

Combatting the north-eastern flood

ALTAFUR RAHMAN

THIS year nature did not spare Bangladesh like it had in the past few flood free years. The flood water played havoc with millions of lives when around 700 people died and 10 million became homeless. The country sustained staggering losses in terms of damage to agriculture, destruction of homes, death of livestock, damage to infrastructure such as roads, rail tracks and electric towers. The preliminary flood damage this year is estimated around US \$7 billion. Needless to say the human misery and sufferings that accompanied the flood heightened even after the water receded.

Absence of mega rivers

It has been noticed that in the north eastern districts, bordering India, there is an absence of mega rivers. The flood water coming across the border has to travel a long distance to discharge into the mighty Meghna or upstream Bailai, Surma and Kushiara or old Brahmaputra river. The old Brahmaputra that branches out of the Jamuna (also known as main Brahmaputra) meanders through the greater Mymensingh district. Instead of draining waters of the north eastern catchments during the flood season, it brings more water from the Jamuna (main Brahmaputra) delaying the discharge of the receding flood water from Sunamganj and Sylhet area.

It is imperative that whatever small and big rivers that exist in this north eastern area must be dredged regularly. Also all the Haors (wet land and watersheds), canals, tanks must be excavated periodically. Many of the rivers in this region criss-cross the east-west plane rather than the north-south path, thus blocking water instead of draining it. If a barrage on the old Brahmaputra could be constructed, it could close the water intake of the main Brahmaputra (during flood barrage gates can be kept open unless they are built strong enough to withstand the flood water) during the flood season. This would not only improve the drainage of flood water from the north-eastern area, but would also divert the flood water of main Brahmaputra river from getting into this region already worsened by flood waters.

Almost every year, the water bodies get filled up to the brim. There is hardly any safety margin left between the water line and dry land to prevent flooding. This safety margin needs to be increased by dredging or raising the earth floor or by constructing dikes. There is also the need to maintain balance between dry land and low flood plains so that flood water can be accommodated and drained out in

time. In Dhaka City and its surrounding areas the ratio between dry land and flood plains has been upset to a dangerous level, because of earth filling due to increasing demand for housing for a rising population. To offset this change the government may relax the building height restriction to allow construction of tall buildings to accommodate the ever increasing population.

The reasons for the recurrent floods are heavy rainfalls in the catchments due to global warming and consequently the "el nino" and "la lina" phenomena causing natural siltation of river beds and of flood plains. Other reasons are earth tremors, denudation of trees, increasing surface water and soil run off, change of course, river erosion, tidal changes, change in wind directions, sea level rise, synchronisation of flood in the Padma, Jamuna and Meghna rivers, accretion of land within rivers due to reduced water flow, lack of land use zoning, filling of

contain flood water, dredging silted rivers to enhance its water retention capacity, widening flood plains to lower the impact, constructing dams to store flood water, transferring inter basin water to reduce water excavation of Haors and watersheds etc. No single measure can control floods in such a large environmental system in Bangladesh covering the deltaic formation created by the confluence of three of the mightiest rivers on the planet.

The government is yet to reach a decision on a national flood protection programme although it has chartered a National Water Policy and approved the National Water Management Plan. The former emphasises on measures like embankment and dredging. The later has set out 64 programmes for implementation across the country. These include structural flood control measures such as construction of embankments and dredging and non-structural measures such

flood mitigation. It is also not possible to control floods with the effort of one or two authorities. This is because each year the origination of flood, its area, quantum, duration, intensity, impact may differ making it a multi sectoral challenge. Floods have to be tackled in all of its form, at every tier, and at every opportunity.

Independent body

At present mainly Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB) together with Local Government Engineering Department (LGED) is engaged in flood protection measures, BWDB is a large organisation and it is entrusted with, apart from flood control measures, the construction of irrigation structures, management of river erosion, and land reclamation, which in themselves are huge tasks. The government must entrust flood control measures to an autonomous authority, which will be solely devoted to tackle this challenge. Such an independent organ-

raising the height of already constructed embankments, should do so by dredging rivers instead of digging the nearby land. Private dredging boats could complement the government ones. Indigenous dredger boats are used to collect sand from river beds on a commercial basis for mainly the construction industry. These boats could be utilised to remove sand from river beds as a planned control measure and also their dredging capacity could be fitted into a well drawn flood mitigation plan. In winter, many of the rivers usually dry up or have little water flow. This is the time when river beds could be excavated to enlarge the river's water holding capacity.

