

How prepared are we for an earthquake?

Interview with Director of Disaster Preparedness Centre

Muhammad Saidur Rahman is Director of Bangladesh Disaster Preparedness Centre, which has been working since 1991 in the field of capacity building of institutions, government and non-government, engaged in disaster management. The organisation basically does research, policy formulation, strategy formulation etc. At the moment, it is working on capacity building of government organisation in case an earthquake hits the country. Mr. Rahman is a former college teacher of chemistry. He has also served as the deputy secretary general of Bangladesh Red Cross (now Crescent) Society as well as the country director of Oxfam. The interview was taken by **Kaushik Sankar Das**.

Daily Star (DS): Bangladesh, used to be called a country of natural disasters thanks to regular floods, cyclones etc. is recently struck by a new disaster, earthquake, in the coastal area and the hill tracts of Chittagong though there has not been much damage. Could you tell us how vulnerable we actually are in terms of a severe earthquake in the country?

Saidur Rahman (SR): A world famous seismologist, Professor Billham said in 2001 that in the Himalayan region, at least seven earthquakes of the strength 8.1 and above on the Richter scale are overdue. A team of experts led by him did a survey and they identified seven to eight risk prone countries and Bangladesh is obviously one of them because of its geographical location. Secondly a study by a UN sponsored programme called International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction in the period from 1991 till 2000 surveyed at least 30 different cities. And the findings of the survey are very threatening to us. They are saying that the two most vulnerable cities to earthquake are Tehran and Dhaka. There were several factors to come to this conclusion. For example situation in an earthquake zone, physical infrastructure, socio-economic condition of the people living there and most importantly response management.

DS: But why Dhaka? It's not listed in the primary earthquake zone in the region.

SR: Because Dhaka got zero points in the main categories. Thickness of buildings, poor quality of construction, poor socio-economic condition of people and above all poor response management were the main negative factors for Dhaka when the survey was done in 1998. All these put together Dhaka was on the top along with Tehran as the most vulnerable cities when it comes to earthquake in the world.

DS: Has the situation changed since then?

SR: Well, let me put it this way -- we are more aware of the risks now than ever before. And the serious earthquake in Bhuj in Gujarat was responsible for the renewed awareness. A lot of people working in this sector went there including myself. One thing that really struck me was that those organisations or institutions, responsible for help or rescue after a disaster hits, get affected by the disaster themselves, then how the response management would be put into effect. For example, the hospital, the water supply system in Bhuj were completely destroyed.

DS: Do similar flaws exist in Dhaka as well?

SR: More than enough, in fact the situation is worse in some cases. The fire brigade headquarters is situated in old Dhaka, if an area like that with narrow lanes and a huge population, is affected then what kind of help can we expect. Also the way utility services like WASA, DESA, Titas Gas have their supplies in densely populated areas, it would be not just difficult but impossible to some extent to respond to a disaster similar to the one in Bhuj. It takes them fifteen days to fix only one burst gas pipeline. Need I say more?

It's not the resources, it's the will that is required. And the ministry has shown a lot of interests in doing something constructive. We along with Oxfam are working very closely with the ministry and we have realised that not the non-governmental organisations', the roles of the government organisations are of utmost importance.

My realisation after visiting Bhuj was that this is not like other disasters like flood and cyclone. The speed with which government and non-government organisations can respond in those situations, is not possible when it comes to earthquake. Because the first job in earthquake is to rescue trapped people from inside collapsed buildings. And who can do this job better than those with proper equipment and training. For that we can only rely on government institutions. On my return, my organisation and Oxfam jointly went to meet the Minister for Disaster Management and Relief and he immediately

tives. The first one was that the capacity of the organisations would be developed. Six meetings were held and they were attended not only by the heads of the seventeen organisations, but also the minister, the mayor of Dhaka and other officials. And the outcome of those meetings could be described as some success, if not more. I wouldn't say they are hundred percent capable as yet, but they are definitely more sensitised to a crisis than ever before. They are ready to do something at least if a disaster strikes.

