

Sloth in relief distribution

The worst-hit are not getting enough to survive

REPORTS from different parts of Dhaka, mid-region of the country and other flood-affected swaths give us the impression that the relief operation as a whole needs to be geared up to the level of efficiency which would make sure that the people in distress get the bare minimum to survive.

A large number of the flood victims have taken shelter on the roads. Even the lucky few who have found a place in schools or similar buildings have only a roof overhead but very little by way of material relief. They are starving and sick. It seems the urgency of the task has not yet dawned upon the government as is evidenced by a regrettable lack of speed in most things they are doing. Leave aside the mafasli towns, even flood shelters in the city, which should not be particularly difficult to reach, have not been supplied with the required quantity of relief materials.

The victims need food, safe water, and medicines including ORS to combat the water-borne diseases, which are spreading fast in many areas.

Obviously, the job of handling the relief operations over such vast areas is too big for a single ministry. The government should immediately form a high-powered inter-ministerial body to oversee all aspects of relief distribution. Adequate resources must be placed at its disposal to increase the volume of relief goods and ensure their quick delivery to the worst-hit areas. The government seems to be convinced that the food stock position (nine lakh metric tonnes) is satisfactory enough to ward off any humanitarian crisis. But having a good stock is not enough; for, without its distribution among the victims at their hour of need, it remains a virtual figure-work.

It is claimed that we have acquired some management skill through the handling of floods over the years. That may be true about the moderate annual floods. But we are thrown off balance whenever a big deluge occurs. Knowing that it happens almost as a matter of pattern once in a decade, we chose to remain unprepared for it. Yes, we have a disaster relief mechanism, but it has to be fully revitalised and geared up so as to be able to cope with an extra ordinary situation such as the one we face today.

Crops loss substantial

Place adequate fund for rehabilitation

WE agree with the parliamentary standing committee on agriculture ministry that an astonishingly meagre sum of Tk 48 crore has been allocated for the mitigation of crop loss due to floods. This stands in stark contrast to the estimated damage worth a staggering Tk 1,400 crore. Such huge gap in allocation must be bridged, especially when the situation is predicted to worsen further. We hope the minister's assurances of an increased level of funding would be translated into action.

The floods have hit the small farmers severely, affecting, according to an official estimate, at least three million farming households. Seeds for transplanted aman have been washed away. These need to be replaced in good time for use after waters recede. To that end, authorities will have to develop a very large number of seed-beds, and that too, in extremely difficult circumstances marked as they are by a paucity of dry lands. At the same time, the ministry concerned need to turn their attention to the spiralling fertilizer prices. Unless these are kept within an affordable range for the farmers, the rehabilitation programme might end up crumbling. To help farmers, the government might need to increase the agricultural subsidies, which, in terms of the budgetary allocation for the current fiscal, had already been doubled.

What's needed most is the timely availability of agri-inputs to the farmers to help them quickly rebuild their lives in the flood aftermath.



ABDUL BAYES

THERE are many amongst us who make a trip abroad and return home with a piece of home textiles -- be it a bed cover or a terry towel, curtains, or something else. Sometimes home textiles tops the list of items provided by the females in the households. The textiles items that are used to decorate inside of a house are called home textiles. We, in Bangladesh, have become habituated in identifying export potentials of textiles with ready-made garments (RMG). It is not surprising, given the fact that RMG has been the main propeller of our exports and formal sector employment, especially for women. Although RMG shares only 5 per cent of GDP, it plays a key role in employment and in the provision of income to the poor -- directly employing about 1.8 million people

or about 40 per cent of manufacturing sector employment.

Sunset

But the sun is said to be setting after the phasing out of quotas on textiles exports in line with the removal of MFA by 2005. Various empirical evidence points to a perilous state as far as exports of RMG are concerned. Quite obviously, Bangladesh would have to compete with India, China,

backward linkages sufficient to be sustainable to face competitive environment in a globalized world.