Floods must also be fought at the individual, family, community, local authority, national, regional and international level. An individual can help by planting trees, a family can join hands with other families to raise the earth wall around their

emission of carbon dioxide (the chief culprit for global warming), by the energy industry in USA, would go a long way to reduce global warming. Similarly, the Bangladesh government's implementation of forestation and other flood control measures could ease the intensity and extent of flooding. However, it seems the US government, for now at least, is satisfied with handing out flood aid rather than restricting its ever growing industry to cut on gas emission.

Flood shelter

During the present flood crisis, the water rose to a level where people had to take shelter on higher grounds such as embankments, schools, government buildings, highways. In some places, people were seen taking shelter on trucks stranded in water on roads and highways. Many people had to walk long distances to find a dry place. These shelters were far and few. Flood shelters, like the cyclone shelters built in the coastal areas, should be constructed especially in the most flood prone places across the country. Such shelters should have adequate sanitary facilities in order to stop the outbreak of diarrhoea and cholera, a common aftermath of flood. This year the flood has taken such a mega scale that even Sylhet city and smaller towns of the eastern region were not spared.

The Sylhet city lacked defenses against such a massive flooding. The river Kushiara despite having fairly high earth walls in some places, lacks wide flood plains and flows dangerously too close to Sylhet town. So when this river overflows, it deluges Sylhet. Sylhet city is also highly vulnerable to floods from the flood plains in the north. As a matter of fact recently the entire north eastern region was under chest deep water. There was no dry spot around to bury dead bodies.

If flood shelters cannot be constructed above flood levels, it too would be flooded. To overcome this drawback the government should either construct stilt buildings or build steel barges like those towed by tugs or steamers in the inland waterways. These could become useful flood shelters as these would float irrespective of the level of the flood water. Barges could be placed in the Haor area where there is no high land. If necessary, they could be constructed two storey high to accommodate more people. These barges, if properly maintained, could have a life of 100 years utilising them as makeshift schools and hospitals during normal times.

It is hoped that in the next Parliament session, flood protection measures will be given utmost importance, and members of both the government and the opposition party will equally participate to come up with permanent solutions to fight the menacing floods. Shouldn't they?

Floods must be fought at the individual, family, community, local authority, national, regional and international level. An individual can help by planting trees, a family can join hands with other families to raise the earth wall around their houses, a community can think and come up with ways of how to protect the plinth of the shared homesteads, the local authority can initiate canal digging, nationally the government can implement costly flood control programmes, regionally advanced flood warning processes can be set up, and internationally long term impacts on floods, due to global warming and consequently sea level rise, must be studied and tackled.



Flooded localities: Heightened misery



low lands and hampering of water drainage by unplanned infrastructures etc. It is worth question why the incidence of flooding has increased globally in recent years. It seems we are caught in a vicious circle of global warming leading to more rain, more flood, deforestation, more surface and silt run off, more siltation of rivers, more flooding.

Flood protection
There is a sharp division of opinion on the use of appropriate measures for flood protection, including river training to confine rivers, construction of embankments along rivers to

as afforestation and flood proofing that requires rising of ground level of homesteads. At present flood protection measures are taken on ad hoc basis. In the existing budget, Tk 1,132 crores has been allocated for water development. The government should double or rather triple the budget allocation and implement a nation wide flood protection programme.

The Flood Action Plan (FAP), especially about controlled flooding, did not get general public endorsement. Although much comprehensive studies have been conducted and pilot projects undertaken for

sation will be more effective and efficient than any government body. The government should also consider deployment of army engineers for flood protection measures. The engineers of Bangladesh Army have constructed the Marine Drive in Cox's Bazar, they could also participate in the construction of anti-flood measures. In the USA the army engineers were engaged in containing floods of the Mississippi river in 1993.

