

Equating micro-credit with coastal cataclysms

MD. SAEEDUR RAHMAN

INAUGURATING the observance of UN International Year of Micro-credit 2005 last month (15 January) the Prime Minister proposed at the backdrop of the Asian Tsunami that a multinational initiative be taken under the supervision of the United Nations to face all sorts of natural disasters in order to attain the international target of poverty reduction. Earlier, in the beginning of 2004 on the occasion of the 49th Annual Convention of the Engineers, the Prime Minister also urged upon the professionals to work out a strategy for containing coastal and estuarine erosion that hinders the national efforts in alleviating poverty for achieving the Millennium Development Goals.

Micro-credit programmes, both nationally and internationally, have been given the due cognisance in raising the livelihood standard of the country's rural poor. It has been very rightly and profoundly pointed out that resources investment under micro-credit programmes is always at high risk of natural disasters which can sweep the vulnerable poor away with eventual disappearance in a jiffy making the entire programme unsustainable; the best example being the living memory of the recent *tsunami*. Micro-credit is thus seen to have a phenomenal linkage with the coastal cataclysms. Blessed with natural resources Bangladesh, on the contrary, is plagued by natural perils that among others include cyclones, cyclone generated storm surges, erosions, categorically in the coastal region. Pasting the issue of safety

and security to the coastal community on the side-top of the micro-credit agenda, therefore, seems rational.

The coastal lands of Bangladesh comprise of approximately 42,000 sq.km. The population is 33 million with density about same as compared to the rest of the country. The poverty rate is 53 percent as against 48 percent for the whole of the nation. The advancement made by micro

interventions which is ubiquitous across the world. As a consequence, globally 100 million people live within one meter of the mean sea level. Such density is higher along Bangladesh coast. The synergy is the increased vulnerability of the coastal rural poor to unavoidable natural calamities. It has to be borne in mind that coastal cataclysms like a chopping axe over the head

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credit financing so far needs to be sustained and economic growth driven further forward by defending the beneficiaries against the recurrent natural disasters.

Over the past century, much before the current version of the micro-credit concept was on the ground, the coastal defence systems had been built up initially to protect agriculture and subsequently to enhance the safety and security to life and property of the coastal community. In doing so the foreshore infrastructure along the 710 km. long coast of the nation has pushed the bay past its natural limit raising confrontation between the forces of nature and human

continuously multiply and recycle the rural poverty. The coastal defence in such an un-breathing situation is the only sentry that can guarantee the micro-credit programmes.

Coastal defence is the protection of the coastline from erosion by the sea and the protection of the coastal lands from extreme hydraulic events. It is intended for protecting foreshore and backshore infrastructure, industries, businesses, homes, and agricultural and recreational lands against erosion and flooding. The objective is to reduce the risks to people and the natural environment by encouraging the provision of technically, environmentally and

economically sound and sustainable defence measures. The management of coastal defences within a strategic framework is the preferred option to achieve this objective which needs a holistic approach to ensure that programmes are fully integrated within the wider environment and address the sustainability issues adequately. The programme is to provide the basis for sustainable coastal defence policies over at least the next fifty years and to set the framework for the future management of risks along the coastline. In recent years there has been a significant change in perception that professional change have been addressing coastal defence issues. The change has arisen from an increasing awareness of a need for those involved with coastal issues to work in more integrated and harmonised manner.

The natural evolution of the coast together with the recurring cataclysms including climate change and sea level rise brings in challenges to future coastal defence management as there will be increased levels of risk to coastal population and property. The coastal defence strategy may deliver a preferred approach to coastal defence identifying the best engineering scheme taking account of economic and environmental issues, including any environmental mitigation measures required for designated habitats. For the purpose, the nation's coastline may be divided into major 'sediment cells'. A sediment cell is defined as a length of coastline which is relatively self-contained as far as the transportation and movement of sediments is concerned and where interventions into such movements do not have a significant effect on adjacent sediment cells. The boundaries of such sediment cells in nation's coast coincide with the mouths of estuaries or prominent coastal headlands.

An important factor in the development of sustainable coastal defence is, therefore, co-operation between adjacent coastal communities in order to ensure that the activities of one community do not have a detrimental effect on its neighbours. In addition, it is important to be able to share knowledge and experiences and to commission research and disseminate findings as widely as possible. This co-ordination is achievable reasonably effectively through the interactive participation of the Community Based Organizations in the coast.

