

Strapped for Cash

Experts have spoken. We need an investment of 3.4 billion US dollars over a period of two years to repair the damage wrought by the floods. We may have to reconcile ourselves with a reduction in GDP growth by one to two per cent at the year-end with our incremental poverty alleviation strategy coming under clouds there.

Foreign exchange reserve has dwindled from the already low level of 1.9 billion US dollars to 1.8 billion, the depletion caused by emergency foodgrains import which has just about begun with more to come. Government is seized of the balance of payment problem, and our Foreign Secretary is on a visit to the USA to seek more food aid which promises to ease the pressure on our forex reserve.

It seems the government has got focused on the priorities of the moment. For instance, distribution of Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF) cards, Open Market Sale of rice, regular consultation with traders to ascertain and declare stock positions and thereby stem panic-buying of all are well-conceived steps.

It is in this overall framework that we welcome the government's decision to trim non-essential expenditure, a chaff which one need not take much pain to separate from the grain. Much of the costs on fuel, furniture entertainment, events, seminars, meetings, foreign travel, elaborate fan-fare at the top, etc. can be avoided with the added benefit of an increase in the efficiency levels which are now a casualty of a rather ostentatious and unfocused official culture.

Step in the Right Direction

The government has decided to place cargo handling operations at the two major seaports of the country under services personnel. While army, assisted by navy, will run the loading and unloading operations at Chittagong, the premier entrepot, it will be a reversal of roles at Mongla, the other major quay in Khulna with navy in control and army assisting them.

Potable Water Supply

The inordinately long duration of this year's flood has played havoc with the drinking water distribution system. In most of the inundated areas stagnant and filthy flood water has entered the WASA supply mains. Besides, underground reservoirs in most of the houses in places like Rampura, Khilgaon and Sabujbagh have long gone under water making the water unfit for human use, let alone consumption.

Until the mains are fixed, an alternate supply system has to be maintained to meet the requirement of these affected people. It is a tall but not an impossible task. We suggest WASA step up its mobile supply system to meet the challenge. It should use boats where necessary. Working in harness with various non governmental and voluntary organisations might give its service the edge people are looking for.

Let this Devastating Flood Unite Politicians

by Muslehuddin Ahmad

It is neither necessary nor possible without appropriate consultations to suggest any format for the kind of united action. It can be done in any form that might suit the government and the other political parties. They should sit together and chalk out the plan. But for the benefit of understanding one may suggest a National Relief and Rehabilitation Committee...

I had the unique honour of meeting President Nelson Mandela some time ago in Johannesburg. While discussing the political situation of Bangladesh and its future he specifically emphasised on the "working relationship" between the top leaders of two major political parties - Awami League and BNP - for taking the country forward. He added, "we also suffered tremendously but we decided to work together even with our enemies for the sake of our people and the country."

Both the leaders - Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and Begum Khaleda Zia and indeed leaders of all other political parties have been speaking in terms of joint efforts to deal with this crisis. Specifically Sheikh Hasina, on several occasions, appealed for united actions thereby meaning, as we understand, that let every one come forward and join hands to face the abnormal situation arising out of the devastating flood.

parties have been speaking in terms of joint efforts to deal with this crisis. Specifically Sheikh Hasina, on several occasions, appealed for united actions thereby meaning, as we understand, that let every one come forward and join hands to face the abnormal situation arising out of the devastating flood. Addressing the Parliament Prime Minister Hasina said, "Let us forget all our political differences, let us unitedly stand beside the flood victims and pray to Almighty Allah to save the people and the country from the wrath of the nature."

Both the leaders have apparently expressed their genuine desire for a united action to face the calamity and its after-effects. What is left for them is to sit together and find out the best way to do this. The leader who will take the first opportunity (protocol to be ignored) to invite the leader to sit together will certainly receive people's acclamation and reap the political PLUS.

