

## Disaster management pitfalls

*Medical support needs to be geared up even more*

THAT the flood is receding is welcome news but the news of the severe health hazards that the flood-affected people are facing is far from solace to us. We are concerned at the rising number of deaths due to various diseases, malnutrition, lack of adequate relief and drowning. Admittedly, our forecasting mechanism is unable to make a long-term flood prognostication but, given that we are visited by flood almost every year, merited a contingency plan to tackle its aftereffects.

It will not be wrong to say that the two previous floods, in 1988 and 1998, were more severe and more prolonged than the current one provided we do not get a second bout in mid-August. Yet, unfortunately, the impact in terms of the number of human casualties in this case is relatively higher than in the past two instances.

Incidences of gastrointestinal disease, a consequence of unclean drinking water; respiratory disease in children, a consequence of exposure to the elements due to lack of shelter; and incidences of dengue and malaria, give us an impression that the government's measures to tackle the after-flood situation are not as exhaustive as they might be. In one twenty-four hour period two days ago, more than six hundred persons were admitted to hospitals suffering from diarrhoea alone.

The news that the government does not have adequate water purifying tablets will come as a shock to the multitudes that are suffering from lack of proper drinking water. While the government can do very little to enhance recession of flood under the present circumstances, its inability to provide the very basic necessities to keep people alive is woeful.

The government's argument that water-purifying tablets have very short shelf life and thus cannot be produced in large quantities at one time, is no comfort to the victims. It is for the government to ensure adequate supply of lifesaving medicines, including water-purifying tablets, even at the risk of wasting some of these tablets. After all, wastage of a certain quantity of water purifying tablet is less costly than human lives lost for the lack of it.

We are also not convinced that the four thousand or so medical teams, spread over the vast area affected by flood can be effective, more so when they lack adequate medical supplies to tackle all kinds of diseases rooted to water recession. We apprehend that some of the diseases, particularly those afflicting children and women, may assume epidemic proportions unless the government gears up its medical support efforts.

The government should act fast.

## Curbing road accidents

*The most obvious solution ignored*

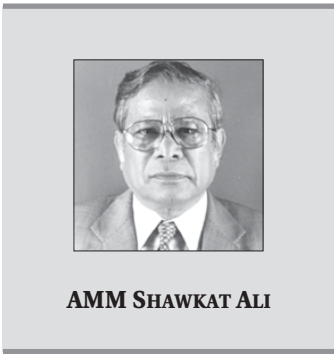
LATE last week, the Asian Crime Prevention Foundation Bangladesh (ACPF, B) held a seminar on road safety with exhibits of accident victims presented on the sidelines designed to sensitise all concerned about the high incidence of road and highway tragedies. It is true we need to raise awareness among vehicle drivers, pedestrians and passengers about traffic rules and signs, but this is only touching on the fringe of the issue rather than addressing it head-on.

The speakers drew upon some survey reports to say that drivers are responsible for 80 percent of road accidents and that 84 percent of vehicles do not have any fitness certificate. In other words, the odds against road safety, in a manner of speaking, work out to an absurd 164 to 100! This is a screaming indictment on our road and traffic management deficiencies.

Reading between the pair of statistics, on the licensing side it is safe to assume that many novices have obtained drivers' licences in a deviant manner and that many of the licences carried by drivers could have been actually forged. As for the fitness of vehicles, most of them do not have any road-worthiness certificate and those that have are suspected to have been obtained through underhand dealings. In other words, it is corruption in the organisations and agencies mandated to ensure road safety and proper traffic management that is at the heart of the problem. So, the principal reason for road accidents lies in man-made factors which, needless to say, are eminently controllable and containable. In other words, there is a no-nonsense house-cleaning job to be done there, before we turn our attention to the other rather peripheral causes of road accidents.

The speakers have recommended enactment of stringent laws to curb road accidents. We believe though that absence of law is not so much of a problem as non-or misapplication of the laws.

# Vigilance does it: Gazipur poll



BY all available accounts, the by-poll in Gazipur ended without any let or hindrance. The example thus set illustrates that it is possible to hold election in a peaceful manner. The Awami League (AL) candidate Zahid Ahsan Russel won with a big margin of 47, 933 votes.

His nearest rival, Professor MA Mannan, a nominee of the ruling alliance, lost to a candidate without any previous political or election experience. In contrast, Mannan had previous experience. This raises the question: does political experience influence voters' decision? Apparently not as this poll had shown. At the other end, we have the example of Munshiganj by-poll where a Member of Parliament (MP) who later resigned won against his rival who had no significant political experience. The case of Dhaka by-poll is different because of the way it was conducted which made it a subject of considerable public controversy that ended up in a legal battle, which is on.

