

FEATURES

# Will Bangladesh Face the Threat of La Nina Weather Phenomenon?

by Quamrul Islam Chowdhury

Lars Olsson, acting director of World Meteorological Organisation (WMO) World Climate Programme, said last week in Geneva that La Nina was already developing and could bring heavy rains to Southeast Asia and Bangladesh within next few months.

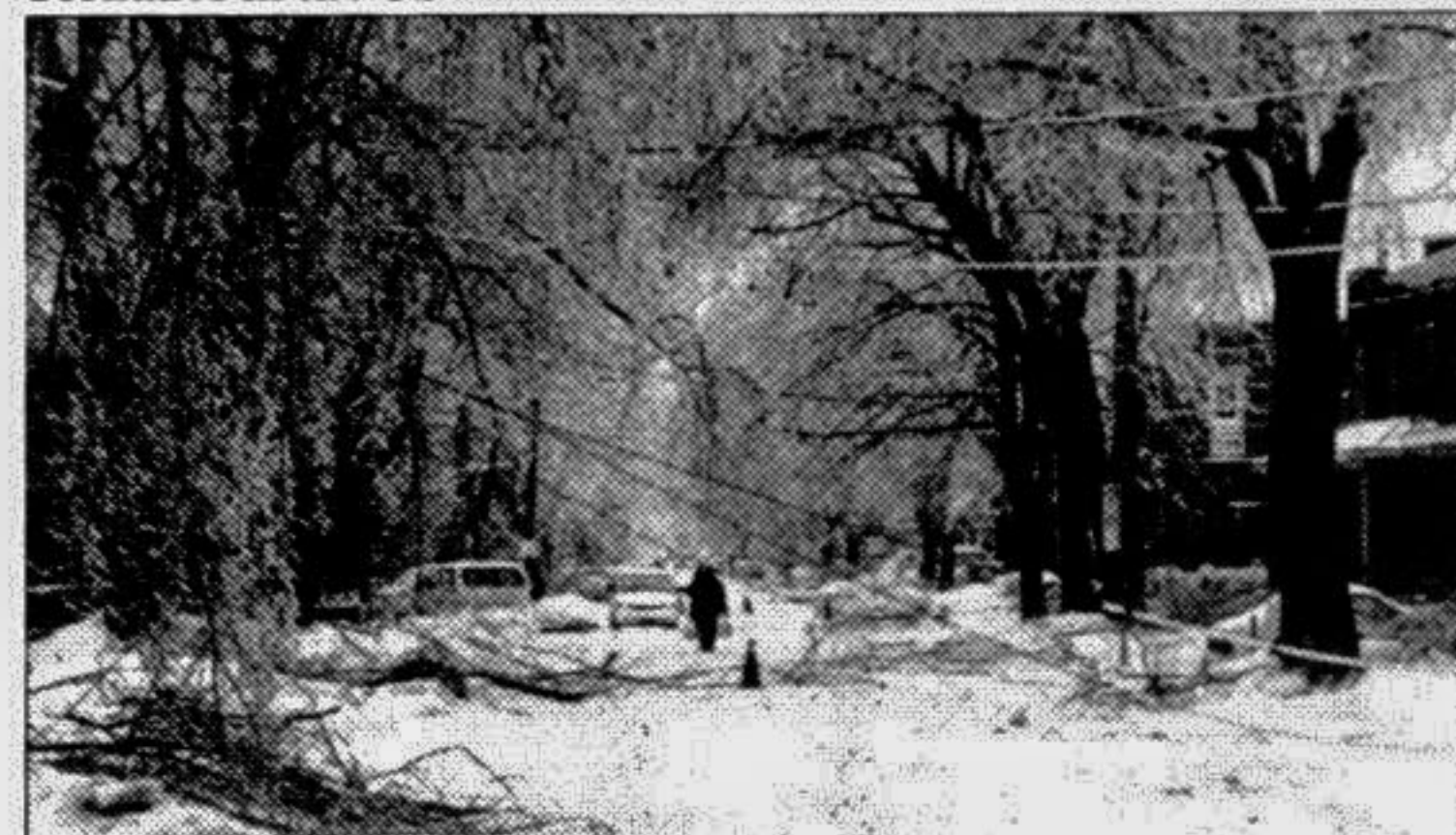
AFTER El Nino-generated temporary drought in the last month, will Bangladesh face the threat of a La Nina weather phenomenon of storms, cyclone and flood at the end of 1998? Scientists believe the weather phenomenon developing in the Pacific could spell disaster in Bangladesh. They fear La Nina may hit Bangladesh in November or December next bringing unusually heavy rainfall to parts of the country. The La Nina weather pattern will form late this year to bring an earlier cyclone and storm season to Bangladesh. Do the policy-makers prepared for facing it? How the millions of Bangladeshi farmers cope with La Nina phenomenon? When some meteorologists are saying El Nino was bad for Bangladesh like some other countries, his pesky little sister La Nina is waiting to hit Bangladesh shore.