Dredging

Both public and private initiatives should be utilised in controlling floods. The government, while constructing embankments or

houses, a community can think and come up with ways of how to protect the plinth of the shared homesteads, the local authority can initiate canal digging, nationally the government can implement costly flood control programmes, regionally advanced flood warning processes can be set up, and internationally long term impacts on floods, due to global warming and consequently sea level rise, must be studied and tackled. It seems that for the floods in Bangladesh, the Capital Hill and the White House are as much responsible as Bangabhaban. The clamping of the

WTO: At last a silver lining for the poor nations?

AMM SHAHABUDDIN

AS they say, hope springs eternal in human breast. So the eternal hope for a much-coveted compromise and understanding, based on a balanced 'give-and-take' policy between the two opposing economic groups, the rich, developed so-called First World on one hand, and on the other, the poor developing Third World countries, had at last sprung a surprise at the recently concluded (31 July) WTO (World Trade Organisation) Geneva conference, putting the derailed 'Doha Round' of global trade talks on track again. It is a happy sign that the rich developed countries, which constitute only one-fourth of the total WTO membership of 147, had at last realised that everything has its limit, and that their one-way wrong policy, followed during the last several decades, has done more harm than good to vitiate the trade and economics relations between the rich and the poor nations. Although the developed nations had reaped the maximum of harvests, at the cost of the poor nations because of their 'imperial' type policy of 'head I win, tail you lose,' they have now learnt to call a spade a spade, to share their proverbial 'summer ice' with the poor nations.

The main reason that led to the shocking collapse of the WTO talks on Doha Round launched in Qatar's capital Doha in 2001, was the arrogance and obstinacy shown by the developed nations to agree to the basic demands put forward by the developing countries, perhaps in apprehension of losing their vested 'economic empire'. The main bone of contention centered round the most vital issue of the demand made by the developing countries that rich nations drastically slash their billions of dollars farm subsidies for their exportable agro-products and the lowering down of the high tariff wall raised by them against entry of products from the developing countries as both the policies had a direct adverse impact on the growth of the economy of the poor countries.

New hope for developing nations

Thus the agreement reached at the recent Geneva talks, however small a step may be considered by many, had opened the closed door to the hitherto 'forbidden' area, a new vista for the exploited poor nations. That deserves a welcome. After about a week's wrangling, the developing countries, which constitute some three-fourths of the total WTO membership, representing some 85 pc of world population, had at last seen for the first time, since they began their struggle several decades ago, some light at the end of the tunnel, some ray of hope, some silver-lining on the horizon. It is for the first time, since the establishment of the first UN-related world trade body, GATT (General Agreement on Tariff and

Round' (1964-67), the 'Tokyo Round' (1973-74), the 'Uruguay Round' (1986-93) and the last one 'Doha Round'. It may be mentioned here that the 'Uruguay Round' took more than seven years to complete its mission from its launch in 1986. So it is difficult to say how far the 'Doha Round' would be able to reach its target scheduled to be reached by the end of 2004, or at best by the end of 2005, when WTO meets in Hong Kong.

Supachai's plea for poor nations

Such doubts are there and will be there until the take-off is made. Undoubtedly, the Geneva talks had been successful in bringing together the "wolves and the lambs" to drink from the same bucket but there is still a long way

on the eve of the 'Doha Round' in 2001. Mr Supachai had then strongly pleaded for giving the poor developing countries, what he called, "a longed-for voice" at the top table of the global commerce to ensure them a commanding role along side the west and Japan. It has taken just three years to change the scenario for the developing countries to make their strong presence felt at the top table because of the strong and united stand taken by the 'G-20' (Group of 20) representing the developing countries, led by Brazil, China, India and South Africa.

'Road map' for global trade

Thus a clear cut 'road map' for the rest of the journey together by the

lost all credibility.

