

Be Prepared for the Worst

If one pieces together the observations emanating from Water Development Board, Flood Forecast and Warning Centre and the Meteorological Department one forms the impression that we are not headed for a 1998 type flood this time around. Upon God we would like them to be proved right because that is a dreadful prospect the whole nation fervently prays not to be visited by, not at least at this yearly interval. Such a break in the 10-year cycle between a moderate flood and a deluge ought to be the remotest from anyone's mind.

But the truth of the matter is we are yet to see the last of the floods. Twenty-four days are left of the Bangla month Sraban and Bhadra, another rain-prone month, is ahead of us. If the 1998 flood memories serve us right then there had been rains up until the middle of September so that nearly two months of downpour should be factored into our calculation. True, as of day before yesterday, all the rivers that had gone into a dangerous spate previously recorded a recession in the water levels breeding a hope that the flood situation was perhaps improving. But with so much of the rainy season still left, a daily speck of good news hardly matters unless, of course, it develops into a pattern of recession. It is only when all the three river basins are in a simultaneous spate that we have a major flood.

If we read between the lines of what an expert of the Flood Forecast and Warning Centre had to say to a reporter of the well circulated Bangla daily *Prothom Alo* on Monday then we get at the gist of the flood outlook. While all but ruling out a flood of 1998 magnitude in the overall he nonetheless reminds us that heavy rains in the upper riparian India where all the headwaters of our rivers are located could make a difference. Given the caprice of nature the duration of the phenomenon of rain-fed floods might not be easy to predict, that's how the unnamed expert concluded his remarks.

The point we are trying to drive home is this: in building up flood preparedness the right approach should be not to say what most people like to hear but to consciously err on the side of caution, be scientific and clinical in the assessment of dangers and brace up for the worst so that all contingency measures will have been taken to weather any eventuality. Otherwise we might begin on a wrong foot with ad hocism overtaking what must now be a serious all-out precautionary bid to minimise the effects of the flood onslaught.

AIDS Alert

Findings in the recent International Centre for Diarrhoeal Diseases Research, Bangladesh (ICDDR,B) survey lead to a disquieting conclusion: Bangladesh may be on the verge of an AIDS epidemic. Also, they suggest the country has not done enough even in the area of sensitisation, let alone an orchestrated effort towards prevention of the fatal disease. Although the survey covered "nearly 4,000 people representing groups that exhibit high risk behaviour (meaning indulgence in indiscret sex and drug abuse)", the implications are ominous beyond an iota of doubt.

That one in every two hundred floating sex workers is a potential carrier of HIV means a larger section of the populace is exposed to the deadly disease. On the other hand, visitors, regular or irregular, to different brothels are equally at risk, for one per cent of the sex workers is also HIV positive. Strangely, the government, instead of engineering any move to contain a possible outbreak, is actually increasing the risk factor. Its abortive attempt to rehabilitate the prostitutes of the Tannazari and Nintali brothels in Narayanganj, which led to dispersion of sex workers in the localities in the end, bears sort of a testimony to that. Moreover, not much has been done, either, in the area of disseminating the concept of safe sex.

Bangladesh is not the only country that has been slow to react to AIDS menace. However, with rampant illiteracy and poverty, it is more vulnerable than others. The ICDDR,B survey indeed comes as a reminder that we must break out of inertia and engage in a battle against the killer. Also, it defined the areas that we need to invest our time and money in. Sensitisation remains the priority; at the same time, the government must initiate a drive to make sure that there is no recycling of disposable syringe, for that, given the fact that over two out of every 100 IV drug users are HIV positive, holds a potent threat of spreading AIDS around.

We hope that the government and its agencies will take note of the findings and plan their prevention and control programme accordingly.

A Lucrative Business!

Illegal toll collection on the national highways by so-called transport workers and mafias, with the alleged connivance of the members of the law enforcing agencies, has virtually become a lucrative business. The daily newspapers are replete with such news items everyday.

On Monday last private checkposts were set up on Dhaka-Aricha highway and Nabinagar-Kallakoir road leading to BB Jamuna Bridge. When police went into action to remove these checkposts a number of truck workers set up barricade by parking their vehicles on the roads indiscriminately. This resulted in total chaos on the highways and thousands of passengers were immobilised terribly suffering in the process.

