

Dhaka Needs Special Handling

Dhaka's underground sewage, overground garbage and flood water have all got mixed up far too much to allow the rate of countryside recession of water to hold good in the metropolis.

If the outbreak of water-borne diseases has been in hundreds till now it could be in thousands when the waters recede leaving bacteria-infested sludges all over the city and its peripheries.

On other vital levels, contamination in the water supplies will have to be got rid of, the dysfunctional sewerage channels need to be revived, gas leaks plugged and the snapped electrical wires joined up.

The flood-related problems of the metropolis are to be treated on a different footing than those of the rest of the country because of the complicated urban impact of the flooding.

We suggest that a special coordination committee consisting of Dhaka's mayor, secretary, local government ministry, chief of public health engineering, heads of DESA, WASA, PDB, gas authority, Rajuk and roads and highways deptt. and suitable media representatives be immediately formed, mandated and put to work to assess Dhaka's needs and salvage her from the effects of the longest-staying flood.

What an Autumn!

Dhaka, and hopefully the rest of the country smiled a dazzling autumn yesterday morning. Heart of all 120 millions leapt up beholding the radiant daybreak for nothing even near this happened perhaps in the whole last century.

But what an autumn it is going to be! Tagore in one of his immortal pictorial poems celebrated the Mother Bengal of autumn where the fields were bursting with young paddy saplings etc.

The water this time will recede but only to bare eaten out roads and houses no more standing and men and women even barer in their lack of cash and clothes, foods and provisions.

Have you seen how people defied the marauding waters and defied the DND? Our people are quite a weathen-beaten lot and will not give in easily to even a challenge of such magnitude.

Augurs Well

The perception that both India and Pakistan, the newly christened nuclear countries may sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), something they had been so stubbornly and vociferously rejecting all along, is getting stronger every day.

It is true signing CTBT will not usher any miracle in the acrimonious bilateral relationship of the two countries. But this will at least stop them from adding to the tension that already exists.

Flood 1998: Some Long-term Considerations

This year (1998-99) the government has allocated Tk 467.9 crore for Disaster and Relief in the Revenue Budget which undoubtedly does not seem to be enough to meet such a scale of emergency operations.

FROM the point of view of scale and duration, the extent of human sufferings, and the economic and infrastructural devastations, this year's flood has been described by some experts as this century's worst occurrence.

Some estimates (estimates based on best guesses of the needs for immediate relief and the post-flood reconstruction works are being produced both by the government, NGOs and the international agencies which come to billions of dollars.

Since crisis time is the most appropriate time for everyone, whether an individual or a government or a business organization, to be realistic by having a hard look at its future survival prospects and design an appropriate strategy, the policy makers as well as all concerned individuals, whether in or out of power, should seriously think about developing such a strategy.

Flood Cycle

Why such devastating floods

have been occurring and how these can be mitigated or managed are questions that flood and water management experts will tell us. But as an economist, in my previous article, published a fortnight ago on this page, I argued that from the number of, and intervals between, the occurrences of such major floods over the last 50 years or so, one can see that there is an indication of a long-term cycle of such floods at 10 to 15 years' intervals with the scale of devastations getting bigger and worse every time.

However, what is most worrisome is the question that if the time-intervals between such floods decreases, as the history of recurrences indicates, then every analyst of any long-run phenomenon will be troubled by the question: where does this decreasing trend eventually lead to? Or more technically, where are its limiting positions? Is it going to recur every 3-4 years or is it eventually going to coincide with the small scale annual floods? I cannot answer this question, the flood experts should. I only pray that the intervals between such major floods do not get narrower any more, since its consequences are alarming to the entire future survival of the country which every thinking person can imagine.

Long-term Preparedness

However, supposing it recurs every 10 years of later, which will be the brighter side of the cyclical pattern, then some important economic and financial issues should be addressed. How should Bangladesh prepare itself to face such situations? Most observers have commented that this year the gov-

ernment was found to be late in responding to the severity of the situation. Be that as it may, what is important is that it has been found to be transferring funds from the budgeted ADP (Annual Development Plan) allocations to the provision of immediate relief for the flood victims.

