

A New Challenge for NGOs

Just as we had expected, the principal NGOs of the country have voiced a collective response to the demands of the situation created by the outgoing century's most pauperising floods.

Most of the NGOs carrying out micro-credit operations are contemplating a few months' moratorium on loan repayment by poor borrowers in the calamity-stricken areas to enable them to pick up the pieces of their wrecked lives.

Since the temporary reprieve on loan repayment is a dire necessity at this juncture which must now unquestionably be met we have to take special measures to bridge the gap and keep the micro-credit system running at the maximum efficiency level.

Principally, we think, the government has to inject fresh funds into the micro-credit system via Palli Karma Sahayak Foundation (PKSF) which has the skill and know-how in the area to make it work at an optimal level.

Untenable

This is how an attitudinal flaw in the form of systemic inefficiency gums up the works even in an emergency situation. A Daily Star report yesterday dwelt on the sufferings of country's ready-made garment exporters due to non-cooperation by the Civil Aviation and Biman authorities.

Valuable time is being lost and the whole purpose of emergency procurement of a plane stands to lose its efficacy. Also a huge financial loss stares in the face of BGMEA (Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers and Exporters Association).

Then the messing around has taken the mickey out of not only the businessmen but also the foreign crew of the aircraft. What an image of the country they are projecting to the outside world!

Good Luck, Primakov

When President Yeltsin, rebuffed twice by the Duma on his nomination of Chernomyrdin as Prime Minister, stumbled on the unlikely Primakov, formerly of the KGB, and the Communists accepted him, it was thought on all hands that the political crisis was over in Moscow.

The economic crisis has only been compounded by Primakov's appointing a Communist as the new Finance Minister and inducting into his cabinet another Communist. In a swift reaction the western financing organisations, IMF included, have told off Primakov not to expect of them any further bail-out dollar.

While this should not be taken as an empty threat it is also true that the west has by now too much financial stake in Russia not to help her out of this present predicament. Perhaps much will depend on the performance of the new cabinet rather than prejudices against the Communists.

It is being said, however, that the problem is, all said and done, political rather than economic. Wholesale reform, as per the western prescriptions, or going back to old ways if partially? Russian society seems to be about half and half divided over the question.

Some Thoughts on this Year's Flood

by Shamsul Bari

must remember, however, that such assistance can only be forthcoming if, as a nation, we are able to demonstrate our seriousness and ability to deal with the situation in an effective manner.

To establish its credibility, the government must show that a mechanism exists which is able to manage, co-ordinate and channel national and international efforts both during the floods as well as in the post-flood reconstruction in an efficient and cost effective manner.

The impression that one gets today through the media is that a great deal is indeed being done by the government, political parties, civil societies, as well as concerned individuals and groups in the country to relieve the immediate plight of the flood-affected population.

The television images of the Prime Minister, members of the cabinet, as well as leaders of various political parties of the country, distributing relief items to the affected population, may help create an impression about their humanitarian concerns but do they help to generate a sense that there is a concerted and comprehensive plan of action to deal with the problem as a whole rather than on a piecemeal basis?

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programmes and the mechanism for delivery? As a start therefore, the government should come out with a well-defined programme of action, based on a thorough and professional assessment of needs, careful budgeting, and efficient implementing and monitoring mechanisms.

From my personal experience, nominating a Chief Co-ordinator in disaster management is always very useful. The Prime Minister herself could be the Chief Co-ordinator for flood relief and rehabilitation or she could name someone else to undertake this responsibility. The civil societies could help by co-operating with the Site Co-ordinators in their needs assessment process which would include establishing numbers, locations, health status, material conditions including clothing, food, shelters, livestock, etc., social needs and the means to deliver assistance.

Common sense and past experience would indicate that the sectors which require particular attention during the emergency phase of the flood are food, shelter, water, health, sanitation, transport and communication. Added to this, other sectors which would assume particular importance during the post-flood rehabilitation phase are agriculture, income generation and road reconstruction.

It is imperative that the Chief Co-ordinator and the Sector Co-ordinators have the required expertise and are dedicated primarily to their co-ordinating tasks for the duration of the emergency. [All these are probably taking place already with the Prime Minister serving as the Chief Co-ordinator and her Ministers as Sector Co-ordinators.]

tasks for the duration of the emergency. [All these are probably taking place already with the Prime Minister serving as the Chief Co-ordinator and her Ministers as Sector Co-ordinators.] If that is the case, it may be helpful for the government to publish reports of the meetings of the co-ordinating body on a regular basis. This will be immensely reassuring to the people.

