Imagination is more important than knowledge

Prioritizing the Environment: A Civic Response from Abroad

HE Bangladesh Environment Network (BEN) has been setup by the expatriates living in North America, Europe and Japan to facilitate communication among Bangladeshis, both resident and non-resident, and interested non-Bangladeshis on environmental problems of Bangladesh. It is hoped that this increased communication will help (a) increase awareness about environmental problems in Bangladesh, (b) formulate right policies to fight environmental degradation, and (c) assist Bangladesh government in adopting and implementing such policies.

The BEN submitted a memorandum to the Finance Minister of Bangladesh Mr S A M S Kibria on October 3, 1998 during the latter's visit to Boston, USA. Through him the BEN expected the Memorandum to be conveyed to the relevant ministries of the government, including the Prime Minister, of Bangladesh. Following are excerpts of the Memorandum. The memorandum has two parts, the first concerns flood, and the second focuses on other aspects of environmental degradation.

On Flood Unprecedented Flood: This year Bangladesh has experi-

enced flood of unprecedented scale and intensity. Many people have died; loss to crop, cattle, houses, and infrastructure has been enormous. The damage estimates are staggering. Bangladesh now faces the difficult task of recouping the losses and then going forward.

Sympathy and Solidarity: We express our sympathy to all those families who have lost their members, and to all people of the country who have suffered because of flood. We express our full solidarity with the people of Bangladesh as they try to rebuild their lives after the flood.

HE last page of the

small story. It was a small news

report on the Bangladeshi expa-

triates in Germany who have

donated Tk 1.5 lakh to the

Prime Minister's Relief Fund.

many would organize cultural

evenings in Cologne, Hamburg,

der to help the flood-victims.

though not all have reached the

community in different coun-

tries around the world have

taken various steps to help

their flood affected compatri-

ots. They may not have been af-

fected physically by the flood,

but they have not forgotten the

people back home. It may seem

obvious that expatriates would

try to help out their families

and relatives in Bangladesh,

but in many cases they extended

fected people individually or

through community organiza-

Some moving and heart-

warming stories are available

on the Net, although many of

the stories have not been told.

Some of these stories/ efforts of

the expatriates can be gathered

through the urgent emails they

have sent to various NGOs, web

sites in order to know where,

how and what type of assistance

victims. One question that was

common was-- 'Will our assis-

tance reach those in need?' This

was pointedly raised in Ms.

Shamim Azad's article in the

Bhorer Kagoj as she asked

where should those in UK want-

ing to help go. Many felt they

could rely on NGOs and wanted

to know about their distribu-

tion channel. Badal Das of

North-East Ohio Bangladesh

Association (NEOBA), in his

email to Grameen, wanted to

know how and what channel

they should render to the flood

their helping hand to flood- af-

The Bangladeshi expatriate

print-media.

Bangladesh Observer on

October 13, 1998 carried a

Financial and Other Material Support: The best way of expressing solidarity is to send financial and other material support. We called upon all our members and other Bangladeshis to come forward with generous financial support. We urged them to do one or more of the following: (a) send individual contributions, (b) join efforts with other Bangladeshis of the local area and send combined contributions. (c) use media announcement and host events to raise funds both from Bangladeshis and foreigners.

Long Term Strategy regarding Flood: As Bangladesh tries to cope with this year's flood damage, she has to think about her long term strategy regarding flood. In this regard, we have some specific recommendations to make.

Problems of the Embankment Approach: So far, Bangladesh has followed the embankment approach toward flood. Experience shows that this is not the right approach, because embankments (a) cannot reduce the total volume of water, and (b) do not create additional passage or storage space for water. All they can do is to cordon off certain areas from floodwater. But this (a) aggravates flood in areas which remain outside the cordons, (b) puts life and property of people inside the cordons at a perennial risk, (c) deprives land inside cordons from beneficial effects of normal flooding, and (d) creates new problems of drainage and environment within the cordoned areas. Finally, given that our mighty rivers frequently change their course, embankments on Bangladesh's alluvial plains are bound to fail. It is for all these reasons that the Eastern Waters Study, authored under the leadership of Harvard Professor of Environmental Engi

neering, Peter Rogers, also rec-

Bangladesh should not try to sever connections of the cities with the adjoining rivers by cordoning them. Instead, like rest of the country, life of the cities should also be integrated with the rhythm of the rivers. The cities of Bangladesh should develop along the lines of Amsterdam or Venice, which have successfully structured their life by enhancing connection with river and sea.

amples:

ommended against the embankment approach.

