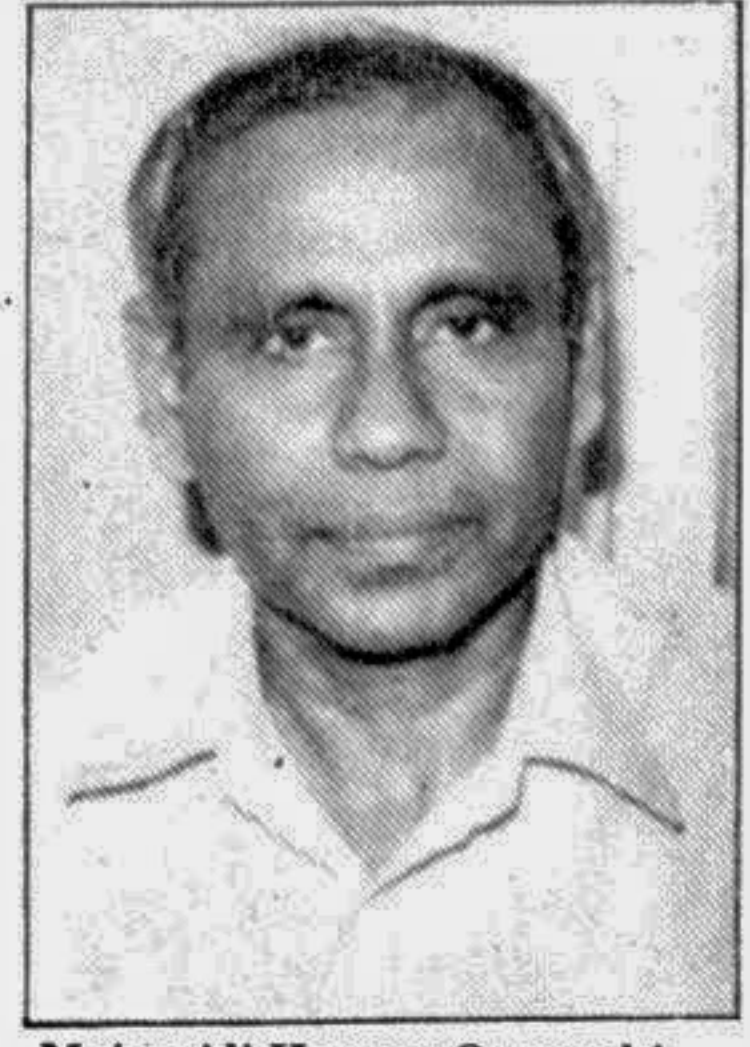


Facing the Flood BDRCS Rushes to the Rescue

With a major calamity like the present flood gripping the Bangladesh delta, where boats are seen plying in roads of the capital city Dhaka, one wonders if a charitable organisation like the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society is aware of the grave situation, and if it is functioning adequately. **Fayza Haq** speaks to three persons of authority in the organisation viz. **Major Ali Hassan Quoreshi**, the secretary general, **Bjorn Eder**, the head of the IRC delegation, now visiting the country, and **Julian Francis**, a disaster preparedness delegate.

DS: What is the size of your aid?
Major A H Quoreshi: We have not yet completed giving the aid. It is an on going process. It is very difficult to assess it at this moment. Aid is being given all over the country, in all the districts, plus the four metropolitan cities. We are operating in 68 different places but centrally, so far, we have concentrated in two phases of relief operations. The first one is the random distribution of prepared food, mostly chira and gur, which covered 100,000 people, ultimately covering 20,000 families. That was done in 37 districts and in the city of Dhaka.



