

The First Hurdle

Water is receding further, faster. Everyday. The pervasive picture of frustration, want and pain is giving in to another full of heroic challenge. The newspapers are one in recording the ordinary man's positive and constructive enthusiasm. But even before they reconstruct their dwelling they will have to cross their first hurdle first. To the fields is the cry of all in the areas where the arable land has almost surfaced. All hands everywhere in the country, excepting the towns and cities, have got down to preparing the fields and landless farmhands are eagerly being sought after. So far so good. The biggest loss to the nation in this flood has been the loss of seed as also of seedlings which could not be grown due to there being no dry land and also no seeds. Without seeds and seedlings what will the peasant do on his prepared land?

All eyes are, therefore, at the moment turned on the question of seeds. And seeds not only of paddy. The government is now convinced that of the 48 lakh hectares expected to be under *Aman*, at least 6 to 7 per cent would not take *Aman* seeds at this late season. The government hopes 43 lakh hectares would yield about 78 lakh tonne *Aman* paddy. The government doesn't say where will the peasants get their seedlings to grow such a crop. It, however, says much of it has already been transplanted and it is preoccupied only with the thought of cultivating 3 lakh hectares left out of *Aman* farming and the land that raise other crops. We fear that the picture is not that simple. *Aman* seedlings are as much in demand as seeds and saplings of other crop — and none of these are readily available anywhere.

You need saplings for farming *begun* and *tamac* as also radish of the Japanese variety. Farmers could not go to raise these saplings in the usual quantity. This is ideal time to broadcast mustard seeds and of course the various beans such as kalai, mung, peas, mashur, chhola etc. Where will their seeds come from? With large-scale silting of the surfacing landmass demand will reach stupendous proportions for peanut and watermelon seeds.

The situation is grim. With imagination and knowledge and with a goodly fund of sincerity the government can help the farmers cross this hurdle. The first true hurdle.

Don't Lose Sight of Erosion

For people living in the villages close to rivers recession of flood waters is hardly an occasion to heave a sigh of relief. Erosion, a perennial danger which they have to live with even when there is no flood, has reportedly broken out with a vengeance as life readies to get back to normal rhythm following the passage of the flood water. Stagnant water of the unprecedented deluge has left the land soft and loose making it an easier prey to the devouring rivers. People living on the sides of the Meghna and the Gumti are bearing the brunt of this revitalised scourge.

Relocating these landless, homeless people should definitely be a major component of the post-flood rehabilitation programme. The government would be well advised to guard against a possible managerial disarray over the matter because the standard practice in rehabilitating erosion affected people is to place them on the nearest char or shoals. But nobody knows when and where the shoal would surface. Unless handled with a sincerity and urgency this element of uncertainty can augment the sufferings of the affected people.

Erosion and flood may not be concurrent but the two phenomena are caught in a vicious cycle. Erosion leads to heavy siltation on river bed, a fact that is chiefly responsible for the annual inundation of land by the turbid rivers during monsoon. It is an irony of sorts that though demographic pressure and urbanisation have over the years seen a widespread poaching of our rivers and waterways, erosion as a constant source of land loss has remained untouched, untackled. Even at a time when yearly courtship with the extremes of waterlessness and excess of water makes it imperative for us to delve in the sciences of river control, erosion as a part of it is strangely neglected. Our knowledge about it is next to nothing. We resort to quick prescription of regular dredging of the rivers to cure the land of its proneness to yearly visitation by floods. But what to do with erosion? Can our concern for river control or water management be complete without erosion being included as its integral and important component? The authorities have to look into the matter seriously.

Good Tiding

None expects a miracle to happen from Sharif Vajpayee meet scheduled to be held on September 23 on the sideline of the UNGA session in New York. But the very fact that they are missing no opportunity to sit down for talks is no doubt an auspicious sign for the future of Indo-Pak relations. For we have always felt that channels of communication must remain open between these two historically inimical countries. More so when they have gone nuclear adding a nery element to their disposition that needed the cooling treatment of continual bilateral interactions to avert any catastrophe.

Some three months ago they met on the fringes of the Colombo SAARC summit. But the hopes raised by that *tete-a-tete* for a restart of the dialogue that had broken down last year on the disputed primacy of the Kashmir question were to prove abortive on the same thorny issue. But both sides took the earliest opportunity to bounce back on course. Although Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif could not attend the recently held Non-aligned Summit and avail himself of the opportunity of meeting his Indian counterpart Vajpayee in Durban, Pakistan Foreign Minister Sartaz Aziz duly called on the Indian PM and set the ball rolling for their Foreign Secretaries to do the ground-work for the New York summit between Sharif and Vajpayee. Prime Ministers of India and Pakistan are now expected to set the dates for the resumption of official-level talks and finalise the modalities for discussing the two intractable bilateral issues — Jammu and Kashmir, and peace and security. We are hoping that the urgency for dialogue will triumph over technicalities.

