

The Katrina fury

Testing time for America

HOW galling man's helplessness can be before the destructive powers of nature is brought home by Hurricane Katrina that struck Louisiana slamming into coasts of Mississippi, Alabama and western Florida last week. Mind you in spite of high tech.

US forecasting relays asking for evacuations from the predicted cyclone path and people responding to the calls when the zero hour ultimately struck. The trail of death, damage and destruction left by the hurricane makes the US experience worst in a century. We, in Bangladesh, a country which has seen some of the most destructive swipes of nature, are naturally empathetic towards the Katrina victims for the anguish and pain they must be going through. Our hearts go out in sympathy for the sufferers of the catastrophe.

But while the hurricane has been devastating what has followed it is a disaster upon a disaster. Stocks of drinking water, food, medicines, fuel are submerged in thickly sifting water. The whole infrastructure along the coast comprising telecommunications installations and oil refineries has been washed away.

Many of the industries lost to the sea surge were not insured and on top of a countless numbers dying the lucky survivors have lost all their material belongings. Everything must begin from the scratch.

All this point to the cruciality of federal funding to bounce back.

But it is not only the economic might of the US that must come to the rescue of its citizens in the South-West coast, there is also another challenge of law and order nature that stares in face of administration: armed thugs plundering away deserted homes and service units, even swooping on relief supplies at many places.

The police presence has been quadrupled, but the irony in all such perilous situations anywhere in the world happens to be that while human compassion flows for the victims, wolves are not far away.

Biman in the red

Corrective measures cannot wait

BIMAN, the national airline, has found its calculations going awfully wrong. It has incurred a loss of Tk 250 crore against a profit forecast of Tk 44 crore in the FY05. So the gap between prediction and performance is indeed big.

The parliamentary standing committee on government undertakings has put the blame on Biman's internal mismanagement and irregularities for the poor show, while Biman officials attribute it to fuel price hike and strident trade unionism.

The committee also blamed Biman for giving false and inaccurate information regarding itself. The charge clearly points not only to mismanagement but also to attempts at hiding it. A great number of audit objections against the airline is still pending and Biman managers have not even mentioned the amount of money involved in more than 1,400 audit objections in their report. Again, what we get is a picture of a mess caused by corruption and mismanagement leading to the huge losses.

Biman has not had a smooth cruising in recent years with reports of controversial purchases and poor performance in many areas blurring its image. It has claimed that none of its aircraft is out of order at the moment, but has not said anything about the two planes that crashed recently. As for purchase, civil aviation experts seem to believe that there was always scope for the national airline to look for better options. Its safety standards and capability to maintain schedules have also not been above question. What is at issue is that the airline, besides being a commercial organisation, is a symbol of national pride which is greatly undermined when it performs so poorly.

Biman definitely needs to be bailed out of its present crisis triggered by mismanagement. Obviously, the ailing airline has to be overhauled and private capital has to be infused into it for its survival. The decision-makers should examine the various possibilities open to them to turn the closed, government-run enterprise into a viable commercial proposition. After all, the findings of the parliamentary standing committee do suggest that things cannot be left where they are at the moment.

Good governance is a mindset



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

human development.

Some speakers were particularly harsh in their evaluation of existing corruption within the country. They outlined that corruption was particularly evident in widespread bribery, obtaining of loan against minimum collateral assets and subsequent loan defaults, evasion of taxes and customs duties. It was also underlined that one of the important features that contributed towards such unaccountable corruption was the politicisation of administration and the posting of inappropriate personnel in important areas of the government disagreed with the

change its mind set about the opposition.

I will share here some of the important reports that came my way in the few days that this survey lasted. They must have already drawn the attention of readers:

– Unknown assailants murder 2 NGO workers in Boalmari upazila of Feni. The two, also preachers, worked for an international NGO (Christian Life of Bangladesh) as field workers. They were killed past midnight while they were sleeping within their house. We can see in this incident, potential for severe adverse publicity in western countries.

– Group of alleged JCD support-

these stay orders. Such inactivity smacks of inefficiency.

-- Parliamentary Standing Committee on Private Members Bills and Resolutions accuse Speaker Jamiruddin Sircar of the Parliament of making the Committee dysfunctional by not allowing the lawmakers to place private members' bills in Parliament. This is consistent with opposition claims that they are allowed a very limited role within the parliamentary process.