Major Ali Hassan Quoreshi

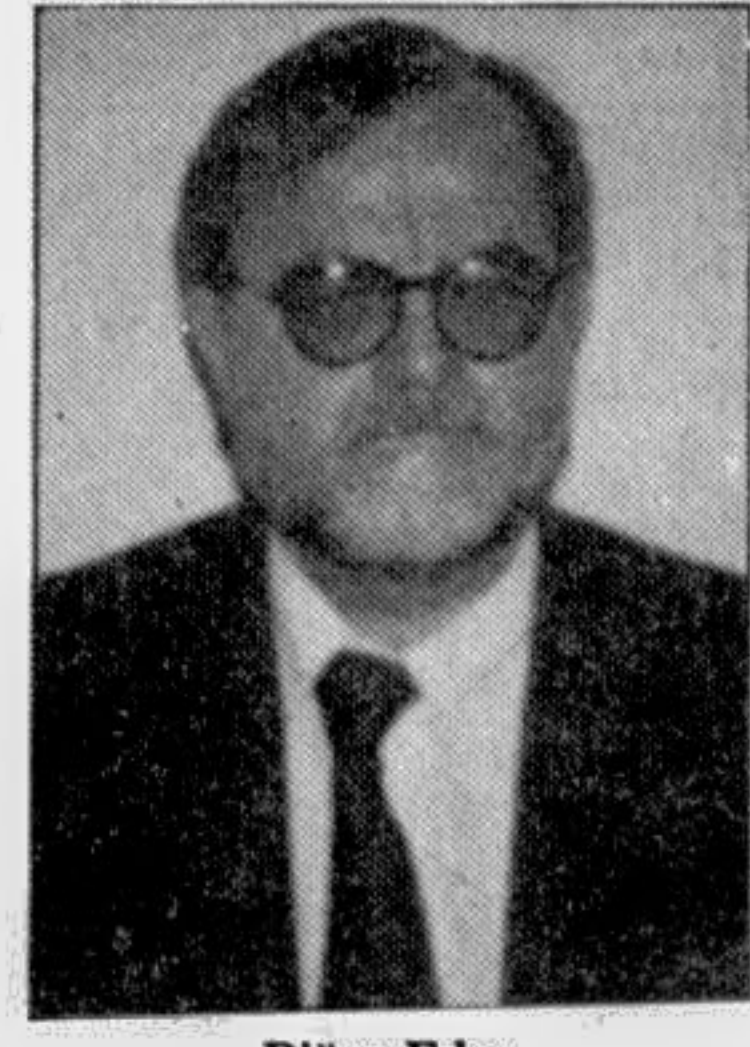
DS: What else have you given apart from food?
Major A H Quoreshi: We distribute various items like household goods, children's clothing, but not lungis or saris, but we'll probably be doing it later on. For us clothes is insignificant, at present we are concentrating on the distribution of food. The random distribution began at the end of July and went on till the middle of August. We then distributed rice and pulses at the scale of 30 kgs of rice and 5 kgs of pulses per family, assuming each family comprised 5 individuals. This is being done in the most flood affected areas in 25 districts including the Ganges and Brahmaputra basins, and the Dhaka city.

DS: In many cases people are flocking around the cameras, and various relief teams have to move on to another area where the next lot of needy people have collected. Our relief, however, is more systematic. The people we reach are either in a relief camps or stranded in their homes. Our Red Crescent teams visit those places. Suffering people need food and medical assistance. In some cases we do not preselect or take the addresses of the beneficiaries. We give instant assistance so that the hungry ones can eat. In the others, beneficiaries are selected, keeping certain considerations in view such as is the family in great need? From a hundred families, say, we select the most vulnerable ones. We try not to duplicate the work of other relief organisations. We attempt to select disabled individuals, women and old people as well as physically weak people, who cannot reach the other relief teams. Considering various factors, we make a priority list, and we attempt to help those in genuine need. This list may not be all inclusive. There may be 200 families in an area, and out of them we select 30 or 40 of them. We don't want to give relief for only a day — we want the relief to be substantial. The family that gets our relief is contented for about 10 days. This is being done for 80,000 families to ultimately cover about 400,000 people. By

