

When the earth shakes and man trembles

MAHFUZUR RAHMAN

ABOVE the valleys and mountains in Kashmir, above the limitless stretches of wrecked homes and human lives, rises a rending cry, a soulful moan, thrown up in unison from a million hearts: why? An unbearable sadness echoes across nations and around the world.

On October 8 the earth shook in northern Pakistan, leaving a large swathe of Kashmir and adjoining areas in ruins. This followed less than a year after a giant tsunami churned the seas and devastated far flung lands. The tsunami killed almost a quarter of a million people in half a dozen countries. The earthquake that struck Pakistan killed over 70,000 people in an area a fraction of the size of the lands hit by the tsunami. It also killed hundreds in Indian Kashmir.

"Why does such human tragedy happen?" I asked my interlocutor after the earthquake. "Some say these are acts of God. Can this be true? There is, for example, a Pakistan-born fundamentalist woman living and teaching in Canada who has said publicly that deaths in the Pakistani earthquake were God's punishment for 'immoral activities' of the people there. But there are many others around the world who share her belief."

"I do not know", was his all too familiar reply, "but people whose opinion it is that God sends mankind natural calamities as punishment for bad behaviour can quote from the holy books to support their view." He went on to quote the following verse from the Koran:

"Mischiefs have appeared on land and sea because of (the meed) that the hands of men have earned, that (God) may give them a taste of some of their deeds: in order that they may turn back (from evil)." (XXX: 41)

"But, wait a minute," I said,

"there were thousands of children among the dead in the earthquake. Many of them were only school children, crushed by collapsing class rooms. Surely, they were too young to do evil and deserve punishment."

"That is true", said my interlocutor, "but, the argument goes, God may have His own design, which human beings cannot comprehend. It may be better to leave things at that."

Still puzzled, I asked: "But how is it that the earthquake killed mainly in Muslim Kashmir and spared India, the mainly Hindu state? How is it that God is so much more severe on Muslims than on Hindus. Also, why did the tsunami victims have to be overwhelmingly Muslim? Did you also notice that most of the latter were in the Indonesian province of Aceh where there has been a resurgence of fundamentalist Islam?"

As usual, my interlocutor mumbled something in reply and was off, just as I was going to ask him why God inflicted the calamity upon fasting Muslims in the holy month of Ramadan. I returned to my musings. I could not help noting that the ultra-conservative evangelist Pat Robertson also sees a connection between God's wrath and natural disaster.

While apocalyptic visions are by their nature opaque to rationality and human intelligence, the human dimensions of natural disasters are clear enough. There is nothing that man can do to prevent an earthquake, a tsunami, a landslide, or a cyclone. But his response to calamities that occasionally bring havoc to the only habitable planet he has ever known can be at least as remarkable as his puniness against nature.

Among the images of immediate response to the tragedy in Pakistan, was the arrival of a British rescue team within hours of the quake. The gesture was noble as well as supremely useful. It saved lives. In a

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The human spirit undefeated: Standing atop the ruins of a house in Muzaffarabad.

country that is haunted by the spectre of Islamic fundamentalism, it was heart warming to see members of another faith, or people with no

faith at all, saving Muslim lives and to see the help gratefully acknowledged. It was hardly less remarkable to see dogs, man's best friend in the

west but an unclean animal in much of the Muslim world, pressed into service to find victims of the disaster. The rescue operation, like many

such in other circumstances, tore through barriers that separate man from man -- and from beast.

Within hours of the disaster, too,

India came with offers of help, while its own people were also victims of the earthquake, though there were mercifully far fewer of them than in Pakistan. Given the intractable hostility between the two countries, it is easy to be cynical about India's offer of help. But the offer was genuinely humanitarian and was accepted, even if with reservations. The aftermath of the disaster even offered glimpses of hope for easing of tension between the two countries. There are few phenomena in human relations more heart warming than old enemies coming together to bring succour to the afflicted.

This did not of course prevent a lone suicide bomber, a woman clad in burqa, from blowing herself up, trying to blow up Indian military vehicles coming to the assistance of earthquake victims in Indian Kashmir. Neither is the zeal of Islamist extremists in bringing relief to the stricken people in Pakistani Kashmir devoid of political aims. Yet the action of the suicide bomber and the motivations of the militants only underline the human dimensions of the problem, as against the divine, that human beings themselves have to sort out. No amount of apocalyptic vision will help.