Extortionism has reached such a proportion that it touches all facets of human life in Bangladesh today. The latest example is the decision of Chittagong meat market 'beparis' (businessmen) to call a halt to their business because of illegal toll collection — the result being the rise in prices of fish, mutton and chicken which affected every family.

Despite the surrender of so-called hardened criminals in the south and the professed hardening of attitude by the Home Ministry towards terrorism, the law and order situation in the country has hardly marked any improvement. On the contrary, it has been deteriorating every day and when the culprits themselves allege involvement of the members of law enforcing agency in these illegal actions there is hardly anything to feel cheery about.

The Russian MiG-29s or a Missile-based Defence System?

by M. Rashiduzzaman

The greatest worry for Bangladesh is that the modern missile technology, electronics and runway-bursting bombs have rendered the old style air defence system practically useless and the missiles are replacing the strategic bombers.

MOST opponents of the Government of Bangladesh's (GOB) purchase of eight Russian MiG-29s tend to forget that even the poorest countries have their own legitimate security concerns that the military and political leaders must deal with. With an annual average defence spending of less than 2 per cent of its GDP, Bangladesh is not among the biggest military spenders in the developing world. By imploring Dhaka not to "waste" money for the military, no matter who makes the brandishing accusations, Bangladesh is being pushed to a unilateral disarmament. This is an unacceptable demand for nearly any country. We could debate if the Russian MiGs and Indian military lorries are the best buys considering their quality and performance, but some observers maintain that the Russian warplanes are essentially "offensive weapons" — unsuitable for the Bangladeshi military that is expected to be in a defensive posture! I claim no technical expertise in Russian aircraft and Indian military vehicles, but most critics disregard the simple strategic logic that offensive capability was the best defense manoeuvre under certain circumstances. More importantly, having MiGs (or any other advanced aircraft) in the military arsenal does not necessarily elevate Bangladesh to an aggressive trajectory against its neighbours — those Russian planes hardly represent a destabilizing war machine nor is it a bargaining chip in its diplomacy with the militarily superior neighbours.

It is the concept of deterrence that inspires most strategic procurement but the weapon that can deter today may be useless and junked tomorrow. The basic unproductiveness of military expenditure to acquire the "retaliatory force" that may never be used in actual conflict cannot be denied, but few countries can avoid this cost of vigilance and the "strategic tic-tac-toe".

Khaleda Zia, the Opposition leader feared that those purchases would "chain" Bangladesh armed forces to India. Bangladesh would possibly depend on India, the giant neighbour, for the maintenance and technical assistance since India is in possession of numerous Russian planes, and the Indian military industry also manufactures some models of those warplanes with license from Moscow. The opposition leaders have rejected the Indian military vehicles as unfit for Bangladesh and held that those military purchases were not inspired by strategic reasons. With the new defense procurements, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina only tried to neutralize the critics who alleged that the Awami League government had neglected the national security, the opposition speakers thundered. Another accusation, more damaging in purport, is that those military purchases had built-in kickbacks for the political leaders in power as well as the technocrats who worked out the deal.

The debate, so far, has failed to focus attention on the key national defense issues beyond the political hyperbole. Two points are clearly missing in the traumatized political fall out of the MiG deal with the Russians — the identification of the long and short range strategic requirements for Bangladesh and the best available, workable, cost-effective and a well coordinated defensive blueprint to satisfy those needs. In case of any military confrontation with India, Bangladesh is, in many ways, helpless, but still it cannot get security through a capitulation to New Delhi, nor through a unilateral disarmament, as

hinted by some observers. It is a highly specialized subject on which the military leaders and weapons experts should speak out without fear or favour, but the issue of military procurement is also a domain of political discussion in any democratic polity.

Besides the 1000-plane strong Indian Air Force, an array of short, medium and long range missiles, and an expanding Navy, India could also use tanks and supporting land-based military vehicles against Bangladesh. There could also be conceivable conflicts with Myanmar from where the fleeing Rohingya (Muslim) refugees periodically sought shelter in the bordering Bangladeshi districts that create international tensions. China reportedly increased its naval presence in the Bay of Bengal, not too far from Cox's Bazaar. Unless the big powers come forward, albeit drawn by their respective national interests, the United Nations has been unable to protect the interests of smaller and militarily weaker states. Contrary to the popular beliefs on this, Bangladesh (or any other state) cannot unilaterally declare itself another Switzerland without such international agreements that guarantee the Swiss neutrality and its territorial integrity (even the Swiss people maintain a strong defensive military ability).