large flux of warm water in the eastern and central tropical Pacific and south American coast. This stops Easterly wind and cold up-welling of the sea leading to shortage of nutrients of fishes thus causing mortality of fish population in the area. El Nino effects cause drought, forest fire, smog and famine in the coastal countries from east Pacific to the Bay of Bengal.

### Fallout of Phenomenon



Tornadoes in the US



Ice storms in Canada

Dr. A.M. Chowdhury, Research Division Head of Space Research and Remote Sensing Organisation (SPARSO) says, with the end of El Nino and beginning of La Nina, Bangladesh could experience more rainfall this year leading to more floods and cyclonic storms. He observes Bangladesh experienced 60 per cent less rainfall in the month of June and the onset of the South-easterly monsoon was delayed by one month due to the effect of El Nino, an ocean-atmospheric phenomenon which starts in the eastern Pacific region and extends upto the Bay of Bengal. Though Bangladesh has experienced a short and temporary drought as an effect of El Nino but the El Nino problem is over now with the advent of monsoon, says Dr Chowdhury adding the reverse La Nina phenomenon has started two months back in the Pacific which reached Bangladesh coast two weeks back resulting in monsoon rainfall.

What is El Nino? El Nino is a Spanish word which means 'Christ Child'. It occurs due to the movement of a

mate Programme, said last week in Geneva that La Nina was already developing and could bring heavy rains to Southeast Asia and Bangladesh within next few months. Sea surface temperature in the eastern Pacific, which had risen under El Nino to about five Celsius above normal, hitting 32 Celsius in some places, had already fallen below normal, mainly along the equator. Olsson observed, 'La Nina is developing quickly. This one seems more intensive than what we have seen before,' he added.

Consensus is growing among meteorologists that a La Nina weather pattern will form late this year, bringing unusually heavy rainfall to parts of Southeast Asia and Bangladesh. Lars Olsson, acting director of World Meteorological Organisation (WMO) World Climate Programme, said last week in Geneva that La Nina was already developing and could bring heavy rains to Southeast Asia and Bangladesh within next few months.

### Can it be Predicted?

Scientists estimate that 70 per cent of El Ninos are followed within a year by a La Nina. Climate researchers are meeting this week in Colorado to exchange findings in an effort to predict La Nina's mood in the next few months. The state of understanding of La Nina and its societal and environmental impacts will be discussed there. La Nina is the other side of the coin (El Nino). La Nina has a serious case of sibling rivalry with better-known El Nino.

Experts are now discussing how correctly they can predict El Nino and La Nina and such issues as why there were fewer La Ninas compared to El Ninos. Though weather experts are divided on the magnitude of La Nina, they agree on its potential to seriously change traditional weather patterns. Bangladesh policy-makers should now chalk out programmes for creating institutional capacities to predicting such weather changes and initiating mitigation measures to reduce vulnerabilities of the people of the country whose economy is predominantly agrarian and depends on the vagaries of the weather.

