

Early warning system for tsunami

Some proposals on the table

The UN-sponsored world conference on disaster reduction held in Kobe has thrown up some splendid ideas. Convened to formulate a strategy on how to save lives in the event of another tsunami, the conference has had a focused confabulation on early warning system to ward off ruin on a scale suffered by the Indian Ocean littoral states recently. The outcome sounds extremely positive.

Experts have seemingly reached a consensus on what constitutes an effective early warning system, although they are yet to figure out the right technology to use in case of the Indian Ocean. In the face of offering being rushed by donor countries keen to contribute their know-how, experts tend to maintain that 'the problem is not the science of predicting disasters but finding a way to reach more people (with the warnings)'. To quote Jan Egeland, the UN relief coordinator, "We have very much accurate means to predict disasters. What we lack is the means to tell the people concerned."

Here, disaster-prone and negative image-stricken Bangladesh has come in for some laudatory remarks from Eva Von Oelreich of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and John Sparrow of the Red Cross Federation's Beijing office. They regard Bangladesh as 'a model' for low-tech measures such as bicycles to spread the word of an impending calamity to thousands of people, thereby enabling them to take safety precautions. True, the last two cyclones caused much less havoc in Bangladesh owing to efficient transmission of warning signals to risk-prone multitudes compared with what used to happen beforehand; but let's not forget, earth-quake is a different ball game, let alone tsunami. We do need to be part of a high-tech early warning system girdling the globe.

Germany's proposal to send buoys fitted with the satellite Global Positioning System to the Indian Ocean so that it could be used by the littoral states quickly is already on the table. But all eyes are now on the Unesco meeting slated to be held within 60 days to determine the technology to be used in the Indian Ocean.

The wrath on Jatra

Too tendentious to overlook

THERE have been at least six bomb attacks on village fairs or jatra shows in the northern districts of the country over the last two months. The attackers seem to be working to cut off the people from their traditional cultural moorings. They are prepared to go to any length to achieve their goal. Suddenly it appears that some people are trying to change the cultural course of rural life.

This is certainly an ominous development for society as a whole. The attackers cannot be allowed to pursue their ill-conceived mission which seeks to destroy a folk culture form handed down from generation to generation. Their activities are not only a cultural affront but could also breed divisiveness and chaos in rural life.

The issue also has a bearing on law and order as the attackers are using bombs and other small arms. The assault points to the dangerous proliferation of small arms in the country with some ulterior motives. This is something that the law enforcers must combat with a sense of urgency.

Now, who could possibly be the perpetrators of such crimes against folk culture and its adherents? Some men having been caught with bomb-making materials earlier on reportedly admitted to having links to a fanatic militant group. And the suspected attackers are believed to have been associated with the infamous leader of the JMJB which is a self-styled vigilante group operating in North Bengal. Going by such indications, militancy of the obscure kind might have been the driving force behind the attacks.

Let's have a thorough investigation into the tendentious attacks so as to get to the bottom of them and bring the real culprits out in the open for punishment.

KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

AS mandated by the UN Security Council general elections are scheduled to be held on 30th January in Iraq to elect a 275-member interim National Assembly. The National Assembly will select a government and draft a new constitution. The National Assembly will then dissolve itself to pave the way for the election of a new Parliament under the new constitution.

January 30th election will be based on proportional representation system with one fourth of the seats being reserved for women. Proponents of the proportional representation system argue that this system will enable the Iraqis in exile to vote in their places of exile. The opponents argue that the system will deny major cities particularly in the Sunni areas where people may not be able to vote due to deteriorating security situation. It is estimated that 9000 polling stations will be needed all over the country. Given the escalating violence in Iraq it is unlikely that elections can be held peacefully throughout the country. Fearing Shia domination after the elections, particularly because many Sunnis may not be allowed to vote by terrorists, some have suggested that the seats in the National Assembly be distributed in proportion to the size of the population instead of the actual number of votes cast. This proposal is opposed by another quarter who feel that it would mean appeasement of the Sunnis who, the quarter allege, have not been able to adjust to the loss of power caused by Saddam's downfall.

Since the holding of the elections cannot be postponed without another Security Council resolution and also in view of the affirmation by President Bush and Iraqi President Ghazi al-Yawer that the elections be held as scheduled, interim Prime Minister Ayad Allawi has suggested

that elections be held over a period of 15-20 days to ensure security of the polling stations and the voters. Increased number of voter turnout will provide greater credibility and legitimacy to the elections than a truncated and turbulent election held only in parts of the country. James Dobbins of Rand Corporation apprehends that even if the elections are held on schedule the new government will emerge with only modestly enhanced legitimacy because though the Sunnis and the Kurds will be adequately represented the Sunnis will not be. Therefore participation by the Sunnis who were largely ignored by the Coalition Provisional Government of Paul Bremer, per-

primary concern if a state is to be reestablished. This is the paradox facing Iraq today. James Dobbins correctly diagnoses the Iraqi situation through his observation that continued insecurity could prevent anything approaching a free campaign and a fair ballot but at the same time a prolonged postponement of the elections can ignite a civil war.