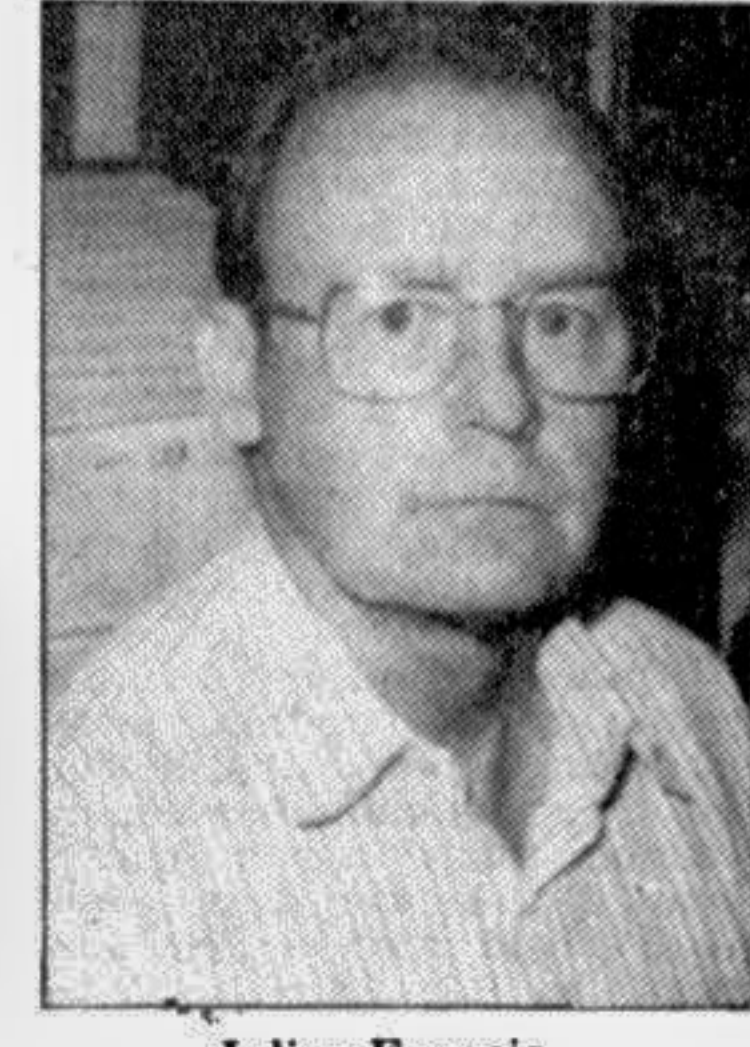
the time this phase ends we will end up covering 400,000 more people, by the middle of September.
DS: What is your plan of distribution?
Major A H Quoreshi: We have our district units. In each district in a metropolitan city, we have an elected committee and Red Crescent members. They carry out the survey for the number of beneficiaries; preselect the areas; and then there are relief goods like food which is prepacked. People either come to us or we go to them. This is done everyday.

DS: Were you not prepared for the flood?
Major A H Quoreshi: We are always prepared for the flood, but we did not know if it would be Ms Rehana or Mr Rahim who would be affected. We are well aware that floods will continue to deluge our lands. We have our teams ready, we have a system laid down. The disaster relief manual states the rules and drills. But we have to reach an area which is presently affected by the flood.

DS: What is the cost of delivery — why is foreign aid needed?
Major A H Quoreshi: The situation was so terrible that to cope with it was beyond our means. As for international assistance, which is a normal case for charity through our international federation based in Geneva, we make an international appeal; next Geneva asks all the sister RC societies to assist. This time we asked for Taka 8 crore 55 lakh to combat the present situation. As the money is being raised, it is being spent. The statistics or requirement is changing. The full amount that is required is yet to be learnt. The European Union is also assisting us. Most of our appeal is expected to be fulfilled very soon. The money is with the donors and the full amount has not been raised as yet. We have received 85 per cent of our appeal amount. There are various channels of sending the money. The donor organisation gives aid



Bjorn Eder



Julian Francis

the Red Crescent or Red Cross Society of the country via the HQ of Red Cross in Geneva. The HQ sends the money to the federation office. This does not necessarily take a long time. If the money is placed today, in say the Netherlands, this money may be in Bangladesh tomorrow.

DS: How much longer will it take for all the water to recede according to your guess?
Major A H Quoreshi: It is unusual that the flood water is standing for so long. In '88 the flood water stood for only two weeks at the maximum. Probably the water will stand for two weeks more. Until that time there will be the need for relief. Once people return to their homes there will be more relief requirement.