Secondly, to do something, not just awareness, they need some

quake in that standing order. **DS: If the organisations are more aware and capable of tackling a crisis of this nature, then why have there been reports of no government assistance after the recent tremors in Chittagong and Rangamati?**

SR: I would take it as a positive thing, because at least as soon as the reports of tremors began to trickle in, all these organisations were on alert and they were also alerted by the deputy commissioners. Since the damage was not severe in Chittagong City, nothing was seen. But if it was, maybe we would have witnessed those in

pose a serious threat to the rescue work?

DS: First of all, there are very few cities in the world like Dhaka that have developed in such an unplanned manner. Building codes are never followed here. Secondly, there are no specific projects or ideas to keep us safe from earthquakes. For example, projects aided by Japan have specified certain areas in densely populated cities like Tehran, Manila, Turkey where specific laws would have to be adhered to in case one wants to build a new house, vulnerable buildings have been identified etc. Here we all know that there are codes but they are hardly implemented.

DS: But are those organisations responsible for ensuring the rules included in the programme that the government has taken up?

SR: Of course, RAJUK is one of the seventeen organisations who are part of this process. The RAJUK chairman attended two meetings; the additional chief engineer attends all the meetings. They are planning ways to revise the building code and make it more effective for implementation. Then there are practical problems like lack of open spaces in the city where the affected people can be taken after a tremor. We are hoping that after the sensitisation process, we would be able to make proper use of our limited resources in a planned manner. We can at least reduce the risk, if nothing more. Take for example an area like old Dhaka. Even if the government wants, it can't relocate the inhabitants somewhere else, but the government can identify the empty spaces and playing fields that still exists there and make proper use of them. In a poor country like Nepal, the government decided to retrofit some schools, it means the buildings have been made earthquake proof by spending a little extra. Even the carpenters and masons are being trained. Here forget them, even the architects are not fully aware of the risks. So it's a long way to go.

DS: What I want to say is that it's not the resources, it's the will that is required. And the ministry has shown a lot of interests in doing something constructive. We along with Oxfam are working very closely with the ministry and we have realised that not the non-governmental organisations', the roles of the government organisations are of utmost importance.

DS: What other measures have been taken to aware people about the risks and the things to do after a tremor?

SR: In one word -- no. They are not well equipped, though they are more sensitised. But at the same time Bangladesh Army has a contingency plan, Bangladesh Fire Brigade and Civil Defence Directorate has a contingency plan, Titas Gas has a plan but all these organisations do not have proper equipment. That's why the ministry has requested for a list of equipment from them. I don't know whether enough funds would be granted to buy the equipment, but I hope the government will take some initiative to arrange the fund.

DS: Apart from lack of equipment, which are the other areas that could

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DS: Let's take a hypothetical scenario. If a severe earthquake strikes in Dhaka city with narrow lanes, badly planned housing estates etc, are these organisations well prepared to respond immediately to the crisis, for example rescuing trapped people from collapsed houses?

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SR: The ministry has prepared one hundred thousand brochures sponsored by UNICEF, two 90 seconds long short films funded by Oxfam have been made -- one addressing the common people on what they could do and the other aiming at the responsible organisations on what could be done by them. Apart from these, leaflets are being published for distribution in educational institutions. And the effort is on. I am very optimistic by the level of seriousness shown by the government. But I agree that it will take time to achieve what we have set out to do.

Kaushik Sankar Das is an Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.



Bhuj earthquake: The disaster that was

bought the idea. And for the first ever time, national sensitisation seminar was held in Dhaka in March last year where the responsibilities of various government institutions in times of an earthquake were identified. The heads of all organisations attended the seminar and interestingly, but not unexpectedly, it was revealed that none of these organisations had any contingency plan. It never crossed anyone's mind that an earthquake can hit anytime and create such a havoc for which an integrated management was essential.

DS: Why do you think the government failed to sit up and take note of the situations from the devastating earthquakes in Kobe and then in Gujarat, especially since Bangladesh has remained as an earthquake prone zone for a long time?

SR: I think the government's priority and orientation changed mainly after the devastation in Bhuj in Gujarat. After the seminar last year, the Ministry took a lot of initia-

specialised equipment too. The government has been arranging with our help to hold a mock demonstration in old Dhaka to show physically what should be done immediately when an earthquake strikes. Since Sylhet and Chittagong region are also very vulnerable to earthquake, similar initiatives have also been taken to train members of government organisations for immediate response to earthquakes. We have to remember that basic responsibility to protect the life and property of people lies with the government and the government has the capacity and resources to do that.