Though President Bush would like to see his reelection as an endorsement of his Iraq invasion by the American voters, the United Nations and the world at large know better. James Dobbins who was US Special Envoy to Kosovo, Bosnia, Haiti, Somalia and Afghanistan advises that the beginning of wis-

dom is the recognition that the on-going war in Iraq is not one that the US can win. In the same vein General George Casey, commander of the coalition forces in Iraq has conceded that the on-going war "is not about winning hearts and minds; we are not going to do that in Iraq... It is about giving the Iraqis the opportunity to govern themselves". As for the insurgents only Iraqi forces under Iraqi leadership independent of the US command can defeat them because the American forces have lost the support of the Iraqi population.

The quest would not be easy in a war torn society steeped in tribalism where "primordial loyalties" i.e. loyalty to the tribe overrides loyalty to individual choice and where internecine conflict is immediately substituted by common enmity towards foreign elements. The only factor, observes Dobbins, that required "in some way that might not be in total consonance with what the Iraqi interim government might want to do at a particular moment of time, US forces will remain under US command and will do what is necessary to protect themselves". As against that James Dobbins feels that until Washington's democratisation campaign can be purged of its association with preemption and occupation it will have little resonance in the region.

It is interesting to note that amidst this chaos relating to the forthcoming elections in Iraq the Shiite community has been consistent in their advocacy of the elections to be held on time. The most senior and influential Shiite cleric Grand Ayatollah al-Shistani adamantly maintained throughout the political turmoil that only free elections could restore legitimacy to the

Iraqi government and end the occupation. He issued a statement that abstaining from voting "is treason against the nation". The second most important Shia cleric issued a fatwa equating voting with Islamic injunctions relating to prayer and fasting. Unlike Iranian clerics their Iraqi coreligionists do not appear to be wedded to the concept of a theocratic state. Al-Shistani is not only sensitive to ethnic, religious and cultural structure of the Iraqi society, he is also reported to have said that he would not mind if a Christian were to be elected President of Iraq.

The difference between the Iraqi and the Iranian Sunnis was evident during the long Iraq-Iran war when the Shiite majority Iraqi army fought

elections in Iraq may imprint in the Iraqi mind the iconography of American torture and mayhem as a testament of unbridled American ambition for global domination and neo-cons in the Bush administration as ideologues of hatred. However tragic, despicable and morally reprehensible the 9/11 terrorist attacks might have been sentinent people throughout the world will always wonder if the retribution for the 9/11 carnage needed the destruction of one of the oldest civilizations of the world based on grounds which have now proved to be totally baseless.

If the Bush administration wishes to usher in the fourth wave of democratisation (first being pre-colonial, the second being post-colonial and the third being in East Europe, Latin America and East Asia) in broader Middle East and North Africa, the first card being dealt through Iraq elections then the White House may be in for disappointment. Western thinkers are unanimous in their belief that building blocks for a modern democratic political culture are not elections, parties and legislatures. Rather building blocks are supportive cultural values -- political trust, social tolerance, basic political liberties and gender equality. While it may not be possible to build these blocks in an election or two, unwavering international cooperation with Iraq preceded by an unambiguous US declaration that US forces have no design on Iraqi resources nor any intention to stay longer than necessary, preferably giving a time limit to end the current occupation of Iraq would help calm the prevailing restless situation. Otherwise any government following the January 30th elections could be considered as lackey of the Bush administration.

Kazi Anwarul Masud is a former Secretary and Ambassador.

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People's perception about public offices

M. ABDUL LATIF MONDAL

IT is a recognised fact that the people undergo sufferings and hardships in the public offices of Bangladesh. It is not that there was no harassment of the people in the public offices during Pakistan period or during the British colonial days. But people's harassment and sufferings have increased manifold during the last three decades or so. People's perception is that public offices are the places where red tape, harassment, bribery and other corrupt practices are common features.