This implies two things: on the one hand, the government apparently did not allocate sufficient funds for such unexpected emergencies, and on the other, it decided to cut down the budgeted allocates of annual development expenditures. It would be useful to deal with these two points separately. This year (1998-99) the government has allocated Tk 467.9 crore for Disaster and Relief in the Revenue Budget which undoubtedly does not seem to be enough to meet such a scale of emergency operations.

As for the second point, about Tk 3.2 billion is reported to have been shifted from previously budgeted ADP to relief measures. It goes without saying that after such reallocation of resources, the government's predicted growth rate of the economy (close to 6 per cent) is

not going to be materialised. Even if foreign donations are much larger than this transferred amount so that the ADP projects can be resumed as soon as possible, because of the lost time and other organisational and infrastructural disruptions it will be difficult to resume the development activities back to their normal level very soon. Growth will definitely be less this fiscal year than what was presumed before. By and large, this way of handling such a major natural disaster shows a haphazard method of crisis management as well as loss of national self respect.

What Should Be Done? I would strongly recommend a disaster management plan for the country with the objective of facing disasters like devastating floods, cyclones, tidal waves etc. This can be done by mobilising its domestic resources with the implication that the country should not stretch out its begging bowl to the world outside.

Further, it should train its own people to jointly face the disasters along with the country's governmental and other human resources. Is it achievable? My answer is definitely 'yes'.

A rotating DISASTER FUND of about \$ 1 billion should be created and maintained in foreign currency reserves so that such emergency spending can be met without either pruning ADP projects or without begging from the outside world. No one has to explain why begging for outside assistance amounts to demeaning national self-respect. Beggars cannot have any respect anywhere. However, to create such a fund a few measures should be adopted.

First, cut down all the useless grants and subsidies to public, semi-public and private institutions which do not produce anything. There are many institutions where 'ghost' teachers, employees and workers are drawing regular salaries and allowances. It can be pointed out that a strict monitoring and implementation of the existing regulations will save a minimum of US\$500 million every year.

Second, introduce a small Disaster Management Tax like the previous Jamuna Bridge Levy on all transactions which will bring in at least a few hundred crores a year. If it is properly designed and explained to the people, no one will object to it.

Third, ask for individual donations to the rich class of people who are enjoying the benefits of government expenditures without paying much income taxes. For example, all the roads, railways and waterways are heavily used and in the process damaged by the industrialists, traders and real estate developers but do not pay anything towards their upkeep. They hardly pay any income tax and should be required to pay some substantial contributions to this fund be-

cause during such disasters, their industries and trade; are as much or more devastated than the poultry and cattle or huts of the poor people.

Finally, the government should have a plan to train and mobilise ordinary people in general to work together towards facing the disasters when they occur. The example of China during such periods of unforeseen disasters is a case in point. Even in Bangladesh this year, one has seen how the ordinary people are assisting the armed forces in preventing a collapse of the DND embankment. These are the sources of national strength that the country has but not harnessed properly.

Conclusions

Bangladesh has to shun its attitude of face the disaster as and when it comes. It has to develop a properly designed long-term Disaster Management Plan with its own resources by creating a rotating Disaster Fund of at least \$ 1 billion to meet the needs of immediate relief and consequent rehabilitation.

This can be done first by cutting its wasteful expenditures in its Revenue Budget and then by imposing a Disaster Management Tax like the previous Jamuna Bridge Levy on all transactions.

It should also take voluntary and semi-voluntary donations from the rich class of people of the society who are enjoying the benefits of the government expenditures but do not pay sufficient income taxes. Finally, it should build a trained but voluntary workforce in all parts of the country to face the disasters along with the armed and naval forces who are deployed at such times. The country should abandon begging from outside for relief and rehabilitation.



Kabir U Ahmad

Flood at Home: How Compatriots Feel Abroad

The sentiments of the Bangladeshis abroad are not much different from many living in the country. Like their fellow countrymen at home, they too have not spared any effort to stand by the country at this hour of distress in all possible ways.

