

LETTER FROM AMERICA

Water, Water, Everywhere!

Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed writes from Princeton

Ever since Henry Kissinger dehumanised Bangladesh by labeling it "an international basket case", Bangladesh has been the butt of many cruel jokes. We have been accused of behaving as though the world owes us a living.

In the aftermath of Bangladesh's last devastating flood, this writer wrote a fiercely patriotic article in the Opposite-Editorial page of The New York Times on November 17, 1988.

The purpose of the current piece is to see what has changed over the last ten years. Under the caption, "Bangladesh — and Proud", the article, meant to be a primer for the Americans, read: "It is not easy being a Bangladeshi these days. While our country is going under — literally and figuratively — the international community has responded with generous aid as well as a strong dose of cynicism and sarcasm."

Ever since Henry Kissinger dehumanised Bangladesh by labeling it "an international basket case", Bangladesh has been the butt of many cruel jokes. We have been accused of behaving as though the world owes us a living. When cyclones lash out at our sea coast, killing thousands, it is because of our "fatalistic attitude." I have heard Bangladesh blasted as the "most backward country on earth." I have seen it kicked around a "Bang-the-dish" in satirical cartoons.

Yet, not so long ago, Bangladesh was the breadbasket of the region. In the pre-industrial days, our prosperity earned us the name "Golden Bengal." Every inch of land was cultivated for two or three crops each year. Life was so easy that neighbouring Indians settled in droves on this fertile plain. Everyone stayed put, with the results that now 100 million people are jammed into an area the size of Wisconsin.

The massive deforestation and the construction of numerous river dams in India and Nepal has a lot to do with the recent floods in Bangladesh. Bangladesh is a delta through which the eastern part of the Indian subcontinent discharges its water to the sea. During monsoon rains, some flooding is inevitable and is actually beneficial for the paddy fields.

But when combined with an overflow from the dams, the rivers — which have not been dredged recently because of prohibitive cost — cannot discharge the water to the sea fast enough.

Consequently, the water backs up, submerging a very flat, sea level country. Our neighbours, who consistently refuse to discuss a solution to our flood problem, share some moral responsibility for our misery. We Bangladeshis are a proud people famous for our poetry, songs and cuisine — may be the best in the world. We may be poor, but we are not backward. The war with Pakistan in 1971 completely destroyed our land's infrastructure. It took a monumental effort to get the country back on its feet. The hot, humid climate is not conducive to heavy, prolonged physical labour. Saddled with the burden of feeding millions, our development plans have to be scrapped regularly because of the catastrophes like this year's. But our population control plan is in place and the births are decreasing.

Given a stable, representative political system — already within reach — and a few flood-free years, our genius will make us rebound. The land that produced literary giants like Rabindranath Tagore, the first Asian to win Nobel Prize, and poet laureate Kazi Nazrul Islam, will not stay down for long. In the meantime, as we fight to save our people from disease and starvation, we ask the international community to be helpful and understanding — and not to indulge in ridicule and pontification.

On December 7, 1988, The New York Times published two lead letters in response to the article. A fellow Bangladeshi argued the leftist version of the events, and a communal Indian Bengali ridiculed me for claiming both Rabindranath and Nazrul as our own, and reminded me that Nazrul was actually a devotee of Kali. Perusing

the article now, it amazes me how little has changed. Yes, we have had representative governments since 1991, but that's about it.

The population has exploded by another 20 to 30 million, major cities are becoming too polluted for human habitation, and our neighbours have demonstrated no qualms whatsoever about inflicting flood or drought on us, to suit themselves. Our governments seem beholden to foreign nations. And if our people have demonstrated any "genius," it is for inflicting harm and dishonour on our women!

Expatriate Bangladeshis generally outperform average Americans in the USA. Those who have remained in Bangladesh are made of the same raw material. Why is that Bangladesh's problems are becoming more and more unsolvable everyday? There are plenty of selfless, honest and idealistic Bangladeshis at home and abroad.

It is time they rescued Bangladesh from the throes of dishonest politicians who misuse their power for personal gain, deadbeat businessmen who borrow the nation's money and never repay, unscrupulous government officials who suck the nation's resources illegally for their own benefit — and the terrorist trio of rapists, mastaans and Chandabaz.

These criminal elements within our society, which also include some policemen, have to be confronted sooner or later, or Bangladesh will really go under. Why not now? We are tired of begging. Let us begin the process of becoming donors. Nature spares no one. Every nation suffers nature's wrath in the form of flood and ferocious winds, called cyclone, hurricane or typhoon in different geographical locations. This year, there were extensive flooding in the southern United States, especially in Texas. In 1993, the Mississippi river rose above the 100-year mark and

devastated northern USA. While it cannot prevent the floods and hurricanes from occurring, with satellite monitoring, America is always prepared.