Combined efforts are absolutely needed. Prime Minister herself very correctly assessed the situation by saying that this flood is abnormal and unprecedented. Therefore it has to be faced in that way. This needs support of all people. As the Leader of the Opposition is already committed to cooperating with the government, the initiative should come from the government side. The party in power needs this support to deal with calamity of such magnitude.

Through the government is the major player it may not possibly deal with everything alone - the task is too gigantic and risks are enormous. After all the life and livelihood of the people are involved. 120 million is too many and the demand will be too big and diverse for the government to handle alone. Flood water has been standing on the soil for nearly two months. This has brought the country and its agriculture and economy to a standstill. The water has just started receding but along with this devastation will continue. The people have been facing limitlessly sufferings. Millions may face starvation and disease unless quick actions are taken.

It is neither necessary nor possible without appropriate consultations to suggest any format for the kind of united action as suggested earlier. It can be done in any form that might suit the government and the other political parties. They should sit together and chalk out the plan. But for the benefit of understanding one may suggest a National Relief and Rehabilitation Committee. Both the leaders should, as far as possible, depending on their load of official work, be present in the meetings of the Committee. Similar Committees should be appropriately established in the districts, thanas, unions etc where members of all political parties should be appropriately represented.

In a united action the chances of failure would be minimal and even if there is any due unforeseen situation, no particular party will be blamed. The government being the major player will reap the most benefit for proper handling of the crisis. The opposition parties benefit because of their wilful participation to help the people and the country. Good for all and loss for none.

Why is Pakistan's Unity Always Under Threat?

What is needed is widespread education, welfare measures for all members of the society irrespective of colour, creed, religion, strata in the society and people's participation in local government at the grassroots level with the basic premise that deserving persons must get what he or she deserves, irrespective of his/her background.

THE one day in Pakistan's history that symbolizes unity equal to or more than Aug 14, 1947 is Sep 6, 1965. On that day the whole nation, rose as one person when threatened by Indian attack, determined to preserve the country's independence. And yet, little more than six years later, the finest experiment in nationhood in its time was torn apart. Today we are acutely aware that no lessons were learnt from this catastrophe, that anyone who tried to reason was vilified as a prophet of doom and worse, a traitor, no account being taken of the factors (for the people) who destroyed a beautiful country. In the context of Pakistan, chauvinism can be described in one form "as exaggerated or aggressive patriotism" or "prejudicial support" or "loyalty for some cause which continues to cause us."

There is a very false perception rampant among a section of the populace about being a "superior race" when in fact Islam, the raison d'être for our existence, enjoins us that all men and women are created equal. However group behaviour or individual attitude sidelines objectivity totally. Chauvinism is also directly related to a concept of manhood and martial races, in this day and age a totally false premise. Except for a proforma "battle" for a few hours given by Porus to Alexander the Great on the banks of river Jhelum, history does not record even a mild protest, what to talk about giving resistance to any invader before the fields of Panipat. Imperial adventurers from Alexander onwards entering India usually found their ranks swell 3-4 times by mercenaries who joined them enroute from regions they passed through, their driving urge being a craving for booty and plunder, their motivation having no bearing with any ideology or belief. In today's modern world, anyone who can bear weapons, from the smallest Vietnamese to the tallest Pathan can overcome

any odds, size and bearing having no influence on so-called "martial qualities". Racial superiority is therefore a divisive myth that should be buried for the good of the nation. Pathans, Punjabis, Sindhis, Baloch and Mohajir are all equal under the sun, they should not only be listened to but heard. Similarly while male chauvinism is rather more marked in certain regions, Islam teaches us that all beings are equal. It is upto us to forcefully ensure that females have equal opportunities as men without discrimination - and that they are treated equally under the law so that they become useful members of the body politic and economic. Until the female of the species contributes positively, the nation's growth will be stunted. From chauvinism comes class considerations and divisions as per racial communities which by itself creates an unfair environment for existence for the smaller communities, whether ethnic or religious. Because of chauvinism, nepotism is deeply embedded in the soul of the nation. This was somewhat contained in the 60s and 70s but the advent of martial law and non-party democracy ushered in by late Zia polarised society deeply, mainly for economic reasons.