DS: What is the cost of your delivery? How many vehicles and delivery people do you employ?
Major A H Quoreshi: It is an ongoing dynamic operation. We have to hire transport; it is difficult to give the exact figure of the transport. In an operation of this nature, our own transports are not enough to carry the necessary thousands of tons of food. We have a large number of light vehicles, trucks, and pick-up vans. Incidentally, a large number of women are employed in our organisation including in our hospitals and at the HQ. We employ about 600 people working in various relief projects in Bangladesh. In our payroll we have 2,000 people all. Relief is not our only operation. We have other ongoing projects throughout the country and we are modifying the projects depending on the situations. We will expand and enlarge if the intensity of the flood continues. We hope to help half a million families. We've just had a meeting with our chairman and the head of delegation. The final plan of action will be sent to Geneva and ultimately BDRCS will benefit.
DS: Unlike in the past, there has been little remarkable civil involvement in flood relief op-

erations, as seen in '88. How do you feel about this phenomenon?
Major A H Quoreshi: The Prime Minister has made her appeal and she has called upon everyone — the public at large and the voluntary organisations. People will gradually come forward. All the voluntary organisations of Bangladesh, big or small, in one shape or another, are involved. Individuals are not being seen coming out of the houses as the families themselves are affected. There is no dearth of goodwill. I'm sure the spontaneous reaction of '88 will be repeated.

DS: What are the present and post rehabilitation programmes that you have in mind?
Bjorn Eder: We have not yet decided what to do in the post-flood situation, but in the first appeal that was sent out in the end of July for international assistance, we only dealt with the immediate situation. Now we are considering the flood as a phenomenon more severe than what was predicted a month ago, and we hope to do some post-flood work as well. We are preparing, as the secretary general has said, one more appeal to Geneva. There we hope a response of a bigger emergency relief. The Red Cross and Red Crescent are an emergency organisation. However, we may see to vegetable seed distribution and possibly some construction materials. We do not envisage that the BDRCS will be deeply involved in the post-flood rehabilitation phase.

DS: Are the priorities of aid given in the right places — what about bedding, sheets etc?
Bjorn Eder: We don't deal with that. We have a limited amount of money and people. We have to choose our priorities on what is most essential. Right now it is clearly food. We have a situation to deal with 20 million people. The flood crisis is the worst and we have to concentrate on that. We have set up

22 medical teams, and in the plan we have 60 medical teams. They each comprise a doctor, paramedics, a male and a female volunteer.
DS: Were you prepared for the magnitude of the flood?
Bjorn Eder: To some degree, I would say, yes. There is a flood in Bangladesh every year, as people know. Usually the people are able to cope with the flood. However, we were not mentally prepared for a flood of this magnitude. But the BDRCS has disaster preparedness programmes over the most disaster prone districts, which are supported by Geneva.

DS: Would you elaborate more on who are the people who have donated money to the Bangladesh Red Crescent?
Bjorn Eder: At present there are 164 Red Crescent and Red Cross Societies in the world. Many of them are in developing countries and have no financial resources of their own. The BDRCS appeal to the federation. The federation sends out the appeals on behalf of the BDRCS.

From our HQ in Geneva our appeal goes to other organisations belonging to the federation. In this case e.g., the Americans, the Netherlands, the British, the Austrians, the Koreans, the Icelanders, the Danish, the Swedes, the Japanese and the Germans have already donated via the RC. The European Union has also aided.
DS: How do you find the situation in Bangladesh — does it give you headaches or nightmares?
Bjorn Eder: In Asia, I think the BDRCS is well organised. This flood is an impossible task for the BDRCS to handle the immediate need of the poor. However we are here not to solve the poverty situation but to alleviate it in case of emergency. In the 10 years I've worked with the RC, the advantage that is counterbalancing the nightmares and headaches is that this is one place, where you are not just an onlooker, but doing something positive and practical yourself to deal with acute emergency. That is a

great satisfaction by itself.
DS: Are you aware that there are reports that the drinking water and sewerage water are getting mixed at places in Bangladesh? Do you know that due to fear of lack of food there is hoarding of fish and meat in homes in Dhaka? Are you aware that prices of food and transport have gone up during the flood?
Bjorn Eder: I am aware of the price hike. The rest I'm unaware of. I know only what the newspapers print.
DS: Is the BDRCS doing adequate work?
Bjorn Eder: In some places it is doing excellent work such as the cyclone preparedness in coastal areas where, the RC has 150 shelters. The important thing is that there are 32,000 volunteers in this area, who are trained and equipped in every union to deal with cyclone warning and relief. The flood awareness programme, however, is quite new. It has not established itself yet.