### Previous speculations

There was a spate of speculations on the outcome of Gazipur poll. Based on quick and dirty assessment of opinion poll prior to the elections, many reports were published in the media.

First, it was speculated that the

ruling party candidate would win because the local voters would like to see development in the locality. In their perception, the candidate of a ruling party once voted to power would be better able to ensure development in the constituency.

Second, Mannan is a popular candidate with previous experience. Besides, he fought the last election as an independent having failed to get nomination from the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and even as an

sympathy did contribute to the victory in the polls. But there must be other factors also, not the least of which is the organisational ability of the AL, in particular, at the local level with support from the central level. Prior to the polls, the newspaper reports were replete with news items with photographs of Russel who opted for a door to door campaign flanked by the leaders of local public opinion belonging to AL. It must have been an arduous task for him and his comrades in the

activists done deliberately? This issue was also raised and it was clarified through the press that the Upazila Nirbahi Officer of Tongi joined his duties only a few days back and as such he was not fully aware of full information. Indeed, the issue raised was promptly attended to by the DC and RO.

### Lessons learnt

There are at least three lessons to be learnt from the above incident. First,

WORTH A LOOK

Indeed, one of the illuminating lessons learnt from this poll is the attitude of friendliness and amiability shown and made visible by Russel and his nearest rival Mannan. At the concluding part of the polls, the two rival candidates embraced one another with smiling faces, bereft of any bickering or hard feelings. The example set by them is worthy of emulation by all those who wish to or will participate in future elections.

independent candidate he secured good number of voters but lost to late lamented Ashanullah Master. Third, as a corollary to the above, it was further speculated that in the recently concluded by-poll, Mannan would have the advantage of his own vote-bank and that of the ruling coalition parties. Added together, it would form an invincible basket of votes.

In contrast, there was very little in favour of the young and upcoming Russel except the love, admiration and confidence that his late father enjoyed in the constituency. It was reported that the tragic assassination of the law-maker Ashanullah Master would swing people's sympathy in favour of Russel. Now that Russel had won with a big margin, at issue is whether this was the only decisive factor in the by-poll.

It is difficult to provide any precise answer. What remains clear, however, is the fact that widespread public

campaign for votes.

The organisational ability of AL, in particular, at the local level, was reflected by the fact that, prior to the polls, objections were raised against appointment of about 21 polling officers, who belonged to a local institution. It was alleged that those officers belonged to or otherwise known as party activists of the ruling coalition government. This news was highlighted by the media. The central and local leaders, as reported in the media, met the Deputy Commissioner (DC) and Returning Officer (RO) of Gazipur and requested him for corrective actions to prevent possible rigging.

It must be said to the credit of the DC, who is also the RO that he immediately agreed to a prompt inquiry to ascertain the validity of the allegations thus made on behalf of the AL candidate. Was the inclusion of the alleged party

there is need for the political parties, in particular those in opposition, to be vigilant on all aspects of electioneering. Second, there is equal need for the DC and RO to play a proactive role in the operation and management of elections. In the instant case, these two factors combined to create necessary conditions for pre-emptive actions against possible rigging.

A third factor must also be mentioned. It is the ever vigilant and highly proactive role that the media had played in this regard. Indeed, many doubt that without the relevant news being flashed in the media, very little or no action would probably be taken.

### Proactive role of the media

The proactive role of the media should always be welcome by the election administration because such a role provides additional channels of valuable information that helps in taking

preventive and corrective actions for ensuring free and fair polls.

The other examples of the proactive role of the media includes field visits by as many as 23 journalists. These journalists belonging to a Bengali daily included photo journalists also. As reported by the same daily, they visited as many as 112 polling centers to have an on-the-spot assessment of how election was being conducted. The total number of polling centers was said to be 195. Thus the team of jour-

nalists from the said daily covered more than 57 percent of the total number of polling centers. Others from different newspapers and the electronic media also joined. Ninety-six polling stations or about 49 percent of the total were identified as risky from the viewpoint of law and order. The newspaper reports confirm the vigilance exercised by the election administration. Election officers, police and Ansars were highly watchful. The armed forces personnel, the magistrates deployed for holding mobile courts for on-the-spot trial of offenders were particularly visible. Equally visible were the ladies and gentlemen of the press, non-government election observers like FEMA, Brottee, Janipap and a number of foreign observers.

