

Coping With Calamities: Not by High-tech Alone

Praful Bidwai writes from New Delhi

People are the crucial input in relief and disaster planning. If the local population participates in such programmes, their success rate rises dramatically. But our officialdom wants to bypass the people in whose name it is supposed to work. Having inherited hierarchical casteist attitudes, it is hostile to popular involvement.

Central agency meant to manage catastrophes and coordinate relief, the National Disaster Management Division, it first panicked, and then collapsed. This compounded its already tainted record of inefficiency and corruption. A CAG report documents that Rs 670 crores of the Calamity Relief Fund was misused.

As officialdom bungled, and ministers whirled around in helicopters, people drowned, boats capsized, 15 million became homeless and had to go without drinking water. Mayhem reigned. The relief operation was shamefully meagre in scale, painfully slow in starting, inconsiderate in planning, and blind to the poor. One shudders to think of what would happen in a nuclear emergency.

It won't do to plead that the devastation was unavoidable because caused by natural forces specific to the East Coast. This argument misses two points. South Asia is not uniquely susceptible to natural calamities. Nor are "natural" disasters socially neutral in their effects. They selectively pick on the poor.

The US and Europe are also prone to earthquakes. And yet, according to Earthscan, all quakes killing more than 10,000 have only occurred in the Third World. Similarly, hurricanes regularly hit the US, but their toll is much smaller than in India, Bangladesh or the Philippines.

The average Japanese disaster kills 63 people. But in Peru, the average toll is 2,900. At the same time as the Latur earthquake in Maharashtra, California experienced a quake, which was 100 times more powerful. Entire families were wiped out in Maharashtra. Only one person died in California.

The 1985 earthquake in Mexico hit the US in 1985, five people died. When a cyclone slammed Bangladesh in 1991, almost a quarter-million perished. The vast majority who die in "natural" disasters are the Third World's poor. They perish because they are forced to live in unsafe conditions in dangerous areas.

Information is frequently updated. In the Global South, there is little forecasting or planning. Information is withheld from the public. Planning of emergency relief—especially shelter, food and water—is appallingly bad. Relief infrastructures are among the first to collapse.

In India, such devastation from calamities has increased three- to eight-fold over three decades. This is explained by social phenomena: tampering with natural protective barriers; obsession with high-techology quick-fixes; and increasing inefficiency and callousness in relief provision.

Uncontrolled human activity along the coast has led to the destruction of mangroves which slow down hurricane speed winds and bind the soil. This is especially true where predatory activity, like shrimp-farming, is promoted. Then, there is dam-induced seismicity too.

Thus, the Meteorological Department got everything right with its sophisticated weather satellites. But its land lines failed. These are vital to transmitting data to where it is most needed.

Our scientists pay little attention to the simple, the down-to-earth, the easy—as distinct from the sophisticated, the ethereal, the exotic. High-tech gadgets like satellite phones or high-resolution imagery cannot be a substitute for something basic like cyclone shelters.

These rugged, two- or three-storeyed structures can withstand hurricanes and tidal waves. People can take refuge and emergency rations can be stored in them. Inexpensive shelters have saved tens of thousands of lives in Tamil Nadu and Andhra.

than buying \$5 million helicopters. People are the crucial input in relief and disaster planning. If the local population participates in such programmes, their success rate rises dramatically. But our officialdom wants to bypass the people in whose name it is supposed to work. Having inherited hierarchical casteist attitudes, it is hostile to popular involvement.

Our political leaders and bureaucrats are not answerable to the public. They cannot be punished for non-performance. This, coupled with our generally poor culture of safety, makes for terrible inefficiency. Our officialdom is corrupted to the point where its sense of duty to the public stands compromised. It cannot be asked or expected to be empathetic and compassionate towards ordinary, poor, citizens in acute distress. This behaviour too is socially determined.

It is futile to indulge in breast-beating about whether the Orissa cyclone was severer or eighth grade in intensity. Rather, we must treat it as a national emergency on a par with the Kargil conflict, and mobilize an all-out relief effort. The primary focus must be on public action: on getting the government to perform, to deliver, to learn, to involve people. If we succeed here even to a small extent, Orissa's suffering will not be in vain.

