

Living with Floods: Sustenance and Work Opportunities

Imagination is more important than knowledge
— Albert Einstein

People's "Abhimot" on Flood

by Muhammad Jahangir

The polluted water that has been stored for about three months will not only cause malaria but also the dangerous 'Dengue fever'. An immediate, 'crash programme' should be launched to prevent the spread of mosquitoes.

EVER since the worst deluge of this century has gripped the country, nationwide discussions have been going on about the prevention of flood and rehabilitation of those affected. On 17 September 1998, the television programme 'ABHIMOT' also joined in the discussions on what might be done to rehabilitate the flood victims.

The following is a presentation of the viewer's opinions received through mail, fax and phone.

The polluted water that has been stored for about three months will not only cause malaria but also the dangerous 'Dengue fever'. An immediate, 'crash programme' should be launched to prevent the spread of mosquitoes.

An austerity policy should be adopted. Administrative expenses and festivities should be minimised. Import of all military equipment and heavy goods should be stopped for some time.

River dredging and plantation programmes should be undertaken.

Humanitarian aid from expatriate Bangladeshis and the international community should be sought.

Relief and rehabilitation programmes have to be transparent and accountable. Illegal

activities and misappropriation of funds in the rehabilitation programme should be monitored.

Top priority should be given to keep the market price of daily necessities at a stable level.

Coordinated plans for flood control, water irrigation, water storage and the best use of water resources need to be undertaken.

Sale of all kind of agricultural land should be stopped for the next one year.

Small and cottage industries should be given financial support to make up for their loss.

The first need of the flood affected people is safe drinking water. Information about the process of purifying drinking water should be disseminated through the media.

Medicines and oral saline should be supplied at low price.

After the recession of flood water chemical should be sprayed to destroy microscopic organisms.

Special attention should be given to sewerage and sanitation.

Reconstruction of the supply system of electricity, gas, water, etc., should be started immediately.

Flood affected people who are poor and illiterate should be

informed about post-flood diseases that might occur due to the absence of protein and vitamins.

Proper care of livestock should be taken.

Permanent flood shelters should be built on high land.

Seeds should be distributed to the farmers at low price.

Sanitary latrines have to be built in all flood affected places and their use has to be ensured to prevent the breakout of diarrhoea epidemics.

Communication system and the damaged infrastructure should be rebuilt on priority basis.

A permanent system for the distribution of relief goods under the supervision of army should be envisaged.

