

Rehabilitating flood-ravaged rural infrastructure

An elegy for Humayun Azad

M.ABDUL LATIF MONDAL

"**F**INANCE and Planning Minister M. Saifur Rahman ... directed the ministries to immediately start rehabilitation of flood-ravaged rural infrastructure with the Tk.1500 crore in repair funds provided in the budget," read The Daily Star on August 6.

The Finance and Planning Minister gave this directive in a meeting held on August 5 with the secretaries of the relevant ministries. It was also revealed in the meeting that in this year's budget, Tk.553 crore had been allocated for repairs and maintenance to the Roads and Highways Department, Tk. 370 crore to Local Government and Rural Development Ministry, Tk. 250 crore to Public Works Department, Tk.110 crore to Disaster Management and Relief Ministry and Tk. 70 crore to Education Ministry. According to newspaper reports, the Finance and Planning Minister directed the Finance Division to immediately release repair funds according to the needs highlighted by the ministries. He assured that the on-going Annual Development Programme (ADP) projects, financed by the government from its own resources or by the development partners would continue along with the post-flood rehabilitation programme.

Exact damage to the rural infrastructure caused by the recent flood is yet to be ascertained. The damage will, however, be much more than what the preliminary reports suggest. Agriculture, the lifeline of rural as well as national economy, the cottage and small industries, fisheries, livestock and poultry and some other self-employment generating sectors of the rural economy have been very badly damaged. So, rehabilitation of flood-ravaged rural infrastructure and revitalising the self-employment generating sectors there deserve the highest priority.

Let us now identify some important problems that may hamper timely implementation of such programme:

When the final reports on flood-ravaged rural infrastructure will be available, it may be found that Tk.1500 crore earmarked for repairs and maintenance in the current year's budget will be absolutely inadequate to meet the required demands for funds. If government funds from less priority programmes are not shortly

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PHOTO: AFP

transferred to the rehabilitation programme, then the programme may suffer a setback.

Works for the repair of rural infrastructure ravaged by the recent flood will require selection and appointment of contractors. Similarly, purchase of fertiliser for the agriculture sector will require selection and appointment of suppliers. For all these tenders have to be floated giving a reasonable period of time for submission of offers. Tenders will normally be floated and evaluated by the concerned attached departments and/or by the statutory public organisations. Since the attached departments enjoy very little financial authority, most of the offers received against tenders for repair works will

come to the government in the concerned administrative ministry for final evaluation and approval. Although, according to a circular issued by the Cabinet Division in 1994, public statutory bodies enjoy more financial powers than the departments, yet any construction purchase above Tk. 5 crore by the small public statutory organisations and above Tk. 10 crore by the big organisations will require approval of the government. This is a time consuming process.

The decision making in the ministries of the government has been highly centralised under the Rules of Business (1996). Under the defunct Rules of Business (1975), the Minister in charge of a ministry was responsible for policy matters concerning his ministry and for implementation thereof. The Rules of Business (1996) made during the period of immediate past Awami League government added that "all business allocated to a Ministry/ Division under Schedule I of these Rules shall be disposed of by, or under the general or special directions of the Minister-in-charge (rule-4)." The status of the secretary as "the official head of the Ministry/Division" was abolished. The above addition/amendment means that hardly any case relating to purchase of materials, equipment, etc. and appointment of contractors or any other issue can be disposed of at the level of the secretary of the ministry, not to speak of at a level below him. The political boss i.e. the minister remains under heavy pressure from different interest groups for favouring them with the decision of awarding contracts, consultancy, procurement, etc. It needs no repetition that procurement of materials, equipment, etc., appointment of contractors and consultants are the major areas of corruption in our public offices. There is no dearth of instances to show that tenders on the above cases had to be invited several times on considerations which were more political than technical. We should not rule out such happenings in the instant programme for the rehabilitation of rural infrastructure.

Obstructing submission of tender documents and snatching tender boxes have become a regular feature in the country for the last two decades or so. The activists of the major political parties, particularly the political party/parties in power, under the patronage of "godfathers" have been mainly responsible for such criminal activities. There is every possibility of recurrence of such incidents when

tenders for repair works to rehabilitate rural infrastructure will be invited. This may seriously hamper timely implementation of the rehabilitation programme.

Extortionists under the shelter of their "godfathers" may create problems in the timely implementation of repair works of the rehabilitation programme. They will go on demanding huge amount of money from the contractors. Instances are there when contractors, businessmen and many others had to give their lives for refusal to meet the demands of the extortionists. Refusal by any contractor(s) to meet the demands of the extortionists may lead to delay in the implementation of the programme.