Each community started to look after its own, within these parameters individuals started looking after their friends and families with merit given no consideration whatsoever. Nepotism became very pronounced along ethnic and sectarian lines, merit has become of hardly any consequence. Entrenched individuals and communities kept on strengthening their hold by inducting their own kith and kin on the basis of anything but merit, the

smaller communities as well as individuals hoping for job opportunities (and advancement) on merit have become immersed in deep frustration, the qualitative edge fading away because of mediocrity. With merit compromised the end result will be non-effective and less productive. In many cases merit has become a disqualifier, those having

corruption as the only means for catching up. The pervasive spreading of unabated corruption became endemic in the social fabric so that every strata of society is deeply affected, remedial measures being confined to theory only. Those who initiate contra-measures are themselves so corrupt that with malafide intention they leave many loopholes, firstly that the accused cannot be brought to justice and if they are the legal aspects are made non-convincing and friendly in the name of justice and fairplay, leaving enough reason for the corrupt to retaliate against his (their) accuser, swiftly and violently enough to act as a deterrent and warning to others not to cross their path ever again. That which cannot be endured is called intolerance.

AS I SEE IT

Ikram Sehgal writes from Karachi

merit being subject to virtual witch-hunting of the worst kind, particularly if they belong to the smaller races and have beliefs not in keeping with those held by the majority. The fact of the "quota system" is a slur on the name of both Islam and democracy. When any individual from any community has merit, why should that person be denied his/her place under the Pakistani sun? A sense of insecurity among the privileged ruling class who are threatened by the hardworking poor and middle class is responsible for creating this unfair environment. White and blue collar workers in the Middle East in the 70s sending in remittances and arriving laden with electronic goods, etc. started a new polarisation in society, many times pitting brother against brother as one entity became awash with the symbols of luxury and the other remained mired in abject poverty. Materialism became the order of the day, a crude display of it a social necessity. Stumped by attempts at obtaining luxury by honest means, affected individuals turned to

ecclesiastical approaches to life, preventing any logical assessment of universal goodness, and positively because the mind is shut and sealed to any other religion (most of the time it is unfair to give it the religious connotation). Any other idea is repelled violently and firmly. Whatever hope there is in democracy is lost in electoral fraud. It has achieved the status of "industry" and has entered the realm of "high tech". The catalyst for this trait are intolerance, chauvinism, bigotry, corruption and other failures described earlier. It is practiced to achieve: (a) ill deserved position in political arena, (b) amassing of wealth and other material gains, (c) denying deserving people their rightful share, thus nursing in society hate and frustration, (d) wasteful expenditures which leads to national bankruptcy and by seeing the poor and the deprived the feeling of further frustration, leading to upheaval in the society to attain a reasonable share for self betterment through violent means. Frustrated and virtually helpless at the deterioration of the quality of morals and institutions around them, bitter at the widening gap separating the rich from the poor and looking for solace in their search for all-encompassing solutions, a vast majority of Pakistani citizens are turning to religion as the refuge of last resort. Increasingly the most pious and believable Muslim preachers have become the interpreters for God and his last Prophet (PBUH). Educated only sometimes at par with modern society, a vast ma-

ajority still live virtually in the "dark ages, their impartation of knowledge suspect and sometimes unbelievable. The lack of educated religious teachers is compounded by the different viewpoints that have complicated what is basically a simple religion. Instead of uniting the populace which was the essence of Islam, many of the modern versions are divisive on ridiculous issues.

However the less affluent are turning to Islam because the modern judicial process is beyond the reach of the common man, with both a yearning and a need for the availability of inexpensive justice. The Qazi courts provide just that, however there is a requirement to compromise the modern aspirations to that need. Those who can afford the judicial process not only have an advantage but are comfortable with the arrangement as compared to the less privileged. The only antidote to the nation's ill is a return to basic Islam - they could well be right - but again looking at the standard of the interlocutors (the religious preachers) they could well be wrong. One can only comment that extremism in any form is bad. History is replete with the effects which could engulf our society so strongly that the perpetrators will suffer. There is also a lesson from history about those who took violent means and overthrew above traits, ultimately themselves joined the "evil empire".