The government of Bangladesh has initiated a process for integration and harmonisation of sustainable utilisation of coastal resources by different agencies. The process has more focused on integrated coastal zone management rather than the need for building up dependable coastal defence systems. The follow-up of the process therefore would require inclusion of the issues and aspects of frontline defence of the coast. Some of the key issues that require increased attention for drawing up coastal defence systems may be the following:

- a. Coastal flooding would increase substantially by 2050.
- b. The increase in flood risk varies across the 710 km coastline with however south-eastern part consistently at higher.
- c. Coastal towns and cities will also be subjected to localised flooding due to impaired drainage of local rainfalls.
- d. Coastal erosion will increase substantially in all scenarios. Average annual damage is guesstimated to be increased ten-fold by 2050
- e. Increased flooding could bring both opportunities and threats for the environment. Salt farming and shrimp culture could benefit from abandonment of uneconomic coastal farmland under some scenarios, but habitats such as coastal grazing fields will be threatened including a qualitative damage to coastal ecology under every scenario.
- f. Non-structural measures such as installing or networking the early warning system and setting the appropriate institution for the development and management of the coastal defence systems will be of equal importance.

The coastal interventions may have several options such as (i) holding the existing defence where it is now, (ii) moving the existing defence further seaward, (iii) retreating the existing defence more landward, and (iv) carrying out no coastal defence activity except for safety measures. In any case however it will rest with the policy makers as to acceptance of increasing levels of flooding, maintaining existing risk-levels or reducing the risks of disastrous flooding. Interventions should be sustainable taking account of the interrelationships with other defences, developments and processes within the coastal zone which should avoid, as far as possible, tying future generations into inflexible and expensive options for coastal defence systems.

Coastal defence systems as evident are the lone confidante of micro-credit programmes that support brightening the faces of the coastal rural poor with hopes and aspirations. The long-term visionary statement of the micro-credit programmes, as such, should include the longer dependability of the coastal defence systems for protecting the credit target groups from natural disasters. Micro-credit programmes must, therefore, move forward hand-in-hand with the future coastal defence systems to truly strip-off the curse of poverty.

MD. Saeedur Rahman is a retired Chief Engineer of BWDB

Hariri's assassination and its implications

SYED MUAZZEM ALI

THE tragic assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, who ruled Lebanon for 10 out of the 14 years since the end of civil year in 1991, has once again pushed the war-torn country to great uncertainties. Memories of 15-year-old disastrous civil war are still fresh in the minds of the Lebanese people, and war-damaged ghost townships of Beirut still haunt them. The killing of Hariri not only threatens peace in Lebanon, but peace in the entire Middle East region, and the recent cease-fire agreement between Israelis and Palestinians.

A brilliant political strategist and the dominant leader of the Sunni faction, Hariri had all along performed a fine balancing act among the different Lebanese factions and at the same time, tried to contain "big brother" Syria's influence in his country. Last October, the trouble came to the fore when the Lebanese Parliament, under heavy pressure from Damascus, extended the term of office of President Emile Lahoud, a Syrian ally, by another three years through a constitutional amendment. Hariri protested this move and resigned as Prime Minister. He was quickly replaced by pro-Syrian Omar Karami. He openly joined the populist move calling for the withdrawal of Syrian troops, believed to be close to 15,000, out of Lebanon. This tactical move further enhanced his popularity by drawing away support from his opponents, and he emerged as the favourite contender at the upcoming elections in May.

Hariri was more than a politician. This self-made construction billionaire was also central to the country's reconstruction process, and was largely responsible for almost restoring Beirut's status as the trade and financial center of the Middle East. In addition to construction and other businesses, he also largely controlled media through his ownership of television stations and newspapers. Hariri used his financial clout to forge closer personal ties with the leaders of oil-rich Arab Kingdoms as well as European leaders. Consequently, more and more foreign investments were pouring into Lebanon. The newly reconstructed sea front Corniche, where he was killed, was beginning to be like "Paris of the Middle East" again.

The question arises: Who killed him? A previously unknown group calling itself "Support and jihad" claimed to have carried out the bombing. A bearded man in a turban appeared in a video on popular Arab Television network Al Jazeera and described the killing as "just punishment" for Hariri's close ties with the Saudi government.

Hariri, a dual Lebanese and Saudi citizen, made his fortune in the construction business in Saudi Arabia during his two-decade long stay there, and was reportedly close to the Saudi rulers [a closeness he often used as counterweight against Damascus]. The Lebanese authorities have reportedly identified the self-proclaimed killer as a Palestinian who has been living

blaming Damascus for "harboring terrorists" within its borders and for "turning a blind eye to the flow of weapons and insurgents into Iraq."