Flood and hurricane areas are evacuated, the army is made available for relief work, and the President declares the affected areas "disaster areas" making them eligible for low interest loans. (Every hurricane is given a female name, say "Gloria." If "Gloria" brings death and destruction, the name is retired forever!) Its intensity may vary, but the aqueous visitor sneaks up on Bangladesh every year. Yet, our governments seem always utterly surprised and unprepared. Too much time is spent on politics, too little on solving the nation's problems. Floods have been with us since time immemorial. After gaining independence, flood control should have been our first priority. That has not been the case, in any meaningful way.

There are those who say that the government tried to downplay the magnitude of this year's flood. Does it think that people believe that the governments cause flood? The government will regret its delay in tackling the nation's number one curse. The death and destruction that the unwelcome guest visit upon Bangladesh will do much more harm to the government than it realises.

Expatriate Bangladeshis in America are very concerned. They are eager to donate money and help in other ways. The government would do well to involve the expatriates and encourage fund raising worldwide. It is not only the Bangladeshi people's lives that are on the line — it is the government's too! Brace yourself, many more disasters are brewing. This past winter, El Nino caused all sorts of trouble; this summer his sister, La Nina, was up to no good. Whoever has heard of a Hispanic family with only two siblings?

Russia Goes Haywire under its Economic Crisis

by A S M Nurunnabi

Western experts are concerned that Russians could reject what has been peddled to them as democracy and capitalism and toss it all overboard.

AS the Russian economy continues to slide, its enfeebled leader Boris Yeltsin devalues the ruble. The risks: steep inflation and a new era of political arrest. For the most part, today's citizens of Russia seem to be confused and distrustful, wondering what, if anything, they can believe in. They did not seem to trust their government, and the administration of Yeltsin did not seem to be helping.

It talked reform but had not been able to deliver fully. It billed its economy as free market system when actually it is a hybrid between baron capitalism and state control. And now it snatched away the greatest accomplishment of the painful Yeltsin years: a stable ruble and low inflation.

The echo of the ruble trouble in Russia reverberated throughout the world. As the Russian central bank suspended foreign exchange trade in the Moscow Interbank Currency Exchange and the depositors queued up in front of Russian banks to take out their savings in instalments of fixed limits, confidence was badly shaken not only in the ruble, but also in capital markets with sizeable stakes in reformist Russian economy.

Countries with smaller stakes in Russia were also affected. Asian markets also suffered. Latin American countries suffered a big blow, as outflow of capital began from the erosion of investor confidence in transnational investments as such.

As economic analysts say, a currency devaluation does not, in itself, automatically mean bad news for a country, sometimes it can be a tonic. Nor a moratorium on debt repayment necessarily a sign of collapse. In Russia's case, however, these measures were poorly suited to remedy the economy's ills and, coming after nearly decade of extreme hardship, seemed cer-

tain to deepen most Russians' cynicism about their political masters.

In this context, it may be remembered that these measures were imposed only four weeks after the IMF and other foreign lenders agreed on \$23 billion worth of props for the Russian economy, and only three days after pledges from Yeltsin that there would be no devaluation and vows from his ministers that all debts would be honoured.

The question may be asked: What went wrong? The answer, according to analysts, is that much of the lending had gone not to guarantee the deposits of deserving savers, nor even to pay the pensions of impoverished old folks or the wages of unpaid miners. Rather it was squandered, or perhaps stolen. That hardly represented a change, but nor has it done anything for confidence in the system, and that, after all, was the problem the IMF agreement was meant to fix.

In the opinion of analysts, that deal was a worthy bet, that time could be bought while new reforms would rebuild institutions and raise tax revenues. But confidence continued to ebb, the banks began to teeter and the men who run them — the "oligarchs" who allegedly paid for Yeltsin's re-election in 1996 and gobbled up quantities of privatised assets — began to squeal. Thus Russia's true priority re-emerged: these banks and their owners were now to be saved.

As a result, the loss of confidence continued and the ruble — freed supposed to float — merely gurgled on downward, the banks were besieged by depositors large and small and, if no more credit from abroad would be forthcoming, the government could be tempted to resort to the printing presses to meet their demands. That is the road to hyperinflation, which

Russians experienced as recently as in 1992, by which time they had seen their savings vapourised.

In other economies, some of the disadvantages resulting from high inflation might have been compensated for by a boost to exports but Russia is at present incapable of producing much that foreigners want to buy except oil and gas, and even the energy industry is badly in need of foreign investment.