DS: Do you think that this flood situation will get worse?
Bjorn Eder: With the international support only marginal

school-going children. They are sparing not only for Bangladesh but also for many other countries in the world, where there are many disasters and where people are badly affected, as in Korea, Nepal, Sudan and India, South America, Afghanistan. I still believe that the well-to-do in Bangladesh should help, if only with their old saris and lungis, old cooking utensils, spare food etc.

DS: It is reported that sometimes foreign aid brings in something like gents' suits — who can use such items in Bangladesh?
Bjorn Eder: The common people in Europe and America are not aware that here people wear lungis and saris. They send what they think is good and useful. They are trying their best. That is better than giving nothing which is what the affluent in Bangladesh are doing. Heeps by the well-off in Bangladesh is being done only to some degree. This has to be organised and done in an efficient manner.
DS: How long will the effect of the flood last — you are a disaster expert aren't you?
Bjorn Eder: The effect of the

Long-term development work as well as in the emergency relief operations get involved in from time to time. We certainly have informal links with the NGOs. The BDRCS units are in touch with the NGOs that are in the both at the districts and capital level, e.g. The Disaster Forum, which meets to discuss different aspects of work in connection with disaster. We have very formal links with the government e.g. the government requested the international federation of the BDRCS to get involved in the rehabilitation programme in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. That was an official invitation and the President of the country appoints the chairman of the BDRCS.

We work alongside the NGOs and make sure that our work is not duplicated. In the district level, we will not be distributing relief materials e.g. to those who have received similar relief from other organisations.
DS: Why does BDRCS only distribute chira, gur, rice and daal — what about biscuits and tinned fish?
Julian Francis: In July we had anticipated that the floods would recede, as in the past years, and people would be going back to their own homes. We felt what we were giving was more appropriate. This hasn't been the case, and so we are in the process of revising our plans. We will be distributing ready-made food such as biscuits. It is possible that we will be distributing clothes too in the next phase, but that depends on the success our international appeal.

DS: When do you expect the floods to recede?
Julian Francis: From our own experience and what we are monitoring from the government authorities, and the various bulletins put out by the flood forecasting, we don't expect the floods to recede before a fortnight. The flood might recede by September, but unfortunately it will have adverse effect on the health of the population in two-thirds of the country. The monsoon crop of rice will be severely destroyed so that although there should be a good winter crop, because of the soil fertility and high moisture the main rice crop of Bangladesh will be severely decimated.

DS: Why is it that apparently the less well-off in Europe and USA care so much for the flood affected in Bangladesh?
Julian Francis: In comparison, the poor are the most generous, because the poor in the west, as even here, have experienced poverty and are willing to give.
DS: What is your background for handling a BDRCS job like yours?
Julian Francis: I have had 30 years of relief and development experience in the Indian subcontinent, and have experienced many man-made and natural disasters in this part of the world. I've seen at least 10 floods, 4 cyclones, 5 draughts and one or two earthquakes.

One believes, after speaking to the BDR authorities, if left to the people of Bangladesh alone, calamities such as the present flood can never be effectively combated.



Relief goods being distributed by BDRCS.