The writer is chairman of Forum of Environmental Journalists of Bangladesh (FEJB), secretary general of Association for Green Accounting in Bangladesh (AGAB).

# Anti-Landmines Crusade Wins a New Royal Champion

Last August, the campaign against a world scourge that kills or maims 2,000 people a month lost a key ally with the death of Princess Diana. Now, as the push continues to ratify the Ottawa Treaty, Gemini News Service reports on preparations which look set to establish another international figurehead.

Andrew Manley reports from London

QUEEN Noor of Jordan is preparing to step into the shoes of Britain's Princess Diana as the high-profile figurehead of the international drive against landmines.

She hosted the First Middle East Conference on Landmine Injury and Rehabilitation on 11-12 July in Amman, which focused on the promotion of self-help programmes in heavily mined countries.

The meeting was organised by the Landmine Survivor's Network, which describes itself as the first international organisation created by and for landmine survivors.

Queen Noor, 46, comes from a Palestinian-American family and has qualifications in architecture and urban planning. In 1978, she married King Hussein — whose previous wife died in a plane crash — and the couple have four children. Described by observers as intelligent, photogenic, multilingual and a natural diplomat, Noor is expected to push the global initiative hard.

One place she might start is nearby Egypt, still capable of producing landmines and still refusing to sign up to the 1997 Ottawa Treaty, which seeks to ban the use, manufacture, sale and stockpiling of anti-personnel mines.

Cairo says it has up to 22 million mines on its territory, some dating back to the desert tank battles of the Second World War. It was an international de-mining aid before it signs. Egypt denies that it still exports mines to other African countries. But Egyptian-made mines were recently found in Angola.



Jordan's Queen Noor: Pushing for a landmine ban

However, in several parts of Africa — a continent plagued by these weapons — progress is being made on implementing the Ottawa Treaty.

Mali is among the African countries, most committed to the accord. It publicly began destroying its stock of 10,000 landmines in late May in the presence of former UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, now secretary-general of the grouping of French-speaking countries, La Francophonie. Besides opposing mines, President Alpha Oumar Konare of Mali has campaigned against

the import and circulation of small arms in west Africa, and was instrumental in finding a peaceful solution in 1996 to the country's long-running insurgency by the Tuareg inhabitants of the northern desert.

Among African nations, Botswana, Djibouti, Guinea, Mali, Mauritius, Mozambique, South Africa and Zimbabwe have ratified the Ottawa Treaty, which was signed by 132 governments last December.

Thirty-two countries had ratified it by early July. Campaigners are now exerting pressure on other signatory states to

anti-mines campaign. Sudan's landmine problem is particularly serious. Minefields are poorly mapped and many of the weapons are old and unreliable.

Angola, which has Africa's worst landmine problem, is delaying ratification and importing and laying fresh supplies, as another round of conflict with the UNITA forces of Jonas Savimbi threatens.

Far from ratifying Ottawa, neighbouring Congo-Kinshasa and Congo-Brazzaville have shown no interest in even signing the document. Sierra Leone, only recently freed from the control of a military junta, has not signed either. Other non-signatories include the Central African Republic and Chad, both of which have vast rural areas that are difficult to police. Ethiopia and Eritrea, currently in a bloody stalemate over border demarcation; and Nigeria, which sees landmine capability as essential to its self-appointed role as West Africa's regional peacekeeper.

The landmine problem has spread in the past decade, making ratification even more urgent in the minds of African campaigners. Anti-personnel mines have been laid by both sides in Burundi's low-level conflict, and the problem in neighbouring Rwanda is considerably worse. Guinea-Bissau still suffers the landmine legacy of the colonial struggle against the Portuguese, and there are still unmarked minefields in northern Mauritania as a result of the Polisario war in the Western Sahara. Neighbouring Morocco is another Ottawa non-signatory.