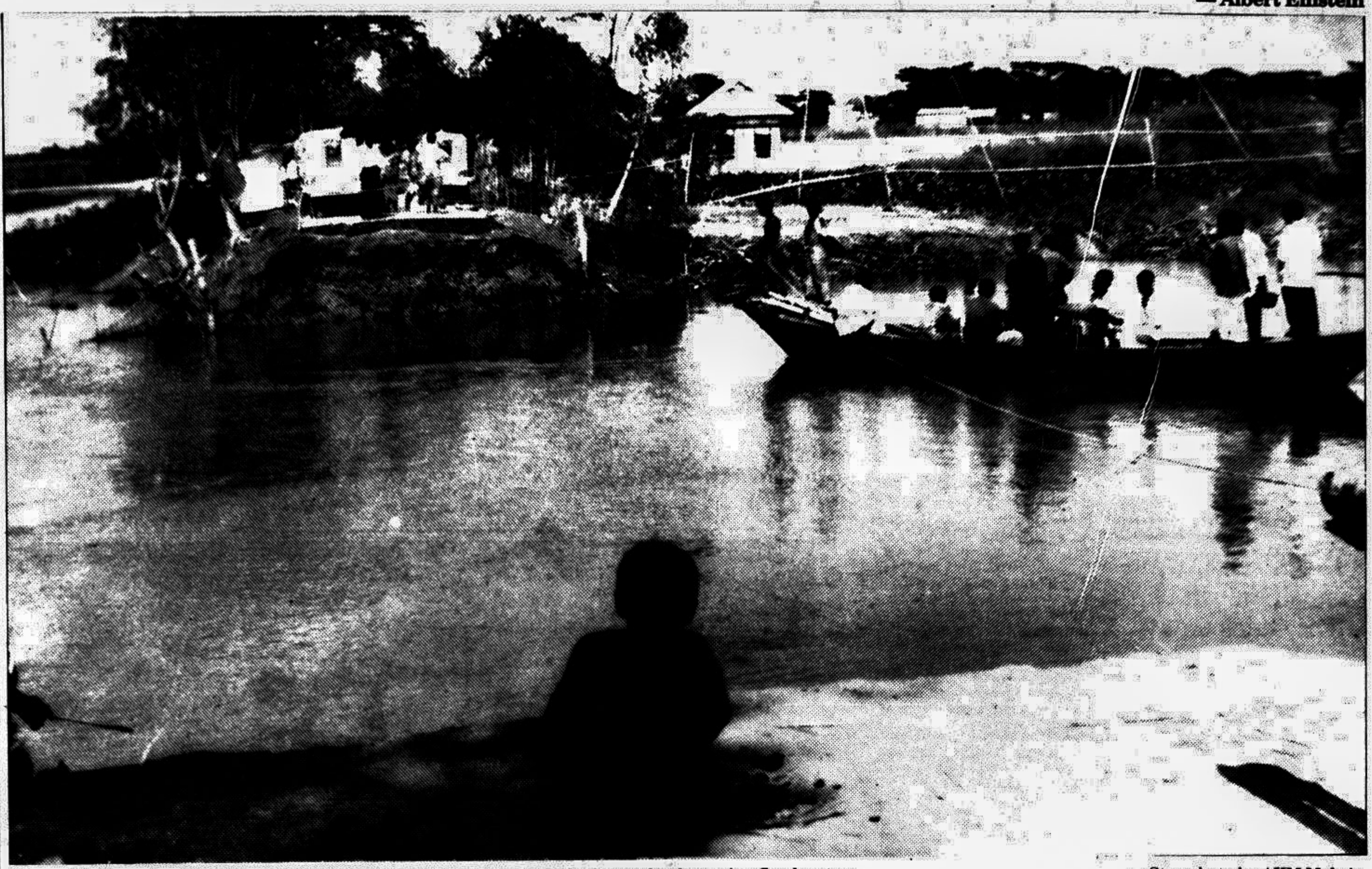
Government should provide interest free loans to the NGOs.

Government should provide interest free loan to farmers.

Government should provide financial support to the affected industries. Flood affected export oriented industries like garments and leather should be provided special loans by the commercial banks.

River dredging programmes must be carried out effectively.

The use of polythene bags should be discouraged. They should not be used for the distribution of relief goods as well.



Gone with the water: A bridge on Dhaka-Munshiganj Road simply washed away by the raging flood waters. — Star photo by AKM Mohsin

Post-flood Work Opportunities: A Report

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post flood rehabilitation program officials should stress on creating women friendly work environment. Sanitation facilities should be gender sensitive in work areas. Women can also be employed to look after the children of other women workers. They can also be engaged to distribute water among workers. The government also should address the wage difference between the sexes. It needs to be noted that women receive less than half of what their male co-workers receive as wages.

(x) Environmental focus: Naeem suggested that rehabilitation programs could include an environmental focus. He described that in many Oxfam project areas, Oxfam is disbursing loans under the condition that environment will be protected (i.e. the loanee will have to plant four banana trees etc.). He also pointed out that African magur fishes, which have escaped with the floodwater, would need to be exterminated. Otherwise, in six months this species will destroy other varieties of 'deshi' fish. Meghna Guhathiakurata mentioned that

in arsenic contaminated areas arsenic has already entered the food chain. Extensive studies need to be conducted to determine the level of arsenic contamination in these and other nearby areas.

(xi) Coping with malnutrition: Malnutrition is on the rise in the flood-affected areas, as many had to compromise their daily meals due to unavailability of food. In fact, children are most affected by malnutrition. In the coming winter, children would be the worst victims of hypothermia if they do not get adequate food

from right now. At the same time, the requirements of the pregnant and lactating women should also be noticed with due importance. The participants urged that the while distributing relief, the distributors should specifically concentrate on this vulnerable group.

(xii) Condition of Educational Institutions Turned Relief Camps: Moazzem Hossain from the Save the Children Fund (UK) pointed out that the educational institutions, which were turned into relief camps, need to undertake a massive clean up drive. However, these institutions lack funds to do the above. So they are in dirty and unhygienic conditions and cannot be used for educational purposes. This issue needs to be addressed immediately, otherwise academic year of thousands of students will be disrupted.