Benefits of the Excavation Approach: Bangladesh, therefore, should abandon the embankment approach and adopt the excavation approach. The main goal of this approach is to create as much passage and storage space for monsoon water as possible. Bangladesh has to preserve, develop, and connect all existing surface water bodies and, if possible, create new ones. The basic idea is to let the monsoon water spread over as wide an area as possible, so that the depth of flooding can be kept low. The excavated earth can help raise the ground level of villages and towns, as and where necessary and feasible. Water stored in the rivers and other surface water bodies will help irrigation during the dry winter season. The excavation approach therefore solves both the problem of flood during rainy season and the problem of water shortage in winter. In addition, this approach preserves all the beneficial effects of normal river-inundation. including replenishment of underground aquifers. The latter is important to avoid arsenic contamination of water, another serious environmental problem in Bangladesh.

Recommendations: In concrete terms, our recommenda-

tions are as follows: Bangladesh should adopt the Eastern Waters Study report as the main guiding document for dealing with water problems of the country.

Bangladesh should embark upon a major program to re-excavate the riverbeds of the country. She has to start with

the smaller rivers of the north and western parts of the country and gradually proceed to the larger ones. Dredging and re-excavation of the major rivers is a difficult task, but progress with the smaller rivers and rivulets will be a big step forward. Given Bangladesh's population density, re-excavation is a feasible goal. Such a program will generate large amount of employment and it does not require foreign currency. The water bodies are mostly under state ownership, and this will make the program less expensive and less fraught with legal obstacles. Not only riverbeds, Bangladesh should preserve and develop all other surface water bodies, like khals, bils,

Bangladesh should minimize obstructions on the floodplains. Many roads and highways need to be reconstructed to allow culverts and bridges of adequate number and size required for passage of water.

Bangladesh should reemphasize waterways as a means of inland communication and transport. The excavation approach should help her in doing

Bangladesh should reemphasize the importance of the inland freshwater fisheries. Again, the excavation approach will help achieve this goal.

Bangladesh should not try to sever connections of the cities with the adjoining rivers by cordoning them. Instead, like rest of the country, life of the cities should also be integrated with the rhythm of the rivers. The cities of Bangladesh should develop along the lines of Amsterdam or Venice, which have successfully structured their

life by enhancing connection with river and sea. On Other Environmental Issues

Different Dimensions of Environmental Degradation: We observe with alarm that, as Bangladesh is trying to industrialize, she is undergoing serious environmental degradation. There are many dimensions of this process. A few ex-

Air Pollution: Urban air pollution has reached alarming level. The lead content of Dhaka city's air is more than 100 times the UN recommended safe level. Dhaka has become a gas chamber for slow poisoning Leaded air is particularly harmful for children as it retards their physical and mental development

Arsenic Contamination of Ground Water: Increased use of groundwater aquifers for irrigation and their non-adequate replenishment has caused the ground water level to go down. This has caused arsenic contamination to reach alarming

Chemical Runoff to Surface Water Bodies: Indiscriminate use of chemical fertilizer and pesticides is resulting in chemical runoff to the surface water bodies. This is causing serious damage to country's fresh water

fish stock. Industrial and Medical Waste: Industrial enterprises are often discharging their toxic and other harmful solid and fluid waste in untreated form into neighboring areas and water bodies. Similarly, hospitals and clinics are often disposing indiscriminately their harmful clinical waste.

Household Waste: In urban areas, disposal of household waste has become a serious problem. This problem has been aggravated by indiscriminate and increasing use of plas-

tic materials. Loss of Wetlands: We are increasingly losing our surface water bodies, both in the cities and in the rural areas. Part of it is driven by population pressure and need for settlement areas. The rest is due to bad policies. Loss of wetlands is causing temperature imbalance and general ecological deterioration. As we noted above, it is also aggravating floods.