One-sided Statement

THE home minister's statement at the parliament on law and order in respect to Monday's opposition-enforced dawn-to-dusk hartal has hardly any bearing on facts and is unmistakably one-sided. As is characteristic of him, he has categorically put the blame for the incidences of violence across the country on the opposition, especially BNP, giving the impression inter alia that the police had no role in the escalation of trouble. Moreover, he has warned of legal action against the opposition for triggering violence in the name of hartal, implying thereby that the police have been within their rights to indiscriminately spray rubber bullets on opposition activists and leaders, and press photographers. What's more, according to the minister, the death of a housewife at Jatrabari on Sunday was caused by bullets fired at the police.

No matter how hard the home minister tries to have us believe otherwise, we have no doubts whatsoever that the police have, as they previously did, overplayed their role on Monday. Besides, their reaction to Rina's death and subsequent activities certainly give rise to misgivings. Why was Rina's burial held under police protection? There is a stark contrast between the home minister's words and deeds. On the one hand, he has stipulated the opposition's rights to demonstration while on the other the opposition activists have hardly been allowed to hold processions and rallies, even if these are disciplined and peaceful. Even worse, BNP leaders and activists were not allowed to enter their own party office on Monday during hartal hours.

The minister's warning of legal action against the opposition comes at a time when the prime minister has herself created a conducive environment for talks with her offer on Sunday (see Commentary). It casts a dark cloud on any possibility of an end to confrontational politics.

We strongly feel that the home minister should cut down on his rhetoric, desist from one-sided statements and support the PM's effort to create a congenial atmosphere to facilitate the dialogue the prime minister appears intent on having with the opposition.

FCD Handicaps

THE evaluation report on 22 flood control and drainage (FCD) projects in the country, recently done by the National Water Management Plan Project (NWMPP) experts, contains some definitive and thought-provoking observations. Part of an initiative to formulate a national water management plan in conformity with the National Water Policy, it highlights certain factors handicapping the projects that should have been thought out at the planning level. While delay in implementation and lack of maintenance could be regarded as operational failures, such matters as inequitable distribution of benefits, and negative ecological and hydrological impacts surely speak of loopholes in the planning process, so do poor cost recovery and lack of beneficiary participation. Simply put, the planners appear to have overlooked some areas of grave importance while outlining the projects.

Whereas lack of maintenance, an endemic problem in all public sector projects, requires stern administrative intervention, delay in implementation traces back to absence of the government's effective participation. Land acquisition glitch and inadequate funding, as identified in the evaluation report as the major deterrents, are areas that can be sorted out only by the state. Fund management doesn't seem to be the government's forte, as was evident in the case of repairing the embankments damaged by last year's devastating floods. With the WB funding late in coming, the project had a delayed start. That a contingency plan could be drawn in anticipation of WB fund to start the project in good time for the flood season did not seem to occur to anyone at the relevant ministry. Poor cost recovery, too, can be ascribed to poor financial management.

On the other hand, the flood control and drainage projects appear detrimental to the ecology and, more importantly, seem to have negative hydrological impact elsewhere. As many as 13 of the 17 projects under FAP-12 and also eight under the Master Planning Organisation (MPO) have resulted in higher water levels outside the project areas. It certainly beats the very purpose of the projects in the broader perspective of flood control.

Now that the problem areas have been identified, we would expect the government to come up with effective and immediate solution to them. In a country prone to frequent floods, this is one area we should put sustained attention to.

Idle Dog Squad

THE much-hyped dog squad appears to have become redundant in police affairs. The German Shepherds and Labradors, procured from abroad a year back, are not engaged in the work they have been trained for, primarily to help the police "conduct screening operations against potential terrorists and detect illegal arms." Apparently, we are not getting the benefit we were supposed to have from the dog squad. On the contrary, we are spending nearly two lakh taka a day on a project in which the government initially invested Tk three crore.

Now, there's no dearth of firearms-carrying terrorists in our politically turbulent society. The measures, however, to keep the law and order under control are still inadequate. We expected, during recent recovery of explosives which sent scare among the people that this squad would be employed. Regrettably, it was not. The DMP Commissioner has furnished a shallow rationale saying, "As the explosives were found in open spaces and were not kept hidden, we did not use dog squad to detect those."

Well, question now looms over the recovery-news of seventeen thousand small explosives from different places in the capital during the first three days of this week. There should have been a recovery drive especially for the ingredients like sulphur, potassium nitrate etc. And the authority could unfailingly engage the dog squad to make the drive more successful. It didn't.

