

Receding waters

Time for speedy rehabilitation

FOR the first time in a fortnight of surging floods, signs of a trough are being read into the latest weather bulletins. The Flood Forecast and Warning Centre (FFWC) has given a relieving piece of news. The Brahmaputra-Jamuna and the Ganges-Padma rivers have been subsiding at all points. Even the Meghna and south-eastern hill basin rivers are falling.

However, waters in Dhaka and Bangladesh's midriff may take sometime to recede. We may not be out of the woods just yet. A depression is building in the Bay and a full moon gravitational pull is on the card. Until August 15, we need to keep our fingers crossed.

Now, this is a trying situation. People who have been long stranded in flood waters will come out and rush to the relief centres. The contact between the flood-stricken and the relief seekers will be direct for the first time. As a result, our relief distribution mechanism will be just as much under pressure as the demands for rehabilitation support will be stupendous.

Are we prepared to cater for the heightened needs for relief and rehabilitation? The donors in their latest assessment report have stated that 'the level of assistance provided by all actors to-date falls far short of the genuine food needs of the most vulnerable, the affected people.'

Water-borne diseases are likely to break out in an epidemic form. Chlorinated water, ORS sachets, medicines and vaccines must be kept handy. Medical teams have, hopefully, taken up positions in different parts of the country. A degree of volunteerism will have to be encouraged.

That said, we turn to the urgent rehabilitation tasks. People need to be helped to rebuild their homes and resume their vocations at the earliest. There has been a tremendous productivity slump, which is likely to tell upon demand-supply equilibrium. Our exports from the RMG sector will need back-up support.

The first task is to rejuvenate agriculture under a special rehabilitation programme to be featured largely by inputs support. The small and medium industries have been the worst-hit; their recovery should be a matter of priority concern. The trade and chamber body leaders should be consulted on that.

Damages wrought to the education sector have been appalling. Thousands of schools and hundreds of colleges were inundated sending them into a limbo for a good part of the academic session. They must be helped back to their feet.

Last but not least, we face the formidable task of repairing the infrastructure of roads, bridges and culverts. The estimated cumulative loss surpasses the size of the national budget. Let's face it, the disaster has upset our calculations, and to that extent the nation should be fully galvanised, cutting across partylines, behind the gigantic task of reconstructing it back to shape.

Death of domestic help

Are we living in the medieval days?

BARBARIC, brute, inhuman -- there are no other words to describe those who beat a little girl so mercilessly that she succumbed to her injuries. Eleven year old Putul was a domestic help at a businessman's house in Khulna city. It was reported that his family members beat the girl with club and iron rod, which not only left her unconscious, but broke her legs also. She apparently sustained fatal injury on her head too. How could they? What serious crime did she actually commit that they resorted to such violent, unspeakable means to punish the little girl?

According to newspaper reports, Putul failed to wake up early in the morning which enraged the mistress. If that is true then we are simply speechless. Could this be a reason enough for beating her so badly that it finally took her life? The girl was working there out of sheer compulsion in the first place. When girls of her age go to school, play with siblings and friends, spend happy times with parents, Putul was forced to work as a domestic help. Her poor farmer father had no other option but to steal her childhood. But that did not give her employers any right to treat her so inhumanly!

We shudder to think what trauma she actually went through earlier. It's high time we delve deep into our conscience and ask -- is this how we should treat innocent children from poor backgrounds? It's obvious that all the awareness campaigns and seminars have had very little effect, because Putul wasn't the only victim in recent time. We have read about other similar incidents of tortures on domestic help, we have also heard about the offenders getting caught, but we have heard very little about their punishments. The law itself is strict enough, but the implementation is lacking. Even in this case the offenders are at large. We demand that they be caught as soon as possible and if proven guilty, punished severely.

Controversial financial measures draw flak



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

AWASH with monsoon rain and heavy discharge of water from the upstream Himalayan rivers system, the people of Bangladesh in general and the citizens of Dhaka in particular, are having to face further difficulties in their lives because of controversial decisions and new fiscal measures.

Dhaka today is a veritable island in the wake of severe flooding. Low lying areas around the capital have already gone under floodwater and hundreds of thousands have been forced to flee their houses. Dishonest traders have been seizing this opportunity and cashing in on runaway prices. The wholesalers have been manipulating the situation to reap higher profits for themselves instead of acting as stabilisers of prices between the retailers and the consumers. Hoarding and profiteering have become the order of the day.