It would be a sad state of affairs, of course, if Bangladesh is deprived of its due share from the upcoming boom in textiles markets that is set to triple to \$856 billion over the next decade following the phase out. For the moment, however, we postpone the line of argument as to why and how doomsday awaited us as far as

reported to be poised to reap home the major chunk of the harvests of home textiles.

Bangladesh has been performing quite well in recent years in this business of home textiles. It is interesting to note that exports of home textiles surged from \$26 million in 1999 to about \$76 million in 2002 -- a three-fold increase within a span of only 5 years! Side by side, local sales also shot up from a meager \$0.01

estimated to be roughly \$4 per piece compared to \$3.5 or \$3.75 per piece for the same from Pakistan or China. And needless to mention, perhaps, that yarn constitutes the largest chunk of the costs component. Since cotton has to be imported, the cost component invariably goes up. What Bangladesh needs at the moment is a focus on home textiles and treat it as another important segment like RMG.

The most important areas of intervention would be, for example, lowering the lead time -- the time taken from conception of a product to the arrival in customers' premises. Bangladesh has one of the highest lead times in textiles. We need to chalk out plans and programmes to reduce the lag. We must also do something positive on the side of utility services. Admittedly, high import dependence commodity like RMG and home textiles could gain very little from changes here and there. But in the world market of today, competitiveness is counted by few coins or cents here and there.

We tend to argue that home textiles is a quota-free growing industry with excellent working conditions in factories. Visits to some of the factories reveal that use of modern machinery and management already got into operations of home textiles. In the presence of inexpensive labour and absence of child labour, the sector could be highly productive with forward and backward linkages. Introducing our home textiles to different markets and devising appropriate incentive schemes for the sector could bring long lasting benefits to the economy.

Abdul Bayes is a Professor of Economics at Jahangirnagar University.

BENEATH THE SURFACE

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and other more competitive counterparts in the world. Our exporters would have to capitalise on efficiency rather than on quota rents. The fact that our RMG sector continues to be an "infant" till now requiring spoon feeding and so far failed to attain its "adulthood" during the last few decades, is a "success story" of "bad economics" where quota and rent seeking paid no substantial dividends. By "dividends" we would mean an industry with forward and

RMG is concerned and search for a new way out.

Sunrise

Available evidence indicates that one segment with huge potential is the \$70 billion global market for home textiles. The US market alone is estimated to be worth \$15 billion and is expected to grow at 5 per cent over the next five years. The same applies for the EU with almost the same value of consumption of home textiles. India and China are

million to \$1.4 million during the same period of time. Reportedly, more than two-thirds of the home textiles produced are destined for EU markets and one-fifth to US markets.

Like India and China, Bangladesh should set to seize upon the opportunities opened up. That would mean, inter alia, adoption of appropriate policies so that the sector grows as competitive. For example, the fob price of a single quilt cover is

Now is the time to act!

BADIUL ALAM MAJUMDAR

ACROSS our nations, scores of our people are heroically battling the worst flooding in many years. By available estimates, at least 2.5 crore people in 41 districts are fighting for their survival. The poor are the hardest hit. At least 285 individuals have already died. The already miserable condition is expected to get worse and last for some time.

Our constitution calls for right to life for every citizen. Right to life means right to survive, right to dignity, and all that goes along with it. The government must meet its constitutional obligations. Citizens must perform their moral and ethical responsibilities.

Throughout our brief independent history, whenever our people have faced natural calamities, the army, our well-organised NGOs, the students, and the international community have stood with us. The ordinary citizens have always been in the forefront.

What can we do to mobilise ourselves and our partners this time? We must not let our general

pessimism about national life keep us from doing what we can and must do to meet this emergency. Nor should our confrontational politics get in the way.

The first step is to remind our-

medium -- radio, television, newspapers, NGO field workers -- how to purify water where there is no safe water (one iodine tablet per litre), where to get water purifying iodine tablets (health clinics or NGO work-

ers), aside their distrust of elected local representatives. In emergencies, people naturally go to their neighbours and local leaders. This is one critical reason we have Union Parishads (UPs).

should use their channels, expertise and infrastructure to get emergency supplies to the Upazila teams.