In order to minimise the above problems for timely implementation of the flood-ravaged rural infrastructure, the government will have to take certain actions. Some of the actions are suggested below:

λ Funds from the low priority programmes need to be transferred to the programme for rehabilitation of flood-ravaged rural infrastructure so that fund shortage does not hamper implementation of works. Reportedly, the government is thinking to suspend execution of less priority projects in the ADP during the current financial year.

λ For the current financial year, the heads of attached departments may be given financial authority to approve tender(s) for repair of flood-ravaged rural infrastructure up to Tk.5 crore as per recommendation(s) of the duly constituted tender committee(s). Field level officers may also be delegated appropriate financial power. This will expedite implementation of the rehabilitation programme. This is suggested because of the fact that according to the resident UN coordinator, Bangladesh will need at least a year to recover from the flood inflicted effects on her economy. The government may review the merits and demerits of delegation of such financial powers after one year and take appropriate decision.

λ The secretaries of the ministries may be delegated financial authority to finally dispose of cases of appointment of contractors for repair works up to Tk.10 crore on the recommendation of the tender committee headed by the head of the department. The cases involving Tk. more than 10 crore will go to the minister for approval. This will help the minister to avoid many a embarrassing situation on the one hand and expedite decision making in such cases on the other.

λ Huge amounts of money will be spent for rehabilitation of different flood-ravaged sectors of the economy. The Daily Star has thus suggested that "parliamentary bi-partisan committees be specifically formed and tasked to supervise the spending which could act as checks and balances against corruption on the one hand, and partisan spending on the other." This suggestion deserves positive response from the government.

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A.H. JAFFOR ULLAH

OUR friend Humayun Azad has gone to a place where he could have a serene sleeping. He does not have to worry about the constant barrage of threatening and menacing phone calls from the few of his countrymen who never saw flowers in his writings; only the thorns that adorned his creative works bothered them immensely.

Early in the morning on Friday, August 13, 2004, Jahed Ahmed, an activist from Atlantic City, New Jersey, woke me up. His grave voice in the telephone gave me a chill. He told me that Prof. Humayun Azad of Dhaka University had passed away. "Where? When?" I asked impatiently. A nervous Jahed Ahmed told me that the writer had gone to the other world in his sleep in a dormitory room in Munich, Germany.

I was privileged to know that Professor Azad was heading to Germany anytime soon. He badly wanted this. For him, life in Bangladesh was synonymous to living in Hell thanks to some of the menacing Islamic extremists who were hell-bent on killing him on the charge of being an apostate.

Unlike all of us who have to die one in their lifetime, Professor Azad died twice. On February 27, 2004, as he exited the Book Fair from Bangla Academy premises, a bunch of religious extremists jumped on him, and tried to decapitate the pedagogue. The sustained injury put him into a death-like condition for over four-five days. He was in a coma. He came out of his transient death and went on to live for an extra 166 days. The army doctors in CMH gave him the critical care in the wake of his deadly attack. Then he was sent to Bangkok by the government for additional medical treatment. Among other medical treatment, he needed extensive plastic surgery to erase the signs of the brutal attack. Prof. Azad returned to Dhaka triumphantly after a month-long treatment abroad. And we wishfully thought his trouble with Islamists was over. But how wrong we were in our simple assumption!

No sooner Professor Azad could rehabilitate to his normal life, a fusillade of threatening phone calls started coming to him and his family members. In July 2004, his only son, Anonnya, had a run-in with some virulent Islamists as he was returning from school. They tried to abduct him. However, due to Anonnya's presence of

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We knew that he was heading for Germany. We, his well-wishers, heaved a great sigh of relief knowing that he would be far from harm's way in Germany where he could devote his time to passion, i.e., writing. But little did we know what was in store for him. Death's cold hand had touched him so abruptly. Now we are grieving his untimely death.

Professor Azad and I were born in the same year. Therefore, his death has special meaning to me. The very impermanence of life must have bothered every one of us. His premature death is a poignant reminder that life is short but art is long. Professor Azad belonged to a rare literati class of Bangladesh whose number is diminishing by the day. His family members, colleagues, students, freethinkers, and well-wishers will sorely miss him.

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This is time for grieving and not pointing fingers at those who are responsible for his premature death. With saddened heart, I am reminded of this short poem written by American poet Emily Dickinson perhaps directed to our fallen angel, Humayun Azad:

To fight aloud is very brave,
But gallanter, I know,
Who charge within the bosom,
The cavalry of woe.

Who win, and nations do not see,
Who fall, and none observe,
Whose dying eyes no country
Regards with patriot love.

We trust, in plumed procession,
For such the angels go,
Rank after rank, with even feet
And uniforms of snow.

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