What is needed is widespread education, welfare measures for all members of the society irrespective of colour, creed, religion, strata in the society and people's participation in local government at the grassroots level with the basic premise that deserving persons must get what he or she deserves, irrespective of his/her background.

To the Editor...

The picture says it all Sir. The front page picture in the DS on August 25 says it all. Saving the DND embankment threatened by flood water is a unique and correct portrayal of what's happening around us. There workers carrying sand bags on their head are seen on the execution phase while scores of onlookers smartly dressed and even with smiling faces possibly are present to see the "tamasha". One can even notice the authoritative gesture of a person directing the operation with hand signal.

Unfortunately flood also hit other countries like China, South Korea and the collective effort of all concerned as seen in news media are quite different from ours. Shall we ever learn?

Tanzia Choudhury Comilla

Hillary's support Sir, We feel sorry for Hillary Clinton, without whose help and support it would have been impossible for Bill Clinton to become President of the United States and be in the White House.

But what an irony of fate! Clinton did not hesitate to betray Hillary in the premises of it. What a folly to succumb to temptations which has resulted in hurting a devoted wife and bared a streak of nature which is not praiseworthy.

Nur Jahan East Nasirabad Chittagong

GB's new paradigm Sir, A news item on the above subject in the DS of 23 August '98 attracted my notice. In reply to the Grameen Bank's new paradigm, I would like to add a few lines.

In short the Grameen Bank model has outlived its usefulness. It would no longer be useful for us on the following grounds:

(a) Because of the fast changing patterns of human life the market position would never remain neutral on account of the uncertainties of money markets in the stock exchange all over the world.

(b) According to the young experts, the operational cost of the Grameen Bank in the urban and rural areas of Bangladesh has been increasing day by day. As a result, the rate of interest against loans under the micro-credit system is getting higher for the poor who are easily trapped into by some dishonest people managing such banks in the rural areas of the country.

(c) The concept of new Economics as defined by Prof Mohammad Yunus is not an acceptable proposition for the good of the common people. It might evolve a new pattern of banking ethics under the framework of neo-classical exploitation of the poor masses globally.

(d) Microcredit system has an element of dependence on others for which positive results could never be obtained in the years ahead.

Abul Ashraf Noor Uttara, Dhaka-1230

"Narrow Squeak..." Sir, I thank Mr Anwar Husain Khan for enlightening us with the information provided in the DS of 14th August under the heading "Narrow Squeak..." Mr Khan, with due respect may I declare that all your remarks were extremely contradictory.

It is not possible for any airline let alone Biman to keep incidents hidden... was one of your statements. Please, do not make us laugh. Have you forgotten that dead body was found inside the under carriage of the wheel compartment and all of you were trying to cover it up? Maybe that fire in the cargo compartment was not entirely true, but you have to admit that most of the hiccups Biman faces are very well kept under wraps.

Shagor Dhaka

Be less aggressive Sir, With the recent bombings (not a new one) at US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania and US missile attacks in retaliation for the bombings on alleged terrorist targets in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Sudan, a pertinent question arises, why the Muslim terrorist groups attack US embassies, citizens etc?

Simply because US never cherishes a friendly attitude towards the Muslims. If we delve into the crisis of the world we will see that US is always behind most of the incidents. America always wants to dominate the world and frequently uses military power to achieve its goal. In this way they destroy world peace.

So, for the sake of peace we urge the US authority to be less aggressive to other countries.

Shahed Economics Deptt, DU Dhaka

Correct decision Sir, As a former student of the Department of English, DU, it is a matter of great happiness for me that my respected teachers dropped the essay "Outside the Hole" by Salman Rushdie that they had introduced.