Towards an Indo-US Nuclear Deal?

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including those on nuclear proliferation in South Asia. A Clinton Administration source confirmed that the talks were an 'on going' process and various issues were 'still to be resolved'. Even if few details were offered it was presumed that Washington was seeking to ensure the signing of the CTBT by both India and Pakistan without preconditions, avoiding their transferring of nuclear technology to third countries, refraining from weaponisation or deployment of their missiles and beginning negotiation on the FMCT (Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty).

The holding of the discussions after three previous sessions which were equally critical is indicative of the fact that despite some basic differences both sides are confident of mutual accommodation. According to highly placed diplomatic sources the US now appreciates New Delhi's 'genuine security concerns' and recognises that it was developing its nuclear weapons under propulsion of fear not just from Pakistan but also China. The US no more insists on India's signing of NPT which, in any case, has since been dumped even by its principal authors by not adhering to its disarmament clauses, but

expects her only to behave in a responsible and helpful way. In exchange, the US would lift economic sanction and technology ban imposed since 1974. Most importantly, the US would bestow legitimacy on India's nuclear weapons developed so far and admit her to nuclear club but as member with restricted rights. In other words, India will be a bonafide nuclear state although with an inferior status. After all, all members of P-5 are not of equal status.

changeable for a nation. There may come a time when the deployment to weapons, either conventional or nuclear, can be aptly agreed upon. The China factor bothers India and even the US in spite of the latter's current bonhomie with China. The US-proposed formula seems to be an admixture of a variety of approaches and measures presumably prompted by a plethora of lobbies and viewpoints at work in the US. However, beyond differences and divergences a few things are clear.

non-aligned countries has been a nagging problem at CD (Conference on Disarmament) being held now in Geneva. Ironically, India, a co-founder of non-aligned movement, will be expected to contribute towards a rift in the rank of G-21 at the CD, and resist all future nuclear disarmament measures if she accepts the proposed deal. Secondly, the deal subtly makes India a potential ally or partner in a possible future US strategy to contain or counter China should such situation arises. Lastly, New Delhi is being asked by implication to 'understand' the reality and shun its stance for a nuclear free world.

By accepting the deal India would only contradict some of her sensible nuclear positions in the past — her tilt for a non-hegemonic world order, refusing to play bloc politics in international relations, opposition to western hegemony over the Third World countries and defending the cause for a world free of nuclear weapons. It will also undermine the efforts of G-21 with certain positions on FMCT (Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty). The G-21 rightly argues that mere freeze on future fissile material is meaningless unless the surpluses of 2241 tonnes of plutonium and highly enriched ura-

nium which can produce 40,000 nuclear weapons or double the present global nuclear arsenal are suitably disposed of. India has not yet raised her voice in this regard. Furthermore, not only she would be asked to oppose such move of G-21 under the present bargain, she would also break the unity of non-aligned movement.

Precisely, India would, under the deal, abdicate her moral right to speak for nuclear disarmament anymore. By being party to P-5's nuclear policy she can no more redeem the grave wrong she committed in May 1998. The deal would only prompt other nuclear aspirants to come out of their closets. It is only a matter of time for Israel to go declare herself a nuclear power. The P-5 chicanery with global nuclear disarmament will no more be exposed or resisted.

The negotiations, in spite of several hitches and uncertainties are now in fairly advanced stage. Jasawant Singh, India's special envoy for the negotiation has hinted about a fifth round of talks which may turn out to be the final round. A similar arrangement is underway also to rope in Pakistan for whom another negotiation is carried out in London at a relatively lower level. Anyone of the two playing a role that is helpful to the P-5, particularly the US, would obviously be favoured one, to reap the greater dividend from the deal.



PERSPECTIVES

by Brig (Rtd) M Abdul Hafiz

There are enough of grey areas in the deal to India's advantage. Because it is not always easy to define what constitutes an overt deployment. In it, there is a range of possibilities from hardened silos to a bomber waiting on a runway with bombs strapped to it to keeping nuclear capable missiles in a state of readiness at a discreet distance. Then, of course, 'the security environment and interests' are not un-

When a deal is struck with both India and Pakistan, P-5 will no doubt be able to sustain present discriminatory nuclear order and the cries for total nuclear disarmament will be bound to be feeble. But the opposition will continue particularly from a segment of non-aligned countries. South Africa which has since rolled back her smaller nuclear arsenal is emerging as a vocal critic of nuclear proliferation. The G-21 composed of

Are They Crying Wolf?

by Abdul Hannan

If the government fails to face up to the challenge of the crisis people will feel betrayed, become angry and blame it. If the government succeeds, it will reap the harvest of triumph. Others who made their share of contribution to the success of government efforts will not be forgotten in the hustings.

sage is concerned, the operative sentence was 'unless huge international aid was forthcoming urgently'.