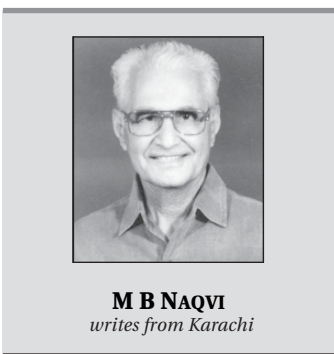
### Example set by rivals

Indeed, one of the illuminating lessons learnt from this poll is the attitude of friendliness and amiability shown and made visible by Russel and his nearest rival Mannan. At the concluding part of the polls, the two rival candidates embraced one another with smiling faces, bereft of any bickering or hard feelings. The example set by them is worthy of emulation by all those who wish to or will participate in future elections. It is also a lesson for the top leaders of all political parties who now are engaged in a perpetual state of confrontational politics.

At the end, the citizens have a satisfying feeling that all stakeholders, in particular the media and the election administration, have set a national standard of free and fair polls. Can this silver lining remove, once and for all, the dark clouds that perpetually appear to hang over our electoral system?

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# Time to say no



M B NAQVI writes from Karachi

ALTHOUGH they have plenty to worry about, Pakistanis have now been forced to take pointed notice of developments in Iraq. They were aware of the murder and mayhem that Iraq has been for over a year. But the slaughter of two Pakistanis, Sajid Naeem and Raja Azad, by their unknown kidnappers -- presumed to be Zarqawi group -- has concentrated their minds like nothing before. These kidnappers were sending a signal.

If Pakistan government wanted these two spared, it was to announce a firm decision not to send Pakistani soldiers to Iraq to help achieve Americans' aims. Islamabad did no such thing and poor Sajid Naeem and Raja Azad were executed on Tuesday last week. All Pakistanis were shocked and angered at the insensitivity shown by Pakistani rulers. An ugly situation has developed in which thousands may become suicide bombers. First sign of local reaction was the suicide bombing to kill the PM-in-waiting, Shaukat Aziz, on Friday last. Al-Qaeda has owned the attack.

Why did Islamabad not reject the US pressure to send troops? The reason is twofold: Pakistani elites are hopelessly in love with the US that throws some greenbacks at them for services rendered. Islamabad fears that if the US wishes are thwarted, the big Bully can do fearful things to it. Witness Iraq. That is one reason. The other is lack of any vision of what Pakistan might

stand for and how it is required to act. These hereditary or uninformed worthies cannot think of life without Americans being their guardians. How can they bring themselves to say 'no' to Uncle Sam? For fifty years the outsiders have taunted Pakistan for being a client state of America. But even when the US imposed a slew of sanctions, Islamabad remained extra-active in rebuilding the old relationship of a principal and a

no quarters and is not giving any. Since it has no tanks, aircraft or HMVs, it relies on two terrible weapons against which the foreigners quail: suicide bombers and, no less terrible, kidnapping unsuspecting foreign civilians for ransom. Only, the ransom is not money; it is forcing the victims' governments to refrain from actively aiding American occupation. Otherwise they would kill them brutally. Resistance has employed these weapons to telling

why American Neocons and their British camp followers chose to go into Iraq: the first was oil; Almighty chose to put so much oil under the Iraqi sands. They thought that whoever controls this second highest oil reserves can get a chokehold on the economies of those who depend on Persian Gulf oil. They extended this logic to other areas where production and reserves of hydrocarbons are large, as in Central Asia. Who maintains that American

PLAIN WORDS

Pakistanis are aware that President Pervez Musharraf had agreed "in principle" to sending troops with US President George Bush in the summer of 2003 at Camp David. The US can claim credit for the upturn in Pakistan's macro-economic indicators: American loans, grants, aid and facilitation in rescheduling debt liabilities, including home remittances, did it. But does this help entitle the US to own Pakistan -- creating a master and slave relationship -- in perpetuity?

satellite. Witness Nawaz Sharif rushing to Washington on a July 4 to make US persuade India not to fire at our returning troops in Kargil.

Turning to Iraq, almost every day there is some version of Baquba's suicide attack on a police station on Wednesday last week that killed at least 68 Iraqis or Falluja's clashes with occupation troops on Friday last in which 13 Iraqis died. The fact is there is a proper Iraqi Resistance -- albeit not too organised with a single leadership -- to an American occupation of Iraq. The so-called sovereign Iraqi government of Iyad Allawai is neither a government nor is it sovereign -- not by a long chalk. It is not a factor in the situation, except as an insulting challenge to Iraqis. Only two sides now matter: occupation army and the people of Iraq, most of whom want to throw out foreign occupiers.