– 29 killed in 'crossfire' in July this year – the RAB was associated with 13 incidents and the police with 15.

– Health care products including breast milk substitutes are being

and those guilty punished?

We also have to tackle the allegation of extra-judicial killings. It is continuing to tarnish our reputation. It would be useful if checks and balances are introduced into the RAB structure so that they can be more effective without being accused of human rights violations. They need to be guided so that their activities are consistent with the scope of judicial remedy and also subject to review. A special parliamentary body could be created for this purpose.

The government has finally also woken up to food adulteration. This needs to be sustained by appointing more staff in the Bangladesh Standard and Testing Institution. Consumers must be protected. We need to do the same with regard to monitoring of building and construction code violations. Appointment of more inspectors is a must.

Another facet that needs the brush of good governance is careful monitoring of the various diagnostic labs and clinics that have mushroomed all over the urban areas of Bangladesh. The vast majority of these institutions are poor infrastructure support and lack professional competence. They have become death traps, more geared towards profit rather than health care. Consequently, our people, particularly the middle-class are voting with their feet and seeking help abroad. This is a serious drainage on our meagre foreign exchange reserves.

Corruption and 'systems-loss' resulting out of abuse of power in the utilities sector could also be drastically reduced through more privatisation and the introduction of rechargeable pre-paid cards in the electricity sector.

I have never believed in calling the glass half-empty. Good governance is a factor that this Administration can initiate by separating the judiciary from the executive. They can start by establishing the National Human Rights Commission, appointing an Ombudsman and by making the Anti-Corruption Commission effective. They also have to decentralise, de-politicise the administration and the judiciary and change their mindset.

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POST BREAKFAST

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criticism and suggested that most of it was politically motivated. In this context he also decried the role of the opposition and their effort to damage the Bangladeshi image.

This controversial debate on governance and administration within Bangladesh raised many questions. However, two things were clear. There was no disagreement that good governance was a mind set and that this was most absent. There was also broad consensus that contrary to the opinion of the present Administration, journalists were consciously contributing towards good governance by drawing the attention of readers to its many failings. It was also evident that reports of absence of good governance in the electronic and print media were being monitored abroad by expatriate Bangladeshis through the internet and satellite television. It was similarly obvious that government criticism about the opposition trying to denigrate the image of Bangladesh abroad was less than true.

In the last few days I have carried out my own survey. I wanted to ascertain whether approach towards good governance is really suffering because of the poor, partial and politicised mindset of those who are responsible for providing it to the general population. My trial survey convinced me that the government not only needs to thank the journalists for their important role in establishing good governance but also

ers from Jamalpur and Netrakona bar others from participating in tenders at the Jute Ministry in Dhaka for purchasing land and property of the now defunct Bangladesh Jute Corporation in those districts. Such open reprehensible activity is only possible if these so-called students receive political support.

-- Seven suspected Islamic militants, arrested by the police in Dinajpur, are released on the intervention of certain political party.

-- Ahmadiyya community in Sharishabari village of Jamalpur district comes under attack of bigots around midnight as they are watching a TV telecast (from London) of an Ahmadiyya Convention.

-- Open corruption among lower level officials working in the settlement and the revenue offices in Shariatpur (particularly applicable in cases of land registration). This conforms to Transparency International's allegations.

-- Civil Aviation official, allegedly guilty of corruption (on the basis of three departmental investigations) is spared forced retirement and escapes through demotion.

-- About 300 corruption cases filed against top politicians, bureaucrats and businessmen during the last 14 years are still pending before different courts. Apparently, the situation has become more complex because the High Court has stayed about 100 of them and the government has not even tried to vacate

sold in the market without expiry dates.

-- Corporate governance is being hampered because of weak regulatory system and undue interference from the Board of Directors with regard to corporate management. This criticism came from the finance minister, the minister for law and also from the Governor of the Bangladesh Bank.

-- Absence of phyto-sanitary standards, open adulteration of food-stuffs and use of harmful chemical additives in restaurants.

-- Granting of Presidential immunity to BNP leader Mohiuddin Jintu after short cutting the process and procedure required in situations that involve the death penalty.