—Star photo by Anisur Rahman

For Some Discos as Usual as Flood Swamps the Country

LIFE has hardly changed for some people despite the current flood disaster, with discos and holiday spots doing good business Ashulia over the weekend. The floods have been a boon for others charging extra for dry rooms and consumer goods, ferry service and sale of new boats, the most popular mode of transport now across the country. Music from food vending vehicles filled the air as people jammed this favourite location known as "lovers paradise" just outside Dhaka. Police constables struggled to keep traffic on track and vehicles properly parked as the road through this once sleepy village rises over Dhaka's flood protection embankment. Troops along with civil officials worked to keep the embankment from getting damaged from surging flood waters or unconcerned visitors. "They don't understand the situation... if this embankment is damaged many areas will just submerge," said one official directing the placing of sandbags. Hundreds of jute bags were being filled with sand by day workers as trucks unloaded them on the road side. The official complained the embankment was damaged when boats ferrying holiday crowd hit the sides to drop or take in new passengers. "It is great fun and the water is great," teenager Ashik said after a dip into the water

from a boat. He said he and his friends hired a boat for the whole day for 500 Taka and has been enjoying the stagnant flood water. They strung on the guitar and shouted popular Bengali songs, many off tune, "Sajna" and "Yummy, Yummy" — two popular mobile fast food restaurants — found it difficult to cope with business. "It is an extraordinary day... I can't stop for a moment, but it is good business," said one staff.

Ferry operators charged extra seeing the rush, while saw mill owners said the floods were a windfall as they sold boats made of wood they would normally sell at a throwaway price. "Say A.B.C..." the popular American band song blasted from loudspeakers as multi-coloured lights flicked at a disco. Locals joined expatriates for a sumptuous food and dance costing at least 600 Taka for each. "I feel bad, what can I do," one client responded when asked what he had done for the flood victims.

Another said: "I contributed to my company fund and calamity does not mean we all have to go into a depressive mood." Disco owners said they had more guests since the floods hit Dhaka's upmarket areas. Knee-to-waist-deep floodwaters gushed across roads, lawns and lapped around up-market homes in the Gulshan and Baridhara districts in north

Dhaka where most foreign diplomatic missions and residences are located, witnesses said.

The total death toll now stands at 444, with more than 30 million people homeless and vast tracts of agricultural land destroyed.

An advertisement in local dailies announcing a "Steak Week" at Dhaka Sheraton Hotel drew sharp criticism from a section of press, which asked how the management could promote luxury when thousands scrambled for food. Some travel agents reported a rush for tickets anywhere outside Bangladesh by the local rich tired or scared of floods. The Coca-Cola beverage company Saturday announced that 15 poisa from each bottle sold until September 23 would go in aid of the flood victims, so "join in and stand by the people in this crisis moment."

Up to two million people have lost their homes in and around Dhaka alone. The floods, the longest-lasting on record in the country, have submerged two-thirds of this deltaic South Asian country forcing Bangladesh to appeal for international emergency help. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina cancelled a visit to next week's Non-Aligned summit in South Africa to oversee disaster relief.
— AFP Feature

Women and Armed Forces

T Ananthachari writes from New Delhi

Recent exposures of sexual harassment of women enlistees in the Canadian Army have brought to surface a malady, particularly in the traditionally disciplined wings of public administration, which can only highlight the mental attitude of men even if it is not among all of them, towards women.

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In 1994 Canadian Peace keepers in Somalia were in the thick of a scandal leading to the death of a Somali teen-age girl. As in many other instances, media exposure in May this year about the travails of a girl who was alleged raped by two officers right in the first week of her basic training. What is more disturbing in a case of this kind is the fact that soon after the unsavoury incident 'her superiors had confined her to barracks and ordered her to report the attack to the military police, whose office is in another section of the base.'
While, according to media reports 'the army is trying to undermine her 'credibility', many soldiers have said 'they were not surprised that such abuses occurred because of officers' pervasive indifference to such concerns. The serious impact of this development on the fact that the Army top brass have 'recognised the existence of such attitudes and lashed out at those who see such harassment as an inevitable consequence of having women in the armed forces.'
It is worthwhile mentioning that women account for 10.8 per cent of the regular Canadian military and 18.7 per cent of the Reserves. According to media reports the military police is said to be investigating as many as 80 sexual assault complaints. It has also been reported that most Canadians do not trust the military to pursue the allegations fully. This issue has assumed such serious proportions that Chief of Staff General Maurice Baril has gone on record to say that he would not "allow the Canadian Forces to become a refuge or training ground for thugs and brutes".

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