The Iraqi Resistance is divided among al-Qaeda, Sunnis, Shias, Kurds, the remnants of Baath party and Arab Nationalists or plain patriots. It asks for

effect more easily because it is like a fish in the Iraqi sea. Thanks to popular support kidnappers are not caught -- easily.

Who occupies the high moral ground in Iraq? Most people are certainly shocked and pained over the heavy toll of innocent human lives; no one likes unlimited blood letting. But politically and morally who can blame the Iraqis and Palestinians for resisting foreign occupation of their lands that have been cradles of civilization? And who regards Anglo-American leadership to be morally justified? Their main alibi for the Iraq war has turned out to be false. Look at what the Brits are saying about Blair. Well, America is rather different for being so self-righteous and disdainful of outside world. Despite men like Noam Chomsky and Michael Moore, contest between Kerry and Bush is said to be evenly balanced; Bush has not lost support in middle America for having his case for Iraq war proved to be false.

Initially there seemed three reasons

control over the sources and trade of this key resource is a noble aim for which Pakistani lives should be put at risk?

The second reason was Israel. The latter fears Iraq and regarded Saddam to be an immediate menace. That was why Israel, with American help, destroyed the Osirak nuclear facility in 1981. In retrospect the US support and supplies to Saddam, including WMDs' wherewithal, and manoeuvring him into two wars against Iran and Kuwait -- and arranging the subsequent UN role in 1990s -- can now be seen as having been aimed at weakening Iraq and making it defenceless. An Iraq ruled by American stooges will give America two benefits: control over its oil and secondly Israel's security will be enhanced just as Israel is planning the final future of Palestinians.

The third reason was geo-strategic: with American interest supreme in Baghdad -- assuming all its hopes are realised -- it will be so much easier to change the socio-political face of ME.

oil demand by 2050; America's presence in Iraq promises a tight control over the region's oil production through (a) suitable regime changes; (b) unilateral and preemptive military action; (c) since 1970s OPEC oil has been traded exclusively in dollars; (d) thereafter the US virtually could print unlimited dollar bills to pay for its profligate imports and run up in 15 years a trade deficit amounting to \$ 2,700 billion; (e) in 1999 Iran mooted pricing its oil in euros, the competitor of the dollar; and (f) in late 2000 Saddam made this switch for Iraqi oil; (g) Bush called both Iran and Iraq Axis of Evil in 2002 and invaded in 2003.

Imagine, if other OPEC nations had also made this switch, the consequences for America would have been huge. Says Chapman: "Worldwide switches out of the dollar, on top of the already huge deficit, would have led to a plummeting dollar, a runaway from US markets and dramatic upheavals in the US". Thus America had good economic reasons to invade and

occupy Iraq. What interests has Pakistan in Iraq to send Pak troops there? Why assist America's imperial ventures?

Pakistanis are aware that President Pervez Musharraf had agreed "in principle" to sending troops with US President George Bush in the summer of 2003 at Camp David. The US can claim credit for the upturn in Pakistan's macro-economic indicators: American loans, grants, aid and facilitation in rescheduling debt liabilities, including home remittances, did it. But does this help entitle the US to own Pakistan -- creating a master and slave relationship -- in perpetuity? Haven't American purposes in Afghanistan and regarding al-Qaeda and Taliban been adequately served? Can't the two be ever quits?

Sending troops now to Iraq involves putting them in harm's way; they will be legitimate targets of infuriated Iraqis. They can be ambushed, shot at or subjected to suicide attacks. On human grounds alone, Islamabad should muster courage to say 'no' to the request of -- who? Allawi, the nominee of Paul Bremer and hated by most Iraqis; and or Kofi Annan whose august organisation and himself have been so mercilessly used and manoeuvred by America that both have lost credibility.

The touchstone on which the question of sending troops should be tested is: under whose operational command will they be in Iraq? The US is very particular on this point: all foreign troops in Iraq will remain under American command. Therefore, the Pak troops will be at the beck and call of Americans. Moreover, sending troops means Pakistan accepts American aims as its own. Do all Pakistanis agree that what the US is embarked on in Asia is morally just and is a noble aim? It had better find enough reserves of will to say the simple N word.

