

Projects of Mass Destruction

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FACING another flood, another experience of human disaster, where should we look? People in general are taught to consider floods as a curse of fate. The ruling class is happy to describe flooding as a natural disaster. But, in reality, flooding is a close associate of the "development" festival drama. In other words, the flooding is closely linked to grabbing of waterways and filling them with shopping plazas and multistoried housing, and to big irrigation and flood control projects.

This is an old story, filled with lies, hypocrisy, cheating, intellectual fraud, and all-out plunder. After the floods of 1954, Water and Power Development Authority (WAPDA) was established in 1959, and several flood control and irrigation projects were conceived. This was the beginning of a new era of massive intervention-injection-construction on the waterways of Bangladesh. Since then we have had plenty of projects for erecting embankments and other structures. Not coincidentally, perhaps, we have since then experienced increased intensity of flooding.

The time gaps between massive floods have been narrowing with the increase of flood prevention projects: 1954 to 1974: 20 years, 1974 to 1987 and 1988: 13-14 years, 1988 to 1998: 10 years, and 1998 to 2004: 6 years. It is a linear progression!

In 1964, a 20-year master plan for water resources development was initiated, and after

independence, the government endorsed this approach quite uncritically and took steps to carry the programme further. More than 8,200 kms of embankments were constructed under these projects. In addition, more than 4,700 kms of irrigation canals, 3,400 kms of drainage channels, more than 9,000 hydraulic structures (such as sluice gates and regulators), 4,300 bridges and culverts, 96 pump houses and two barrages were built.

In 1972, the World Bank seemed critical about some of the projects that had been started in the 60s. It termed many of the projects as "poorly conceived" and "ill-suited" to the particular needs of the country. It categorically named one, the Ganges-Kobadak irrigation and

flood control project as "an example of a poorly selected and prepared project."

But by then \$132 million had been spent on it. According to the Bank, "after 16 years of construction, redesign, and reconstruction, the project failed to perform at even 50 percent of the original design standard." Nevertheless, the same institution kept itself busy continuing similar old big projects and formulating similar new ones.

Repeatedly, the Bank and other "development" missions have noted the great potential for using ground water for domestic and agricultural needs and therefore advocated for its more intensive use. Many water projects, such as Brahmaputra right bank embankment project, Pabna project, Dakatia and Halda project, Barisal project, Ganges-Kobadak Kushtia project, Chenchuri and the Barnal, Salinpur-Bashukhali projects in the Khulna area, Surma-Baulai Haor and the Knowal River projects in Northeast region, River training, Chandpur riverbed stabilization project, Chilmari project, and Kurigram project came into being.

To name a few, Chalan Beel, one of the richest wetland areas of Bangladesh, is now almost ruined by water projects. Due to construction of ill-conceived embankments and regulators, drainage has been impeded and water-logging has become a serious problem in Atrai-Hurasagar drainage basin. In Beel Dakatia, a huge area has been waterlogged for about twenty years as a result of big water projects.

After nearly thirty years of "successful" and intensive tapping of groundwater, nearly 35 million people in Bangladesh are now facing deadly threat from arsenic poisoning. Experts opine that arsenic in the groundwater has links with indiscriminate use of groundwater. Now, again, the Bank has taken the lead in conducting million dollar projects related to "managing" the arsenic problem.

The ADB also played a significant role in formulating and supporting similar programmes. While numerous documents describe the processes leading to the initiation of flood control, drainage, and irrigation (FCDI) projects, few exist that critique a project's completion or post-project evaluation. The

The floods today in 2004, therefore, are both a product of the flood control projects and also a good reason to prepare more projects in similar line. With the money taken from people's pocket, the flow of water is blocked, rivers are destroyed, the overflow of water become disastrous, water-logging become permanent, and the results are all around us.

Bank and the ADB were the largest actors in these FCDI projects. The share of these two institutions of the projects in the sector has been more than 70 percent.

Alan C. Lindquist, in a UNDP sponsored agriculture sector review, reported that while the ADB prepared "project completion reports upon completion of its projects" there was a "lack of completion of ADB projects in Bangladesh, even though some were begun ten years ago." In fact, he continued, "ADB-Dhaka was not able to show me a single project completion report for one of their water projects." Lindquist, citing another review of ADB water projects in Bangladesh, stated "only 3 out of the ADB projects attempted since 1973 have been completed and, on average, those took 72 percent longer to complete than projected."