Checking post-flood river erosion: People of Kanaksar Union in Louhajang thana do it their own way. — Star photo by Anisur Rahman

An Update on Nagorik Durjog-Mokabila Uddyog

The observations, insights and experiences that these initiatives have provided are extremely important in identifying both the type and extent of the problems we are facing as well as developing appropriate responses. It is in this context that we have convened a citizens' initiative to pool our efforts and ideas to better address the problems we face.

A group of concerned citizens have come together to form the "Nagorik Durjog-Mokabila Uddyog" (Citizen's Initiative for Confronting the Disaster) to address the post flood problems of relief, rehabilitation and employment generation. The specific objectives of this initiative is spelled out in the mission statement.

Mission Statement of Nagorik Durjog-Mokabila Uddyog

The crisis that the country is facing as a result of the worst floods in this century has again mobilized individuals, groups and organizations to stand by the distressed and participate in the task of recovery and rebuilding. The observations, insights and experiences that these initiatives have provided are extremely important in identifying both the type and extent of the problems we are facing as well as developing appropriate responses. It is in this

context that we have convened a citizens' initiative to pool our efforts and ideas to better address the problems we face. The essential purpose of this initiative is to:

- organize and release the creative energies of the citizens and help them participate in the post-flood rehabilitation and recovery activities;
- collect, evaluate and disseminate information on damages and losses caused by the current floods and to monitor the impact of the relief and rehabilitation program of the government and the NGOs;
- assist in determining the types of intervention that are required to feed, shelter and generate income earning opportunities for the flood-affected people as well as to help them overcome the damages wrought by the deluge;
- support the relief and rehabilitation activities of the government and NGOs;
- help to coordinate the post-

flood rehabilitation and recovery activities of the NGOs, private sector and other organizations of civil society, as well as provide a focal point for coordinating these efforts with the rehabilitation programs of the government.

This initiative is not intended to substitute any governmental or non-governmental activities that are underway. It will attempt to complement and strengthen such efforts. We strongly feel that the resilience of the people, the creative energies of individuals and the collective efforts of different organizations will see us through this crisis. We welcome the support of all Bangladeshis in this endeavor, in the form of information on the problems faced by the flood victims in their locality, the extent to which problems in the area are being tackled by the official and NGO programs, and suggestions on how to improve the rehabilitation efforts in your area. We also welcome cooperation with all organizations engaged in the rehabilitation process and would like to coordinate our efforts with any other attempts at coordination or citizens' initiatives.

Current Activities of the Nagorik Durjog-Mokabila Uddyog

The Steering Committee has undertaken a major exercise to ensure that all flood damaged hand tubewells do get repaired. Activities around this initiative will involve identifying non-functioning tubewells, contacting government agencies, NGOs and local groups to repair such tubewells, providing information on how to engage in such repairs, etc. In addition, the Nagorik Durjog-Mokabila Uddyog has undertaken the following activities:

1. A survey is being conducted to estimate flood damages. The questionnaire has been printed in newspapers to enable all interested citizens to respond. In addition, different NGOs and the Grameen Bank are also conducting a country wide survey based on this questionnaire.
2. An exercise is being conducted to collect, synthesize and disseminate information on flood related issues from newspapers, governmental reports, and NGO sources.
3. A study has been initiated to analyse NGO effectiveness in relief and rehabilitation activities. The study is also looking at micro finance institutions and their coping strategies in the post flood situation with regard to their financial viability.
4. Another study has been undertaken to monitor prices of major food commodities and wage rates in different parts of the country.
5. The post flood migration from rural areas to Dhaka city is being monitored.
6. An exercise is being conducted to monitor the distribution of VGF cards and agricultural credit to ensure that the worst hit areas and the most needy persons are receiving such assistance.

Sustaining the Distressed

by Ishrat Zakia Sultana

The VGF card system is praiseworthy but the government has to ensure that the affected farmers are getting the benefits and no partisanship takes place in this context. 'Food for work', 'wheat for polythene' are also worth mentioning programmes.

WE survive in nature and die in nature' this is a truth applicable for all of us. Yet time and again we continue to defy nature, consequences have been catastrophic as is evident by the recent floods in Bangladesh. Now that water is receding people are facing the cruel reality. The need of the hour is to sustain production and jobs opportunities for the lower and lower middle class people who have been most affected by the floods.