The inaction and, in the process, idling away public money lead us to believe that service of this specialised unit is no more necessary. We would urge the authority concerned: either put the dogs to use, or dismantle the squad project.

Why Did the Australians Retain the British Queen as Their Head of State?

by Harun ur Rashid

Australia is neither in Europe, despite its retention of British monarchy, nor in Asia. Internationally, for a "middle power" such as Australia in Asia-Pacific region, the perception, image, identity and profile are important. By retaining the British monarch as its head of the state, Australia relapses into the past at the beginning of the next century.

THE Australians have voted confirming the Queen of Britain as the head of state at a referendum held on Saturday, 6th November in Australia. The result is no surprise because the polls were predicting it. However the republicans thought that the "undecided" voters between 7 and 12 per cent might provide them a victory. Fifty four per cent voted for the retention of the Queen.

With this issue, there was another subject which was also put to a referendum. That was the proposal of the constitution which recognised the existence of the Aboriginal and Torres Islander people prior to British settlement in Australia in 1788. This preamble also suffered a defeat in the referendum as the debate on the republic or British monarchy was so dominating that had drowned the consideration of the preamble by the public.

A record of more than 12 million voters out of nearly 19 million population were registered as voters and under the law voting is compulsory. Penalty is imposed if a voter does not cast his/her vote. About \$120 million were spent to hold the referendum.

The core issue at the referendum... The core issue before the Australians in the referendum was whether Australia should have a foreigner or a local person as the head of state. They were given the opportunity to amend the constitution of 1901 through this referendum to choose between the present status quo, i.e. the British Queen as their head of state and the President in a republic, i.e. choosing one of its citizens as the head of state.

In my view, it is not the constitutional monarchy which appears to be the heart of the issue. There is nothing wrong with the system of constitutional monarchy. The system is working well around our region, such as in Cambodia, Malaysia, Nepal and Thailand. If there was a ceremonial monarch who was Australian, probably the issue would not have arisen. But the fact is that the Queen Elizabeth II of Britain is the head of Australia. She neither lives in the country nor represents Australia when she visits abroad.

Under the present system, no Australian, how distinguished or revered, can be Australia's head of state pursuant to its constitution. The Governor-General (an Australian) in Australia, in formal occasions, a visiting head of a state proposes a toast to the British Queen as Queen of Australia and not to the Governor-General. This appears to be a wrong symbolism for many in Australia at this period of time.

The delinking of British Queen from Australia was raised vigorously by the former Labour Prime Minister in 1994-95. He saw Australia's increasing role in Asia and wanted to change the present symbol (the Queen) and find a new national identity. In the event of Australia having a President instead of the British Queen, he perceived that Australia's standing in Asia would be enhanced.

Reasons for the defeat of the republicans: The monarchist cleverly sidetracked the core issue and ran a campaign on the "flawed" model of a republic where two-thirds of the members of the parliament and not the people choose a President. They exploited fully the split among the republican movement. There are other reasons for the victory of the monarchists.

First, to succeed referendum, in terms of the constitution, needs majority of voters nationwide plus majority in at least four states. Australia consists of six states and two territories. In the past only eight out of 42 referenda have passed because of the strict constitutional provision. Another five received overall majority but not a majority of states. Past experience demonstrated the difficulty to succeed in a referendum unless there was a bi-

partisan support of the major parties. This referendum has not received such support from the major parties. The present conservative government led by the Liberal and National Parties was split on this issue. The Prime Minister supports the monarchist while his deputy did not. The opposition Labour Party supported the change.

This division among the major parties signalled the doom of the referendum.

Second, there are many British permanent residents (numbering about 200,000) who live in Australia without being Australian citizens and they are eligible to vote in Australia under law. The overwhelming majority of this group campaigned for the retention of British monarchy. Furthermore the majority of Australians who migrated from Britain (Anglo-Saxon origin) did not wish to see any change. They are mostly over 40s and form a sizable group and love the British Queen as their Queen of Australia.