Consultants, local and imported, have been the major beneficiaries of these projects. Since these were all "aided" projects, appointment of "donor" preferred foreign consultants has always been compulsory. Irrespective of qualification, consultant fees have been a significant share of the project costs. Another study showed that, "foreign consultants cost 6.8 to 25 times as much as local Bangladesh consultants, and 57 to 73 times as much as their BWDB counterparts." Often "aided" water sector projects have been considered by both local and foreign consultants/engineers/bureaucrats/suppliers as something highly desirable irrespective of relevance or results.

Hugh Brammer, associated with water sector projects in Bangladesh for a long time, wrote in 2002, that he witnessed an incident "where a chief engineer simply crossed out the word 'not' from the recommendation that certain soils were 'not suitable for irrigation' in the draft report on a detailed soil survey of a proposed irrigation project area. The authority was successful in

obtaining funds from the donor to implement the project -- which was a disaster." He also observed that, "Bangladesh consultants hired to carry out such surveys (and also project appraisals) were aware that 'happiness reports' were more likely to ensure their future business than strictly objective reports on their findings."

All these highly expensive huge structural measures could not save Bangladesh from disastrous floods in 1987 and again in 1988. Nevertheless, the water resources programmes were intensified and pursued with more rigour. The Bank continued to pursue similar projects. It went for a comprehensive programme to "control flood" and "water management."

After easy negotiations between local-global partners, the Bank gave birth to another big project of mass destruction (PMD): the Flood Action Plan which "would be the first step in the implementation of a comprehensive long-term programme for flood control and drainage in Bangladesh." According to the Bank, "embankments must be seen as elements of a comprehensive water control system planned and designed to modify the water regime in the interests of more profitable land use in an environmentally sound manner."

It is easy to see that the Bank always advocates structural solutions to the flood problems that involve huge costs. Expensive projects have always been preferred, probably because expensive projects ensure a nice windfall to the parties involved. In 1990, the Bank expressed its satisfaction with the impressive record of construction of the Bangladesh Water Development Board and its predecessor agency, with some 5,000 water control structures and over 6,000 km of embankment.

Subsequently, however, the Flood Action Plan was virtually abandoned in the face of criticism from home and abroad. But it was later

replaced by the WARPO, which was basically the same programme under a new name. In 1998, another massive flood brought huge material loss and severe human sufferings. Again similar and bigger projects! And eventually we have now reached to 2004 flood.

A number of studies have examined the environmental impact of the water management projects. The beneficial effects were found to be: increased flood-free secured land for agriculture, livestock, settlement, industry, and infrastructure; all-year accessibility; higher rice yields in both wet and dry season; expansion of cropping areas and the extension of the cropping period due to improved drainage; opportunity for fish culture in ponds; and reduced hazards from extreme floods and tidal surges.

These beneficial effects, however, are often much lower in magnitude than the estimated benefits shown to justify the projects. Moreover, the benefit in project area in short term is not seen keeping long term effect in the area as well as in the area outside the project under consideration. Therefore, the benefits cost more per capita than shown in project proposals.

There are comparatively fewer studies to understand the costs and negative impact. Some studies found detrimental effects of those projects as follows: increased drainage problems behind embankments; reduced residual moisture in the dry season, especially on higher ground, hence reducing cropping options; deterioration of soil physical properties in water-logged areas; potentially greater loss of crops under conditions of extreme flooding and embankments failure; loss of formerly flooded habitats for major capture of fishery species; changes in hydrological regimes of remaining habitats; increased agrochemical runoff and contamination of surface waters; restriction

of water-borne transportation by physical structures and siltation; increased depth of flooding, higher flood velocities and erosion of char and other unprotected active flood plains; loss of livestock grazing areas; increase in the incidence of diseases, such as cholera and malaria, as a result of reduced

