

Management of 1998 flood: An experience to emulate

AHMAD MAHMUDUR RAZA CHOWDHURY

THE country has once again been ravaged by, a deluge of extraordinary magnitude. Although there is signs of flood water receding now but the fear of another bout of flood looms large in the horizon. The period stretching upto first fortnight of September is fraught with danger. The purpose of this article is to look at the salient features of the management techniques of 1998 flood which was worst in our living memory and secondly, if we can make use of any lessons learnt from that year's experience.

Flood: 1998

Amid flood situation deteriorating with maddening unpredictability and the weather prophets failing to make any definite prognosis, the first meeting of the National Disaster Management Council (NDMC) was held with the PM in the chair on 16 July,1998. As more and more areas were engulfed, the marooned people needed food, shelter, medicines, clothes, drinking water and what not? (even dry match box and candle). Cattle were swept away and 53 of country's 64 districts were crying for succour. In retrospect, when the total flood management of 1998 is looked through an analytical prism today, four glowing bands appear prominent. They are: a) Relief operation; b) Post flood rehabilitation programme; c) Resource mobilisation and d) Coordination, supervision and monitoring.

Relief operation

Identification of genuinely distressed families, making food stocks available in local godowns with arrangements for quick replenishments from CSDs/silos, providing medicines, ORS, water purifying tablets and guarding against misappropriation of relief materials were the foremost tasks that had to be addressed with utmost care, firmness and precision. Armed Forces Division (AFD) was integrated in the operation and normal channel of inter-ministerial communication was short-circuited at times to facilitate prompt action. NGOs were persuaded to mobilise their resources to augment government's relief effort. (This year, somehow, NGOs' involvement appears to be less pronounced). Partisan politics took the back seat and the local administration was advised to involve the local people irrespective of their political leanings. Nearly 2800 shelter centers were operating and more than 4000 medical teams worked ceaselessly. The supply of relief materials from friendly countries was so synchronised that life saving drugs and water purifying tablets were

airlifted first on priority basis.

Rehabilitation

A massive rehabilitation programme was mounted to salvage the economy derailed by the flood. VGF programme covered 4.2 million families under which nearly 20 million people were fed for long seven months and in some areas even up to nine months. This had not only saved lives of millions but also averted a mass exodus of rural population to the capital. Rehabilitation programmes were drawn in health, agriculture, fisheries and livestock, communication, water and irrigation sectors.

Resource mobilisation

Post flood rehabilitation programme required resources that far exceeded the budgetary allocations and ADP provisions for the fiscal. To meet the yawning gap between the demand and targeted domestic production the government imported 4.62 million tons of foodgrains. Private sector was also involved in import and sale of foodgrains and in fact, 62 per cent of the total import was made by the private sector(2.88m.mt). Besides, the government provided Tk.32,000 million agricultural loan to be disbursed through banking channel. Since the government had invoked assistance from the international community well ahead and the response was encouraging, restructuring of country's economic, monetary and fiscal measures could quickly be accomplished. Top priority was assigned to agriculture, communication, fisheries and livestock and rebuilding of basic infrastructure.

Coordination -- the crux of management

An effective and functional coordination mechanism was a sine-qua-non for any operation of this magnitude. There was not only need for inter-ministerial and inter agency coordination within the government but the coordination exercise had to embrace the NGOs and international agencies who played pivotal role in the total chain of activities.

In a prompt move, a central Cell was set up at the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) which was primarily run by the personal staff of the PM, few officers drawn from the PMO and representatives of the AFD. The Cell would brief the PM on day to day situation. It was carefully run in a manner that it did not intervene directly with the normal functioning of formal government channels or committees at various levels. It was in effect, supervision and monitoring from a distance without sitting on the shoulders of formal bodies. The bottlenecks were identified and

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prompt actions were taken to remove those snags. Almost everyday, the district administrations were contacted over telephone to know the ground realities there. Few examples will elaborate the working mechanism of the cell.

Towards the beginning, there were some reports of pilferage the reason being that the carrying cost had to be met by selling a portion of the foodgrains. When this was brought to the notice of the PM she instantly changed the system and allocated money from her own relief fund to be used as carrying costs. This proved to be an effective deterrent to relief misappropriation. The cell drew up a nationwide scheme to replenish the local food godowns immediately and the food department was asked to

implement and monitor the replenishment process so that at least 15 days' revolving stock was made available at each lowest level godown. For any impasse, they would contact the Cell immediately. Similar mechanism was also drawn for medicine, ORS, water-purifying tablet, C.I. Sheet and sundry others. There were occasions when the Cell would ask the local administration to deliver urgent relief materials from government godowns/ storage facilities pending arrival of D.O. The Cell would take responsibility for this act of irregularity. The people in the central Cell worked with zeal and confidence and did not procrastinate actions for time consuming bureaucratic formalities. It was the immediate intervention by the PMO

that ensured procurement of medicine and water purifying tablets on a priority basis and this move was prompted by a news report in media.