If the government reaction was sparked by concern to remove any panic about food shortage caused by the report, the Agriculture and Food Minister alone was enough to make a statement about satisfactory food situation in the country. It is not understood why the government should be nervous about a report which merely gave a forewarning about the shadow of a famine. In a way the report was an alarm bell to the government so that it was not caught unaware and was prepared to forestall a potential crisis and the shadow does not assume substance. By all intents and purposes, the BBC report was blown out of proportion. The reaction was symptomatic of a neurotic obsession with criticism.

Hopefully, none will die of starvation. The poor and the destitute do not have the right to die of starvation. They die of disease and malnutrition. Have not more than 500 persons already died during the current floods? Who cares to know who they died. So why bother? Why shadow-boxing? Government is not responsible for the floods. It is responsible for the consequences though.

The handling of the BBC report lends substance to a widespread impression that the government, for strange reasons, has been playing down the floods as a national disaster and has treated it in a slipshod and inept manner. There was no sense of urgency to the unfolding tragedy of the floods. The government dragged its feet and waited inordinately long before it decided to make an appeal for international help and assistance. It was not until late August, well after eight weeks of flooding in the country when the calamity assumed the look of the full-blown disaster with over twenty million people rendered homeless, road communications with the port city of Chittagong and Khulna disrupted, and the Dhaka city submerged in flood-waters, foreign missions folding their staff and family for evacuation home, that the government recognised that a calamity of

overwhelming magnitude was at the doorstep. It was only after the donors and UN agencies had completed their initial assessment of damage and requirements and expressed anxiety to offer help, the Foreign Minister told the donors on August 25 that any help they could offer was welcome. It was not a strong appeal for help. It was clear that he was not yet ready with his home work about our actual requirements.

Finally on August 26 the Finance Minister in his meeting with the donors made an appeal for 608.39 dollar as emergency relief assistance. The amount was later raised to dollar 880 million. The appeal would have received far more seriousness, focused attention and urgency had Prime Minister Hasina personally written to the UN Secy General. So far we have seen assurance of only 172.5 million dollar in cash and kind. This is a trickle and woefully inadequate. The government should have taken a leaf out of the hand-book of the past. During the 1988 floods, in response to a letter of appeal from the President to the UN Secy General, the UN sent Esafi, the Under-secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs, for assessment of damage and requirements, organised a special aid-pledging conference at the UN Headquarters and adopted a resolution in the General Assembly emphasising the need for urgent assistance and long-term solution of the problem. In pursuance of the resolution separate studies on flood-control were undertaken by the UNDP, World Bank, France and Japan. The World Bank was assigned to co-ordinate the studies and come out with an agreed document. It is not known what happened to the report.

On September 4, the UN issued a flash appeal for 223 million dollar assistance and is expected to issue the second appeal for international assistance for emergency relief and rehabilitation soon after a full assessment of our requirements is made available to them. Prime Minister Hasina appreciating the contribution of the UN in the relief and rehabilitation efforts of the government should personally write to the Secy General with an appeal for

further help urgently. For the victims of natural disaster there is no aid fatigue. The donors have an abundance of sympathy, compassion and support for them. Aid-fatigue is due to man-made disasters caused by misuse, corruption and wastefulness of leaders of recipient countries. What is needed is appropriate projection of our needs at the appropriate time in an appropriate manner.

The performance of BTV in its treatment of the floods has been dismal and despicable. Impervious to the vast sweep and scale of flood devastation and the magnitude of the sufferings of people, the TV footage on floods was confined to pictures of distribution of sares and lungis by government leaders to flood affected people. It is demeaning for those receiving doles. But what they needed more was shelter and food. People wanted to see images of human stories of villages, livestock, roads, bridges and culverts washed away by floods, millions of people uprooted from home precariously surviving perched on rooftops and stranded in makeshift shelters and road-side shanties. Such footage would have created awareness about the severity of the crisis and mobilised national and international support and cooperation to relief efforts. BTV's insensitivities to priorities was limitless. They remained preoccupied in the observance of mourning day for the entire month of August. People were disillusioned. This is being talked about. Bangabandhu who was never out of touch with people would not have liked it. There is a perception that this a deliberate attempt to tarnish the image of Bangabandhu and undermine the popularity of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

The Information Ministry is in shambles and disarray. Unlike in the past situations of natural disasters, there is no media centre in the hotels to brief the visiting foreign journalists and conduct them for interviews or visits to flood-affected areas. The Prime Minister should take charge of the Ministry herself.