The rural Australians are conservative by nature and they were frightened from any change. The monarchists campaigned that the lands could be taken over by the Aboriginal people if the yes vote for the republic was successful. The men and women who were involved in the second world war with Britain did not support severing link with the British monarchy. The word "royal" affixed before the Australian government institutions continues to be a pride to them. Once Australia became a republic, the word "royal" will disappear from the titles of the Australian institutions. It is interesting to note that the Australian women in particular opposed the republic more than the men. Often, the above groups love

the Queen more than the British people. It is in their psyche and it is difficult to erase this sentiment. In the campaign they proved to be a solid band and a die-hard monarchist. Their support tipped the scale to the monarchist. Some say distance from Britain makes the British Queen leader to this group of Australians who still call Britain as their "home", although they enter Britain through the "aliens" channel at British ports. They forget that a German enters Britain more easily and quickly through immigration counters than an Australian does because Britain and Germany are members of European Union.

Third, the overwhelming majority of Australians who have migrated from countries other than Britain and Canada supported the republican movement and there is a view that their support strengthened the anti-republican sentiment among the older Anglo-Saxon Australians. It is a group which is commonly known as WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant). Interestingly those who migrated from Ireland (they are Catholics) supported the republican movement.

Fourth, the attempt by the monarchists to present the republican movement as something for the elite worked very well with the ordinary Australians. Even the Prime Minister denied that the republican movement had originated from grass roots level. Furthermore, ordinary Australians have lost faith in the politicians and they did not support a model of a republic where a President would be elected by the politicians. The republicans had suffered from a backlash of the negative image of politicians. Fifth, the republican movement was split on the method of the appointment of the President in case Australia became a republic. A strong

group supported that a President should be elected by the people, such as in Ireland, Portugal and Israel while another section supported the appointment of the President by the Parliament, such as in India and Germany. The former Labour leader and Governor-General (1989-1996) Bill Hayden supported the model of directly elected President. The republicans who supported directly elected President voted no in the referendum along side with the monarchists. This "unholy" alliance appeared to be the principal reason for the defeat of the republicans. Had all the republicans been united they had a fair chance of victory in the referendum.

Sixth, Australia is linked in history with Britain. Its culture, traditions and the form of government were borrowed from Britain. For example, the uniform of the police officers look exactly those of British police. Prior to 1950, almost all migrants came from Britain. However, Australia is located in an Asia-Pacific region. There appears to be a conflict between its history and geography. There is a view among older Australians that Australia's security could be jeopardised if the link from Britain is severed.

Finally, there is a view that the conservative Prime Minister John Howard, a strong monarchist, did not keep his promise to keep distance from the daily republican campaign. During the last days prior to referendum, he had given almost daily pronouncements against the republic. But his office defended the Prime Minister for campaigning a no vote for the referendum. His active involvement is believed to have influenced many voters to say no to the republican model. The opposition leader Mr. Kim Beazley said that the Prime Minister

Dark Cloud on a Silver Lining

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The Prime Minister during her recent visit to the Press Club she reportedly said "Similar attacks also took place during BNP's rule. So what is there to complain about?" Did the PM mean to say that since press-bashing is an old habit we cannot expect to see any improvement during her time? Doesn't such replies give the impression to the police that they can continue to beat up the press as they have been doing? During her speech at the Press Club she spent a significant portion of it castigating this paper for what she considered to be a wrong heading (not the news) and asked "what about accountability of such papers". And yet she did not find a word of consolation for the two photographers who were shot by her police except to say that BNP did the same thing.

On Monday we published a picture of a person in civilian clothes carrying a big shotgun alongside another person in plainclothes but with a "police" tag on his chest. The question in public mind was who was the other person who did not identify himself as police? Who was he? How was he allowed to carry a shotgun, and for what purpose? Since when have the police decided to field such uniform-less and tag-less "police" personnel on the streets? Why wasn't the public informed about it? How was the public to distinguish between a criminal carrying a gun and such uniformed "police" carrying a gun? Will not this practice permit criminals to impersonate the so-called "plainclothes police"? We want to ask, are plainclothes police personnel permitted to brandish weapon as this