Deforestation: Most of the shalbons have now become extinct. Sundarbans are under threat. Bangladesh has gone well below the requirement of at least 25 percent of land to be under forest

Loss of Bio-diversity: With loss of wetlands and forests. Bangladesh is increasing losing its flora and fauna. Many of the species are becoming rare; some have already become extinct. Bangladesh is becoming a very uninteresting part of the world.

Industrialization without Environmental Degradation: Experience of other parts of the world has shown that environmental degradation is not a necessary price to pay for industrialization. Bangladesh. with a population density of about 1000 per square kilometer, cannot, and need not, slavishly imitate the production processes and lifestyle of the US, where density of population is only 26 per square kilometer. If the above processes of environmental degradation are allowed to continue, Bangladesh and its cities will become not only inhospitable but also downright unlivable. With unlivable cities and contaminated rural areas, Bangladesh can hardly expect to attract foreign investment and go forward.

Need for Government Intervention: Since environment is a public good, market forces based on private interests cannot be relied upon to protect environment. Comprehensive

government intervention and guidance is necessary. Industrialization in such a densely populated and fragile country as Bangladesh has to proceed with extreme caution. Otherwise, the whole process may lead us to an

ecological disaster Recommendations: Environmental degradation is a big problem. It is, therefore, not possible to discuss and prescribe solutions to all aspects of this problems in a small memorandum like this one. Many of these problems demand more research before comprehensive solutions may be proposed. However, based on the discussion that has taken place in the Bangladesh Environment Network, we want to make the fol-

lowing recommendations:

a) Air Pollution: The main source of air pollution in Dhaka and other cities of Bangladesh is the Two Stroke Engine Vehicles (TSEV). These deadly vehicles are banned almost all over the world, and must be removed from the streets and roads of Bangladesh as soon as possible. Mere import restrictions will not serve the purpose. We were gravely disappointed when last May the finance ministry initially al lowed a nationalized bank consortium loan of 50 crore taka to Bangladesh Auto-Tempo Owners' Association to import another 5,000 TSEVs. We urge the government to take the follow-

ing steps: (i) Declare a deadline (say years from now) beyond which TSEVs will not be allowed to ply anywhere in Bangladesh, either in cities or in the rural areas. (ii) During these transition years, make it mandatory for TSEVs to put on temporary filters to prevent the deadly exhaust from getting into the air. (iii) Switch to use of unleaded gasoline.

b) Arsenic Contamination of Water:

(i) Ensure replenishment of the groundwater aquifers by adopting the excavation approach to flood control and by implementing other measures that will facilitate seepage of monsoon water into underground aquifers. (ii) Decrease dependence on ground water for irrigation and increase use of surface water for irrigation. (iii) In the meantime, explore use of simple measures that have been

suggested and are available to

remove arsenic from water. Information regarding these measures is given in the attachment to this memorandum.

- Albert Einstein.

c) Chemical Runoff: (i) Reduce dependence on chemical fertilizer and pesti-

cides. The industrial countries themselves are increasingly moving toward organic agricul ture. Bangladesh should also encourage organic agriculture. (ii) Protect the surface water bodies from chemical runoff.

d) Industrial and Medical

(i) Introduce appropriate rules regarding disposal of industrial and medical waste, and ensure their strict observance (ii) Make environmental protection a priority in the approval process of any industrial project. Follow up on compliance of the environmental component of the project. (iii) In setting up Export Processing Zones (EPZ), take particular care of the potential environmental impact.

e) Household Waste:

(i) Prohibit use of plastic materials where paper or other biodegradable material can serve the purpose. Introduce extra tax on use of plastics. (ii) Introduce community involvement in waste collection and disposal process. Introduce fines for non-compliance. (iii) Introduce measures that will encourage recycling.

f) Loss of Wetlands:

(i) Preserve and develop the existing wetlands by adopt ing the excavation approach (ii) Create and develop new water bodies. Traditionally creation of water bodies was the main form of public works in this country. Return to that tra-

Deforestation:

Preserve the existing forest areas. Undertake a program of reforestation of the parts of the forests that have been encroached. (ii) Encourage social forestry so that forests and habitation may not be exclusive of each other.

h) Loss of Bio-diversity: (i) Preserve the plant and animal (including fish) species that now exist in Bangladesh, (ii) Identify the species that we have lost over the past year. Try to introduce these species from elsewhere (for example, West Bengal) if these are still avail-

Solidarity Across Oceans

by Sohela Nazneen

In Manchester, the school children belonging to the Muslim Cultural society and Hindu Cultural society held cake sales whose proceeding went for the flood victims. They also held sponsored 24-hour silence and vegetarian weeks in order to raise funds.

