

Living with Floods: The Civic Response

Imagination is more important than knowledge
— Albert Einstein.

Prioritizing the Environment: A Civic Response from Abroad

THE Bangladesh Environment Network (BEN) has been set up 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 experienced 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.

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 cord 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 Engineering, Peter Rogers, also recommended 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 recommendations 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

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.

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, haors, etc.

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 re-emphasize waterways as a means of inland communication and transport. The excavation approach should help her in doing this.

Bangladesh should re-emphasize the importance of the inland freshwater fisheries. Again, the excavation approach will help achieve this goal.
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life by enhancing connection with river and sea.
On Other Environmental Issues
Different Dimensions of Environmental Degradation: We observe with alarm that, as Bangladesh tries to industrialize, she is undergoing serious environmental degradation. There are many dimensions of this process. A few examples:
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. Lead 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 level.
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 liquid 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 plastic 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. 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 problem 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 following 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 allowed 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 following steps:
(i) Declare a deadline (say 4 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 transitional 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.
c) Chemical Runoff:
(i) Reduce dependence on chemical fertilizer and pesticides. The industrial countries themselves are increasingly moving toward organic agriculture. Bangladesh should also encourage organic agriculture.
(ii) Protect the surface water bodies from chemical runoff.
d) Industrial and Medical Waste:
(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 a 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 adopting 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 tradition.
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 available there.

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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 proceeds went for the flood victims. They also held sponsored 24-hour silence and vegetarian weeks in order to raise funds.

THE last page of the Bangladesh Observer on October 13, 1998 carried a small story. It was a small news report on the Bangladeshi expatriates in Germany who have donated Tk 1.5 lakh to the Prime Minister's Relief Fund. The news report further mentioned that the Bangladeshi expatriate community in Germany would organize cultural evenings in Cologne, Hamburg, and Bonn to raise funds in order to help the flood-victims. Stories like this are numerous though not all have reached the print-media.

The Bangladeshi expatriate community in different countries around the world have taken various steps to help their flood affected compatriots. They may not have been affected 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 their helping hand to flood-affected people individually or through community organizations.

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 they should render to the flood victims. One question that was common was—'Will our assistance 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 wanting to help go. Many felt they could rely on NGOs and wanted to know about their distribution channel. Badal Das of North-East Ohio Bangladesh Association (NEOBA), in his email to Gramen, wanted to know how and what channel

would be used to distribute the money, clothes raised by NEOBA. This question of accountability and transparency of the distributing agencies was much debated by the expatriates on various web sites.
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 Haq 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 "Fliters 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 funds.
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 Cultural society held cake sales whose proceeds 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 families; etc."

Two Heads are Better Than One
Aside from raising funds, expatriates were active in awareness raising about the type of assistance needed and

providing information 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 interested in gathering information about the flood and brainstorming about innovative intervention strategies the Alochona or Online sites are major hubs where the expatriates and Bangladeshis exchange news and views. Not only are these sites 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 adults are given preference in intra-family 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

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