There is a government standing order for disasters. It describes the responsibilities of all the government organisations from the PM's office to local Union Parishad in times of disasters, but earthquake is not included in the order. It was written a long time ago and revised in 1995. At the moment we are working on how to include earth-

quake in that standing order. **DS: Let's take a hypothetical scenario. If a severe earthquake strikes in Dhaka city with narrow lanes, badly planned housing estates etc, are these organisations well prepared to respond immediately to the crisis, for example rescuing trapped people from collapsed houses?**

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Kaushik Sankar Das is an Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.

Jinnah's sister, Fatima

ARDESHIR COWASJEE

THERE once was a man -- Mohammad Ali Jinnah -- who by the sheer force of an indomitable will carved out a country wherein his brethren could live and thrive in peace and prosperity. He did it without mounting a single hunger strike, without spending a single day in jail. He worked hard, and he lived well according to his own taste and style.

Three days before the Dominion of Pakistan came into being, on August 11, 1947, over half a century ago, Jinnah addressed the members of his constituent assembly and, clearly and firmly, he told them that religion was a matter between a man and his God and was 'not the business of the State'.

A man of perception, having seen the beginnings of Pakistan, shortly before he died, he predicted that each successive government of the new nation would prove to be worse than its predecessor. History has shown how right he was.

Fatima, one of Jinnah's sisters, a dentist by profession, never married and abandoning her profession decided to tag along with her ambitious and able brother, a widower. She was a parsimonious woman, eternally at war with the world. She had no influence over her brother's political life and had little to do with the making of Pakistan, with its subsequent breaking, or with its mythical ideology. Some once dubbed her madar-i-millat, and the appellation stuck.

Now, after reading the July 22 front-page news of Jadoogar of Jeddah Sharifuddin Pirzada's startling disclosure that Fatima's death was not a natural death but, in conformation with the rumours that arose 36 years ago, in 1967, when she was found dead in her bed, there had been foul play, I did what we all do in Pakistan and 'rushed', not to the scene of the crime, but to the telephone and rang Sharifuddin. What are you pulling out of your hat this time, I asked him, by threatening to reveal 'all' on August 14. The press had got it wrong, he said.

When leaving a conference held on Fatima's life and doings in Islamabad on the 21st, he was waylaid by reporters who badgered him about the old and set rumours relating to her death, and demanded that he come

out with the truth. So he did -- the truth to the best of his knowledge, based on what he had been told or had learnt (as he was not in Pakistan when she died).

He was told some days after her death by her nephew, Akbar Pirbhai, who had arrived in Karachi from Bombay, that he was convinced that his aunt had been murdered by a disgruntled servant, that he wished to meet President Ayub Khan and request that an enquiry be held. A meeting was arranged, and Ayub Khan, sensibly, considering the bitterness that had followed and persisted after Fatima's defeat in the 1964 elections, and considering that emotions run high in Pakistan at the slightest excuse, suggested that nothing be done on that score. Those who found her dead were obviously as sensible as was President Ayub Khan and wisely let it be known to the people that Fatima had died a natural death.

Sharifuddin said he would send me a report on the incident written by the then commissioner of Karachi, Syed Darbar Ali Shah, who in 1983, some sixteen years later, at Sharifuddin's request, had put on paper his recollections of her death and funeral. He would also send an excerpt from a book, 'Fatima Jinnah' written by Dr Agha Hussain Hamadani, of which the National Book Foundation has recently published the English translation. (Anyone interested who wishes to be further confirmed can get a copy of Darbar Ali's note, written in typical bureaucratese, from my friend the Jadoogar, the weaver of magic spells.)

News travelled at a relaxed pace in those

far off days of 1967. Darbar Ali was in his office when he was rung up by his sister, who had been rung up by Lady Sugra Hidayatullah (widow of jolly old Sir Ghulam Hussain affectionately known to his friends as 'Sir Sahib'), who had been visited by Fatima's dhobi, who had been to Mohatta Palace that morning, rung the doorknob, and had received no response. Lady H and the dhobi hurried back, she managed to get into the house, and they had found Fatima dead. Darbar Ali immediately rang the Deputy Inspector General of Police for further information, only to find that he also had heard the news.