The devaluation had been anticipated even after the IMF in mid-July put together a \$22.6 billion bailout package. The deal didn't reassure investors, however, who continued to pull their money, in dollars, out of Russia. Moscowvites seemed perplexed. When they got the news of ruble devaluation, some rushed to buy big-ticket items and food before prices went up.

The IMF had been pumping billions into Russia on the proviso that much needed reforms would be rammed through. Moscow asked for even more money a few days before devaluing, but the IMF finally said no. The government now must figure out how to collect taxes more aggressively from corporations, banks and individuals. The government, it is feared, cannot survive by taking in less revenue than it expects and trying to balance the budget by slashing spending.

If it follows that course, millions of unpaid teachers, soldiers and government employees will never get the months of back salary owed them. In addition, Moscow needs to impose honest privatisation on the subsidised industries that, for now, make almost nothing that consumers want. It must regulate the banking system into some semblance of honest book-keeping and provide legal protection for investors and private property owners. In other words, Russia's economy needs an almost complete over-

haul. Such a grim economic outlook has a grim political counterpart. Russians had plenty to complain about a government so incompetent at collecting taxes that it could provide few services; a payments system so constipated that soldiers, miners, teachers and a host of other workers went without wages; appalling living standards even for those in work, ill-equipped hospitals, pollution and so on.

Many politicians are ready to offer remedies for these ills. Some exploit nostalgia for the certainties of the Soviet past; many attribute Russia's troubles to unbridled capitalism and market economics; few are friendly to the West.

It was to forestall the rise to power of such politicians and to keep Russia on some sort of democratic, capitalist path, that the West, through the IMF, had been ready to lend it money. But the policy has not worked. Analysts opine Russia lacks institutions and officials capable of applying large quantities of money honestly and efficiently. The IMF should have insisted that the money it was providing was properly spent. If lending is now to resume, it must only be the strictest of terms.

Russians are long suffering, but they have been suffering too long to remain passive. If the anguish drags on until the year 2000 election, they might not take to the barricades, but they are apt to protest with their votes. Western experts are concerned that Russians could reject what has been peddled to them as democracy and capitalism and toss it all overboard.

It is an outcome the West wants fervently to avoid. Although they disapproved of the devaluation, the Clinton administration and the IMF say they will work with Moscow to get through and pursue broader reforms.

Taliban Ban Threatens the Daily Bread

The relationship between the foreign aid community and the fundamentalist Taliban has never been good. But, reports Gemini News Service, the recent departure of most aid organisations has left Kabul residents worrying about where they will get their daily bread. Jason Burke writes from Kabul

MOHAMMED Ghous is a worried man.

As a baker in a run-down suburb of Kabul, Ghous needs hundreds of litres of water each day to provide residents with a supply of cheap United Nations-funded bread.

Although he has managed to continue production, scores of other bakers have recently had their subsidies withdrawn by the UN World Food Programme.

"Everyday people are coming wanting to know what is happening. There are people who rely on the subsidy. If it goes they will be dead," said Ghous.

On the western edge of the city lie the six dormitory blocks of the polytechnic. Five are unoccupied. All are without running water, electricity, sanitation or windows. Their abandonment is the reason for Mohammed Ghous' anxiety.

In July, the Taliban government of General Malik Pahlawan ordered the 38 international aid agencies working in Kabul to abandon their offices in the city and move into the complex.

The aid workers refused. Talks brokered by the UN failed and within days, the aid workers left. Their offices have since been locked and sealed.

For the aid workers it was a frustrating and depressing episode that summed up the difficulties they face in dealing with the Taliban.

The Taliban claimed the foreign aid community was being typically confrontational. Yet again, its leaders complained, the customs of Afghanistan and the authority of the hardline Islamic militia were deliberately being flouted.

The American missile attack on Osama bin Laden's headquarters on Afghanistan's

20 years of war

- December 1979: Former USSR invades Afghanistan
- February 1989: Soviet troops leave. Civil war starts
- April 1998: Peace talks between the Taliban militia and their opponents begin
- May 1998: Peace talks collapse. War continues
- August 1998: Taliban captures last of opposition towns in Afghanistan
- August 20, 1998: US missile attack on Osama bin Laden's Afghan base

eastern border — in retaliation for his alleged involvement in the bombing of its two embassies in East Africa — has served to further compound matters.

Fearing a backlash, the UN pulled its staff out. Many other

aid agencies followed suit. Talks aimed at finding a way out of the impasse inevitably collapsed.

Caught in the middle are the people of Kabul. For large sections of the city the aid workers' departure deprived them of essential supplies of food and drugs as well as access to clean water.