To be effective, any emergency assistance must be based on a sound assessment of the needs of the affected population. It is not clear whether this is being done presently on a systematic basis. It should be the responsibility of the Sector Co-ordinators to assess and quantify the needs in their respective sectors of responsibility. They in turn will be assisted in their tasks by Site Co-ordinators in charge of specific geographical areas.

Once the needs are assessed and confirmed by Site Co-ordinators, these are conveyed to the central co-ordinating body headed by the Chief Co-ordinator who will seek and ensure the availability of the necessary resources, whether material, financial or human. It will be the responsibility of the government to allocate the necessary resources either from its own means or through appeal to the public or foreign governments and agencies.

The people of Bangladesh have proven time and again their legendary resilience in facing and surviving calamities of all sorts. This time too they have demonstrated over the last two months their ability to bear pain and suffering with dignity, equanimity and courage.

Another key factor to ensure people's confidence and support would be the creation of an atmosphere of co-operation and solidarity in the country under which the entire nation is geared to face the situation in an unified manner. The government, the opposition parties, other political forces, the civil societies, individual efforts, must all coalesce for the same purpose. To create this atmosphere, the government may consider the formation of an advisory group composed of political leaders, eminent personalities and experts on the key sectors of emergency response.

Prof. Yunus, in his article, has drawn attention to the critical needs of the people in the post-flood phase. He has identified the most urgent requirements to be in the shelter, food, health, agriculture, employment and transportation sectors. He has suggested a number of measures which are eminently sensible and should be taken into account in the government's strategy for this phase.

I am convinced that the government is fully committed to meet the situation. Relief efforts are visibly there, but clearly not enough to reach everybody or meet the needs of all those reached. Orders have been placed for more food imports to meet the catastrophic short-fall. Clearly much more food will have to be imported. Appeals have been made for international assistance and there are positive responses already. But the amount pledged will not be enough to meet the requirements. However, a great deal more would be forthcoming if the sincerity and efficacy of the government's efforts are well established.

As emphasized above, an important requirement in this regard would be the existence of a finely-tuned management and co-ordination mechanism. Both the people of the country

and international donors must be made convinced about it. This, to my mind, is the key to the support that the government would need, both internally and externally. It is not enough to claim that the mechanism exists; it must be seen to exist.

Let me conclude with a personal plea. This year's flood has provided Bangladesh with an opportunity to draw lessons from its experience in this enormous task. After things have settled down to some sort of normalcy, it would indeed be useful to look back at the way we responded to it, prepare a list of best and worst practices, and draw appropriate conclusions. This will be immensely useful to deal with future calamities which unfortunately are likely to continue to visit us at regular intervals. Over the years Bangladesh must have achieved world's greatest expertise in dealing with natural calamities. It is time we translate this expertise into a definitive Handbook for Emergencies, for the world-wide use of other nations facing similar circumstances. No other nation is better placed than Bangladesh to undertake this important task.

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It may be mentioned that though UNHCR has no mandate to deal with natural calamities, as a gesture of its solidarity with the people and government of Bangladesh, UNHCR Branch Office in Dhaka has contributed 4,000 pieces of plastic sheets as shelter material for 20,000 flood affected people.

The real test will come after the water has receded and people start returning to their home, or whatever is left of it, to rebuild their lives once again. What means would they have to undertake such a task when they have lost virtually everything during the flood should concern us all, and more particularly, the government.

Is it Bureaucratic Ego vs Ministerial Ineffectiveness?

by Kazi Alauddin Ahmed

There is a perpetual "famine" of "guts" in out politician-ministers. The bureaucrats take advantage of such a situation, at times, to terrible embarrassment and dismay of the minister. It is not to suggest that the minister should undermine a civil servant in case of any disagreement on any policy matter. Nor it is to accept unambiguous behaviour of a bureaucrat towards a minister in such cases...

THE bureaucrat has been rewarded. The Minister has been openly slighted. The intervention of the Chairman of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Ministry of Health proved infructuous. Other designated Members of Parliament in the Committee expressed their consternation at the outrageous remarks of the Health Secretary on the face of the Health Minister.