The news report further menwould be used to distribute the tioned that the Bangladeshi exmoney, clothes raised by patriate community in Ger-NEOBA. This question of accountability and transparency of the distributing agencies was and Bonn to raise funds in ormuch debated by the expatriates on various web sites. Stories like this are numerous

An Expatriate in Need is a Comparative In Deed

I had frantically emailed and asked friends and relatives about the flood related activities in their areas and I was touched by efforts they had undertaken (which they would not have recounted unless I had asked them). Though the expatriates doubted how much their efforts would be effective in helping the victims, it did not deter them from participating vigorously in the campaign to help Bangladesh. Their enthusiasm, sincerity and love for Bangladesh are palpable in their emails, articles sent to me or posted at various web sites. Local Bangladeshi organizations, women's groups, community organizations, school children all have come forward to help. Mainul Huq emailed from Canberra detailing the activities of the local Bangladeshi community and student organizations. The students and the local community in Canberra sold 1500 lunch boxes and raised \$8000 for the flood victims. The Muslim community in Canberra donated \$2000 to the Prime Minister's Relief Fund. Dr. Rounaq Jahan emailed from New York to inform that Bangladeshi women's organization in Washington DC-Sanghati has been actively raising funds to help the flood victims. Nuzhat Ahmad from Washington DC emailed that "Fliers of Sanghati urging people to donate are all over DC."

Organizations such as Operation USA will continue their drive to raise money to procure medicine till October 30. Many of the Bangladeshi students at the US universities and community organizations have been very active in raising

Apart from the adults, the children (Bangladeshi and of other nationalities) have also tried to do their bit. In Washington DC, the Bangladeshi high school children have been quite instrumental in raising funds. campaigning for flood related assistance and passing on the information about various agencies, organizations collecting what type of donations etc to the other communities. Mashrur from Virginia emailed that he and some of his high school children have been actively involved in collecting funds since August. "We haven't collected a lot," he wrote, "but we certainly are trying." In Manchester, the school children belonging to the Muslim Cultural society and Hindu Cul-tural society held cake sales whose proceeding went for the flood victims. They also held sponsored 24-hour silence and vegetarian weeks in order to raise funds. In order to 'attract' sponsors they came up with campaign slogans such as: "One pound will cover the cost of rice for a family for a week; two pounds will pay for one saree; Three pounds will pay for the vegetable seeds for three fami-

Two Heads are Better Than One

Aside from raising funds, expatriates were active in awareness raising about the type of assistance needed and

facts about the flood. Letters have been published from expatriates in Japan in the Daily Star on how to make bleaching powder solution to purify water. The Net is full of questions asked by the expatriates about policies, steps taken by the government and on the flood reports published by various NGOs. Also, the expatriates have highlighted and discussed various issues on the Net. These included, failure of government's rice purchasing program, role of the middlemen and what steps can be taken, distribution of HYV seeds in the post-flood period and its effect on subsistence based food production and what type of intervention is needed, politics of wheat-aid, nutritional status of the flood-victims and changes in their diet caused by flood, etc. For those who are keenly in-

providing information and

terested in gathering information about the flood and brainstorming about innovative intervention strategies the Alochona or Oneline sites are major hubs where the expatriates and Bangladeshis exchange news and views. Not only are these site informative and thought provoking but also contains valuable information for policy development. Reports of personal experiences in remotest areas, on food prices. nutritional status of flood affected people are available. These reports raise very pertinent issues. For example, the nutritional survey shows that 16 kg allocation of food aid is not enough to sustain the nutritional level of flood affected families and people might resort to selling of portions of food- relief. It also points out that the children will require

special attention as adult males are given preference in intrafamily food allocation. Moreover. 36% of the children are suffering from diarrhoea. Furthermore, people want cash and dry food, and though wheat is not preferred by the food-aid recipients, a depressed US wheat market will push forward "wheat -aid" policy to flood affected countries.