The PM would visit flood affected areas almost everyday although some visits had to be cancelled or rescheduled for inclement weather or because of helicopters being unable to land. Her intensive tour gave her clear understanding and first hand impression on the colossus of the flood. She would leave Dhaka in the morning, return in the evening and hold review meetings with various agencies after magreb prayer on the daily situation.

News reports on flood in media were treated with utmost seriousness. The personal staff would scan the newspapers and no news item on

corruption, scarcity of materials or instances of administrative lapses or cases of irresponsibility would go unattended. The man at the job would receive a telephone call from somebody in the PMO for clarification on the report. Not that all newspaper reports were found credible but many reports helped detect snags which prompted timely intervention of the Cell that saved the programme.

By August 1998 the full-blown flood was unleashing havoc with severe ferocity. Foreign media reports expressed concern that millions might die of starvation, disease and malnutrition. But the PM in her usual gusto loudly declared that not a single person would be allowed to die on any of these counts.

The government's decision to



The all-engulfing flood of 1998.

PHOTO: COURTESY DRIK

No Vietcong in Iraq

The only way out of this global crisis is the United Nations. Defanged by the US and haemorrhaging credibility, this institution still offers the best hope for peace in Iraq. Only a UN-led multinational force can bring stability to the region, replacing the US as the primary player in the region, and at the same time, removing the most effective recruiting tool for the fanatical insurgents.

NAEEM MOHAIEMEN writes from New York

LOOKING at the scared faces of Tilak Raj, Sukhdev Singh and Antaryami, we have to ask, are these really the agents of Neo-Empire? Desperate men, who went to Iraq for their Kuwaiti employer, are now hostages and pawns in the power struggle between the Occupation and the Insurgency. The fate of the seven new hostages -- three Indian, three Kenyan, and one Egyptian truck driver -- illustrates that the Iraqi insurgency is no heroic rebel army. By targeting civilians and employing brutal methods, they have lost any righteous air, just as the US occupation force has also lost its own legitimacy.

Speaking to the Indian press Sher Singh, one hostage's father said, "With great hopes we had sent our son abroad in April this year by selling a piece of land. Little did we know that we will have to face this." His wife Jaspal Kaur added, "What can we do? We are very poor people." It is desperate poverty like this that forces millions of Indians, Pakistanis, and Bangladeshis to work in sub-human conditions in the Middle East and Gulf region, and it is that same cycle that has trapped these seven men in this terrifying ordeal.

When I read about the Indian hostages, I was reminded of my old barber in Bangladesh, Himangshu Datta. One day, in the middle of cutting my hair, he calmly informed me that he was changing his religion to Islam, at least on paper. Apparently, in the tremendous outflow of Bangladeshi migrant workers to Dubai, being Muslim sometimes gave an advantage in unspoken quotas. In the hopes of getting a job as a sweeper in one of the government offices, he was going to get a certificate with a Muslim name. I asked him what he would do about his nether regions, and he sadly answered, "Listen, I need to make some money to send back to my family

in the village. I will do anything."

For a man to abandon his religion for migrant-level work in the Middle East, with its nightmarish work standards, speaks volumes about the desperate poverty people are escaping. A recent Human Rights Watch report even described the condition of Indian and Bangladeshi workers in Saudi Arabia as "near slavery" -- and yet, the flow of migration continues unabated. Commentators talk about fanatical hordes in the Third World, willing to die for religion. But the experience of migrant workers shows that poverty trumps ideology and religion as a driving force for the vast, working class population of these nations. In this aspect, they share a commonality with the GIs who are mostly from the American underclass, and joined the army not for ideology, but to escape poverty.