NGOs take a different view

Although whatever had been achieved at the Geneva talks has been welcomed by the rich and the poor nations as a new milestone and landmark for a fresh and renewed journey to achieve their goal of common good, sweeping the past mistakes, deliberate or otherwise, and frustrations under the carpet, it has come under heavy criticism by some influential NGO activists and groups, such as, the British based *Focus on the Global South* and the *Oxfam*, both of which have been fighting on the side of the developing countries to win their due share in global trade. Some even had accused the developed countries of "bullying and arm twisting of the poor nations to accept the offer made by them, which was considered by such aid agencies as "against their (or poor nations) interest." The *Oxfam* had opined that the Geneva pact "fall far short of what is needed to reform world trade rules so that they work for the poor." *The focus on Global South* went a step further to dub the Geneva pact as "a catastrophe for the poor." Anyway, these warnings will serve as red signals for the developing nations.

Thus the developing countries, instead of being carried away by the complacency of what had been achieved, should move more cautiously, keeping in view the danger signals raised by their well-wishers, to avoid the still-hidden 'land-mines' that could sabotage their road map. But to achieve this the developing nations need their unity to consolidate their position at the 'top table' when they meet their powerful counterparts.

The developing countries, instead of being carried away by the complacency of what had been achieved, should move more cautiously, keeping in view the danger signals raised by their well-wishers, to avoid the still-hidden 'land-mines' that could sabotage their 'road map.' And to achieve this the developing nations need their unity to consolidate their position at the 'top table' when they meet their powerful counterparts.

Trade) which came into existence in 1948, the monopoly of a ruling 'minority group' exploiting the poor nations worldwide, had been broken. GATT, later replaced by WTO in 1995, had opened a new chapter in global trade after a hard and strenuous journey.

Rich richer made

The GATT, later WTO, was literally entangled for the last five decades, particularly for the last 30 years, with the question of reducing barriers between the rich and the poor nations, but as the last say remained with the powerful minority group of the rich, the mill was always grinding in favour of them at the cost of the poor. Hence whatever was achieved by the GATT and WTO, as the only international trade body for regulating global trade, by holding different 'rounds' of talks, it made the rich richer and the poor poorer. Such 'Rounds' of trade talks included the 'Kennedy

to go to actually make them drink from the same pot. As they say, you can bring the horse to the pond but you can't make him drink unless it drinks itself. Only time will show how the rich countries behave in the changed circumstances. It all depends how much the rich nations agree to share with the poor countries, which are now more organised and united than before to face the music. In fact, they are now ready to make the rich nations to face the music. The developed countries, led by USA, had already heard metal music at Seattle (USA) when the WTO talks ended in a fiasco in 1999 because the developing countries threatened not to sign any trade deals unless they were involved in the decision making process. This very question was raised by the WTO Chief Supachai himself prior to his assuming office as DG from his power sharing predecessor Mike Moore, former PM of New Zealand, The world trade body would have

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LEST WE FORGET

Rtn Aziz-ul Haq Dedicated to service

HARIPADA BHOWMIK

A PERSON lives by his/her deed, so does late Aziz-ul Haq. His role as government servant, as Director, BARD and Director, CIRDP is perhaps a fragment. In his later life, he could enormously contribute as a Rotarian.

Mr. Haq played a pioneering role in Rotary activities while he was in Comilla. He was posted as Director of Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development (BARD) in 1968. Soon after joining the Academy he invited several eminent persons of Comilla to explore the possibilities of organising a Rotary Club. Every Wednesday evening they started to meet and discuss topics of interest, such as, basic education for adults, primary education of the children, special education for women and so on.

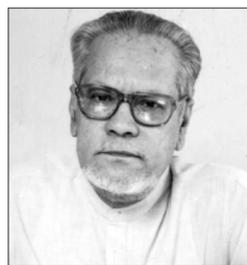
As a member of the Rotary Club of Dhaka at that time, he encouraged and assisted the would-be Club to apply for admission into Rotary International. In June 1970, the Rotary International affiliated them and Aziz-ul Haq became the Charter President of Rotary Club of Comilla.