The expatriates on the Net are also pushing for policy decisions. Some have formed an environmental group whose discussions are open for all This group has already placed a proposal to the Finance Minister for controlling and mitigating various environmental problems in Bangladesh. Many of their suggestions are timely. executable and innovative.

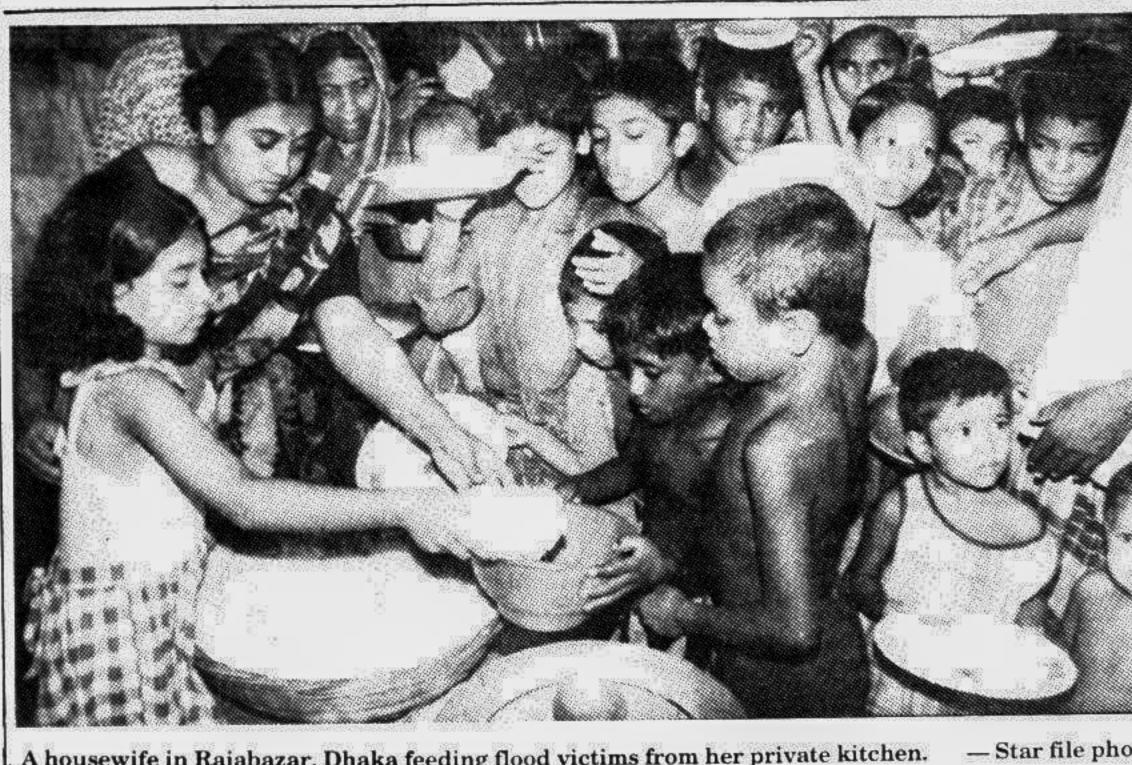
Giving the Flood Victims a Voice

Besides these web sites, many expatriates played a crucial role in raising the consciousness of the world about the flood in Bangladesh. In New York, high school students with \ tions, political personage, insti-

the help of the Bangladeshi community are planning to run stories on how Bangladeshi children are being affected by the flood. In many British schools the students are study ing the flood in Bangladesh India, and China. Because of the role played by the expatriates in many cases, this has been treated, as a 'human' issue not just a 'geographical' matter.

As it has been said before the stories are numerous though they may not be available in the media. Though the expatriates are not physically with us, they are providing material and emotional support. We in Bangladesh appreciate and welcome their support.

For those who are interested in the web sites: Alochona is located at HYPERLINK http:// www.bdirc.org http://www. bdirc.org or email HYPERLINK mailto:alochona@bdirc.org alochona@bdirc.org. For Oneline web site please check HYPERLINK http://www.oneli ne.com http://www.oneline. com. For Grameen's web site please check: HYPERLINK http://www.bangladeshflood98 .org http://www.bangladesh flood98.org.



A housewife in Rajabazar, Dhaka feeding flood victims from her private kitchen.