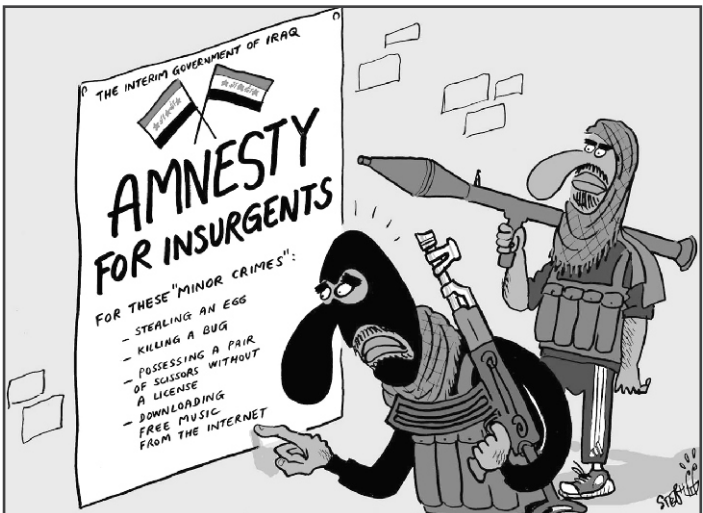
By kidnapping poor migrants, and using them as pawns to punish the US occupation, the insurgents of "Holders of the Black Banner" show their brutal streak of inhumanity. I view with similar distrust groups such as the Al-Mahdi Army, Ansar al-Islam, Jamaat al-Tawhid wa'l-Jihad, and Jaysh

Mohammed. During the Vietnam War, anti-war activists saw the Vietcong as a people's liberation army because they stood up to the US army. But in the present crisis, there are no good sides, reflective of our tangled global politics.

Many of us in the modern anti-war movement opposed the US invasion, and true to our predictions, the occupation has turned into a bloody mess and a recruiting ground for fanatics and terrorists. But in opposing the occupation, we also cannot find anything to support among the insurgents. Especially for those of us from majority-Muslim nations, Muqtada al-Sadr or Abu Mussab al-Zarqawi are no latter-day Che Guevaras.

The only way out of this global crisis is the United Nations. Defanged by the US and haemorrhaging credibility, this institution still offers the best hope for peace in Iraq. Only a UN-led multinational force can bring stability to the region, replacing the US as the primary player in the region, and at the same time, removing the most effective recruiting tool for the fanatical insurgents.

Naeem Mohaiemen is Editor of Shobak.Org.



Business planning -- a look at some major benefits

KAZI ALAUDDIN AHMED

MANAGEMENT experts consider planning very much synonymous with decision making. For it is planning that forces a clearer definition of what the company is trying to be. As a matter of fact, planning demands the development of specific work to accomplish its objectives.

Among the critical benefits that can be derived from business planning, the most important has been its direct assistance to managerial problem solving. Yet the manifold benefits accrued from business planning do not stop at any particular point. The companies which are serious about their planning are able to find a number of byproduct benefits generating almost automatically. Perhaps the most important among them is the impact of planning upon managerial decision making.

In order to determine the corporate objectives of a company, the process of planning is of paramount importance so much so that it clarifies many hitherto vague points and misunderstanding. Once thought through and committed to writing, objectives provide the clearest kind of guidance to managers and others at all levels who must make decisions and take action in support of them.

It is a very true that a proper business plan makes management decisions far less opportunistic. Because planning forces the kind of prior analysis that downgrades the making of "seat of the pants" decisions. This is as it should be. Snap judgement decision making of the past by an astute manager has turned out nowadays to be a mind of luxury in today's highly competitive business atmosphere.

The cost of making a business decision has risen many times what it was just a scant 10 or 20 years ago. For example, the cost of new plant and equipment, of personnel development, developing of a new product and introducing it into the market-place, to name only a few areas where company expenditures have soared. Decisions affecting these areas now are for move consequential than they have been in the past partly because of

Planning encourages better use of time at all levels. All efforts are targeted on meaningful activities and through integration of work, redundancy and useless wheel spinning are virtually eliminated.

the large sums of money that must be committed. In the presence of such kinds of factors at play, proper planning provides enough scope for analytical type of decision which is far more likely to be in the better interests of the business than any opportunistic decision. The reason is that it is based more closely upon fact and a systematic weighing of alternative actions. In any case planning should not be thought of as restrictive or as a retirement when it comes to making managerial decisions.

There is yet another significant byproduct of the planning process. It is the better communication that it affords. Indeed the plan turns out to be management's most effective communication tools because it contains a written account of everything that is vital to the business for the period covered by the plan. As such, it is irreplaceable in creating an intelligent understanding of what is expected at levels where it is exposed. Concurrently, it can virtually eliminate the kind of misunderstanding that a business normally faces when its plans are carried around in someone's head rather than recorded for the appropriate managers to read, understand, and work with.