Unfortunately, this chaotic situation has not been helped by the introduction of certain new financial measures.

The Finance Ministry in its wisdom, probably on external advice, has decided to reduce interest rates on savings accounts and also on various kinds of Savings Instruments. This has meant reduction of income particularly for those who have retired and others from the middle class who tend to rely on income mostly from interest. I will not go into the economics of such a move. I will, like many others, only point out that this step will be sort of disincentive towards savings. This

has not been a popular step.

Another debatable financial decision has been to repeat and maintain through 'Artha Ain, 2004' of 30 June, 2004, which came into effect from 1 July, 2004, the provisions of 'Artha Ain, 2003' of 30 June, 2003 associated with 'The Provisional Collection of Taxes Act, 1931 (XVI of 1931)'. Apparently, it has been retained in public interest. It would appear that earlier reservations about applying this provision last year has been re-considered. Accordingly, the very fact that such a

enhanced to Taka 10,000 in 2003 but its implementation was shelved. It was considered impractical. However, the new Finance Act, 2004, displaying poor political wisdom, instead of cancelling it, has re-initiated this statutory rate on the same Service Code as of 1 July, 2004.

I have found it difficult to understand this step. I would have understood a possible increase in the statutory rate if it was rational. This does not make any sense. Then too, no distinction has been made in terms of amount of deposit and the

source on the annual interest, the bank will still deduct the statutory service charge of Taka ten thousand. This means that the saver in question is left without any income and will probably be in negative territory. In other words, he is being indirectly advised to keep his money in a Current Account. I guess the other option that is being hinted at is investment in the totally uncertain and unregulated stock market.

This step is controversy at its best.

One can only hope that better sense will prevail and the Finance Ministry

turning into a political issue with front-ranking Awami League leadership also lending their support to the protests. The High Court has also stepped in a few days ago, and on a writ petition, with a returnable rule, stayed the entire process of DCC for realising holding-tax on a self assessment basis. The petitioner has claimed that the Municipal Corporation (Taxation) Rules 1986 has no provision for self-assessment.

Dhaka City Corporation would have done well to have had consultation with citizen groups before

in the air) and untreated areas which are breeding grounds for mosquitoes. We have already seen how dengue has returned to the city. Numerous civil societies have also remarked on the absence of parks and play grounds for children. In effect, there is consensus that the quality of life in this city has deteriorated sharply. This is partially due to massive urbanisation but is also largely due to poor planning and zoning by the DCC Authorities.

It would be pertinent here to point out that Dhakaites would not have hesitated to pay additional holding taxes, if they found that they were getting their value for money. Unfortunately that is not happening in terms of services or amenities.

The DCC has to understand that this questionnaire that has been circulated should have been preceded by community consultative meetings. Similarly, instead of trying out such a step, the DCC might have tried to increase holding taxes by a certain percentage. As the last fixation had been undertaken more than a decade ago, it might have proposed an increase of twenty per cent as a flat rate. It could have also suggested pro rata increases of an additional ten per cent every three years in the future.

Yes, the DCC needs additional resources. However, it is equally important to be seen as people friendly and not a measure thrust from the top.

It is time that the DCC seriously set up a Consultative Committee, apolitical in nature and composition. This Committee should then be entrusted to see how other mega-cities like Bangkok, New Delhi, Bombay, Calcutta, Karachi, London, Tokyo and New York resolve their problems. It should also consider creating a Coordinating Body to establish better city governance with all the involved stakeholders -- WASA, DESA, Titas Gas and RAJUK. This might lead to improved infrastructural facilities.

Muhammad Zamir is a former Secretary and Ambassador.

POST BREAKFAST

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provision which was not enforced last year, is now being repeated in 2004, denotes menacing prospects for savings account holders in general.

According to this re-stated law, certain changes have been brought in the First Schedule, Section-3, Part-II Services related to Services rendered by banks. This Section-3 is part of 'The Central Excises and Salt Act, 1944'.