Bangladeshi vulnerability also increases because South Asia is on the verge of a dangerous nuclear arms and missile race — primarily between India and Pakistan — that has been causing strategic worries in the neighbouring Asian countries. The cutting edge of the next generation's defence system will be missile-based. Even the peace-

loving city-state of Singapore has been beefing up its air force with mobile and quick-reaction surface-to-air missiles. Besides, the nuclear competition and the missile-flaunting by China, India and Pakistan, several Middle Eastern countries are defying the restrictions of the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR) and secretly buying/developing different kinds of missiles — to deter the much more powerful and fearsome Israeli conventional, nuclear and strategic missile superiority. [The Middle Eastern countries, not all of them oil-rich, also maintain their air forces although they hardly match the Israeli/American attack planes]

Fueled by the escalating technology, the future costs of acquiring 300 to 1,000 km range (surface to surface) missiles are expected to be more affordable than buying, maintaining and deploying sophisticated warplanes. To cite an example, the US-made Tomahawk cruise missiles cost about \$700,000 a piece, and according to a published report, the Clinton Administration recently ordered 114 such missiles for \$96 million (less than what 8 Russian MiG-29s would cost).

For the MTCR, supported by Washington and having committed to fight proliferation, there is no choice between offensive and defensive missiles. Yet some members of MTCR are demonstrating their double standards by covertly developing, helping, selling or buying missiles and anti-missile capacity.

Globally as many as 33 countries are known to have ballistic missile capability and 13 Asian countries had the ability to make and deploy missiles

the greatest worry for Bangladesh is that the modern missile technology, electronics and runway-bursting bombs have rendered the old style air defence system practically useless and the missiles are replacing the strategic bombers. Bangladesh, like numerous other countries would look for anti-aircraft missiles and also possibly need surface to surface and surface to ship missiles to deter attacks on the military establishments, airports, seaports, economic infrastructure and the emerging gas/oil fields in the Bay of Bengal. Yet, Bangladesh may not afford to pay for such capability or may be politically disinclined to acquire a missile based defense system.

In addition to the objections of the MTCR (Bangladesh is its signatory) and the prospect of damaging relationship with the United States that holds the key to international assistance to Bangladesh, I anticipate Indian opposition to any future proposal for a missile-based security structure in Bangladesh. India generally escapes the scrutiny of the MTCR since Indian missile technology is presumably acquired through domestic resources but other nations seeking missile-based security (e.g. Pakistan, Syria and Iran) are under pressure from the international anti-missile regime. Several countries reportedly want technologies to produce 300 to 1,000 km range missiles (considered suitable for defensive purposes); even the low cost and low technology crude missiles can effectively deter a potential attacker, of course not forever. Any move for a missile-based defense system would also be opposed by those who have a mindset that Bangladesh did not need any military preparedness against external threat, since, in their eyes, no such threat really existed!

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OPINION

Acquisition of MiG 29s: What's the Big Deal?

by Mumtaz Uddin Ahmed

INDUCTION of eight MiG 29 fighter aircraft in the inventory of Bangladesh Air Force (BAF) appears to have shaken the minds of many individuals in the country. The national dailies are coming out with wild comments everyday arguing whether it was necessary for us to venture into such costly acquisitions. The US State Department has also expressed its concern over it, just to remind everyone that they are the defacto guardians of the world community. If we had acquired nuclear capability, perhaps then, such outburst could have been justified to some extent. But one fails to comprehend, how just eight MiG 29s can cause so much uproar in the national and international arena. Is it going to destabilize the balance of power or is it going to cause an infinite power race in the region? The ever increasing defence expenditures by two of our neighbours by keeping the Kashmir problem alive does not seem to raise as much alarm internationally as it merits, even when the two have acquired nuclear capabilities. The answer perhaps is: the Muslims must be kept in shackles wherever they may be. It seems, had Pakistan turned into a nuclear state first, perhaps all hell would have broken loose on it. But thank God, it was the other way around and both India and Pakistan, got away with mild rebukes. The story goes the same for the rest of the Muslim countries who tried to raise their heads in the recent past. The only exception was Kosovo for which the NATO forces took up arms in favour of the assaulted ethnic Muslim minorities purely to avert a human tragedy. However, since the subject of my writing is limited to the MiG 29, I shall restrict myself to the topic only, with just a few words of advice to our American friends: "Do not interfere in our own affairs".

