

Early Warning System Flawed

CLOSELY on the heels of the floods that caught us unawares in the western districts we have had a cyclone battering us, again virtually without any advance warning. As for the flash floods it could be linked to bursting of dams in the upper riparian region under heavy rains. This, India apparently failed to notify us about, taking in the process, a flak for the coordination failure. For, a couple of years ago India and Bangladesh had mutually agreed to a flood warning mechanism whereby the latter would receive relevant information from the former at an interval of 48 hours in place of the 72-hour time-lag settled for earlier on. We didn't get the lead time for flood preparedness but it would still be worth probing as to whether we had any manoeuvrability to brace up to the calamity; and if we had, whether we used it properly.

Against this backdrop we are once again jolted into realising how precariously placed we are in terms of disaster management by reason of another forecast debacle that occurred about the cyclonic storm on Saturday.

This time it is an internal coordination pitfall between the Meteorological Department and the SPARSO, which even in their individual capacities, seemed to underestimate the dangers of such an extensive spiral what with its lessening intensity went north-easterly. There was the advantage though that both the met office and SPARSO received pictures from three satellites including the US one which hovers Bangladesh twice a day, to be able to keep the disaster management people posted about developments almost round the clock. The coordination with the field level has been extremely poor as well. Even the three days' advance notice could have been better utilised to ensure a reduced scale of losses.

The net result of all this has been that no evacuation could take place as a pre-emptive damage control exercise. All this is a pointer to the dire need for streamlining our flawed forecasting system.

NBR Goes on Computer

THE National Board of Revenue (NBR)'s decision to computerise its taxation mechanism comes as a big stride towards checkmating corruption within its ranks and putting a stop to tax evasion. We welcome the manner in which the board is going about the monumental task of modernising the taxation network. Instead of wholesale systems renovation, major customs and excise outlets in the country, namely Customs Houses in Dhaka and Chittagong, the Inland Container Depot at Kamalapur, the Mongla seaport and the Benapole land port, will be computerised and networked in the preliminary phase. The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) has already been approached to have these installations networked to a central computer system within the next 15 months. Later on, the rest would be brought under the network. As we understand, with a central data bank to have access to, the customs outlet would definitely have major impetus to up their service standard. Besides, it would also facilitate the monitoring mechanism. Overall, introduction of computer network in taxation does hold promise towards enhanced collection and minimised procedural complexities.

Nevertheless, no matter how up-to-date the database is and how efficient the network, ultimately it's the tax commissioners who decide whether they want a system free of corruption and mismanagement or not. Corrupt and inefficient minds can render even the most foolproof system inefficient by blatant abuse and misuse of authority. The point we are trying to make here is that a computerised system cannot be the panacea for a state apparatus that has become a symbol of blatant corruption, sheer incompetence and shameless mismanagement over the years. The cleansing has to begin at the personnel level.

Indeed, one of the reasons that tax collection has been well below the mark could be lack of logistic and personnel support. And we are appreciative of the fact that the people at the helm have taken this crucial aspect into consideration. Decisions have already been taken to increase number of Commissioners and thereby bring more people in. The changes in tax department have been long overdue. We are really glad that it has begun on a positive note.

Safety for Workers

YET another incident of stampede in a garment factory. This time it left 50 workers wounded at Polycotton Knit Fabrics in Tejgaon but the message rings louder beyond the injury figure. The staircase was too narrow to take the load while they were evacuating the premises. It's quite natural that when a fire breaks out, there will be a stampede. But the fact is that these thoughts do not seem to nudge the owners of the garments units. We repeatedly suggested corrective measures every time such an accident occurred. Yet in most cases the absence of alternative exit routes, fire escape, ventilation system, fire and smoke alarm gadgets, fire extinguishers, etc., constitutes a denial of the workers' basic safety rights.

The government has extended fiscal and policy support to the garment sector - which makes it imperative for the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) to take better care of the workers. What is more to the point, it is their hard work that fetches millions of dollars in foreign exchange to the garments exporters. And a tiny fraction of it is needed to revamp the poor safety conditions of the hapless workers. Why are they not allocating that small sum for something that can - and would - only sustain for their own benefit while giving the garment workers a safer working condition? We raise this question for both the government and the BGMEA leaders to answer. For, in our view, both are responsible for the tragedies that take place. They should keep it well in mind that every time an accident occurs, their image takes another slide.

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"...there is nothing sweet nor fitting in your dying. You will die like dog for no good reason."

- Ernest Hemingway

YES, for no good reason scores of people are being murdered in Bangladesh every day. The Dhaka-based news agency UNB (United News of Bangladesh) circulated a news item on July 2, 2000 quoting Bureau of Human Rights Bangladesh (BHRB) which claimed that on an average nine people were killed daily in various incidents in the country. Begum Khaleda Zia, Chairperson of the mainstream opposition, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), speaking at an inter-city meeting of Rotary International on July 1, 2000 claimed that every day some ten murders and eight rapes were taking place.