They both 'rushed' to Mohatta Palace where they found a crowd had collected. The press was already on the scene, as were Fatima's family doctors, Colonels Shah and Jafar. Darbar saw the body on the bed, covered by a sheet, with her face exposed. He described it: "I found the agony of death clearly visible on the noble face. Her hair was also in disarray and her neck veins looked abnormally rigid." He confirmed that the pronouncement of the two doctors, highly respected and trusted, that she had died a natural death "was a great blessing for the preservation of peace in Karachi.... Had it not been so or had any suspicion arisen about the cause of her death at the time of her funeral procession, there might have been widespread riots and unnecessary bloodshed."

But, as wrote Darbar Ali: "In spite of the pronouncements of the doctors, many still suspected the actual cause of her death and thought that she had either been strangled or done to death through some violent means.

CORRIGENDUM

The title of a the article "How heeded is the 'king's message'?" which was published in an abridged form in this page on 14-8-2003 should be read as "The King's Message".

Lord Krishna and Hindu philosophy

PREM RANJAN DEV

JANMSATAMIS the eighth lunar day of the dark fortnight of the month of *Bhadra* when Lord Krishna was born. An enthusiasm to celebrate the occasion is always felt in our hearts. We know that the Hindu culture and tradition does not derive from any one prophet or incarnation. It has neither a uniform creed nor any organised church. Its history and prehistory are ageless. The Vedas, which are the scriptures of the Hindus, are unique in character. We find in the Vedas a great variety of subjects and a great flexibility of doctrines.

Another ancient work of profound philosophic value is known as Bhagavad Gita, the song celestial, as it has been called. It forms a part of the great epic Mahabharata. The Gita attempted to bring about a synthesis of the existing Upanisads of the time. This book has attracted the interest of the philosophers as much as have the aphorisms of the Vedanta. Almost all of the great Vedantists have some commentary on this book of seven hundred stanzas. Apart from the Vedanta philosophy, there exist other systems of thought, such as Sankhya, Yoga, Nyaya. These systems of thought are not in any sense in serious disagreement with the Vedanta. An attempt has been made to bring about a synthesis of all systems of thought by the Puranas, literally, ancient truths. They are semi-philosophical works. There are eighteen of them attributed by tradition to one person, Vyasa. The most outstanding of these Puranas is the Srimad Bhagavata which itself is considered as commentary of the Vedanta. In this book have been fused all the great systems of Hindu philosophic thought with wonderful skill. Those who are especially influenced by this book commonly go by the name Vaisnavas.

Everybody knows that there is no single human

authority accepted by all the Hindus nor has there been any movement to create such a central authority. There is also no ecclesiastical or hierarchical binding authority in Hinduism. In spite of all the above considerations, there is a definite body of knowledge and common themes that can be clearly identified as Hinduism. This core of knowledge and practice that is common can be clearly identified as Hinduism. The *risis* or Vedic seers function as a binding force. Authority resides in the *risis*, and there are several of them. Rather than vying for a complete monopoly on wisdom, these *risis* respect one another and work collaboratively. Risihood in Hinduism is knowledge-based, and such knowledge can be cultivated. But methods of science and logic may be applied here. This knowledge is progressive and dynamic capable of continuous development. The *risis* can also cultivate supernormal faculties and are very important in Hindu tradition.

Festivals, ceremonies and rituals are integrating and uniting force in the Hindu tradition; pilgrimages and temples play the same role. There is a huge literature of stories, mythologies and legends that affect the imaginal man. There is also integration at the conceptual level. At this level, many systems of philosophy are developed. The classical philosophies like *Nyaya*, *Vaisesika*, *Samkhya*, *Yoga*, *Mimamsa* and *Vedanta* come under this category. "Again, there is no conflict over holding the single, universal truth. Rather, each system is recognised and respected by the others."

Hinduism encompasses an entire civilization and way of life that has evolved since the dawn of human civilization. The Vedas, the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita and the epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata play an important role in the development and practice of Hinduism. These ancient scriptures of the world, uphold the eternal truth of the eternal existence of the supreme Lord. "Owing to the eternal will-to-communicate the Lord descends on earth to re-un