Civic Response: An Urban Rampart

by Muhammad Ali Tareque

We may look at a calamity form the brightest points of view, but that should not be the goal in itself. Keeping in mind the weapons we have to our disposal, we have to workout the bulwark designs to fortify ourselves and save ourselves from the lethal attack of demoralization.

ATURE, from its neverending quiver, reveals to 'us, time to time, some of its accoutrements, to collate us in some way or other to unveil our inadequacy to go on forward with any sort of deliberation. Natural catastrophe only being an instance, we could be led to formulate a theorem from the human history in order to equip the social scientists to workout tangibly ambitious as well as executable prescriptions for the future.

However, interesting it is to note that, the recent deluge, along with the huge mass of alluvium, that it has dragged behind it, has also pronounced silently a tale that never was told to this extent before, in this liberated land. The tale of civism that was whispered from every niche and recess of the city in a conglomerated voice of exposition as well as silence.

Let us have a brief look on the varieties of notes those were employed for the orchestration

The similitude goes for the round face of affection. The affection wrenched away the parable of the full moon. The round breads (not always so much round, being frequently at the mercy of merciless unpracticed male hands) rolled on its way of benediction not as much as that of affection, from its sender. If we patiently keep aside the probable malicious objectives those were supposed to be carried out by it, we see that the stupid-faced breads with their plump cheeks have zestfully turned into chits of affection. A whole lot of organizations, educational institututes and individuals (far excelled others in number) involved in this correspondence love, with letters without written inscriptions.

Elixir of love. Putting on green masks and solemn white aprons what was being given birth to, was the pulverized form of a solidified potion, the oral saline. Oral saline gave another way to dissipate the benign empathy towards the distressed fellows. The halfdoctors of the medical colleges occupied themselves with a seasonal involvement along with their all time chores of blood collection and others. Needless to mention that these programs were again run by different institutions, political and nonpolitical organizations. The popular recipe of oral saline was being composed in several restricted spots, filled in the cellophane envelope, and closed with the hearty warmth of the sticking machine.

Aid for melody. A reincarnation of a previously customary way of collecting aid had taken place in the city during the recent deluge. While sitting in a restaurant of Aziz Cooperative Market at Shahbagh I experienced an emotional encounter, when I saw some seven or eight students of Dhaka University passed by the restaurant singing some ode with their assorted melodious voice. Never had I felt such an emotional attachment and provocation from an outside phenomenon (well, it frequently happened to take place with in my very self). Songs really have got that alleged capability of being de-tached to a just distance, from

where it can instigate one without informing one of the unnecessary internal mechanisms.

And with much more exposure and exuberance went on the modern version of this 'Aid for melody': the band concerts. Different organizations and in stitutions have organized these concerts: No doubt, these pro grams have succeeded in raising bigger fund, but as I have felt (humbly I left place for other to feel otherwise), these programs have succeeded less to assemble people to a unified feeling, and to take any sort of emotional attachment to a height from where the spontaneity brings people together.

Art for aid's sake. The process of anti-Raphellite propaganda became a regular practice not very lately. Long since art has been being used for causes other than art. Seemingly, exceptional would it be if no artist was seen to arrange an exhibition in order to raise fund for the flood affected people. And exception did not display its face. Several art exhibitions were held in this city with this

objective in mind. Sorrow shared is sorrow halved. It is not so much of greatness (I am not willing to

look down upon the thing, just want to prioritize it) for a jeopardized one to do a favor to one with more severe condition, but of glory, to be merged with a larger mankind through what ever a phenomenon. Catastrophe, in my view, has no significance in itself, only for that, it brings some opportunities for the people to fling their curbed sight beyond their bounded periphery, to march on with the greater humankind, step by step, and assume at least an extent of their identity as a part of it. A considerable number of government & private employees have decided to payoff a percentage of their salary, albeit there was hardly any person within them who, somehow or other had not been affected by the flood.

However, we may look at a calamity form the brightest points of view, but that should not be the goal in itself. Keeping in mind the weapons we have to our disposal, we have to work out the bulwark designs to fortify ourselves and save ourselves from the lethal attack of demoralization.

The author is a free lance

The topic of the next issue is: "Traffic Jam: Mechanized Vehicles versus Rickshaws" to be published on 5 November 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.net

Teachers and students of Rajshahi University preparing food for the flood affected. — Star file photo