According to a recent UN report, hundreds of thousands of people are now at risk of disease at a time when the availability of medicines, and the skilled staff to administer them, has been drastically cut.

The northern suburb of Khair Khana, where Mohammed Ghous lives, is one of the worst affected areas. Its rows of dusty, dirty streets had their water piped in by a French aid agency. Now the agency has gone and the only source of safe water is a single tap at the mosque.

One local resident, Rachmatullah, said he was worried because his wife was expecting their first child.

"Water is the first necessity," he said. "We are all using the one tap at the mosque. It is getting very crowded and if there is a problem with supply there then the only place to go will be the wells."

Less than a mile away, in another part of Khair Khana, the wells are already in use. According to the UN, many are badly contaminated.

At the moment most of the aid work in Afghanistan is continuing with local staff, but it is unclear how long they can continue without support of expatriate specialists on the ground.

Afghanistan currently depends on aid for much of its healthcare, sanitation and water supplies.

Water, Water Everywhere, but.....

by Julian Francis

FOR THE last couple of weeks, it has rained very little (at least not much) in Dhaka, where I live and work for the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC).

The flood waters, which have been affecting up to two thirds of the country for the last 50 days have, nevertheless, been increasing over this period, and now the comfortable residential colony in which I live, close to Dhaka's diplomatic area, is full of stinking stagnant water which is full of floating plastic bags, a 'gift' of progress which clogs the ways through which water should drain away. Small boats provide a 'taxi' service in my road.

Of course, I am lucky that the phone, electricity, running water and gas are still available but two million people in the capital have now been driven out of their homes by the flood waters. The foul, very slow moving water all over Dhaka city and districts is potentially most lethal as so much sewage has overflowed into it. At the end of a tiring day which is usually at least 14 hours long, I feel a bit guilty having my shower. The waste water goes into the already overflowing sewage lines while I am acutely aware that millions of people are wading through this type of dirty water every day. I see tankers of drinking water going through axle deep flood water which brings the comparison into sharp perspective. In addition, I have seen the horrific sanitary

conditions that are being faced by, for instance, the thousands camping in the flood shelters.

Two thirds of the country are affected by the flood waters which, though expected to have subsided by now, have actually been increasing in many areas due to torrential rain in the Indian states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and West Bengal which finds its outlet to the sea through Bangladesh. It is therefore anticipated that the floods will not begin to recede to any great extent for another week or so, and it will be the end of September before farmers can think of finding dry enough soil in which to plant seeds. At least 30 million people have been affected in some way by the floods and it is estimated that at least 10 million will be in need of assistance to be able to eke out a living. The poorest are always the worst hit at times of disasters such as this. The landless labourers in the rural areas and the daily labourers/slum dwellers in the towns and cities have both been without work for so long. Their families stranded on embankments and in government buildings for so long have been living in temporary but unhygienic conditions.

A landless agricultural labourer would, normally, at this time of the year, be earning about 60-70 taka a day transplanting paddy (rice) seedlings. Now that paddy land might be under up to 10 feet of water. If he owns any animals he might be

passing his days collecting water from a well with which to feed them as the price of cattle fodder has doubled in the last few weeks. The fruit trees that his wife tend close to their homestead will have been destroyed by the length of the floods. And rather than go in search of the elusive relief supplies of the government and NGOs, these people may have decided to borrow money with which to survive even if the interest is as much as 8 per cent per month.

When the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) launched an international appeal at the end of July to support the flood relief work of the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society (BDRCS), some aid officials criticised it for scare-mongering. They felt that the floods at that time were 'normal'. However, the BDRCS and the IFRC have years of experience in dealing with floods in this country and their officials were sure that a disaster of huge proportions would unfold. Many thousands of the worst hit people have already received food and medical assistance from BDRCS in more than 30 districts of the country, and more districts will be covered in the coming days. The food supplies which include *chira* (flattened rice) which is ready to eat with some molasses, rice and *dal* (lentils) and high energy biscuits. The food supplies are distributed through the Red Cres-

cent district units who are able supported by members of Red Crescent Youth and other local volunteers. The BDRCS has also organised and deployed 22 medical teams, each consisting of a doctor, a para-medical and at least one male and one female volunteer. The problems they are encountering include diarrhoea, hepatitis, typhoid, skin diseases and, in some places, measles. Malnutrition is also expected to increase the longer the floods linger.