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# Plight of the Arakanese Muslims

MOHAMMAD ZAHIR GAFFARI M A RAHIM

THE Arakanese make up a significant Muslim community in Burma. Inter-religious rioting earlier last year has seen this group increasingly become the focus of media attention as well as state and societal persecution.

In the 7<sup>th</sup> century, Muslim invaders called Rohan or Rohang conquered what is now the northern Arakan state. It is said that eleven Bangali fishermen from the west (now Bangladesh), founded the northern part of Arakan state including its capital Akyab (now known as Sittwe). However, while the Arakanese Muslims claim descent from the ancient Rohan and while there have been Muslims in Burma for centuries, in

general all Muslims are viewed as outsiders.

Nowadays, Muslim residents of Arakan state face problems even being recognised as citizens of Burma. During the Nagamin public campaign which aimed to clarify the status of Burma's residents in 1977, the Muslim population faced pressure to leave the country. In Arakan state, this campaign degenerated into attacks on Muslims by both civilians and military forces.

More recently, the 1982 citizenship law threatened the status of many Muslims living in Burma. The law required proof of residence by an ancestor prior to the British annexation of Burma in 1882 for full citizenship, but this only applied to residents who were not members of "indigenous races" such as Shan, Chin, Karen, Rakhine etc.

Groups of Arakanese Muslims numbering more than 300,000 fled across the border to Bangladesh in late 1970s and 1990s. For even a casual observer, the pressure on Muslims in Arakan is impossible to ignore. Segregation and religious tensions between Arakanese Buddhist Maghs and Muslim communities have only increased resentment and conflict.

Suspicion has deepened among people following the establishment of militarism and Burmanisation since 1962, inciting hatred among different religious groups. Freedom of religion and movement for the Muslims have been restricted. Since that time, no Muslim has been appointed to high government positions, and many Muslims employed in government

offices have been dismissed. General citizens of Myanmar are given a Pink Card as their identification, but Arakanese Muslims usually get a white temporary second class citizenship card.

Furthermore, citizen rights are also limited. No Muslim is permitted to construct or shift his residence and business from one town to another. There are no facilities for them for shopping in the markets in almost all towns of Arakan state. In universities, institutes and colleges there are no opportunities for the Muslims for advanced education in specialised departments with similar discrimination as in the government services. Lands belonging to mosques and religious institutions also have been

seized.

The first half of 2001 was marked by two instances of Muslim-Buddhist sectarian violence. The violence first occurred in Sittwe on February 4 when two hundred innocent Muslim youths and helpless persons were shot to death, about fifteen hundred were missing and one thousand were seriously injured, two thousand Muslim-owned buildings were burned, thirty-seven mosques were destroyed.

On May 16, rioting broke out again in Bago division. At least one hundred Muslims including four Muslim leaders were murdered; at least twenty mosques and a thousand homes and businesses were destroyed. Then anti-Muslim riot spread to three other districts in this division, and by the time order was established the death toll had risen to no

less than three hundred with more than ten thousand people left homeless.

The actions of the military regime only increased tensions. Muslim refugees who fled from Hpa-an district in Karen state to refugee camps in Thailand claimed increased persecution at the hands of soldiers. The right of Muslims to move around the country were curtailed. Moreover, it was reported that the military regime banned building of new mosques and the refurbishment of old ones.

Two incidents of violence against Muslims in Arakan state left deep scars on them. Clashes between Rakhine Buddhist Maghs and Muslim students in Akyab (Sittwe) University in Arakan province started on February 18, 2004. Among the two hundred Muslim university students, no one still could

attend class as they were beaten, tortured and banned throughout the town. Thirty Muslim students were currently in detention.

Conflicts between Muslims and non-Muslims in Burma will continue to be a serious problem well into the future until they are addressed appropriately. It is noteworthy that Burma is presently one of the few countries in the world where militarism remain in practice. As all are well aware, in 1988 the dictatorship massacred several thousand people in Burma, which enraged the entire population.

As reported by the UN Special Reporter, the military junta continues to violate all human rights, engaging in extra-judicial and arbitrary executions, forced disappearances, rape, arbitrary seizure of

land and property, forced labour, arrests, torture, detention without trial, inhuman treatment of prisoners leading to illness and death in custody, forced relocations -- all directed against ethnic minorities. This has resulted in a flow of refugees to neighbouring countries while restrictions on movement is faced by Muslims in Arakan and harassment, arrest and detention of opposition NLD member led by Nobel Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi and of students continue. It is most urgent to put an end to all these brutal acts and ensure peaceful living of the Arakanese Muslims in their homeland.

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