Taking advantage of the situation, Washington came close to blaming Syria's presence in Lebanon for Hariri's murder and withdrew their Ambassador as an expression of its "profound outrage" at the killing. Outmanoeuvred,

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in West Beirut and who is suspected of having links with Al-Qaeda.

In the charged Lebanese atmosphere, many blame Damascus of having carried out, or at least having a hand in, Hariri's assassination. Damascus vehemently denied such charges, and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, sensing serious diplomatic repercussions, was among the first to condemn the murder. The Syrian spokesman also emphasised that "to create instability in Lebanon is certainly not in Syria's interest at this time". Rime Altaf, a Middle East expert at the London-based Royal Institute of International Affairs, said "Syria could not have possibly wanted this", and added "it would be a case of shooting yourself in the foot. It clearly is the pro- and anti-Syrian forces at play, but rationally and logically whoever did this was trying to get the Syrians into more trouble."

Notwithstanding such denials, the funeral procession for the former Premier turned into an anti-Syrian demonstration, and thousands of mourners openly called for the withdrawal of Syrian troops from their country. Earlier, Hariri's family turned down Lebanese Government's proposal for a State funeral and asked the latter to stay away from the burial ceremonies.

Washington-Damascus ties have generally been strained, as Syria, in the absence of a commitment from Tel Aviv regarding return of the occupied territory of Golan Heights, was not willing to join the peace process. When Bashar succeeded Hafez al-Assad he made some overtures, but by then Rabin was dead and so was the peace process. After Iraq invasion of March 2003, Washington started

Syria turned to its loyal ally Iran and, after a quick Summit-level meeting in Tehran, both sides declared their resolve to jointly face the threat from their common adversary, Washington. Earlier, both sides had blamed Tel Aviv for fishing in troubled water and for instigating United States to take military action against Syria. It may be recalled, Syria was the only Arab country to side with Iran during the latter's nine-year war with Iraq, and both the countries had maintained hard-line against Tel Aviv. After the Iraq War, however, Syria had somewhat modified its earlier stand and had expressed its interest in improving its ties with Washington. Tehran had not shown any such interest.

Both sides, nonetheless, assiduously cultivated France, Germany and other EU countries. So far Tehran has received sympathetic EU response on its alleged nuclear programme. Historically, France has also maintained especially close ties with Damascus and Beirut, but Syria received a big jolt when Paris

joined Washington and others at the Security Council a few months ago in the adoption of a resolution calling for withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon. It is speculated that after his resignation from the Premiership, Hariri had persuaded his close personal friend French President Chirac to join in the call for the withdrawal. Renewed US pressure, and isolation from their traditional EU allies, might push Syria more towards Iran than ever before. Isolation of Syria will not be in the long-term interest of the West. As the Arab dictum goes, "You can't have war in the Middle East without Egypt, and you can't have peace in the Middle East without Syria."

In this heated atmosphere, the first thing to do should be to diffuse tensions and to undertake a credible international investigation to find the actual perpetrators of the crime, as called for by the UN Security Council last week. Election process, which has just started, has to be maintained and a fresh government with the renewed popular mandate should take charge. Syria, on its part, has to comply with the Security Council resolution regarding withdrawal of its troops from Lebanon. As front line states, developments in occupied territories have a direct bearing on Lebanon and Syria. The recent Palestinian-Israeli ceasefire agreement marks the beginning of a long-awaited move for resumption of the peace process. Washington has to make more sustained and credible moves to make a breakthrough in the peace process it wants restore its ties with the Muslim countries.

During my Ambassadorial tenure, I had series of interactions with Hariri, and was simply impressed with his pragmatic and practical approach to all key regional and international issues. In my first meeting with Hariri, I had recalled with deep appreciation that Lebanon had been the only Arab country to allow the opening of "Bangladesh Information Centre" during our War of Independence. He had smiled and had said that Lebanon has always stood by the oppressed people in their quest for freedom and independence even though they had to pay a heavy price for such a commitment. Bangladesh enjoyed a soft corner in his heart, and he had personally helped in the recruitment of thousands of our construction workers to take part in Lebanon's massive reconstruction process. As a friend of Lebanon, we hope the country comes out of the present ordeal soon.

Syed Muazem Ali, a former Foreign Secretary, has served as Bangladesh Ambassador to Lebanon, Syria and Iran, based in Tehran [1995-98].

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