With the generally worsening situation, the BDRCS is preparing a further major action plan and appeal which is likely to include more relief supplies, supplies of seeds, especially for quick-growing vegetables, and clothing. The effects of this disaster are going to be felt for months and years to come, but to alleviate the suffering of the poorest sections of the population the BDRCS will be stretched to its limits to keep up the frantic pace of moving sustaining food supplies out of it's Dhaka warehouse. It is easy for the hard-working staff of the BDRCS and the Federation to identify with the flood-affected people of the country, as more than half of BDRCS' own compound is under water which makes loading and unloading trucks most difficult, and many of the houses of the staff have been inundated too.

The writer is Disaster Preparedness Delegate, IFRC, based in Dhaka

Flood Review

by M A Matin

Now it is well recognised that flood distress is caused not only by peak flood level but also by duration above danger level. Duration above danger level as on 7/9/98 has crossed 1988 1988-flood level.

flood duration at Bahadurabad, Sirajganj and Dhaka in the above selected list. At Hardinge Bridge the duration will cross 1988 flood duration by next few days. But it is unlikely the du-

ration will cross 1988 flood duration at Bhairab Bazar.

Flood this year has crossed recorded highest flood level (1910-96) at Hardinge Bridge and is still rising. At Rajshahi

the 1988 flood is the 16th flood from the highest point of view and 1987 flood is 3rd highest flood (19.46) and has been exceeded by this year's flood (19.64) and is still rising. From the trend it is guessed the peak now within days and so the Meghna at Bhairab Bazar.

So this is an unprecedented synchronisation of flood peak.

In 1988 the Hardinge Bridge (2/9/88) and Bahadurabad (30/8/88) reached their peak within 3 days but Bhairab Bazar peak (9/10/88) was weeks away even though between 30/8/88 and 2/9/88 Bhairab Bazar was maintaining a very high flood level between 7.40 and 7.45 metre.

By meter-days-above-DL a combined flood index (recently proposed by the writer) this

year's flood will cross 1988 flood distress within days even though the flood will be receding.

As the flood recedes, it will be a good exercise to review the design flood level of different embankments (flood dikes, road embankments and railway embankments), and initiate follow up actions.

It may be of interest to look at the superimposed water level hydrographs (1988 and 1998) of Dhaka and Sirajganj.

Outlook of flood: The flood is rising in all the three major rivers in the country. The Brahmaputra at Noonkhawa the most upstream point in Bangladesh rose by 10 cm on 7/9/98. The trend showed that the increase was likely to continue for at least another day i.e. 8/9/98. This effect will reach Sirajganj by about 10/9/98. With present rate of

rise Sirajganj is likely to attain a level of 14.86 metre by 10/9/98. This level is 18 cm above the level on 7/9/98 and 26 cm below 1998-flood level at Sirajganj.

Dhaka on the Buriganga is likely to strike the peak on 13/9/98 at 7.29 metre i.e. a rise of 46 cm above the level on 7/9/98 and only 29 cm below 1988-flood level.

Present status of flooding dated: 7/9/98

| Ganges | at Rajshahi | 19.64 rising | RHFL-20.00 year? |
|-----------|--------------------|--------------|-----------------------|
| | at Hardinge Bridge | 15.06 rising | (yr 1936 shows 19.90) |
| Br-Jamuna | at Noonkhawa | 27.35 rising | RHFL-15.05 (yr 1910) |
| | at Bahadurabad | 20.31 rising | RHFL-28.10 (yr 1988) |
| | at Sirajganj | 14.68 rising | RHFL-20.62 (yr 1988) |
| Meghna | at Bhairab Bazar | 7.33 rising | RHFL-15.12 (yr 1988) |
| | | | RHFL-7.66 (yr 1988) |

Note: RHFL= Recorded Highest Flood Level

| Estimation of flood distress level and comparison with 1987 and 1988 flood | | | | |
|--|-----------------|------------|---------------|----------------|
| Flood-ID | Station | Peak level | Days above DL | MDA-Sum-MDA-DL |
| 1987 flood | Bahadurabad | 19.71 | 7 | 0.98 |
| | Sirajganj | | | |
| | Hardinge Bridge | 14.57 | 28 | 9.29 |
| | Bhairab Bazar | 14.80 | 24 | 6.49 |
| 1988 flood | Bahadurabad | 20.62 | 15 | 20.96 |
| | Sirajganj | 20.62 | 17 | 6.29 |
| | Hardinge Bridge | 15.12 | 29 | 16.71 |
| | Bhairab Bazar | 14.87 | 22 | 7.18 |
| 1998 flood | Bahadurabad | 20.31 | 58 | 54.03 |
| | Sirajganj | 14.68 | 76 | 21.64 |
| | Hardinge Bridge | 14.87 | 23 | 17.57 |
| | Bhairab Bazar | 7.33 | 49 | 37.09 |
| | Dhaka | 6.83 | 45 | 16.82 |