Sustaining Production: The farmers have not surrendered to nature. They have gone back to their villages and are ready to start cultivation. But the problem is the land is filled with silt. The three months long flood has damaged the seedplots, seedlings and the croplands to a large extent. They have also used up their little cash during the flood period. So in the present situation they have no money and no easy way to grow their crops. The farmers need seeds of paddy, seedlings, fertilizers, insecticides and so on. They also need cash money on a priority basis.

Food Crisis: The supply of food is not bad in the market but the farmers do not have the means to buy them. The government must ensure the supply of food to the affected farmers else the agricultural rehabilitation programme would also fail. The total production of a

season has been completely destroyed. Bangladesh has 20 lakh food deficit in normal period.

On 20 Sept 1998 the Agricultural and Food Minister Begum Motia Chowdhury stated that an amount of Tk. 3718 crore and 34 lakh ton agricultural production have been damaged. Add to it the normal deficit. The damage assessments are made more on assumptions, the actual damage may exceed the above figures. Only 6 lakh ton food crops is stored in the hand of the government.

The amount of imported food is about 10 and 20 lakh by the government and non-government initiatives respectively. 13 to 15 lakh ton food is expected to come as relief by the donors. So around 40 lakh ton food will be managed within next one month time. The main problem is to maintain this one-month time. It is necessary to reach the stored food and cash money the flood affected people as soon as possible.

Some Essential Steps: The government and the Banks have announced loan programmes. It is however extremely important that classification be made among those who actually need food and those who have the ability to purchase food. Many middle class farmers have also been affected, relief distribution and rehabilitation measures must take them into account as well.

The VGF card system is praiseworthy but the government has to ensure that the affected farmers are getting the benefits and no partisanship takes place in this context. 'Food for work', 'wheat for polythene' are also worth mentioning programmes. The government must also ensure non-partisanship in the distribution of agricultural loans. Lawlessness, terrorism and chandabaje in the name of relief collection has increased. The government must ensure proper law and order situation.

Job Opportunities: The government and the NGOs should formulate programmes to involve the affected people in reconstruction work, tree plantation, fisheries etc. This would on the one hand lead to reconstruction, on the other provide the people with means to sustain themselves.

Conclusion: The matter of sustaining production and job opportunities is however linked to proper management, coordination, a congenial law and order situation and above all the will and unity of the people. It is time we sink our narrow differences accept the present catastrophe as a challenge and rise above the situation. The people of this country have done this before and can do again. Last but not the least let us learn to live with nature.

The Author is Departmental Editor of Shukha Bichitra.

The activities of this initiative will be guided by a Steering Committee composed of the following members:

Professor Rehman Sobhan (Convener, Former Advisor to the Caretaker Government, Executive Chairman CPD); Professor Muhammad Yunus (Former Advisor to the Caretaker Government and Managing Director of Grameen Bank); Barrister Syed Ishtiaq Ahmed (Former Advisor to the Caretaker Government); Professor Jamilur Reza Chowdhury (Former Advisor to the Caretaker Government, and Former President Bangladesh Institute of Engineers); Professor Wahiduddin Mahmud (Former Advisor to the Caretaker Government, and President Bangladesh Economics Association); Kazi Fazlur Rahman (Former Advisor to the Caretaker Government); Mr. A M A Muhiit (Former Finance Minister); Mr. M Syedurazzaman (Former Finance Minister); Mr. Mahfuz Anam (Editor, The Daily Star); Mr. Mattur Rahman (Editor Prothom Alo); Mr. Fazle Hasan Abed (Executive Director, BRAC); Ms. Khushi Kabir (Coordinator, Nijera Kari); Dr. Salehuddin Ahmed (Managing Director, PKSF); Gazi Faruq Ahmed (Executive Director, Proshika); Dr. FRM Hassan (Executive Director, GSS); Professor Syed M Hashemi (Project Director, Grameen Trust); Professor

The topic of the next issue is: "Living with Floods III: The Civic Response" to be published on 22 October 1998. Creative suggestions are invited from our esteemed readers. Please send your materials to: Imtiaz Ahmed, Executive Director, Centre for Alternatives, Room No 431, Lecture Theatre, Arts Building, Dhaka University, Dhaka-1000. Tel: 9661900-59, Ext. 4550; Fax: (8802) 836769; E-mail: imtiaz@bangla