WHEN Mr Mukht Chowdhury in Frankfurt expresses deep alarm over the severity of floods in Bangladesh, he only echoes the sentiments of the large number of Bangladeshis nationals in Europe or elsewhere in the world.

Our hearts bleed say the compatriots in Germany, France or some other countries of the Europe. When the owner of the 'Darjeeling' restaurant in Brussels waits to know more and more about the catastrophic flood at far away home, he certainly first wants to know details of the devastation in his home district Comilla but as he fans out in the different areas of the headquarters of the European Union along with other Bangladeshis to raise funds, the concern for the flood victims of his entire country appears writ large on his face. Bangladeshis living abroad are evidently more anxious about the flood conditions since they are away from home and desperately feel that they must do something for aid the fellow deluge-hit countrymen.

As I told them about the situation in the wake of the devastating floods at home when I left the country on September 5, there seemed endless questions from them about various aspects of the flood-related scenario. Why the flood waters are holding on and not receding for such a long time and has the

severity of the disaster surpassed the extent of devastation of 1988? How many people have been affected by the floods? How the government is tackling the situation? Are the relief operations adequate? How the political parties are behaving at this critical stage of natural calamity? Could they overcome their known rivalries and bitterness in the aftermath of floods for the sake of services to the flood-stricken people? How is the relationship between two main political figures — the head of the government and the leader of the opposition — at this hour? There are many more such questions from them and obviously these are only usual from the compatriots abroad on the flood related consequences at home.

Frankly, while it is easy to give them some information, answering all their questions is somewhat a difficult task. How can one correctly reply to questions whether the division between the government and the opposition has been blurred at least on some essential areas as regards to providing relief to the affected and drawing up concerted plans to mitigate the sufferings of the countless people looking for

food, shelter and other basic necessities under dire conditions? And can you really easily answer to their restless queries whether the kind of national integration required at such an hour of national calamity has been evolved in Bangladesh? If the answer is 'no', then who is to blame for this — the government or the opposition? Or, is there a lack of the kind of people's response that is badly

needed to meet the kind of the magnitude of flood damaged which are considered worst in many years? Undoubtedly, different quarters at home have thrown their entire weight behind the relief activities. Students are collecting relief materials; political, social and cultural activists have fanned out to the far-flung flood-hit areas, makeshift camps in the heart of the capital Dhaka are venturing to prepare dry foods and political leaders are trying to provide a

healing touch to the people who are badly in the need of sympathy and assistance. But an impression exists among the Bangladeshis abroad that it is necessary to develop more serious and sincere efforts for relief operations. They feel a mechanism — albeit temporarily — has to be evolved at least for the sake of nearly three crore affected people by close interactions among the divergent po-

litical forces for united and more systematic relief operations. When I was waiting at the Heathrow for a few hours for a flight to Frankfurt, a middle-aged man volunteered to know if I were from Bangladesh. As an affirmative answer went out from my side, he asked if the major rivers in the country were still recording rise in the water levels? Mohammad Salam hails from Sylhet area and has been working in the Airport cleaning job for last

twenty years. His concerns were evidently surrounding his relatives and property at home and the overall conditions of the country now in the grip of the floods. He would have been happier if he could learn good news on the flood situation — but paradoxically it was not to be. He was clearly bewildered on the unbelievably long stay of the flood waters without showing signs of abating — except the water in the 'Buriganga' near the capital recording a fall in the level for the first time in 54 days! He wondered whether the people had been duly alerted about the type of the current floods by the concerned authorities.

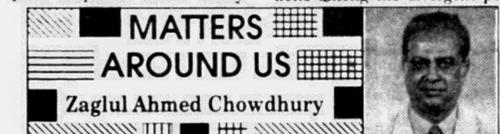
The sentiments of the Bangladeshis abroad are only on line expected from them and these are not much different from many living in the country. Like their fellow countrymen at home, they too have not spared any effort to stand by the country at this hour of distress in all possible ways.

It is not out of context to mention a few lines about how the responsible persons and quarters look at the current devastating effects of the floods in Bangladesh. "We are deeply concerned — we are keeping a

close watch on the situation" said Ms. Ruth Albuquerque, head of the unit of the Director General of the "External Relations" dealing with the countries including Bangladesh at the European headquarters in Brussels.