The public offices comprise of ministries, attached departments, subordinate offices, autonomous bodies carrying different organisational titles such as, corporation, board, authority, state-owned enterprise (SOE) and company. The persons who man these offices are broadly known as public servants. According to the Bangladesh Penal Code, public servants include, among others, every commissioned officer in the army, navy and air force, every judge, every officer of a court of justice, every person (a) in the service or pay of the government, or remunerated by the government by fees or commissions for performance of any public duty, (b) in the service or pay of a local authority or of a corporation, body or authority established by or under any law or of a firm or company in which any part of the interest or share capital is held by or vested in the government. People's experience is that they are destined to suffer at all tiers of the administration and in a public office whether it is a ministry, department, statutory public authority or SOE although the degree of sufferings may differ from office to office.

However, the experience of the people is that the offices that harass

them most are the police department, tax department, land records and survey department, education department, passport department, health department, registration office, ports (airports, seaports and landports), city corporations, utility services bodies and companies such as Bangladesh Power Development Board (BPDB), Rural Electrification Board (REB), Dhaka Electric Supply Authority (DESA), Dhaka Electric Supply Company (DESCO), Bangladesh Telegraph and Telephone Board (BTTB), Gas Transmission and Distribution Companies (GTDC), Water and Sewerage Authority (WASA) etc. The common

corruption would be things of the past and they would get their things done in normal ways. But corruption in the public offices of Bangladesh rather increased rapidly. Hardly any public office or any section of public servants remained free from this ignoble vice. The various commissions and committees on administrative and services reforms, sociologists, researchers and civil society members have tried to identify the factors that have made the public servants corruptible. The factors, among others, are: (i) poor pay package compounded with economic insecurity, (ii) growth of consumerism and the lure

of modern luxuries, (iii) private sector resorting to illegal methods such as, rewarding officials for business gains, (iv) poor and delayed enforcement of laws, and (v) society's reticence and / or condoning corruption.

The increase in corruption in the public offices has not only brought sufferings for the people but also adversely affected foreign investment, particularly foreign direct investment (FDI). Various surveys conducted so far have identified corruption as one of the most important impediments to FDI in the country. Corruption in the public offices and in other spheres of the society increased with such rapidity that Transparency International rated Bangladesh as the most corrupt country in the world for four consecutive years starting from 2001.

Political interference: Although

finally dispose of under the existing laws. The recent scandal in the recruitment of class IV employees in the district administration throughout the country is a case in point. Further instances of such political interferences during the periods of the past and present governments may be cited. Such unjust political interferences obstruct the natural course of action(s) and many people become the victims of injustice.

Lack of transparency in rules, regulations, orders and procedures: The rules, regulations, orders and procedures for disposal of business and delivery of services in the public offices are very often not clear enough. Further, many public offices, especially service-oriented ones, use outdated and unnecessary forms. Moreover, there is the culture of secrecy. The Public Administration Reforms Commission in its Report (vol. 1) of June-2000 says, "

power: Absence of proper delegation of administrative and financial power from the head offices of the departments, autonomous bodies and state-owned enterprises (SOEs) to the field offices causes inordinate delay in the disposal of cases at the field offices. Even at the head offices, power is concentrated in the hands of the chief executive such as chairman, managing director etc. Even routine cases relating to day-to-day administration go to the chief executive for decision. The delayed disposal of cases brings sufferings and hardships to the people.

Lack of sense of belonging and shifting problems to others: Most of the officials of the public offices lack the sense of belonging to their organisations. Individual contentment and cooperation to accept and serve the common goal(s) of the organisation(s) are hard to find among the officials of the

public offices. There is a tendency of shifting the problems to others. Professor John Kenneth Galbraith in his book *The Culture of Contentment* writes: "Encountering a problem, an organisation man turns naturally, automatically, to a subordinate. The latter is told to get on with it. This he then does by turning to an assistant, and the delegation continues. The culture of organization runs strongly to the shifting of problems to others -- to an escape from personal mental effort and responsibility." Professor Galbraith's observation also applies to our public sector organisations. This slows the pace of work and ultimately leads to the sufferings of the people.

Value of money not delivered: The utility bodies such as BPDB, REB, DESA, DESCOC, BTTB, WASA and GTDC that provide utility services to the people do not deliver value for money and cause sufferings and hardships to the consumers. Some of the sufferings are: (i) abnormal delay in providing telephone, electricity, gas and water connection after payment of demand draft / deposit; (ii) wrong billing; (iii) delayed delivery of bills leaving little time for clearing the dues without surcharge; (iv) delay in fault repair; (v) delay in refund of deposits.

To conclude, the realities obtaining in the public offices of the country suggest that people's expectations of the administrative system that would be nearly free, if not free, from red tape, bribery and other forms of corruption, seemingly, are not going to be materialised in the near future. Rather, the question is whether people's expectations will ever be materialised.

M Abdul Latif Mondal is a former Secretary to the government.

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

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.

Human rights preachers?