Are those from Geneva who are supposed to be experts in

disaster assessment crying wolf? The situation is grim and conditions of people are desperate in the grip of floods for over two months. The government is faced with an enormous task of rehabilitation and resettling of about 3 million homeless people affected in 47 out of 64 districts. The infrastructure of roads and bridges which collapsed during the flood have to be rebuilt. Aus and Aman food-crops which was lost causing 13 million-ton shortfall of food has to be urgently replenished. Farmers and labourers thrown out of work and employment for 3 months in a row have to be paid in cash and kind to enable them to start their lives torn apart all over again. The aid committed so far is far short of what we asked for. Confidence is one thing, complacency is another.

It is an emergency. Editor Mahfuz Anam in his recent commentary in The Daily Star pleaded for declaring disaster emergency in the country. Foreign Minister dismissed it as 'involves thinking'. This is not the time for thinking but action. What is the harm in declaring a disaster or calamity area if it is able to mobilise focused attention and urgency to a situation of emergency? The Indian government has declared West Bengal as a disaster area. States struck by natural disasters in the United States are often declared as disaster areas. It is not intelligible why our government is hamstringing by its decision not to declare the flood-hit places as disaster area. It cannot be serious about the opposition leader's characterization that every time the Awami League is in the government, there is a natural calamity. What about the cyclone in 1991 and floods in 1988?

This is a national calamity and calls for national response and participation. The government just cannot do it alone and needs collective efforts of all including political parties of all persuasions, doctors, engineers, teachers, students, intellectuals, officials and common men and women. In the past, the nation stood united before a common adversary, be it in 1954, 1969, 1971 and 1990. The flood is a common adversary

and the common cause is the hungry faces and forlorn looks of flood-affected victims. It is time to face the adversary unitedly. Prime Minister Hasina has to take the lead to unite the nation. She called for unity in her address at the last session of the Jatiya Sangsad. But unity comes from leading, consistency and clarity, not pleading alone. The leader of the opposition has offered to extend help and cooperation to the government to meet the challenge. The flood provides a window of opportunity to rise to the occasion. In the wider national interest Prime Minister Hasina should grasp the arm of support and cooperation immediately. This is a moment to bury the hatchet and unite as many columnists have pleaded and not to moment to outflank each other in mud-slinging and vituperation. The road-map to recovery and to ride out the calamity is to constitute immediately a national relief and co-ordination committee comprising representatives from all political parties, professions and NGOs and headed by the Prime Minister. Water is receding but the crisis is far from over. PM should be seen to lead the nation at this hour of crisis and not led by her lesser mortals. Many of her cabinet colleagues are speaking in different voices on the same subject. She should be seen in charge, above trivialities, taking important decisions, giving directions and personally reviewing and monitoring the performance of relief efforts of different organisations and agencies from her situation control room in her office and in the meetings of national relief and co-ordination committee. Her visits to flood affected areas particularly in remote areas should be more frequent for purposes of supervision of relief efforts. She should make a nation-wide Radio and TV address immediately to mobilise willing participation and support of people to meet the challenge in the wake of the floods.

The flood provides a defining test of the relevance and legitimacy of the government. If the government fails to face up to the challenge of the crisis people will feel betrayed, become angry and blame it. If the government succeeds, it will reap the harvest of triumph. Others who made their share of contribution to the success of government efforts will not be forgotten in the hustings.

The author is a former Press Counsellor, Bangladesh Mission to the UN, New York.

To the Editor...

An open letter to the Hon'ble President

Sir, I have been instigated by the worst ever flood in Bangladesh, the appeal from Professor Muhammad Yunus in The Daily Star of 13th September '98 and the commentary of Mahfuz Anam on the following day to write this open letter to the Honourable President. As a conscious citizen of the country, I do not find any other better personality to present my this letter — an appeal.

Honourable President, Sir, People of the country are in serious (worst ever) distress. The flood has made them stunned and dumb. They will face the reality more as the flood waters recede and they return to their homesteads.

