing to receive the Prime Minister. Fat policemen sat for hours under a colourful canvas shed behind a row of comfortable chairs meant for the dignitaries scheduled to arrive 'any time'.

Red Crescent workers said there was not a single cyclone centre in the area. "We have gone to see the affected people but could offer nothing to them, there is no relief," said a young worker.

On the way to Bhola, few miles away from Hasan Nagar, district officials in expensive safari cars waited by the roadside near a makeshift helipad. Two BAF helicopters landed at around 2pm. Security officials quickly descended from the choppers to keep a vigil on the crowd. A crowd of 50 AL activists shouted welcome slogans as the Prime Minister descended from it. She was then followed by ministers and pressmen who accompanied her all the way from Dhaka. As the entourage approached the main road, Tofael Ahmed, sitting next to Sheikh Hasina, suddenly opened the door and got off the vehicle pointing his finger at someone angrily. Sheikh Hasina smiled and waved back to the chanting crowd ignoring the minister's sudden concern. Within minutes the vehicles disappeared towards Choukighata and Hasan Nagar.

None of the dozen fishing trawlers available at Hasan Nagar ghat agreed to go to Char Zahiruddin 15km across the mighty river with a very strong current and high waves. A local Red Crescent official intervened and convinced a trawler to do the job for an exorbitant fare. "Nobody wants to go to the char, because it is isolated," said the



Shaftullah: The self-proclaimed leader of Char Zahiruddin

official. The approach canal to Zahiruddin showed signs of devastation. Scores of dead cows, buffaloes and goats lay on both sides of the canal. Dogs and crows feasted happily over the abundant supply. As far as eyes travelled there was no sign of any trees except twisted banana plantations amid shattered dwellings belonging to the 15,000 inhabitants of the island that rose in the middle of Meghna some 30 years ago. On every direction, horizon was apparent over the green paddy fields. Zahiruddin counted 12 dead since Saturday and many more were missing.

Each of the 3,000 huts on the island was damaged — some leveled to the ground and some tilting dangerously. The islanders were looking for missing relatives in the paddy fields while the air smelt heavy with rotten flesh. Zahiruddin had taken the full impact of the cyclone. "The whole population of the island would have been wiped out if the tide was high during the storm," said Nurul Islam who had lost all his cattle

and poultry but saved himself by sheltering in the sole cyclone centre of the island. He said the wind was very strong but the tidal surge remained about five feet high. "I thought all the huts with their occupants were washed away as it happened few years ago but thanks Allah not many have died," he said.

Char Zahiruddin's inhabitants have been settled under a government programme. They were victims of river erosion elsewhere and started migrating to the area since 1971-72. Every settler was allocated 1.5 acres of land under the programme and they built their huts in the middle of the plots. Every hut is separated from the other by a paddy field. Char Zahiruddin has a small primary school but it has no medical facility. Part of the 40-km-long and 15-km-wide island was taken over by the forest department which planted kewra trees over a huge stretch. In addition to farming, most of the islanders survive on hilsa fishing. Islanders complained that they were subjected to 'systematic extortion' by the lo-

cal self-proclaimed leader Shaftullah. "Each dwelling must pay the leader 200 taka per year or lose the cattle or the boat or face eviction," said an old man adding, "nothing moves here without his approval."

The sole cyclone shelter of Char Zahiruddin housed the 14-member police camp established few months ago to maintain law and order. Sub Inspector, Abdul Hai who headed the camp said he was maintaining contacts with Bhola over wireless but none came to visit it since September 27. Over 500 men, women and children took refuge in the shelter which was built to accommodate hardly 250 people. It grew cracks as the fierce wind hit it with a velocity of 150kmph.

"Inside the shelter men, women and children were crammed holding their last belongings in the air. Some had their goats and chickens held above the floor because there was no space inside," said Abdul Hai.

Another police constable showed the cracks on the wall and complained that the windows and doors of the shelter were so badly made that the slightest rainfall flooded the floor inside. "During the cyclone people had to stand in ankle-deep water inside the shelter," he said. The shelter was built in 1992 by the Red Crescent.