It may be recalled here that provisions of this Act had earlier also been amended on 10 November, 1992. In the law of 1992, it was decided by the government that for 'services rendered by the bank' under Service Code S032.00, the rate of duty would be Taka two hundred per deposit account per year. Here 'Services rendered by bank' would mean the services rendered by a scheduled bank as defined in the Bangladesh Bank Order, 1972 (PO No 127 of 1972) by way of maintaining deposit account.

This charge was unjustifiably

servicing of such a deposit account.

A graded approach might have been undertaken where those below Taka one lakh would have paid a certain amount which could have been increased with the amounts of deposits in slabs of Taka five lakh each. Then, there would be variance and some justice and fair play. What does a poor person do who is maintaining a savings account with only Taka ten thousand in it? Does he then end up losing all his savings paying the yearly statutory fee of Taka ten thousand? What happens if a person has only Taka eight thousand? This is absurd. Banks are impersonal institutions and are guided by existing laws and rules. They will have to implement these laws. The only net loser in this exercise will be those who maintain savings accounts of any description.

Let us also see another facet. What this law denotes is that if a person has Taka two lakh in a savings account, then at the end of the year, after reduction of income tax at

will revise this latest amendment and withdraw the statutory charges.

The other new initiative that has drawn the ire of the people of Dhaka relates to self-assessment of holding taxes in the capital city. The Mayor has tried to explain this new arrangement by claiming that this will bring thousands of new holding tax payers into the tax-net (owners of the new housing units built over the last decade). He has also claimed that this will 'eliminate corruption and injustice.' The general public have however not bought this line.

Every day, newspaper reports have highlighted clashes between police and house owners over the new format of assessing holding taxes. Recently, chase and counter-chase between the police and the demonstrators virtually turned the Lalbagh crossing and its nearby areas into a mini battlefield. Such pro active protests have also led to many arrests and injuries both for law enforcement officials as well as the common population. This is fast

promulgating such an exercise. There are reports that the Dhaka City Corporation is hoping to reduce tension by extending the illogical time frame for submitting self assessment returns and deleting some of the irrelevant entries in the questionnaire. The authorities in the DCC seem to have totally misread the current attitude of the citizens of Dhaka. This will not soothe frayed tempers.

The public, in general, have for some time in the recent past, been very critical of the gradual slide of city governance in Dhaka. Various seminars, workshops and television news reports have highlighted the terrible state of affairs with regard to the sewerage system, maintenance of roads (persistent and unplanned digging of roads), garbage collection and the lighting of streets. They have also read results of international surveys which have been very critical of Dhaka as a city to live in due to potential health hazards from its toxic air quality (percentage of lead

Will Indonesian presidential polls result lead to political unrest?



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

INDONESIA, world's fourth largest populous nation, earlier this month went for elections to choose a president -- for the first time through direct votes -- in a remarkable step towards further democratisation of the pattern of rule. But the outcome of the polls, which has only recently been announced after several days because of vastness of the country and the new system, gave enough indications that the nation of more than 22 crore people may witness political problems centering the results.

Among the several candidates in the fray for the top position, none has been winner since at least fifty percent of the votes is required for victory. Candidates taking first and second positions will now go for run-off elections in September so that a winner emerges with more than fifty percent of the votes. The system is something like the French presidential polls but allegations of irregularity and threats for taking the issue to the courts are creating

concern for the future shape of things in the country of innumerable islands.

Former army general and ex-security minister under president Megawati Sukarnoputri, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono topped the elections with 34 percent of the votes followed by the president herself, who secured 26 percent of the votes.

The third position went to another ex-army general Wiranto with 22 percent, who alleged that the voting

in Indonesia centering the elections and analysts say the future developments may complicate things even though nothing very serious barring some minor bomb blasts have so far taken place following the announcement of the results.

The second round of polls will be between Gen Yudhoyono and incumbent Megawati Sukarnoputri but Gen Wiranto alleges that he has been pushed out of race by being relegated to the third position. He is

nation for long 32 years mainly through, autocratic, style. A pro-democracy movement forced him to quit power, bringing Borhanuddin Habibie as interim president and later Abdur Rahman Wahid was elected president by parliament members. Megawati, daughter of "Bung" (Brother) Sukarno, was widely expected to become president but when dark horse Wahid was chosen, she graciously accepted vice-presidency in a praiseworthy

husband also formed a part of the criticisms against her. However, the president was firm in the saddle as the opponents were not a big threat against her. Meanwhile, Indonesia admirably moved closer to democratisation of the rule and the decision to elect the chief executive of the nation through direct popular votes was a step in the right direction.