At the same time we must decide how much we should spend on the upkeep of our forces. It is also a hard fact that a poverty stricken nation can ill afford the luxury of maintaining a big armed force. We, therefore, need to strike a balance between the two. We must decide how much we should spend to ensure our security. At the same time we must remember that in order to maintain an effective armed force, it is not necessary to spend a large quantum from the national exchequer every year to buy modern equipment. Once the defence policy is approved by the parliament, the induction of the equipment can be made in phases, keeping in mind that defence spending should not exceed 15 per cent of the total budget expenditures. If this ratio is maintained, it will not be too hard for the nation to pay a price to preserve our freedom.

If we cutdown on our defence spending and divert the fund to achieve greater success in other areas, i.e. education, healthcare and other nation-building activities, then those sectors would certainly get a boost, but at what cost? Who would guarantee that our frontiers would not be threatened tomorrow? An article under the caption of "Bangladesh's Defence Budget and MiG 29 Purchase" was published in The Daily Star on 5th July 1999 written by Dr A H Jaffar Ullah. An interesting scenario can be drawn from the article. He quoted the budget statistics and tried to portray that an impoverished country like Bangladesh where people cannot afford two square meals a day and where infant mortal-

ity rate is alarmingly high, can ill afford the luxury of acquisition of MiG 29 aircraft. He has also blamed the Government and the defence planners for failing to recognize the incongruity of such expensive shopping binges. According to him, expenditures on defence do not produce any tangible result or in other words, does not give any perceptible return. I fully agree with him that the defence budget of Bangladesh, like that of any other country, takes away a substantial chunk from the national exchequer, but I failed to comprehend how it should produce a tangible result that might convince him about the necessity of such expenditures.

Defence expenditures are made in order to keep the armed forces in a state of operational readiness to cope with an external aggression if and when that takes place. Unless it is an absolute certainty that we shall never be called upon to defend our frontiers, then I fully agree with him that it is a sheer wastage of resources to maintain armed forces. Can he give us that guarantee? He has referred to the Indo-Pak scenario where high defence expenditure

by both the countries is justified, just because there is an issue called the "Kashmir Issue", lying unresolved for the last half a century. Of course, it is debatable whether the never ending arms race in the region would ever solve the issue by mere use of force, or a long awaited self-determination as envisaged in an UN Charter could resolve the matter if and when it is acceptable by both the warring nations.

It is a fact that Bangladesh has no such problem so it may appear to be futile to venture into costly defence expenditures. But does that mean we should remain unprepared and just "think about crossing the bridge only when we come to it"? Won't it be too late to tackle a problem, the magnitude of which might be beyond our state of preparedness? The whole nation will be in complete disarray if we ever face such a situation. Can he cite one country of the world that does not maintain effective defense forces, however small the quantum, except for a few who are guided by mutual defence alliances? Of course, every country does not have outstanding issues with their neighbours necessitating the maintenance of such forces at considerable cost to their exchequers. Yet, they endeavour to keep their forces in constant readiness to meet any eventualities at the frontiers.

Air defence is not an easy task to achieve. With the induction of MiG 29 aircraft, the BAF will perform its task with greater effectiveness in both war and peace. The role of the BAF will always be defensive, but should there be a need for offensive action, it should be able to carry out its task, at least in a limited way with aircraft like the MiG 29 with multi-role capabilities. Since the BAF will always suffer numerical disadvantage, it has to be compensated through pos-

sition of qualitative weapons platform, handled by highly efficient personnel. It is interesting to note that a single combat aircraft carries more firepower and causes more havoc deep inside enemy territory compared to the combined firepower of a Brigade of land forces and that is precisely the reason combat aircraft are so expensive. In peace time, well-trained combat pilots and technicians of the MiG 29 aircraft can form part of a multinational force of the UN to ensure stability in any part of the world. The role of Bangladesh Armed Forces in UN operations has earned worldwide admiration in the recent past.