The unfortunate incident was reportedly brought to the personal attention of the Prime Minister by all the members of the Parliamentary Committee. Nothing was heard about it after that. There is no point in making a surmise. Still then, it could be anyone's guess that the matter died its natural death. But it would have surprised many like me to see the same bureaucrat comfortably installed as the chairman of a nationalized bank on contractual basis! Indeed he proved himself most formidable and of course, indispensable.

Traditionally, bureaucracy has been viewed as a monolithic institution in the sub-continent. Initially, during the British days, the top bureaucrats recruited through sets of stiff written and oral examination, used to be brilliant students and almost invariably coming from aristocratic families and feudal lords in the garb of Zemindars. The post-partition India and Pakistan could continue for sometime to hold on to the tradition — atleast for the period of transition. In India, however, the academic bril-

liance of the civil servants fitted, for a longer time, to the rigid English trend. But in the erstwhile Pakistan, for a couple of years, precisely for little over a decade, the civil service could show flickers of excellence. This was, however, centred around a few persons having real outstanding educational background. The family lineage, which, in British rule, was an unwritten condition to be met by individual candidate seeking a place in the civil service.

Rift between the bureaucrats and the ministers has not been a new phenomenon. There had been ample instances of political ministers coming in open controversies with the secretaries in the (British) Indian Civil Service (ICS) used to come in clash with the ministers — on formulation or implementation of policies of the government. And where the personality, educational background and stock of the minister had been respectively towering, excellent and most venerable in the civil society, the politician — minister could never be dictated by the civil servant.

In undivided Bengal, a story was in the air that the Chief Secretary, a Britisher had a big jolt from no other a personality than Hussein Shahid Suhrawardy, the Chief Minister of the time. Mr Suhrawardy was reportedly having a private discussion with one of his close

followers (perhaps it was the legendary Mina Peshawan) in his chamber. The Chief Secretary peeped through the curtain seeking Chief Minister's permission to get in on an urgent errand. Mr Suhrawardy asked him to wait outside for a few minutes. The Chief Secretary, true to British etiquette stepped back but in about 3/4 minutes later he peeped in. And again he was asked out. A few minutes elapsing the Chief Secretary, being visibly restive, trotted inside the threshold and this time the Chief Minister was furious. He asked the Britisher curtly if it was the English courtesy to pry in private moments. The visitor was about to leave then. He was intelligent enough to bid good-bye right at that moment leaving the Chief Minister and the Chief Secretary closeted in the room. Barring the extra hue that might have been spiced on the incident, it is anybody's guess that something happened and it did only due to the great "guts" of the Chief Minister, no matter how bitter it was for the beholder.

Unfortunately, there is a perpetual "famine" of such "guts" in out politician-ministers. The bureaucrats take advantage of such a situation, at times, to terrible embarrassment and dismay of the minister. It is not to suggest that the minister should undermine a civil servant in case of any disagreement on any policy matter. Nor it is to accept unambiguous be-

haviour of a bureaucrat towards a minister in such cases. In view of the fact that the Minister is responsible to the Prime Minister, and ipso facto, to the cabinet as a whole for the performance of his Ministry, he is certainly the boss. The Secretary can only be the office and legitimately point out the implications of the ministerial decision and if the latter does not agree the former can simply record his note of dissent. There cannot be any point in entering into a wordy duel over the matter to eventually cross the bounds of decency. It was indeed very sad that, in the cited case, both had unknowingly ridiculed themselves creating a very unsavoury atmosphere in the Health Ministry which allowed the lesser ones wild booms to gossip about.

At this stage we can turn to the observation, among others, in an article recently published in an English daily recently. The writer, presumably an ex-civil servant (I may be wrong since I do not know the gentleman) alluded to a press conference of a High Court Justice where he lamented over the non-consideration of his report (Police commission — 1988) by the Government. Finding such non-acceptance attributable to a non-explicable "paradox" the writer made some assumptive comments. I quote: "one explanation is that few ministers can comprehend the subject of reports, let alone possess the ability of processing

their recommendations into decisions. This is not the entire explanation. They (ministers) are busy with more mundane, and in their judgment, more pressing, matters of their constituents, friends and relations or matters of transfers, postings and promotions of petty officials — matters beyond the pale of ministerial domain. A former minister was known to have ordered transfer of darwans to be submitted to him for decisions....."