Many eyes were cast on the presidential polls since it was new and

MATTERS AROUND US

The army obviously played a role in the affairs of the nation in different forms till democratisation began but it is not clear if the army has taken a complete back seat now in the revolving political situation. The presidential polls that have sparked off controversy of some degree are likely to go for the second round unless courts intervene or political problems, which still seem somewhat remote, force to delay or complicate the process. Indonesia has come a long way towards establishing a representative government and as such any development that scuttles the process will be something that is least desirable.

had been flawed and the matter be taken to the court. If finally the presidential polls falls into litigation, the second round of election may become somewhat uncertain. Furthermore, general Yudhoyono feels that security must be tightened to the line up to the run-off elections as he fears wrong doings related to elections matters.

The government brushed aside the accusations and maintained that things were moving in the right direction for free and fair presidential polls in the country. However, an undercurrent of tensions is palpable

from "Golkar party" of ex-dictator Gen Suharto, which secured maximum seats in the parliamentary polls in April. Since Wiranto comes from the part that fared well in the parliamentary elections, his accusations against "unfair" presidential elections are likely to raise some dust in the political scene.

Indonesia won freedom from the Dutch under the leadership of charismatic Ahmed Sukarno, who remained at the helm till deposed in the failed pro-communist coup in 1965 that brought Gen Suharto at the centre stage and he ruled the

decision that earned her admiration. Physically handicapped Wahid was forced to relinquish the presidency for alleged incompetence and corruption and Megawati was the clear choice for the position.

She enjoyed the advantage of being the daughter of the leader of the Indonesian freedom movement and her tenure as president is marked by both achievements and criticisms. A good governance remained a subject of criticism in the country and alleged interference in different matters including business deals by her parliamentarian

unique for the country. I had the occasion of visiting Jakarta late last year and was impressed to see the development of the country, which is also the population wise biggest Muslim nation in addition to being an important Asian country with considerable clout in the Southeast Asian region. However, people at that time were eagerly looking forward to the presidential polls that was still several months away. Because the future political scenario was largely contingent upon the outcome of this election.

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All the southeast Asian nations were not democratic but the wind of change has its impact on the region in a positive manner. Indonesia being the largest country in that area occupies important position in the larger context of democratic rule and the nation is moving, even though somewhat experimentally, towards the avowed goal of representative character of government. The presidential election is a key component in the whole exercise. All concerned would be well advised to refrain from anything that would adversely affect the process. A free and fair poll is imperative on one hand and sheer opposition for the sake of it is equally undesirable on the other. After all, at this stage the country needs political stability.

Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury is a senior journalist.

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE

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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.

Problems of Mohammadpur

We the residents of Mohammadpur are facing several problems. They are as follows:

1. The by-lanes in Nurjahan Road and elsewhere have no drains, which in fact is damaging the roads and aedis mosquitoes are growing rapidly in the potholes.

The residents of this area are not attaching pipes to the outlets of their drains of toilets and kitchens, for which aedis mosquitoes are getting spaces to breed themselves in the concrete spaces which are getting damaged and providing craters.

2. There is usually no traffic police to look after the traffic jam at the end of the Nurjahan Road. The local bus owners are dominating the area.

3. The vendors and rickshaws are also creating traffic jams at the end of the Nurjahan Road.

4. A private transport company is keeping all their buses in front of the Residential Model School and driv-

ing their huge buses in the residential areas of Mohammadpur, which is creating several problems for the local residents.

5. Our houses are not safe even in day time because of the thieves, who are mostly addicts and need to buy their drugs from the local Town Hall market and Geneva Camp of the non-Bengalees.

6. The non-Bengalees of Geneva Camp and Town Hall camp are creating many problems in the area. No government has been interested in rehabilitating them outside Dhaka, because even after the 33 years of our independence, every year the government is perhaps getting a certain amount of aid by showing their poverty, allegedly.

7. The local businessmen have to give certain amounts of money to the local Mastans, even police and local commissioner's office every month virtually to buy their safety.