In conclusion I can only say that the various comments of eminent personalities of the country opposing the acquisition of MiG 29 aircraft, are being made due to their sheer ignorance of the importance of air power. The operational capability of the BAF will increase manifold when the new aircraft are added to its inventory. Air power is a deciding factor in a modern warfare and it has been amply proven during the Falkland War, Gulf War and the recent Kosovo crisis. Fighter aircraft are not meant for making routine deafening noise in the sky to remind the people that they are well protected. The pilots who will fly them with their sweat and blood at the peril of their lives and the technicians who will keep them in good flying condition, can ensure better security to safeguard our national sky in the near and distant future. Since air power has come to stay, our national airspace will continue to be guarded well by aircraft like MiG 29s and other state of the art combat aircraft like MiG 31, MiG 35, Eurofighters etc.

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MiG-29, India Phobia, and National Interest

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THE agreement to purchase MiG-29s by the government of Bangladesh has raised controversy and debate in and outside Bangladesh. There was some good exchange of ideas on this in the internet news daily NFB and other Bangladeshi based internet sites. Dr Jaffar Ullah has written sober articles in NFB and in The Daily Star on the MiG-29 issue. Dr Jaffar Ullah has pointed out the superfluity of a defence expenditure for a country with no means of subsistence for millions.

Some other writers have also expressed their concerns over buying MiG-29s from Russia. It appears from their writings that they are not overly concerned about the exorbitant cost for acquiring those sophisticated combat aircraft. They are merely concerned because Bangladesh is buying those from Russia, an ex-superpower and an ally of India. Perhaps, they would not raise their voice if the government were buying F-16 aircraft from USA. I agree with Dr. Jaffar Ullah as he wrote: "The money could have been diverted to technical education for training unskilled high school dropouts so that they may become welders, electricians, plumbers, carpenters, bricklayers, etc." We should not spend so much money in an unproductive sector in a country

like ours stood beside Bangladeshi of the then East Pakistan and cooperated with our elected government in exile to make our land free of occupation Pakistan Army. With such a great friend in need we do not need to fight but we can coexist in harmony the same way Canada and Mexico coexist with USA as friendly neighbours. And we do not have to spend millions of dollars depriving the needy millions in our country by unnecessarily imagining a hostile India and creating India phobia.

Agreement on Farakka and Chittagong Hill Tract Peace Treaty are two bright examples indicating achievements without hostility and fighting but through gentle diplomacy and negotiation.

Who really started the anti-India stance?

The past military dictatorships and cantonment-born political organizations with the help of some collaborators tried to develop their power-base by creating an anti-India sentiment among people in our country. The collaborators needed to create India phobia to conceal what they did in 1971 and to erase, as much as possible, their criminal acts from the memory of our people. They also wanted to confuse the

young generation for the same purpose and with the same motive. They have become successful to some extent too.

The past governments after 1975 did not have any willingness whatsoever to raise and solve national issues like Farakka with India. To the contrary, the past military dictators were able to spread anti-Indian propaganda by keeping problems like Farakka alive even though it caused a great deal of harm to the people living in the Northwestern districts of our country.

Over militarisation of our defence establishments through deceitful means

As you can imagine, the bilateral problems between Bangladesh and India were the constant source of political gains for the military dictators. They got much mileage out of it. For whatever reasons a group of people in our country supported the anti-Indian stand of the military dictators. They tried to portray India as a hostile country and encouraged superfluous, anti-people investments in defence. They did not help to protect our genuine interests. Rather they wanted to imagine a confrontation with India for

no valid reason.

Both late President Zia and ex-Prime Minister Begum Zia raised the Farakka issue at the United Nations without having much success. Begum Zia did not even want to discuss such a serious national issue with her counterpart Narasimha Rao during her first visit to India as Prime Minister. But, later she raised it at the United Nations in New York. The problem was regional, not international, and the problem was with our neighbour India, not with any other country in the world. But, our ex-Prime Minister wanted to internationalize the problem (with no success) much the same way Pakistan wanted and still wants to internationalize their problems with India. In a nutshell, all the past governments after 1975 did not want to solve problems with India through negotiation and wanted to keep those issues alive and in the name of defence against India, military dictators increased unproductive defense expenditure by depriving the masses their due share of the national wealth.

Should we move in the right direction?

Now, the time has changed. The present government could

reverse the direction of unproductive military expenditures and divert the resources to most needy sectors like healthcare, environmental development, and mass education. But, it is unfortunate that the present government, widely known as pro-people (because of their origin) has decided to side with the defence establishment by equipping