The loss of life and property in Pakistan has been enormous. The government of the country has put the estimated cost of reconstruction at some 5 billion dollars. There is a feeling that this is not an overestimation. The immediate relief available from the rest of the world has not been insignificant, though it has fallen short of the response to the Asian tsunami, both as to its speed and its size. The international community should be as generous now as it was for the tsunami victims. There cannot be a better use of the world's resources. Pakistan's national priorities must change too. The purchase of some sophisticated

arms from abroad has, we are told, been postponed. Why not abandon it altogether and use the resources released for reconstruction and economic development?

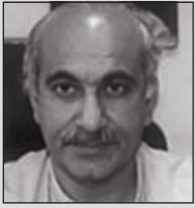
A disaster like an earthquake hit the rich and the poor alike, but not equally. The well to do generally live in better built houses. Their survival rate in a calamity is thus much higher than among the poor living in ramshackle housing. Proper housing for the poor should go a considerable way in mitigating the effects of natural disasters. Construction of buildings -- houses and schools -- that can be expected to withstand shocks of earthquakes must be a priority in any medium and long-term plan for rebuilding human life in Pakistan. Many mosques stood the onslaught of the Asian tsunami and this was much touted as divine intervention. But the fact that the houses of worship are often, but not always, spared by natural disasters while other structures collapse can be easily explained in non-divine terms: the former are generally strongly built, while many of the latter, particularly those housing the poor, are all too flimsy.

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There is in fact a great deal that man can do when the earth shakes, particularly by way of bringing the human community together.

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Will Natwar sing?



M.J. AKBAR

NATWAR Singh has exhausted his capacity to hurt himself.

But he has not exhausted his capacity to hurt the Congress. The story of the ex-foreign minister of India confirms an old view of mine. While there is always the danger of character assassination in public life, the far bigger danger for politicians is character suicide.

Now that Mr Natwar Singh has more time on his hands, if not more peace in his mind, he is probably allotting blame for his misfortunes. Paul Volcker is surely on top of his list. But, in all honesty, he needs to divide the blame between Volcker and hubris. The details in the UN report were half the problem. The other half was television: or, to be more specific, the frequent appearances of Singh and Son on the box. Volcker condemned Natwar Singh in his report. Natwar Singh ended up condemning himself on television. The minister is an extremely well-read man. He might have paused to check Shakespeare. He "doth protest too much." As for Jagat Singh: his innate aggression might be tolerated in a decadent feudal environment, but it does not travel very far in civilised society. If the not-so-young man thought he could huff and puff his way out of trouble, he has not grown up.

One wonders if either Mr Natwar Singh or the Congress took any advice on how to handle a problem that quickly pole-vaulted into a crisis. Friends comment, or suggest; that is perfectly normal and understandable. The initial reaction seemed based on the view that this was a silly season story, the sort of news that fills a gap when nothing much is happening. Hence the slightly thoughtless initial reactions, both by the Congress and the minister. "The Congress will send a legal notice to the UN." In other words the Congress was sending a legal notice to India, since India is a member. "Who is Paul Volcker? He doesn't even know that I am the foreign minister of India!" It was silly to doubt Volcker's credentials, and a phone to any sensible man in America might have prevented such a mistake. But hubris tends to have an escalating impact on poor judgment. By the time Mr Singh was asserting,

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vibrantly, that "I, as foreign minister of India" could dictate national policy it was apparent that he was out of sync with the culture of democratic governance. After that his departure was no longer a question of whether but of when.

Mercifully (for the victim), Prime Minister Manmohan Singh brought one stream of the running story to a halt when he decided that Mr Natwar Singh could no longer be a tenable custodian of the nation's foreign policy. The Prime Minister's initial defence of his colleague is not to be faulted. He cannot jettison a senior minister at the first onslaught, even though he was aware of Volcker's reputation, as well as the integrity of the committee that had done the damage. But the final compromise, in which Mr Natwar Singh has become a minister without portfolio, achieves nothing. Natwar Singh is no Lal Bahadur Shastri, whose advice was needed even after he resigned his portfolio. Nor did the former resign; he was ordered to walk the plank (in his own interest, since the plank was fitted out with a temporary safety net).

The compromise has fuelled suspicion that Mr Natwar Singh knows something that we do not, at least not yet; and that something could hurt others in the Congress. This may not be true, but the Indian voter is a suspicious sort of chap. The chances of anything remaining secret are remote. By the time the various wringers have done their work, at least half a dozen enquiries would have sifted through the oily affairs of an elitist friends' circle who thought that the world was their oyster and their dads were little pearls. There is the Volcker report, already with us, documents awaited.