However, the recent decision by Britain to rush through legislation ratifying Ottawa — expected before the end of July — may help to produce further movement in Africa. A government spokesman said that once Parliament had acted, London would be in a position to put pressure on non-ratifying African countries such as Kenya.

The writer is a British freelance journalist who reports for a number of media organisations including 'The Economist', 'Africa Analysis' and the 'British Broadcasting Corporation's World Service'.

# Ayurvedic Cure for Blood Cancer!

by Amit Kumar

Each batch of Ayurvedic medicine takes two to three years to make. Using seven metals gold, silver, iron, lead, zinc, copper and tin and herbs, the medicine is made after an elaborate procedure of grinding, heating and mixing.

IN India, alternative systems of medicine have usually been treated in either of two ways: with scepticism by the scientific community, or as a miracle by the people at large. This is what makes the work of Vaidya Balendu Prakash, honorary physician to the President of India, so path-breaking. The doctor is trying to ensure that the ancient Indian medical system of Ayurveda gets its pride of place in science, rather than relegated to its grey areas.

The scientific community may have just begun to take note of the encouraging results of a unique — probably the first ever — pilot project in which metal-based Ayurvedic formulations were used by Prakash to treat blood cancer.

Five out of the seven cases of acute promyelocytic leukaemia also called acute myeloid leukaemia, sub-category M3 (AML-M3) he took up have recorded remission. While pleased with the results, doctors say it will need long-term follow-up of a significant number of patients to establish the true place of this form of medication in the treatment of AML-M3.

The treatment, a safer and cheaper alternative to chemotherapy, is being monitored by a batch of doctors from the country's premier All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS).

Though two of the patients

who died in advanced stages died, informed Prakash, the five others who completed the three-month course have shown heartening results.

"It's the first time that an alternative to chemotherapy has been used," he told IANS in an interview. "The Ayurvedic treatment is less toxic and has no side effects." Also, while a year of chemotherapy in a hospital could cost Rs. 1 million (about \$23,800), the Ayurvedic treatment would cost no more than Rs. 25,000 (about \$590).

Now even ratified by the Ministry of Health, Prakash's efforts got a shot in the arm after he successfully cured two relatives of former Union Health Minister Salim Sherwani of leukaemia. It was Sherwani then who then ensured that the Ayurvedic treatment would be looked into by allopathic doctors just as Prakash had wanted.

The doctor, 39, holds a degree in B.Sc. and Bachelor of Ayurvedic Medicine and Surgery, or BAMS, the Ayurvedic counterpart of MBBS. Apart from being physician to the President, he is the chairman of the Ayurveda-Siddha-Unani Drugs Technical Advisory Board, the highest body of its kind.

However, the doctor's iconoclastic ways have not gone down well with his peers. Prakash has challenged the multi-purpose drug called

Chyavanprash which is the staple of many an Indian household.

"They don't tell you how much to take and how often. Plus, it contains too much sugar and should not be taken by diabetics," he says. "But do the manufacturers carry a warning?"

Prakash points out that Chyavanprash is a medicine, but is marketed as an alternative to a general purpose health tonic. "And what about expiry?" he asks.

Most claims of herbal are only verbal, says Prakash. "Many so-called herbal products actually use 90 per cent chemicals. They are taking advantage of attitude change and to evade excise duty." Most herbal shampoos, for instance, use a detergent base.

The son of an Ayurveda doctor, Prakash followed in his father's footsteps. And in just 13 years, found a global niche for himself.

Last year he was invited by Pakistan cricketer Imran Khan's father-in-law Sir James Goldsmith for treatment.

Though Goldsmith, suffering an advance stage of cancer, died before he completed the course, he offered Prakash a grant to set up an Ayurvedic research facility in Paris. Prakash declined, saying he preferred to stay in his own country.

Apart from Britain, which he has visited almost 70 times, and the U.S., where he has been more than 20 times, and a host of other countries, Prakash is extremely popular in neighbouring Pakistan.