Many islanders were missing as they had to turn back from the overcrowded shelter and head, in vain, for another refuge. Chukun Ali Majhi lost his son, grand-son and mother as the family started walking towards the shelter after their house was blown away. He was speechless when people discovered the body of his 10-year-old grand-son three days later. Two other bodies found in the paddy fields at the time of this correspondent's visit could not be buried because nobody volunteered to do the job. Action Aid, an NGO operating locally buried one body later.

"Nobody has counted how many islanders are missing and we have no cattle or poultry left any more," said an elderly islander picking bits and pieces from his shattered hut.

One Shaftullah, about 33, claimed that he was the leader of the island. When asked whether he was elected, Shaftullah replied in the negative but said he was traditionally a leader. "I have received some chitra, gur and murti as relief from the district headquarters which is far from adequate," he said.

Back in the district headquarters in Bhola, officials at District Commissioner's office said as per their information the death toll was 33. They were not aware of what was happening in Char Zahiruddin. "Don't worry, we have instructed our TNOs to help the affected people," said the Chief Relief Officer at DC's office.

The September 27 cyclone probably did not take as many human lives as it happened in 1991, but it left behind a trail of devastation inflicting irreparable damages to human properties. The local administration showed some activities only when PM Sheikh Hasina and her ministers visited some affected areas in the mainland Bhola. Otherwise the nature-hardened people of these coastal areas have taken their own initiative to start life again.

Modern Methods of Learning

by A M M Aabad

THE report on the suggested educational reforms has been submitted to the government for preparation of a National Education Policy, to be announced soon. This report also considered the other previous exercises for updating our educational system including the one drafted almost 20 years ago. It is expected that the modern teaching and learning options have been reviewed for the policy makers, and suitable recommendations have been made for pilot applications in developing countries such as Bangladesh, based on the experience gained by international agencies such as the UNESCO.

Today the medium of education has greatly diversified compared to traditional media followed during the earlier decades of this century. Namely attending the school or the academic institution, where the pupils face a teacher with books for exercises on the board and paper, followed by written and practical examinations. Now, many add-ons are available, as supplementary options.

At present the distant learning methods have become cheaper and more accessible to the lower budget hierarchies (compared to what the elite class can afford). The impact of technology, specially the electronic media in this information age (IT), has opened up revolutionary ways of getting educated, singly, sitting at home, or in groups located in different cities.

The electronic media has several broad divisions, computer, radio, television, and the audio-visual (all combined called multi-media). The latter, includes material recorded on audio or video tapes. Already one electronic university is operating in Bangladesh. Then there is the Internet, with choices and options inconceivable even five years ago (including the electronic tutor). Distant inter-active teaching methods have come to the common man's doors. Many of these modern educational media are available in the Third World countries (for example,

the cable TV caught up quickly and is very affordable now even in the rural areas).

Another fascinating topic is the growing availability of electronic books in the form of compact disc (CD) for use with the home computer, or on-line within systems such as the Internet (international), or LAN (local area network) — imagine the two dozen volumes of Enc Britannica on a single CD!

Now distant teachers can teach in real time, as in the video-conferencing system (a medical operation can be watched by the students outside the operation theatre, in the same building or cabled outside, or relayed by wireless). The MMDS technology has the potential to penetrate up to the primary school level in the rural area.

The government has already in operation a scheme for equipping, in the first phase, selected high schools and colleges, first with computers, then with networks, to enable a wide range of exchange facilities (the

campuses in the US universities are linked with a computer in every room in each residential hall).

Our new policy must ensure that computer illiteracy is eradicated from the academic sector right from the secondary school stage, to provide the educated adult with the freedom of choice for further self-education after leaving the academic environment.

Today the services available through the electronic media is cheap, fast, and network-based, with almost negligible updating budget and zero-maintenance. The use of paper is undergoing a quiet revolution. The education media is changing. We must not be unaware of the options, and what we might be missing, unless properly briefed by the experts and professional consultancy services. The UNICEF has a major role to play as advisor and surveyor for pushing up the rate of literacy in the developing countries.

— Dharuti Feature Service
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WORLD TEACHERS' DAY Challenges of 21st Century

by Principal Quazi Faruque Ahmed

Authorities in Bangladesh should recognize that improvement in the social and economic status of teachers, their living and working conditions, their terms of employment and their career prospects are the best means of overcoming any existing shortage of competent and experienced teachers.