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People who have lost homes need dry shelter now, and support to rebuild their homes. Let's throw open the schools and other institutions for temporary shelter. Let's empower the UP of every affected area to guarantee reconstruction funds for rebuilding homes. Our development partners can afford to provide the necessary funds.

selves of the greatness of our people. We receive generous and committed support not merely because of our plight, but because our people possess the resilience and courage to overcome disasters when given the chance. They did so in the past.

The second is to recognise that each of us has an urgent role to play right now.

People desperately need to protect themselves against water-borne disease -- treat children suffering from diarrhoea -- and secure enough food.

The highest and the most urgent priority is information. We need to inform our people through every

ers), and how to make oral saline if there are no packets available with sugar (four level teaspoons) and salt (one-half spoonful) per litre. When people are armed with information, they will do what's needed to protect their families.

By now, there are probably privately-owned water filters of some sort in middle-class homes in every district where water supplies are disrupted. Let's run them around the clock -- providing millions of gallons of purified drinking water.

Of equal priority is distribution of emergency supplies. The government functionaries cannot deal with this emergency alone. They must set

open the schools and other institutions for temporary shelter. Let's empower the UP of every affected area to guarantee reconstruction funds for rebuilding homes. Our development partners can afford to provide the necessary funds.

Oral Rehydration Therapy (ORT) corners must set up right now to prevent diarrhoeal death when the water recedes. Planning must also start immediately to provide the farmers the seeds for plantation as they will be needed.

None of this can happen effectively if politicians interfere. There must be a total moratorium on party

rivalry declared by both major party leaders and a total ban on all forms of corruption, publicly declared by all government officials and non-government functionaries. Relief activities are a magnet for crooks -- at least during emergencies. Let's empower our people to not tolerate corruption. We can all declare ourselves to be news reporters -- ferreting out corruption and reporting it -- as we also report on the heroic successes of the people.

So my plea to those of you reading this article is to think about what it is that you personally can do to help the situation. Do not think that this is a crisis only for other people to resolve. There are many things -- from donating food or safe drinking water to helping build barricades to helping drain floodwater from our neighbourhoods -- that we can all do. Drop what you are doing -- or if that is not possible give an hour or two after work -- and join all of us in this struggle for survival. Lend a hand. Meeting this crisis can become our finest hour.

Dr Badul Alam Majumdar is Global Vice President and Country Director, The Hunger Project-Bangladesh.

Think about your mistakes and learn to say sorry

ERSHAD KHANDKER

THE term "ruminant" means to meditate. Like a cattle chewing on regurgitated food! Most English dictionaries state the term "ruminant" by likening it to the act of chewing by cattle. I guess, the expression that a cow has while chewing on food pumped back from the stomach is quite scholarly! This does not suggest that cows are scholarly creatures, but that ruminating or meditating is a scholarly act. The secret lies in the similarity of the facial expression between a ruminating cow and a ruminating man!

The expression is one of contemplation. Hence, the term "ruminant" being used to denote meditation. The cow needs to chew on food and it is a natural act, devoid of any intellectual benefit. While for a human being, rumination can also be a natural act, and it seems for certain people in a certain country, quite like the answering the call of nature, and with the same lack of any serious difference for the mind

or for society! We may think of our problems, but we do not really think with introspection.

All the problems in Bangladesh have correlation with this. Why is that most politicians, technocrats,

Then why the gridlock? Why are the roads in the state they are in? Instead of a solution, we are left doing computations to see the loss of man-hours and productivity and the effect on GDP as a result of the

anticipated and preventive measures taken. Your main resource is your intellect and drive and enterprise.

Singapore's founding father, former Prime Minister Lee Kuan

needs to change, and the Chinese model of growth driven by the private sector needs to be adopted, states the former Singapore prime minister and father of the nation. Mr. Lee Kuan Yew's visionary politi-

cal ruminations means you are being introspective, contemplating your own behaviour and self, looking into oneself, and presumably examining your vices and virtues. What comes next?