Word spread after he treated patient suffering a rare type of leukaemia in Karachi in 1987. Though doctors hadn't given the man much time, Prakash's treatment cured him completely.

There have been other such cases. Like that of a boy whose blood cancer, the rare AML-M7, had relapsed despite a bone marrow transplant. He had been brought back to India to die. The boy was treated by Prakash, and has been living for more than ten years since.

In his pursuit to get the desired scientific status for Ayurveda, Prakash does what many other practitioners don't: in his research facility in the town of Dehradun in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, he painstakingly documents the smallest part of his work, has an animal laboratory, practices quality control, and is carrying out toxicological tests.

Each batch of Ayurvedic medicine takes two to three years to make. Using seven metals gold, silver, iron, lead, zinc, copper and tin and herbs, the medicine is made after an elaborate procedure of grinding, heating and mixing.

— India Abroad News Service

# The Elephant is a Large Animal

by Anju Sharma

ONCE again Indian wildlife research scientists stuck on their myopic magnifying glasses and met in New Delhi to discuss which plant and animal species need to be saved.

They searched and considered solution to that million-rupee question plaguing conservation in India: how can these species be saved? The level of input given by wildlife science to conservation in this country can at best be called library decoration; at worst irrelevant, biased and backward.

The "scientifically correct" workshop, part of the Biodiversity Conservation Prioritisation Project (BCPP) initiated in November 1995 by the World Wide Fund for Nature, was solemnly going about its business of setting priorities for biodiversity conservation in India, when one of the participants asked a question: a similar exercise of listing important sites was carried out in 1988, and areas that needed priority conservation measures had been listed. Nothing had come out of the exercise. Why should this current exercise be different? Nobody had an answer, of course.

At a time when the entire "hands-off nature, people-out-of-national-parks" conservationist approach taken by the country seems to be failing and needs urgent scientific attention, the scientists continue to hide in their library cupboards, and seemed to be stuck on the micro rather than the macro.

In other countries and continents, the scientific community has long since started to show scientific objectivity and record the impact of human needs rather than just grudgingly acknowledge that they exist.

The workshop itself fleetingly touched upon the need to understand the perceptions, knowledge and priorities of the local community, and its relationship with the ecosystem was emphasised. Ironically, however, none of the scientific papers presented made an effort to document and understand these interactions, or offered a method on how to include people and make them an integral part of conservation and management strategy.

People-animal conflicts in India are now old hat. Everybody who is anybody in conservation is talking about whether the Gulgars, for example, should or should not be allowed to continue their nomadic lifestyle in Rajaji National Park in Uttar Pradesh. The scientific community in India has strong personal opinions on the matter, but professional, studied and considered opinions backed by facts and statistics — scientific opinions — are in short supply. Surely, having solid, fact-based opinions on human-animal interactions is now a biodiversity conservation priority.

The record of wildlife research in this country in dealing with conservation emergencies is not good. When homeless elephants tried to drive home their point to the national media by trampling over humans and crops in Bihar and West Bengal, the voice of the scientific community, when they whispered together, was to borrow words, like wind in dry grass and rats feet over broken glass.

The elephants, to give them due credit, were not trying to make a local point — they were acting for elephants across the country who would be forced to kill many more human beings as they find themselves similarly marooned in small pockets which cannot sustain them. This will soon be a national problem. No national solution has been identified by the scientific community.

The tiger is on the verge of extinction. That, it seems, is the sum total of the knowledge we have on this glamorous symbol of India's fauna. Millions of dollars and a much extolled Project Tiger later, we know that the tiger is on the verge of extinction. It has not tickled the fancy of one scientific mind in the country to find out what went wrong with Project Tiger. With no lessons learnt but many more dollars allocated, the conservation plans blunder on.