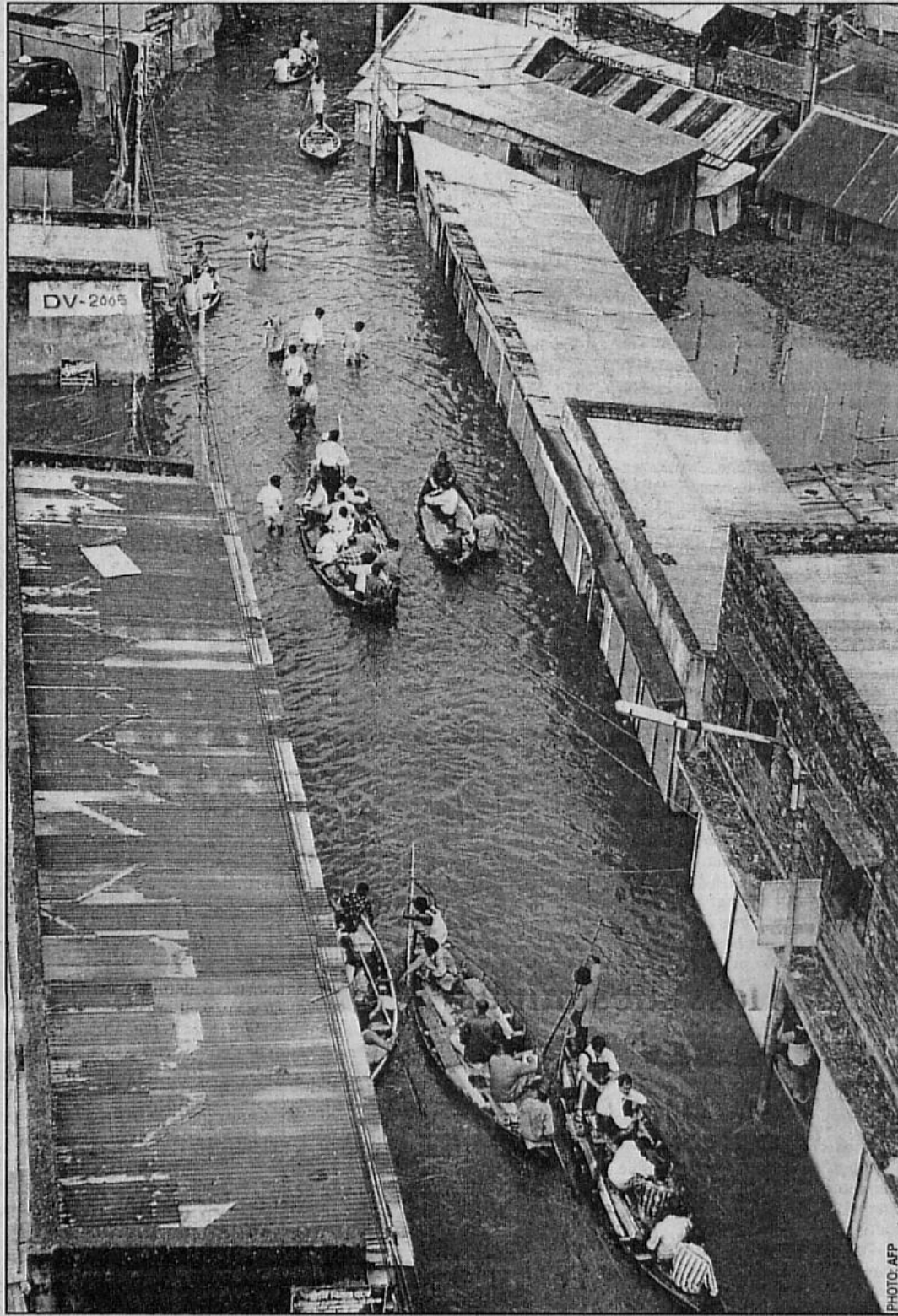
flushing of polluted water sources. There is no evidence of the global institutions who sponsored these projects accepting responsibility for all these detrimental effects. Not surprising.

Despite all that has been done to make a country of free-flowing abundant water into one that is water-logged, it seems that the water sector has become an increasingly more lucrative field for profit making investment of corporate bodies and beneficiaries. To them, projects are not meant to solve the problems which lead to disaster, but are a permanent system of monitoring and studying the phenomenon that give

connected parties a permanent way of making wealth. Floods, just like poverty, give them immense opportunity to ensure fat lives at home and abroad.

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Slaves in Saudi?

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ON July 15, Human Rights Watch issued a report on the condition of Foreign workers in Saudi Arabia. The revelation that "Guest Workers" are systematically abused in Saudi Arabia should come as no surprise to anyone familiar with that region's history. What a shame that it took Sarah Whitson, executive director of HRW's Middle East and North Africa Division, to finally speak the unpalatable truth. "We found men and women in conditions resembling slavery," said Whitson in the press conference announcing their findings. The report described "the pervasive abuses foreign workers endure...the abysmal and exploitative labor conditions many workers face, and the utter failure of the justice system to provide redress." The real question is this -- why did the Islamic world not uncover these human rights abuses, so close to the holy city of Mecca?