Though the picture or rather, the portrait of a minister drawn above cannot be generalized, it may be true in some cases. But the parliamentary democracy and type of government we have in induction of political workers on the basis of individual contribution to the party in power, cannot, for obvious reasons, be ruled out.

Such persons have got to be accommodated to reciprocate their dedicated service to the party. We must accept this practical aspect and restrain ourselves from expecting too much out of them. On the other hand, we cannot also appreciate any major breach in the norms of administrative discipline or, so to say, in the effective functioning of any ministry. Such a stance on our part would call for a number of preventive measures to haul up instances of personal vilification of the minister by the Secretary and vice-versa.

- Inevitably therefore, it would require: a) elucidative presentation of the jurisdiction and functions of a ministry; b) the minister (or future incumbents) must have fore-hand theoretical and practical orientation of the jurisdiction and functions of his ministry; c) the minister, to be looked at as the ultimate decision maker, must keep himself/herself abreast of the "do's and don'ts" and he/she must give topmost priority to issues of national importance; d) the minister must advance with great caution when seeking to fulfill his/her party's election promises so as not to come in clash with greater national interests and objectives; e) the civil servant (precisely

the secretary of the ministry) will continue to be guided by the overall national perspective and of course the set rules of business and in that he/she will very clearly and unambiguously advise the minister on how best the political commitment of the party in power can be aligned with the legal, constitutional and national interests;

- 1) it will be the minister only who will enjoy the prerogative to accept or reject secretarial right to record his note of dissent; 2) in spite of the advices of the secretary and his/her eventual dissenting note in record, if the minister insists to go by his own, the implementation of the decision will be entirely his/her (minister's) personal responsibility; h) the secretary will be obliged to execute the right or wrong (dispite his advice on the contrary) decision of the minister — his protection remaining there on records; i) the secretary must not overact his/her authority as an executive — he/she must not have any confusion that he/she is just a part of the ministry, not the whole of it.

Notwithstanding the suggestions above and irrespective of the rules and regulations governing a high ranking functionary of the Government, it can be said with reasonable impunity that some of our civil servants in the upper echelon suffer from a sort of inferiority complex. Let me cite and example. A couple of months ago I represented my employers in a meeting of their industrial association where one State Minister was the chief guest and the Secretary in-charge was the special guest. We were all cloistered in an air-conditioned conference room where none would be ordinarily expected to smoke. But to our utter dismay the brazen-faced secretary in-charge (additional secretary substantively) sitting by the side of the Minister kept on smoking a very costly brand of cigarette. His attitude was conspicuous of a deliberate and in-temperate air to "pooh" his boss in the ministry with every puff. Such an awful display of wild, uncouth ego by the Secretary in a meeting could be an isolated sample of the current status of our civil service. Perhaps this is the type of people for whom the menacing puppet of "stock" can be legitimately evoked. Sorry, Mr Secretary! Very sorry!

To the Editor...

Efficient management

Sir, The World Bank in their various reports has indicated that there is no efficient management system in the banking sector.

It has suggested to raise the pay scale of the bankers to stop their job hopping. But the World Bank has not given any thought to the retirement age of the bankers.

It has talked about CBA activities, loan discipline, surplus staff, inefficient management etc. It has never suggested about the raising of retirement age although the retirement age of bankers in USA and European

countries varies from 60 to 65 years. The WB authority should also study the age limit of an efficient banker to increase efficiency.

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Good step, indeed

Sir, I have read the wonderful news about the government's intention to privatise all power sector operations. Perhaps we are finally going to put at rest the ghost of 'systems loss' which in our country is essentially an euphemism for theft.

The prime minister is quite right in asking why revenue recovery from the poor rural consumers is much better than that from the rich urban consumers. The answer is blowing in the wind, isn't it? What is important is to make sure that our electricity is produced and sold competitively, and soon gone will be the days of being able to use electricity without paying, or paying several months or years later.

Good on you prime minister for taking this marvelous initial step. If our infrastructure is managed on a sound basis, we will be well on our way to sustained economic development, and it is about time for that!

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Biman

Sir, Biman Bangladesh Airlines deserves appreciation for declaring all its domestic flights and some international flights as 'no-smoking'. Let other organisations also follow the instance set by Biman for protecting the non-smokers and children from the adverse effects of smoking. M Zahidul Haque BAI, Dhaka