The first and foremost need at this time, I believe is to come out of the traditional party politics to which we have been seriously locked in for years. So something appropriate should be done, so that:

(a) the party political activities and programmes are kept to bare minimums;

(b) all political, student-political, trade union agitations and likewise programmes are suspended at least for a period the nation can come out of the flood situation;

(c) only objective-oriented publicity is done through the electronic media instead of traditional political leadership

exposure-oriented publicity, particularly in the flood-related activities;

(d) political harassment to opponents are stopped immediately, which may create situations congenial for post-flood rehabilitation activities;

(e) possibility of active participation of all leadership in the flood activities are ensured through appropriate measures including administrative orders.

Excellency, People of the Republic know you even from before your becoming President of the Republic. Their expectation from you is indeed very high. We believe that only your coming forward may help the nation in achieving the aforementioned objectives of the citizens. If required, one special session of the Parliament may be called only for the specific purpose to pass necessary enactment. The session may be quite brief, because the people do not have the patience, at least at this crucial moment, to hear long discussions and debates.

RI Khan
A Citizen of the Republic

City life

Sir, You may have noticed the recent traffic situation in the city and the national highways. City life is paralyzed due to traffic jams. Implementation of rules and regulation is a

must. I am sure you will agree with me and start serious campaign through your newspaper.

Anoib Adil Khan
30, Shantinagar Dhaka

Negligence of duty

Sir, When one person dies out of a doctor's negligence there is a lot of hue and cry and rightly so too. But where is the hue and cry when 20 people die and another 10 are hurt or missing due to gross negligence of an engineer or a contractor, whoever constructed that standard bridge? Even to the newspapers, strangely enough, this was no sad news for they printed it on the back page with a small heading. Looks like people's life have no value in our country!

It is the government's responsibility to investigate and find out who was responsible for its construction and for overseeing it. How much of the estimated 1 crore was actually spend on its construction? Was it constructed with the required amount of rods and cement or half of it got stolen? Even ancient brick made bridges also stand strong in rivers with strong currents, so why can't a modern bridge built with much sophisticated material, knowledge and skill do? Not even for 8 months.

How could it collapse so soon leading to the untimely death of

so many innocent people? Investigation and punishment of the one's responsible for this negligence of work must be carried out, so that this is not repeated again by others. If not, punished more such bridges and buildings will be constructed leading to premature death of helpless people.

Dr. Sabrina,
Dhaka

Flooding of Banani, Gulshan and Baridhara

Sir, Rampura Road from Malibagh Level Crossing connecting up to the Airport Road should effectively form a barrier to stop the flood water from the eastern side of the road as the channel below the Rampura Bridge has been sealed by a concrete wall. In reality however the flood water on both sides of Rampura Road maintained the same level.

The reason for this is that Dhaka WASA constructed in 1995 about ten RCC culverts across Rampura Road from the eastern edge of the road to the western edge. At both ends of these culverts circular man-holes with Dhaka WASA's emblems were provided facilitating easy flow of water from the eastern side to the western. These culverts extend from a

few hundred yards from the northern end of Rampura Bridge up to Baridhara Diplomatic Enclave. These culverts are responsible for flooding low-lying areas of Badda, Baridhara, Gulshan, Banani and western side of Malibagh.

The existence of these culverts is obviously not know to Dhaka Municipal Corporation who were putting sandbags to close the openings of the road divider. Bangladesh Water Development Board which blocked the Rampura channel is also unaware of the existence of the culverts constructed by Dhaka WASA.

The ministry concerned should look into this.

M Rofique
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Gulshan, Dhaka

Housewife's private kitchen

Sir, Shehab Ahmed's front-page story on housewife Sanjida Aziz and her family's noble efforts to feed the local flood-hit people at Green Road through their private kitchen made me not only emotional and proud but also very guilty.

Shehab's reporting could not have been better and the story of this freedom fighter Mr. Aziz and his family reminds me that there are still many people in our country whose contribu-

tions in the community go unheard of in spite of the fact that they make a big difference, both in real and in inspirational terms. Alas! we need so many more Sanjidas! Thanks to The Daily Star for having brought this to public notice.

Quazi Mahmud Ahmed
14A, Square Tower
36/6 Mirpur Road, Dhaka

Sharing experiences

Sir, These floods have claimed the lives of close to 1000 souls and the toll may eventually be higher. In India the official total is above 2000 and in China well above 3000. There is flooding in the Netherlands at this moment and the mighty Mississippi has claimed many lives in the recent past.

Floods and their effects are felt by many millions of people all around the globe and transcends the North-South, East-West divides. Surely we can share our experiences and pool our resources for the good of all and thus reduce their effects on everybody in the future.

How about an International Conference on the matter, a much more worthwhile endeavour than watching our boys being humiliated at Cricket!

Joseph Jabbar
London, UK