Based on interviews taken in Bangladesh, India and the Philippines, HRW found abysmal and exploitative labor practices, wanton rape of women workers, and beheading of guest workers accused of crimes without proper legal process. Anyone who has visited Saudi Arabia knows the racism with which ordinary Saudis treat the brown and black-skinned masses that come for Hajj. Like hundreds of Bangladeshis every year, my parents endured these indignities during their recent pilgrimage. When he returned from Mecca, my father told me, "To them, we will always be miskeen (beggar). Doesn't matter what we do, or where we come from. They see our skin and don't need to see more." If this is how pilgrims are treated, imagine how much worse is the plight of the "Guest Worker." Yet, we Muslims remain silent on these abuses -- after all the Saudis are the keepers of Islam's holiest site, so they cannot possibly be racist!

How appropriate as well that HRW used the phrase "slavery" to describe conditions inside the desert kingdom. Saudi Arabia was in fact one of the last nation-states to abolish slavery. Along with Yemen, the Saudis only abolished slavery in 1962. Prior to that, the Islamic world's experience with slavery was extremely problematic. Muslims once led the rest of the world in science, culture and human emancipation. The positive examples are numerous and often-repeated. However, the advances brought about in the early days of the Islamic Caliphate ossified, with very little innovation or re-interpretation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

As Lewis explains it, although

The Muslim world is sliding backwards into medievalism, and it is time for reformers to speak openly and bravely. There is a cancer that is eating away at our soul -- a disease marked by paranoia, double standards and virulent racism. While we are in full-throated cry against abuses in Iraq and Palestine, we stay completely silent when it is Muslims who are the abusers (of both non-Muslims and Muslims).

slavery and the taking of concubines was legal in the Islamic world, in practice it was far milder than that practiced in nineteenth century North and South America. Henri Dunant, the Swiss founder of the Red Cross, visited North Africa in 1860 and commented on the "relative mildness" of the slavery practiced there. As compared to ancient Rome and modern colonial systems, Islam gave the slave a certain legal status and the slave-owner also had obligations (as well as rights).

Although the Islamic world started off by giving more rights to slaves than in the European colonies, as with many other areas, these progressive positions did not keep up with changing times. By the early nineteenth century, Britain, under pressure from domestic abolitionists, had abolished slavery in its colonies. Slave-trading was declared an "international crime" and traders were to be punished wherever they were encountered. With this newly liberal outlook, the British Empire soon came into conflict with the Ottoman Empire's practice of slavery.

In the struggle for emancipation of slaves, there was double-layered racism that favored the white slaves. Many of the white slaves in the Ottoman and Persian empire were Georgians, Circassians and other Caucasians. These slaves were eventually freed due to the Ottoman's own internal pressure for legal reform. However, in the case of black slaves, British pressure was a key factor in their eventual emancipation. The Persians initially rejected the British push for emancipation of slaves in 1846, but eventually a compromise agreement was reached. Over in the Ottoman Empire, an 1830 ferman freed all Christian slaves who had not converted. Oddly, slaves who had converted to Islam were not freed (perhaps due to the British focus on Christian slaves). Finally, in 1857, again under British pressure, a second ferman was issued banning trafficking in black slaves throughout the Empire, with special exception for the Hijaz.

There was also, by now, internal pressure to reform slavery in the Islamic world. The Bey of Tunis announced in 1846 that every black slave who asked for it would receive a "deed of enfranchisement." In his

announcement, he also noted that Muslim jurists were divided about the legal basis for slavery. One noted anti-slavery advocate was Moroccan writer Ahmad Khalid al-Nasiri, who accepted the legality of slavery under Muslim law, but vigorously protested its application. He wrote in the 1800's, condemning "the unlimited enslavement of the blacks and the importation of many droves of them every year, for sale in the town and country markets of the Maghrib, where men traffic in them like beasts, or worse." (Kitab al-Istisqa, Casablanca, 1955)

The unpalatable truth is that, the

Ottoman and Persian empires were one of the last to abolish slavery, falling far behind their European counterparts in matters of human emancipation. Full abolition of slavery did not come until the twentieth century, with Saudi Arabia holding out until 1962. Given that desert kingdom's shameful record on this basic human right, it was no surprise to read Human Rights Watch's report and find that today's migrant workers are kept in conditions of "near-slavery."

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How else to explain our outpouring of sympathy for the Bosnian genocide, but our complete silence on the ongoing genocide in Sudan? In that country's civil war between the Arab Muslim North, and the black Christian and Animist South, 2 million people have been killed to date. In a BBC profile of the hundreds of black Africans who have been raped by pro-government Janjaweed Arab militia, one victim described the attackers: "They called me Abeid (slave in Arabic)."

Shame on the Muslim world for staying silent!

Naaem Mohaiem is the director of Muslims or Heretics? a documentary on the persecution of Ahmadiyya Muslims.

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