man was doing? The point we are making here is that since norms and practices are being so deliberately and disdainfully flouted, public confidence and trust in the police is decreasing. Police is being seen more and more as an instrument to impose the ruling party's will rather than enforce the law of the land. Few are to believe the Home Minister's claims that housewife Rina Ahmad was killed NOT by police firing but by the miscreants, then could that miscreant be one such person depicted in our picture? Khoka, the BNP MP from old Dhaka and its popular Mayoral candidate, is a well liked public figure. Even his political opponents like him for his sincerity, dedication and commitment. He is always out in front with his party workers in hail or storm. His contact with the people of his constituency is quite unmatched. In short "Khoka Bhar" is a popular figure - not only in his party but also among the public in general, one for whom outpouring of public sympathy is likely to be quite spontaneous. Police obviously knows him well, not only because he is a former minister, a sitting MP but also because he is so often in the streets leading processions. So why did they shoot at him, and from such a close range, and on the very day after the PM sent out an olive branch? Was it to destroy any chance of a fruitful dialogue with the opposition made possible by the PM's offer?

Now let us go back to the first set of questions. We think the PM's statement contains significant concessions. It has the seed which can be made to grow into a successful set of negotiations. We also think that the Home Minister's speech in the Parliament of the following day was in direct contrast to the PM's statement (see editorial). This duel signal gives ample reason for the opposition to doubt the sincerity of the AL Chief's initiative. Today, her offer lies buried under the picture of Khoka's blood-drenched head that was carried by most of the national newspapers. We want to see the Prime Minister's offer getting the importance that it deserves. We want proper discussions on the meaning and implication of what she said. We do so only because we think there is no alternative to a dialogue between our two big parties. Sheikh Hasina's offer that she is willing to talk about the opposition's "one-point" demand means that she is willing to talk about early elections. She offers to offer earlier and therefore for her to consider it again is not unusual. But her offer will have to be reciprocated by the opposition. To start with (the opposition) will have to take the suggestion seriously, analyse it, understand and interpret its implication and then chalk out its own negotiating strategy in the dialogue that will have to ensue. For the above to take place Sheikh Hasina will have to do one simple thing. She will have to make the offer, which she made in a rather casual manner while responding to some questions of newsmen, more formally. Either she or, preferably, in her place the AL secretary general, Zillur Rahman, should write to his counterpart a letter incorporating the suggestion made by the PM. AL must understand that public statements and off-the-cuff re-

Hartal and holiday

Sir, We hate hartal. Two-day weekly holiday is also not acceptable, as our country is an underdeveloped one. We are requesting for opening all government offices, banks, schools, colleges, universities, hospitals and other organisations on one weekly holiday instead of hartal day. We cannot carry on like this.

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Quest for justice

Sir, All types of heinous crimes seem possible in the society we are living in. Child molestation and rape even by the police have become commonplace. Throwing acid on young women has been haunting the society over a long period of time. The harrowing experience the victims suffer from acid burn is unimaginable. We have read many reports in the print media. But unfortunately we have not seen or read any exemplary punishment by which the rate of crime might be reduced. It is a mystery how the criminals are exempted. Sometimes political hnk is said to be responsible for the absence of justice. But how long will the continue? We are tarnishing the image of our country. Take a note to the excerpt that I am quoting from a foreign media. Does this enhance our image or blemish it?

"Nov. 1 - When I first began researching this story, I had heard about barbaric acts of violence against women in the third world, but I had no idea that hundreds of young women in Bangladesh were being at-tacked with sulphuric acid simply because they dared to say no to men. "Acid throwing has been called the most barbaric crime of the century. Experts say three to five women a week are being burned with acid in Bangladesh, and the numbers are increasing at an alarming rate..." (By: Connie Chung, ABCNEWS.com; Monday, November 8 p.m. ET). I, very humbly urge all responsible people of the country to halt for a moment and think about the future of our country. Which direction the country is heading to? Will we still remain lethargic and self-centred? Let us shake the fabric of the society and set it right. Mahmudul Hasan Lecturer Dept. of English Mohanmadpur Central University College Dhaka. Power failure Sir, Faridabad and Gandaria is a well-known residential area in the old part of Dhaka city. Seven or eight lakh people live in this locality. For the past few weeks residents of Faridabad and Gandaria have been experiencing intermittent power failure. Power failure has been virtually chronic here. All of a sudden electricity goes off and the sufferings of the residents - especially the school and college going students - know no bounds. We would therefore urge the authority concerned to take steps to avert the power failure in Faridabad and Gandaria area in old part of Dhaka city. Mahbubuddin Chowdhury 17, Hart Charan Roy Road, Faridabad, Dhaka-1204.

To the Editor