Will the authorities concerned look into all these problems?

Reham Abdullah Islam
Nurjahan Road, Mohammadpur, Dhaka

Life is more than matter and energy

Astrologers, who are persons non grata in the scientific community, are now quoting latest scientific findings to gain acceptance as recognised professionals. They assert that scientists are now proving what the former had been practising for thousands of years, in fact since around 11,000BC, when the Atlantean civilization rose and fell. This highly developed race was destroyed through self-destructive chain of events due to greed, corruption and misuse of power (the harnessing of solar power, mainly its electromagnetic effects).

Astrology predicts the effects of the planets and the stars on human lives, this information had all along been available in the genetic code carried by the DNA. The ball is now in the court of the scientists, assert the American Astro Analysis Institute.

According to the modern view of

physical science, all explanations of physical natural phenomenon were based on two basic raw materials, matter and energy, well known by a formula.. The third factor was missing: information. Now the mystery of life is being unraveled by the trio: mass, energy, and information.

In this Age of Information, scientific experiments reveal that the cosmic intelligence pass along information (or data) through the Earth's magnetosphere, which is an information carrier (inside the core and in the surrounding Van Allen radiation belts always facing the sun). The scientists have found through mass-energy experiments that to produce certain changes in any organism, a fixed amount of energy would be required. This energy is now found to be a thousand times less than accepted earlier. It was not the intensity of the radiations that produced the various effects, but the informational reciprocal between the electromagnetic field and the living organism.

The various changes in life on Earth were not caused by energy or radiation but by the cosmically induced fluctuations of the magnetosphere. Thus was born the science of cybernetics.

The magnetic storms in space, the full moon, the sun spots (11-year cycle) affect living organisms, as detected by SQUID, the Superconducting Quantum Interferometer Device, monitoring the human body's magnetic field, which is only 100-millionth that of the Earth's. More data is awaited as the experiments have to be carried out at temperatures approaching absolute zero.

Another astonishing discovery relates to the strange properties of water (the body is more than 80 per cent water). Water (in the cells, and the sea) can "remember" past events, such as the magnetic variations; which is information. Also scientists have detected, recorded, and played back music 'recorded' or remembered by the canvas which

the painter was listening to while painting the picture.

Initially life originated from the sea/water, according to many religious and scientific sources. A Japanese scientist Maki Takata found that a sunspot activity had changed the blood reactions of every person on Earth (it took him 17 years to confirm the finding, because the cause was outside the Earth).

He also found that the blood can also detect sunrise, as the activity of the blood suddenly changes just before sunrise (time for prayer; and Naseem, the early morning breeze, which has special properties). Life is beyond the ken of our philosophy.

Mahseen Dhaka

Reward and punishment

Corrupt practices (graft, nepotism, rackets, commissions, threats, terrorism, godfatherism and a host

of related malpractice's) in the public services (Bureaucracy, politics, and the infected business world) is holding up Bangladesh from taking off as a developing country. The development budgets have two main serious weaknesses: the utilization factor is low, and the QC (quality control) is poor. This creates a thriving market of black money, operating in many grey areas. The authorities are aware of it, but part of this team is also corrupt, directly or indirectly.

There is a quick fix: reward and punishment. This area has to be reviewed and updated, to suit the current market conditions (moral, mental, economic, financial), and the trend of operations and styles. A low per capita income encourages temptation and corrupt practices. Since the mentors, operators and victims come from the same society, it is not an easy task to create watertight compartments for enforcing regulatory measures. We are not lacking in paper work, but the proof

of the pudding lies in the eating. The whole social environment has to be changed. Incremental success is of no use, as viruses multiply, fast, and it is frustrating when cooperation is not available quickly in a tainted system.

How to be strict, and practical? Prosecution and punishment have to be 100 per cent, without bias. The other side of the coin is reward in recognition. Dragging cases to the court is all right if justice is quick and deterrent. But the separation of the judiciary is hanging fire for decades; for reasons which are not mysterious. No use quoting the proverb "Where there is a will, there is a way." There are bifurcated wills, thanks to political autonomy! Truncated parliament cannot offer solutions. We are united in diversity! No point in going deeper than this introduction. The ball is in the court of the governors.

Md Abad Dhaka