Pages of national dailies are flashed with pictorial reports of gory murder almost every day. The police which usually contradicts newspaper reports terming those as 'highly inflated', at long last admitted on October 17, 2000 that in the country nine persons were murdered and twelve women raped daily. The daily average of the incidences of other crimes reached a staggering three hundred (the daily *Prothom Alo*, October 18, 2000). The daily *Manabjibin* in an exclusive report on May 7, 2000 said over 15000 murders took place during the four years of the Awami League rule. This figure was substantiated by the daily *Ajker Kagoj*, the daily *Dinkal* and the weekly *Jai Jai Din*. Various opposition groups maintain that counting from the day the present government assumed office so far about twenty thousand murders took place. In most cases sophisticated weapons were used. Those murdered included

political leaders and activists, journalists, students, housewives, advocates, businessmen, officials and ordinary citizens. If killing of over sixty thousand people in Sri Lanka in 17 years and about eighty thousand in the India-controlled Jammu and Kashmir can be termed as the direct outcome of long standing civil wars how can one then term the murder of nearly twenty thousand people in Bangladesh in about four and a half years time? Most of the killings are alleged to be political in nature -- the power group trying to physically liquidate its opponents and vice versa. As if a frenzy of killing has gripped the interested groups and nothing could deter them.

Former finance minister and BNP presidential member Sajifur Rahman said it has now become dangerously unsafe to go out of one's house after dusk. It is also not safe even inside the house. Grills are broken open and crimes committed. Murders are taking place in broad day light and no place, not even courts and hospitals, are at present safe. No body knows whose turn will come next. A sense of insecurity now prevails among all segments of the society. Perhaps natural death is what the people are clamouring for. The government is constitutionally bound to safeguard the life and property of every citizen in the country.

When Sheikh Hasina took oath of office as the Prime Minister she had declared vociferously that her very first priority would be to restore law and order and combat terrorism. Instead of any sign of improvement, the law and order situation has further deteriorated and has literally reached the nadir. Everybody is

murders and other crimes. The police usually remain bystanders and in their turn are earning the wrath of the common masses whose only aspiration now seems to be able to sleep in peace.

As already stated, killings are committed by various interest

maintain their supremacy. After the killing of Murgi Milon, alleged to be a notorious criminal who used to pose as a youth leader of the ruling party a minister accompanied his body to its final resting place perhaps as a mark of solidarity and honour.

Goons, and not administration control localities, upzillas and zillas and the ordinary people have become hostages in their hands. They have their armours and private torture chambers. In most of the cases killers remain unarrested and roam freely. The police also frame charges in such a way under coercion or lure of underworld benefit that even if the killers are arrested they immediately get bail. The people are no longer prone to believe whatever is dished out to them through the controlled electronic media and the sponsored write-ups and official handouts.

Of late Bangladesh has become a lucrative market for the smuggled arms and weapons (and drugs). Arms are coming through various routes from across the border with India and Myanmar as well as by ship. According to an unofficial but reliable estimate there are as many as seven hundred thousand illegal arms in possession of various groups and people and the flow of illegal arms smuggling continues unabated. Many in the country are apprehensive that during the

HEART OF THE MATTER Mansoor Mamoon

of the opinion that never before it was so bad.

There had been a change of guard in the home ministry along with several reshuffles in the police administration. The controversial Public Safety Act (PSA) was adopted amidst much hullabaloo. 'Block raids,' 'combing operations' and other high sounding words were heard for the umpteenth time. But nothing seems to be working. The crime rate including that of murder is constantly on the rise. Dhaka, Luxmpur, Narayanganj, Satkhira etc have turned into crime zones. Godfathers posing as self-proclaimed satraps are in virtual control of the administration in many places. Sons of the high-ups following the dictum of 'like father like son' are also involved in committing

groups, by the godfathers and their henchmen who belong to the ruling party as well as the opposition. Smugglers, loan defaulters and owners of black money are also in league. It is a vicious cycle of crimes and counter-crimes, killings and counter-killings. Because of the political clouts of these killers the police in most of the cases cannot take any action. Sometimes the police themselves are involved. When the police are politicised and when they are made or go corrupt none can expect that the law and order situation would improve. The number of police and the logistic support they are provided with often prove to be inadequate compared to that of the gangsters. Many of the influential political leaders now nurture armed brigands to

LETTER FROM AMERICA The Battle for Jerusalem

Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed writes from Princeton

It is so easy to make the case for the Muslim supervision of the holy sites in Jerusalem. As followers of the religion that teaches to respect all the prophets equally, Muslims are the only people bound by faith to preserve, protect and respect all sites that commemorate Prophets Jesus, Moses (peace be upon them) and all others.

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