-- Criticism of the government for having failed to bring about the separation of the judiciary from the executive. References were made in this context to the Majdar Hossain case and the 12-point directive given by the Supreme Court regarding this matter.

There were also several reports of police officials involved in misrepresentation, theft, robbery and in one case even rape. Suggestions were also made in certain newspapers about the failure of the police in being able to effectively tackle the criminals and extortions in Tejgaon, Mohammadpur, Agargaon, Magh-bazar, Mohakhal, Shahjahanpur and Sabujbagh (various parts of Dhaka).

All the above references dealt

so tainted our moral fibre that we are beyond redemption.

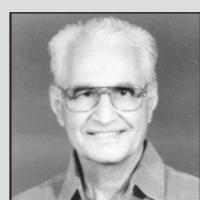
It is still within the power of the present government to pull up its socks, tie its laces and be seen as moving forward. Our general election is not far away. If good, responsible a political governance is not provided and the mind set of the Alliance not changed, it will definitely impact on election results.

This of course pre-supposes a fair electoral process, an independent Election Commission and an impartial caretaker government.

It also has to address itself to other serious pending issues. A year has nearly passed and yet there have not been any concrete results with regard to the despicable grenade attacks on the British High Commissioner, Sheikh Hasina, the most unfortunate murder of the former finance minister SAMS Kibria as well as the 17th August wave of bombings all over Bangladesh. We have seen the swift action taken by the British government after the London bombings. This was an example of good governance. Why can we not emulate such response with regard to our criminal acts or even incidents of acid throwing?

This was also the unfortunate month of August when Bangabandhu and his many family members were assassinated thirty years ago. Why is it that the judicial process has not yet been completed

Careful, Iran is not a pushover

M B NAQVI
writes from Karachi

TWO statements by the US President and EU spokesperson are significant: the former said vis-à-vis Iran's refusal to stop its nuclear programme that "all options are on the table". The latter intends taking the Iran issue to IAEA's Executive Board that can send up the case to UN Security Council for penal action. These developments have to be taken seriously.

Europe had earlier opposed American unilateralism that reeked of contempt of the UN. The US was contemplating military action against Iran on August 12 despite the American experts' estimate that Iran would take 10 years to fabricate atomic weapon. Despite its own action, Europe is unlikely to welcome another US military action. Herr Gerhard Schroeder, the German Chancellor, has already fired a shot across Americans' bow: unilateral American action against Iran will be opposed.

Maybe Schroeder thinks that to oppose American unilateral pursuit of its geo-strategic objectives is the way to win an election in Germany. His 2003 opposition to American invasion of Iraq did help him win his

second term of office. It may be a straw in the European wind. Schroeder was not alone in 2003. Apart from support in the EU, world opinion too was opposed to an American military thrust into Iraq. There is no reason why things should be any different in Iran's case. Indeed, bigger worldwide protests may follow. Tony Blair's indication that UK will not participate in a US military action in Iran is a pointer.

India and Pakistan will be hugely embarrassed. Both are America's

branded as an outlaw is meant to clear the road for American military action, though the expected worldwide protests can cause crises for American foreign policy.

Indications are that the US may be seriously contemplating military action against Iran. The likely scenario of that war, according to American reports, will not be a proper invasion, though a small force of 30,000 or so Marines and Special Forces will try to establish a bridgehead on the coast, probably not far from Iran's oil-bearing Kuzistan. For

mind if Karzai's writ runs only as far as US Humvees reach.

The same can be said of Iraq, the context being further likely (?) American military actions for regime changes. In Iraq all possibilities are open about what may happen to the country, including a civil war and its break up into three states. But what nobody is talking about (except those who are sustaining the insurgency) are the oil and other contracts given to US corporations and the permanent bases in the country.

If these subjects are of no consequence.

This would suggest that the US is not fazed with what is happening in Afghanistan and Iraq. It means it does not think that Afghanistan and Iraq have compromised its capacity to go ahead with the programme outlined by the Twentyfirst Century Project. Doubtless this estimate rests on certain obvious assumptions: it is none of America's business to clean up the political mess that its military actions make. In the case of Afghanistan a regime change with a more pliable one gave it permanent base(s) and goes on listening to its advice. Never

quench to Iraq! It is only those who are not mesmerised by America's panoply of power and who can read American media's outpourings critically insist on seeing all sides of the problem. There is however an immediate issue for them to consider.