Another most handy advantage that a well-designed and written business plan has, is its support to a far more realistic appraisal of an individual manager's work. This is because the plan contains a detailed outline of specific action assignments for the period covered. With this, the manager has a detailed measurement device which has been agreed to by the people who have been assigned work responsibilities as a part of the plan. Appraisal then becomes meaningful because the manager can compare results against the programmed action and never forced to rely upon vague appraisals.

It can also be expected that, with proper planning morale will be raised

substantially, almost automatically. The plan as a communication tool tells what is to be done, how it is to be done and who will do it. Many the questions which introduce a high content of personal insecurity into any business are clarified. When security is ensured confidence is built which in turn, instills a desire in the individual manager/ employee to a better job since, by now a clearer understanding of what is to be done and why it is important is available to the concerned person(s). In a single word -- motivation, which, of course, is the essence of morale.

The presence of a comprehensive company plan, it is claimed, helps attract capable people. In the same manner, once an individual is part of the organisation and sees for himself

import four million mt of foodgrains was one thing and reaching the food to the needy was different. It was an uphill task. Long chain of activities were involved in the process. Finalisation of purchase contracts, opening of LC, availability of vessels, timely shipment, unloading at sea and land ports, port congestions and last but by far not the least, transporting the food grains to the deep interior were few major steps that demanded close monitoring. A cleavage at any point would jeopardize the total process. Special meetings were held separately with Bangladesh Bank, railway, port authority and shipping ministry, NBR and sundry others. BB monitored banking operations keeping close liaison with finance ministry. Ports were made to operate at their optimum efficiency and railway authorities were instructed to mobilise whatever available wagons they had to evacuate the offloaded grains from the ports (land and sea) to destinations.

It was a Herculean task that needed intense coordination and monitoring. The Cell had to maintain accounts of wagons, pinpoint their locations and see that these were returned to the ports immediately after discharging goods at the destination. Through an ingenious mechanism it was possible to say with precision how many wagons were lying at which outlying stations at any point of time either due to oversight of some railway officials or for the shortage of locomotives.

Special feeder service of BIWTC bergs were commissioned to carry export related goods between Narayanjan/Demra and Chittagong/Mongla ports to meet shipment deadlines. Massive import of foodgrains coupled with fall in export (resulting from flood) brought tremendous pressure on country's FE reserves. Policy options were weighed and decisions taken to meet any eventuality. The relief minister spent days together in the affected areas, the agricultural minister visited rural areas to see for herself the condition of farmers and identify pitfalls in the agri-rehabilitation programme and the finance minister kept liaison with donors and oversaw the working of fiscal and monetary measures. Inflationary effect on food items was marginal. The advisor to PM on agricultural affairs sat regularly with people from SPARRSO and allied scientific organisations and scanned the weather satellite data obtained through the courtesy of Japanese GSM satellite and advised the policy planners. The PMO was kept open on Saturdays.

These are only few instances and examples could be multiplied. This aptly demonstrates how a close knit

coordination, supervision and monitoring mechanism was brought into operation that kept the juggernaut of disaster management under the grip of the government.

This year quick home work is essential before events slip out of control. Dark cloud looms large and no longer can we afford to sit on the fence knowing well that international agencies, too, suffer from bureaucratic constipation. Water borne diseases are spreading wildly and dengue is a new menace this time. There are reports of shortage of medicines, water purifying tablets and the law and order situation is not at a satisfactory level.

While stressing upon the need for an action oriented, down to earth coordination mechanism, it goes without saying that the apex unit should work from a distance and should not get involved in the day to day activities of ministries, agencies or coordination committees at various levels. The central coordination body should be more of a policy formulating body, a hard task master whose foremost responsibility is to ensure accountability at each tier of administration and getting things done by removing bottlenecks. In 1998, it was a national crisis and obviously country's top office had to assume command and responsibility. It was a gigantic task the success of which would find many authors but failure would point fingers at the top only.

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Now that the country has again been subjected to the scourge of flood, we must be adequately equipped to face the cataclysm. Intelligent people learn from others' experience and we too can draw heavily on the lessons learnt from the experience of 1998 flood. It is no longer treading through an uncharted hostile sea. All the information is available in government offices. Just dig out those files, clean the dusts and see how best can we be benefited from the knowledge and experience buried in the files of that unforgettable year. There is a success story of Bangladesh which is worth emulating.

Ahmad Mahmudur Raza Chowdhury is a former civil servant.