Suppose a private car is a crying need of mine. I will never be able to buy it until or unless I take effective steps for buying it and stop thinking about the upcoming expenditures such as diesel price hike, wages of the driver, car security etc. When I need a car right now, then I have to buy it right now, otherwise it won't be bought in my whole life! Like that if we think that our law and order situation will improve some day, and we keep dreaming, our present problems will never be solved.

Terrorists will continue killing and chopping innocent people and we will be hoping for the enforcement of law till the end of the day! When Rab can be a solution of this problem, some are beating about the bush against its activities as if they don't want us to live a secure life. Well, I have some questions for

those who have strong abhorrence of Rab and to whom the lives of terrorists are far more valuable than those of innocent civilians. What if the law is never enforced? Would we be suffering till Qayamat?

For your kind information, ours is a densely populated country and every day new terrorists are born. Who will accommodate them? Will you? Sounds irritating, doesn't it?

Cantara Wali Ruhi
JU

Rab
I completely agree with Ms. Nur Jahan's opinions on Rab actions. There is no doubt that Rab is doing an excellent job all over Bangladesh. Everybody is speaking gaily about Rab feeling completely happy and safe in this situation. The recent Durgapuja celebrations and peaceful holding of Bishwa Jtama proved that law and order has

improved. And the total credit is due to Rab. During these months after Rab took charge of combating crime, they have achieved great success.

But our Honourable Leader of the Opposition cannot see this achievement as a positive one. I would advise the critics of Rab to give the government enough time to contain crime. I think it would be good for the country and for the Awami League.

Muftah Wali
Jahangirnagar University

Bomb attacks in Bogra
We are observing bomb attacks on our cultural events on an almost regular basis. No government took any necessary steps to remove this problem which is a common phenomenon all over the country these days. No security agencies (whether it is elite or non-elite) could provide

any clue in this regard. It sounds queer that after every bomb attack, the leaders deliver speeches and blame their political rivals. Where will we go now?

If a government can't protect our lives then it should not hang on to power. We voted for this government not for making our lives miserable. It is a very positive sign that the government has reduced the terrorist population to some extent with the help of Rab.

So it should take a look at the bomb attacks without wasting any more time.

Khurshed Shaheen
4th year, Dept. of Anthropology
CU

Add something
We know a journal or a newspaper plays a vital role in our life. A newspaper supplies valuable information on various events. We learn a lot

by reading newspapers. I am a new reader of The Daily Star. I think it is the most popular English language daily in the country. However, I would request you to consider the following.

Please open an Education section in your newspaper along with a page for religious issues.

Md. Abdul Kader Jealane
Chudanga.

Rituals for the departed
A letter in a local daily objected to the current ritualistic practice of placing wreaths at graves and garlanding photos of dead persons at official and political ceremonies (anniversaries).

Who are supposed to be impressed by these physical displays (in the 'other world')? After death, the ultimate caretaker is the Almighty Creator, and there are no

options for the living near and dear ones except to pray for the salvation of the soul, as is the practice in all religions. We are obsessed with physical PR (public relations). We have leaders in our society who do not point out such unethical aberrations in the society. The spirit of religion has to be followed without extravagant sentimental trash. May I know what is the correct attitude in such cases?

Mawaz
Dhaka.

Marvelous achievement
The whole nation was waiting for this very moment. Finally our warriors have given us the cutest new year present. The big win by 226 runs has given us the occasion to celebrate and to get the lost confidence back. Our Test status was under threat but this time our boys

saved the day. Congratulations to them.

Some unexpected and unpleasant events took place in the city in 1997, when we stepped into World Cup cricket. Thanks to people for subduing their passions this time around. We're now looking forward to more stunning performances and of course for a dreaming "white-wash".

Our fingers are crossed for you, Tigers!

Niloy Chakrader
ICAB, Dhaka.

In memory of Najma Anwar
With a heavy heart, I express my corroboration to the wards of tributes paid to 'hapless' actor Nazma Anwar by Ms. Sara Zaker in the 8th January issue of your daily. There is almost none like her in the present film-TV-stagedom to portray the character of

the 'inimitable middle aged woman' who 'was so fit, always full of joy and had to accept an unbelievable fait accompli. She was more a woman than an actor. We do not take care of a person who is living around us. We only see him/her from outside, and do not care to see the person from inside. That is the inescapable 'mistake' we commit during our lifetime. Is that what William Shakespeare said in his famous work 'Macbeth'?

Thanks to Sara Zaker that she has cautioned us to be a patient listener to our compatriots.

Alamgir Kabir
Mohammadpur, Dhaka.

Dear readers,
We have a new e-mail address for the Letters to the Editor page. Please send your letters to letters@thedailystar.net