At their first installation Rotarian Akhter Malik of Peshawar was present as the District Governor of Rotary District 327, Rotarian District Governor Kasim Dada of Karachi, late Justice Abu Sayeed Chowdhury, Rotarian Abdur Rahim Khan, Rotarian A.F.M. Abdul Haq were also present at the first installation meeting of Rotary Club of Comilla. At that time, one of service projects of the new Club was "Each One, Teach One" that was implemented through teachers and students of a primary school.

In 1973, Aziz-ul Haq retired from the Academy and returned to Dhaka and was inducted as a member of a new club, the Rotary Club of Ramna. He again moved to Comilla in 1979 as the Director of the regional Centre on Integrated Rural Development for Asia and the Pacific (CIRDAP) at its office at BARD campus, Kotbari, Comilla. Now CIRDAP headquarters is in Dhaka.

The Rotary International initiated its 3H (Health, Hunger and Humanity) programme in 1984. The Rotary Club of Comilla formulated a programme on facilitating production of fish fry to raise protein content in food. The Rotary International deputed Rtn. Ray de Zylva, a Rotary Volunteer from New Zealand to examine usefulness and feasibility of the project. The Rotary Foundation after careful scrutiny sanctioned a sumptuous 3H Grant of US\$486,000 for five years. The project entitled 3H 84-7 *Inland Fishery in Bangladesh (IFB)*, surfaced in Comilla and started working on production of quality fish fry in each union (cluster villages - 171 in Comilla district). The Club hired necessary technical personnel to implement the project under the careful supervision and guidance of the Rotary Club of Comilla with Rotarian Aziz-ul Haq as its centre-pin.

Between 1984 and 1988, 250 union fish nurseries were established which supplied carp fish fry to villagers. The Rotary Club of Comilla proved its efficiency in production and supply of quality fish-fry and spread of fish culture in the district of Comilla and also in Chandpur, Feni, Noakhali, Chittagong, Brahmanbaria and Habiganj. This was proved to be a great service to the people in increasing supply of much-needed protein. The project was signalled as a "Candle" representing Rotary's spirit of service. Among a few others from different parts of the Rotary World, Rotarian Aziz-ul Haq was also invited



to represent his Club.

With a great success in *Inland Fisheries in Bangladesh*, the Rotary Club of Comilla was encouraged to sponsor another project *Integrated Farming in Bangladesh (IFIB)* in 1990 to assist enterprising fish culturists in involving themselves in other allied development activities. The Rotary Foundation of Rotary International made a grant of US\$260,579 available for the project. Farmers in the project areas had responded with enthusiasm, gratitude and optimism.

Integrated Farming made simultaneous efforts to promote fishery, horticulture, poultry and forestry development with a view to increasing production of nutritious food, generating employment, and raising household income through better use of limited land and water resources. The project ended in December 1994, giving training to 849 farmers and supplying credit to 133 farmers. The other trained farmers were also encouraged to adopt integrated farming practices.

The IFB and IFIB projects were applauded by the Rotarians of the Rotary World as examples of spectacular development with dignity. Rotarian Aziz-ul Haq used to pay frequent visit to the project offices and project sites. He always provided guidance to the project steering committee and the management personnel of the project.

With his guidance, the Rotary Club of Comilla also established a 20-bed Eye Hospital in '90s on a plot of land donated by a Rotarian from Comilla who resides in Thornton, in collaboration with the Rotary Club of Thornton Health, U.K., and support from the Rotary Foundation. In recent years, the Club opened a Children's Library and a Computer Training Centre at its own building in Comilla town.

Rtn Azizul Haq was always up with the spirit of Rotary service until God took him to the other world (Sep 3 was his death anniversary). In recognition of his outstanding service, the members of the Rotary Club of Comilla named their Club building after him as "Aziz-ul Haq Rotary Centre". The Rotary International awarded him with several awards: Rotary's Service Above Self; President Citation for Meritorious Service; and Rotary Foundation "Candle" representing Rotary's spirit of Service.

The persons who have devoted their lives to the cause of mankind always find out a way so that they can easily reach the people. Aziz-ul Haq liked the Rotary Clubs as his media. With his contribution to the nation through Rotary activities, he virtually served the mankind.

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