There is a school that thinks America is in a quagmire; it has started something it cannot finish. Too many American lives are being lost and personal popularity of George W is going down. He is in no position to seriously think of getting into the much larger Iranian bog. He only has to find a way of getting out of Iraq, not getting into Iran. Others say more clarity of thought is needed: Bush is not an old-style colonialist. He is after establishing

America's hegemony through regime changes not always by invading, so as to control key raw materials with the ability to deny their supplies to unfriendly states and to keep America well-supplied.

He accepts no responsibility in behalf of new pro-American regimes that are required to clean up the mess by themselves with minimum aid from Uncle Sam.

There is however an economic argument against intervening in Iran. Iran pumps out 3-4 million barrels of oil a day. Military action

one circumstance must be remembered. A polarisation is beginning to take shape between China and Russia on one side and the US on the other. Crisis over Iran can only deepen this cleavage. A similar, rather tentative, polarisation may also emerge: America versus old EU members, led by Germany and France. An expectation is that if the US pipes down and lets diplomacy in the UN take charge, the momentum of US drive for domination in Asia will be lost. That will mean the whole programme sketched out by Neo-Cons in America will run the risk of breaking down. The world will be a lot worse than it was in 2001 with no special gain to America other than Iraqi oil, the security of which might remain under question by insurgency and permanent bases in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq that may be hard to use for the purpose they were acquired for.

Much will depend on the American can people. Will the protests sparked by Ms. Sheehan's demo outside the Bush ranch in Texas mushroom and spread throughout the length and breadth of America? Or the conservative instincts of America's silent majority will reassert and reverse the Bush's plummeting ratings? Both are possibilities. We may be sure that the Bush supporters can, in the latter case, seek to revive the momentum of his drive in Asia and action against Iran will fit the bill, no matter who opposes. Hopes for peace hang on the peace movement in America gaining unusual strength.

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PLAIN WORDS

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TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

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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.

The Presidential pardon

Family of the assassinated person shall extend mercy to the assassin may be against monetary assistance and the assassin must get pardon from the victim's family. Unless the family of the victim extends mercy, the head of the state should refrain from extending his constitutional power of granting. The victim's family must get adequate compensation. If the assassin is wealthy person or otherwise willingly extends mercy but at any cost the assassin must get pardon from the family of the victim. It must be made a constitutional obligation for the President, before he extends assistance, to consult the victim's family -- who might be need of financial assistance. As such unilateral granting of mercy should

have another clause added that consultation with the victim's family or else this clause in the constitution of the republic of granting mercy by the president could be utilised for political motive and benefit.

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Devaluation and forex crisis

It appears that the country has suddenly been thrown into a serious balance of payment problem during the March-June quarter of the last financial year (2004-05). In the bank area, this has come to be known as 'dollar crisis'. The matter has already turned into a national issue and

opinions of various shades and colours are being offered to explain and alleviate the situation. International Monetary Fund (IMF) has offered its pet solution of devaluating local currency to overcome the problem. Every day, the media is carrying news and views on the issue from different corners.

Last week, Mr. Saiduzzaman, former finance secretary, who later became advisor in charge of the Ministry of Finance during the Ershad regime, gave an overview on the matter (The Prothom Alo). His analysis was concise but quite comprehensive. According to him, the current balance of payment problem is paradoxical, as the country has experienced record quantity of exports as well as record remittance in the recent time.

According to knowledgeable

sources, the dollar crisis erupted all of a sudden right after National Board of Revenue (NBR) took initiatives to verify credit card and bank accounts in order to locate the tax evaders. As the initiative was announced, hundreds of people withdrew billions of Taka from local banks, converted them into dollar and started to transfer to banks in Singapore and Hong Kong, among other countries. It is this very reason for which the dollar crisis suddenly cropped up in the Forex market early this year. While anticipatory 'capital flight' causing forex crisis is a common phenomenon in the world, such an unorthodox 'currency flight' to avoid taxman's long arm is rather uncommon.

We are in favour of Bangladesh Bank's interventionist policy at least till December