Part of the problem maybe that the scientific minds in the country cannot see socio-economic realities as they peer down at sacred nature through their glasses. At the BCCP workshop, for example, one of the premier research minds in the country, with years of experience, gave the following reasons for conserving nature — the rights of living organisms, and the fact that "sacred life" provides an "elevating experience" for all people. Unfortunately, the world turned big and bad since the last time he looked up from his microscope.

Another part of the problem is that at a time when the world is busy tearing out its hair at the extinction problem, a vast chasm exists between science and management practices in the country. As scientists make daisy chains and talk about sacred and dainty nature, the forest service is taking matters into its own burly hands and dealing with them as badly as they can. They scorn wildlife research as an "academic exercise". No attempt has been made to build a bridge across these cross-purposes.

Conservation in India is in crisis. A crisis needs presence of mind, and quick solutions. We already have a list of priority areas that have been listed as National Parks. We have not been able to find a way to save them. And if the wildlife research community does not wake up now and become truly scientific, they might as well keep on sleeping. But we can kiss the tiger goodbye.

If wildlife research and management in India was indeed a cartoon film, this would be about time when antics of the scientific community and the wildlife bureaucracy, just stopped being funny.

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CSE/Down To Earth Features

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CSE/Down To Earth Features

# Old Nukes, New Threat

ENVIRONMENTALISTS and military experts say that the rusting fleet of decommissioned nuclear submarines in Russia are in a danger of sparking a catastrophe. The danger of nuclear waste remains critical in Russia's north and far east, says Vladimir Gonav, head of the parliamentary committee in Northern Russia.

Lack of proper maintenance and neglect have left the fleet of 150 decommissioned Soviet-era submarines in such poor conditions, that some are rusting half-submerged in their docking bays. If they are moved, radioactive material could leak out.

Despite the threat they pose to the environment, most of them are likely to stay where they are until Moscow finds the finance to tackle the problem. The money it has allocated will fund the dismantling of only five vessels a year.

A group of nuclear experts who met under the Vienna-based International Atomic Energy Agency pointed out Russia's north-west as having one of the world's largest concentrations of nuclear reactors, spent fuel and radioactive waste. They reported that by 1995, more than a billion cubic metres of radioactive waste had accumulated the Russian Federation.

# Facing Extinction

AT least one out of every eight known plant species on the Earth is threatened with extinction, says the first international survey of plant diversity. Sixteen organisations jointly worked for 20 years to complete the study. Habitat destruction and introduction of non-native species have caused about 34,000 species to become so rare that they could easily disappear, shows the study. It is nearly 12.5 per cent of the 2,70,000 fern, conifer and flowering species known worldwide.

In the US, nearly 29 per cent of 16,000 species are at risk. Similar percentages have been recorded for Australia and South Africa. Some of the cases are really noteworthy. For instance, 75 per cent of the yew family — which produces the anticancer drug taxol — is threatened with extinction globally. Even familiar groups such as 14 per cent of roses, 32 per cent of lilies and irises, and 29 per cent of palms, are in trouble.

The report says that widespread extinctions might affect medicinal science. "Plants have historically provided some of the most important drugs that we have," says chemist David G I Kingston of Virginia Tech, USA.

# Not Enough to Drink

FRESH water supply is gradually becoming a matter of serious concern, says a report of the United Nations (UN). With nearly 900 million people affected by diarrhoea each year and an equal number suffering from diseases caused by round worms, unclean water ranks at the top of the world's pollution problems.

The World Health Organisation observed at the UN Commission on Sustainable Development meeting that nearly one billion people worldwide still lack adequate supplies of clean drinking water. Whereas about two billion people do not get water for proper sanitation.

The study by UN and the Stockholm Environment Institute warns that if major initiative is not taken, two-thirds of the world's population will live in countries facing severe water problems by the year 2005. Clelio Habito, secretary of socio-economic planning for the Philippines says, "We must ensure adequate drinking water for everyone in the world." For this, it should be ensured that the cost of providing water is fully borne by someone, he says.

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