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Chittagong Port : Facing the Situation

by Md Shah Jahan

Unrest at the port would hamper smooth clearance of massive food and other life-saving consignments from the donors who have promptly responded to the call for assistance. Slightest unrest causing any disruption at this situation of the country cannot be tolerated.

WE have nowadays become numb to innumerable social menaces and crimes e.g., rape, murder, kidnapping, bribery, mugging, burglary, thuggery, women trafficking, custodial deaths and so on. Recent unrest at the Chittagong port is not an isolated incident, rather this is another link in the chain of these menaces. Our society has been dragged to such a state of indiscipline and indifference by the nefarious activities of political and vested quarters - to perpetuate their interest even by steady installation of vices. They have blunted our conscience and plundered our morality thereby rendering us devoid of honour and dignity.

We remember poignantly how the lifeline of the nation, the Chittagong port, has been used as a means to bow the government down. The seeds of flagrant violence among workers in a bid to make Chittagong port inoperative, have been sowed deliberately without taking into account its national consequence.

In the midst of the unprecedented flood in the country when we hear that the rival groups clashed with each other injuring 50 people including policemen to the further detriment of situation, we are at a loss as to the sense of proportion of the trade union activists at a time of national calamity. In view of the failure of the union leaders to realise the grave consequence of pursuing such action disrupting normalcy, and the foregoing announcement by 22 trade union bodies of an indefinite strike in the Chittagong port, and subsequent persuasion of the union leaders by the authority in order to pacify them to keep the port going and yet the volatility hanging as a sword of Damoc-

cles, have awoken us to a crude reality - machination of vested interests.

In the face of the grim situation, the Government should not play the role of a mere spectator. It should explore possibilities to deal with the prevailing but unwarranted situation in a lawful manner to protect the vital interests of the vast suffering multitudes whose very existence has been threatened by the devastating flood. The laws in the statute books are to be applied for the amelioration of the suffering of the people.

Government can explore a two-pronged strategy to face the situation: by exercising powers under Essential Services (Second) Ordinance, 1958 which provides, under Section 3, as follows: "(3) This Ordinance shall apply to all employments under the Government, and to such other employment or class of employment as the government, being of the opinion that such employment or class of employment is essential for the maintenance of public order or for maintaining services necessary to the life of the community, may, by notification in the Official Gazette, declare to be an employment or class of employment to which this ordinance applies."

The law has given overriding power to this Ordinance under Clause 5A, which provides: "the provisions of this Ordinance shall have effect, notwithstanding anything to the contrary contained in the Industrial Relations Ordinance, 1969 or any other law for the time being in force" so that the authority under this law could be exercised without any hindrance at appropriate time.

Alternatively, the Government can consider putting a moratorium upon the activities of the trade unions at the port. Though in line with the international laws and sentiments provisions for protecting fundamental rights of the workers have been guaranteed in our Constitution under Article 38 which provides as follows: "Every citizen shall have the right to form associations or unions, subject to any reasonable restrictions imposed by law in the interests of morality or public order", the framers of the Constitution have struck here a balance between the "rights of the workers" and the "national interests" but the Article in effect gave precedence to the national interests conferring upon the executive authority to put "reasonable restrictions" upon the freedom of association in accordance with law.

This is a clear direction to curtail the rights of the workers to the extent which causes harm to the national interests. When the Government is ordering speedy unloading of foodgrains at the seaports and requesting the donors to expedite shipments of foodgrains such unrest at the port would hamper smooth clearance of massive food and other life-saving consignments from the donors who have promptly responded to the call for assistance. Slightest unrest causing any disruption at this situation of the country cannot be tolerated. It would mistrust the Government's effort to reach assistance to the affected people. It will also frustrate prompt response of the donors as the materials would not reach the suffering people in time. The Government must be prepared to deal with all kinds of situations and eventually, if the Government fails to take appropriate steps, amelioration of the suffering of the people will not be possible.