WORLD Teachers Day is being observed today (October 5) in many countries of the world including Bangladesh. Programmes have been drawn up by various teachers' organisations including Bangladesh Federation of Teachers' Associations (BFTA), representing both the government and non-government school and college teachers, befitting the occasion. As is known to many, October 5 is dedicated to those who devote their lives to their belief that learning gives rise to liberty, that education is the life-blood of democracy. The vision of a future where people will live together in harmony, tolerance and mutual respect is not something to dream about, but something to work and struggle for. Teachers are in the forefront of this battle.

As a matter of fact, education is an investment in the future of individual as well as society. On the eve of the 21st century, the right to education is nothing more than the right to participate in the life of the modern world. Yet, while the importance of education is more widely recognized today than ever before, those who play the central role in providing it — the 50 million teachers of the world — are often overlooked. World Teachers Day is dedicated to correcting this situation and recognizing the devoted women and men on whom the education of our children depends.

Why October 5th was chosen as the World Teachers' Day? To have a proper answer to this query, it is necessary to trace the origin and background of

the events which led to the adoption of UNESCO/ILO recommendation concerning the status of teachers. Adopted on 5th October 1966 at a Special Inter-Governmental Conference held in Paris, the recommendation was the first such international declaration on the status of teachers in history and it represented a giant step in defining the responsibilities and asserting the rights of members of the teaching profession throughout the world. The adoption came after two decades of exploratory meetings, proposals and worldwide consultations with teachers and inter-governmental organisations. The origin of the recommendation can be traced to as early as 1946 with a request by the delegate of China at the first session of the UNESCO General Conference to draft and promulgate a World Teachers' Charter which would tend to (i) ensure the material conditions of the teacher, (ii) raise his moral condition, (iii) protect freedom of teaching.

As regards the content of the Declaration, the recommendation is still one of the most important international tools for bringing about improvements in teaching profession, as well as development of education. The 145-paragraph document is virtually mandatory reading for any one interested in education.

The recommendation states, among other things: (i) Since education is a service of fundamental importance in the general public interest, it should be recognised as a responsibility of state. (ii) Since education is an essential factor in economic

growth, educational planning should form an integral part of total economic and social planning undertaken to improve living conditions.

In adopting this recommendation, governments unanimously recognized the importance for every society of having competent, qualified and motivated teachers. Yet according to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the situation of teachers some thirty years later has reached "an intolerably low point". The ILO draws attention to the drastic decline in teachers' working conditions worldwide and the exodus of qualified and experienced teachers to better paid jobs. Colin N Power, UNESCO's Assistant Director General for education has said, teachers not only feel they are excluded and disempowered; they often are. The situation of teachers is most pressing in developing countries where two thirds of the world's teachers live.

When we look into the arena of education in Bangladesh we find that three systems of education are prevailing here: (i) purely government institutions, (ii) government-aided non-governmental institutions, (iii) purely private educational institutions run on loss and profit basis (some of them with international affiliation).

American historian Henry Brooks Adams said, "A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops." In the light of these words, "Authorities in Bangladesh should recognise that improvement in the social and economic status of teachers, their living and working condi-

tions, their terms of employment and their career prospects are the best means of overcoming any existing shortage of competent and experienced teachers, and attracting to and retaining in the teaching profession substantial number of fully qualified persons."

If we really believe that education is an investment in the future of individuals and of societies, it is imperative that the existing glaring disparity and discrimination in education must and forthwith be removed. It is found that Bangladesh Government spends, on an average, Taka 34 lac 20 thousand per government institution whereas the figure is only Taka 3 lac 17 thousand per non-government institution, although only 9.94 per cent students are enrolled in government institutions. Again, teachers serving in government and non-government institutions are paid inequally. Non-government teachers are paid much less, despite the fact that they have the same educational qualification and experience and follow the same curriculum. So a soul searching is required so as to effect a change in the system of education in the spirit of democracy, adhering to the provisions and principles of our Constitution. This is more required since we are virtually at the doorstep of the 21st century. A nation like ours cannot but accept the challenge of the ensuing century with courage and vision in the field of education.

The writer is Secretary General, Bangladesh Federation of Teachers' Association.

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