As the international community is rather horrified to know that flood waters have engulfed parts of the posh area in the diplomatic enclave of Gulshan and Baridhara in Dhaka, the Bangladeshis nationals abroad — particularly in Europe — appear moving from post to pillar to know the latest damages being wrought by the catastrophe. It is necessary to keep them posted in a better way about the country — especially during extra-ordinary circumstances like the present calamity. It is also necessary to evolve a mechanism to ensure their greater involvement from abroad in efforts to lessen the hardships of their countrymen when they are asked to do it. They are preciously close to country's heart even though they are away for the sake of livelihood. "We are here but our minds are with our people in the country", says Mr Bazul Rashid, the restaurant owner.

Countrymen abroad share joys and woes of the nation. They are asset for us — we must remember them and admire their efforts.



Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury

To the Editor...

"PM Should Declare.."

Sir, Once again Mahfuz Anam through his commentary on a national crisis let his readers down. Once again the uncontrollable personal emotion like the current flood-water, inundated the logic of his commentary.

With the first drop of rain water during this time of the year (monsoon) should we come out with our thalaks and scream for begging to the world to be smart and perpetuate our beggar-fame? Is there any dignity in such smartness? Or should we try to help ourselves first and let other's to come forward if and when required? Shame on you for letting us down.

Moinul Dhaka

'patriotism'. In our country, the political leaders commit the sin of practising 'politics without principle'. Otherwise, how can the members of one party switch on to another and that too at such frequent intervals? When a political party is born, the members should vow to owe their allegiance to their respective parties till the last day of their lives. The one and only goal of the leader should be securing the interest of the country. But nay, we have other missions to fulfil, other goals to reach and that also through the path which only leads to the destiny of self interest. Have we ever bothered craving for immortality through our deeds? No, we have only one life to live! So, why waste a single opportunity that we are blessed with?

It is beyond our apprehension as to how the ruling party is acting naive by trying to tackle this devastating situation which is still increasing with a considerable magnitude, while the opposition parties are more active in criticising the government, calling hartals (even at a time like this) and addressing public meetings. What a fine example of unity we have! The fanatic section went to the extent of attempting natural calamity as "Allah's Gazab", as if, Bangladesh is experiencing such disaster for the first time.

The reasons for calling a state of emergency, as cited by you may be reckoned conceivable by anyone of minimum calibre. Natural calamities are beyond human control and the sense of egotism should not be raked at all by admitting that the government is unable to meet the challenge alone. Moreover, the current deluge is the unprecedented one in more than 100-year history of this region in terms of magnitude, devastation, carnage and persistence.

The Prime Minister made the grave mistake in the beginning by boasting that we shall not seek foreign assistance for facing the crisis. This attitude has slackened the speed of the donor's coming forward with the helping hands. And true enough, when the gov-

ernment itself is not declaring state of emergency, how can the world community extend their assistance in congruity with the severe crisis? The present situation sees the emergence of forming an 'All-Party Relief Committee' comprising not only leaders of political parties but also the three chiefs of the armed forces. Time now calls for taking off the cloak of respective entities and unite to form one party — remembering the wise old saying, "United we stand, divided we fall".

The fact is undeniable that each government has had its contribution to the building of this independent country during the past 27 years and therefore, should be graced with their due share of credit. The former President Hussain Mohammad Ershad should be remembered and praised for building the embankment protecting the metropolis even today. Moreover, he did prove his efficiency in management while tackling the flood of 1988. Begum Khaleda Zia deserves applaud for tackling the cyclone of 1991 quite well. Therefore, the Prime Minister would only prove her magnanimity by calling the opposition parties, seek their advice and act unduly. The people would definitely remember her forever if she takes the right decision at the right time.

To conclude, I would join your voice in saying that it will not be a DEFEAT for the Prime Minister to admit that she cannot face this situation alone. Rather, it will be her greatest VICTORY if she can prove her ultimate goal being the welfare of the nation!