You wake up in a cold sweat, seeing your own failings in bold letters. Then you act! You act to make yourself safe from further mistakes, you apologise for your mistakes. And then look to make yourself more sincere. Next time, a well meaning lawman breaks down the door of some innocent man's house, we should expect that the lawman would apologise for the mistake, own up, and make us proud.

And we should expect the politicians, civil servants, and the great masses living in all corners to learn the to think of the greater good of the society and the country. The ability to think about one's mistakes, own up to them, and rectify the mistakes is a special talent. When will we learn this talent?

Ershad Khandker is a contributor to The Daily Star.

and the great citizenry are in consent about the need to look ahead in planning for the future of the country and yet there is so much disorganisation and gridlock? Imagine the traffic problems we have. We have had seasoned politicians taking the helm in successive governments, able experts in the civil service, an able planning commission. We know the percentage of population growth, and the corresponding rise in vehicles to meet the demand for transportation.

traffic problems! Studies have been done, the bell has tolled. No one woke up. The story is the same in every sector of the society and economy and body politic.

All countries in the world have problems, big and small. There is not one society or country on earth that does not have murders, traffic jams, strikes, and social upheavals. But there is a planned and coordinated response in most countries when problems appear. There are even countries where problems are

Yew, visited China recently. This great man, the architect of modern Singapore, noticed that the Chinese private sector is producing all the nascent wealth. The government just regulates or deregulates, based on the situation. He has issued new observations based on his China trip. Brilliant civil servants, who manage the economy with vision and hard work, drive the Singapore society. The government machinery controls the economy and supervises national development. This

city has moulded and shaped Singapore's destiny. His thoughts and dictations help Singapore find the right path, and his people understand and act on his suggestions and admonishments.

I think the problem lies in our human resources, the great bevy of experts and laymen that make up the population of employable age. These human resources are just not used to being introspective, thinking of their role in society, and acting with responsibility and sincerity.

Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE

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Seeking divine blessings

In my mohalla, in Dhaka metropolis, there are many mosques within a radius of 250 yards from my flat. I marvel at the precision of the azan calls: all start simultaneously, within seconds of one another (not to mention the radio and tv channels). Now a tall minaret has been constructed at the nearby mosque. I went around and found that some other mosques in the locality were laying the foundation stones, perhaps for taller minarets. It is a sort of competition, religiously practiced.

AZ
Dhaka

NRBs at gunpoint!

The press reports reveal an alarming new security risk in the Bangladesh

society: many NRBs (Bangladeshi nationals residing or working abroad) are reluctant to take a trip home on a short holiday, as terrorist gangs of armed dacoits monitor such arrivals, and raid such homes, specially in the rural areas, for a quick loot. Not only that, sometimes these armed gangs take away a hostage from a family and extort release toll. Types and levels of insecurity of the citizens are increasing day by day.

This creates a negative image about Bangladesh in the eyes of the Bangladeshi residing abroad. It would certainly affect the huge flow of foreign exchange into the country, encouraging saving in foreign countries rather than remit it to Bangladesh. The banks have to ensure secrecy of bank accounts of the wage earners (action to be initiated by the government?

First, the right approach has to be pointed out. Unless the masses are aware of the implications, they cannot support one cause or the other. The political leaders are not very obliging in this tutorial, and talk down to the electorate, in the name of democracy.

Democracy is still in the ghoont (purdah) stage, and cannot make political appearances with natural poise. Ad hocism in political priorities takes precedence over long-time implications of political policies which have to be objective. This has been going on for three decades, and still there is no light at the end of the tunnel. Strangely, the feuding parties have entered different tunnels, and are looking for different lights!

The critics and analysts are lost in the branches and leaves. The versatility of the Bengalee mind is admirable, but the subject limitations, introduced by over-

enthusiasm, and sentimental approach to issues which affect others, if not all. The leadership footprints are small, and our political playing fields lack elbow room for compromise. The current image is think big, and act small!

Can't we send our overworked politics on a holiday? But political tourism is not developed in this country, and no venture capital or entrepreneurship is available in this sector. Reason? Impatience -- not willing to wait for the incubation period. This is something else than the 33 years lost since 1971.