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commentary on the 10 Sept 98, a delay for reasons best known to you. In my opinion an objective journalism should also be done in due time, to influence the course of action as suggested to be implemented in time. A delayed observation, criticism or suggestion normally compromises the gravity of the situation which has been addressed.

While I agree with your commentary that there should be a declaration of Natural Disaster Emergency, I fail to understand one thing as to why the government had refused to ask for or accept international support in form of foreign aids right at the beginning of this deluge. Had there been proper projections of the calamity and if it been brought under greater international media focus right at the beginning, I feel we could have avoided a lot of extra trouble with timely support from the donor agencies. It is definitely a boost to the national ego if we can be self-reliant and face such disasters with our own resources, but experimenting, without realising the impact or being fully prepared as has been the case of cyclones (we have learnt through experience) at the cost of the teeming masses do involve a volume of risk, in terms of life and suffering — bottom line is there's been a lot of changes in every aspect between '74 and '98, as such all dreams don't hold good save the sentiments and emotions and you don't run a government based on emotions only — one has to be more practical.

It is an encouragement to learn that the mainstream opposition has come up with offering an unconditional support to the government in facing the deluge, a pleasant surprise indeed and this is what is expected, by and large from all to stand by the suffering people. An uphill task now lies ahead during the post-flood period and any wrong or delayed move may compromise the success in mitigating the suffering, as such it is felt that the support of the opposition should stand valid during the post-flood period also and the donations

committed should be utilized properly. Amongst the immediate/simultaneous attentions that will be required will be the crop plantations, the building, repairs of roads, bridges and culverts, the subsequent dredging of the main rivers, giving Late President Zia's infamous canal-digging concept a serious thought, and last but not the least, completing the Dhaka Protection Dam as had been started by Ershad government, which today had proved to be a saviour of the capital city. Sink your differences when you face a national crisis and work shoulder to shoulder — if you really care for your fellow countrymen.

Li Col Aziz Ahmad (Retd) Gulshan, Dhaka-1212

Jamal N Islam Clarifies

Sir, It has been brought to my notice that while I was away in London (most of June), there was some discussions in the newspapers about the non-renewal of my membership of the Chittagong University Senate (from the category of educationists), and the appointment of a new member. I am somewhat surprised, as I never complained to anyone about this. It is perfectly natural for a member to be replaced by another at the end of a tenure. The fact that the new appointment is made by a body authorised to do so is adequate reason for the new member to be accepted by all concerned. I do not see any scope for criticism. People have different kinds of abilities and each member of a body such as the Senate can make his unique contribution. It is unnecessary, improper and embarrassing both for the erstwhile and the new member to make comparisons. I am told that the previous administration took some steps not to renew my membership, but for various reasons this could not be implemented. If it had been carried out, I would have had no objections whatever. Likewise, I have no objections whatever to my non-renewal by the present admin-

istration. Regrettably, there is a tendency by politically involved people to extract some advantage from this kind of situation, often at the expense of politically neutral people. I would respectfully request those concerned to kindly allow me to do my work, whatever that is worth in peace and quiet, and not involve me in such meaningless controversies. Jamal Nazrul Islam, Professor and Director Research Centre for Mathematical And Physical Sciences, University of Chittagong

An appeal

Sir, Alarming news of the gradual deterioration of recent flood is threatening us. The long stagnancy of flood water is causing different types of water-borne diseases along with air and water pollution.

The devastating flood is still creating havoc not only in Dhaka city but also most part of the country and it is already recognized as the worst flood in recent history. The unplanned dumping of polythene bags are worsening the city drainage system which is, ultimately directly or indirectly, prolonging the flood situation. Because nearly 5.5 million used polythene shopping bags are tossed away in Dhaka on every day. At this moment it is increased nearly 6.2 million due to random use for distributing relief materials. In this circumstances, we would like to draw the attention and to make a fervent appeal to every responsible citizen and organisations of Dhaka city, please don't drop or dump the waste polythene bags to and fro in the flood water especially at this moment. We, of course, should not use polythene bags in relief distribution. Remember, it is creating a great hazard in our city and our daily life in many ways.

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