The Enforcement Directorate has begun its interrogations and alerted airports that the directors of Hamdan, Andaleeb Sehgal and Vikas Dhar, should not be permitted to leave the country for the moment. The tax authorities will doubtless want their turn. Mr Virendra Dayal has been put on a parallel track, to report on UN processes and reports. Justice R.S. Pathak, with the powers of a civil court, will enquire into the Volcker conclu-

sions. And then of course is the continue enquiry report being done by the media. Ironically, Mr Natwar Singh and his son might find that, of all these options, Volcker might have been the most gentle.

The media has, so far, the softest job. Volcker has done most of this work; all it needs is a bit of follow-up. It is bad news for the Singhs, since with each layer and each lead their protestations look that much more hollow. It is apparent now that Paul Volcker's basic information came from documents seized from government records after Saddam Hussein's defeat. He then cross-checked the names with bank transactions. There were no allegations against those who did not figure in bank records: witness Bheem Singh, a Jammu and Kashmir panther.

I can hardly comment on the merits of each individual allegation, but the case against Sehgal looks strong. Sehgal was in the picture only because of his connections with the Singhs, and, as confirmed by a former Congress minister, P. Shiv Shankar, a member of the Congress delegation to Iraq, was in the group only in his capacity as their friend. It would be very unusual if two plus two did not make four. It is safe to assume that Andaleeb Sehgal did not go to Baghdad under the false assumption that it was Paris in summertime.

The life of a government is best measured in events, not months and years. By that yardstick, the Manmohan Singh government has reached its midway mark. The early chips, like the shindig over tainted ministers, did not affect its stride; in fact, it was the BJP that was sounding strident. But 2005 has been a year in which the government has aged faster than it expected. The budget was more hope than hope; economic reforms were trapped in the contradictions of the ruling alliance. There were political mistakes, the most unforgivable being the mismanagement of Bihar after Lalu Yadav failed to get a majority in the first Assembly elections of the year. The consequences of that mistake will be evident in the November polls. Now we have a very old-fashioned scandal, as grubby as they come. Since the foreign minister

was involved, it was entirely appropriate that it had an international flavour. But the most significant fact of this scandal, as far as the Manmohan Singh establishment is concerned, is that it is a Congress scandal.

The lead singer pulls in the bigger bucks in any performance, but he also pays a higher price when things go wrong. In fact, if the lead cracks up, the show disappears. If a Jharkhand Mukti Morcha slips in the ruling coalition, it barely raises a yawn. If Lalu Yadav stumbles, despite his 25 MPs, it is probably good news for the rest, since his ability to blackmail the coalition is dented. But if the political and ethical credibility of the Congress goes, then the edifice crumbles. The coalition can still brazen it out in arithmetical terms, but it will not be able to function as a government. It will also whittle Dr Manmohan Singh's personal credibility. Take that away, and there isn't much left.

During his more intemperate spells, just before he lost his job, Mr Natwar Singh often asserted that he was indistinguishable from the Congress. That is precisely the sort of thing that a Congress Prime Minister or a Congress President might want to hear. The last thing the Congress wants is to have beloved sons like Jagat Singh, who have dear friends like Andaleeb Sehgal and pathfinders to Baghdad like Anil Mathrani. A Congress-man might have such afflictions, but the party would like to consider itself a little bigger than an individual.

Alas, the paradox. The only time an accused is readily believed is when he spreads the accusation. Mr Natwar Singh's power lies in ambiguity. As long as there is no clarity, and the whisky trail, or the oil-cash trail, does not lead to specific hands and homes beyond doubt, he and the Congress are safe. But there are too many documents leading to too many established companies; will everyone keep quiet? If Natwar believes that he is being made a scapegoat, will he sing?

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Lessons from other regions for Saarc

SHAMSHAD AHMAD

THE trend of our times is economic development through regional cooperation. This is true of South Asia as it is for Europe, Latin America, Africa, Middle East and the rest of Asia.

We are witnessing a new upsurge of freedom, democracy and unprecedented economic growth in many regions of the world. South Asia must break out of the stranglehold of poverty, hunger and disease. It must take up the challenge, as one region, to combat economic deprivation.

No comparisons need be drawn between various regional organizations as each one of them represents a different set of problems and priorities. In particular, one must guard against the temptation to cite the EU example as a model for South Asia.

As stated earlier, the European Union has a long history that stands out in sharp contrast to other regions trying to integrate economically. It had qualitatively a more conducive political and economic environment, with Western Europe building on the ashes of the War a new edifice of mutual cooperation. It did not rest on any laurels and carefully crafted its institutions and mechanisms to achieve its goals. This whole process started in 1951 and took more than half a century in culminating in its present form.

Likewise, the history of Asean bears no parallel with the evolution of regional cooperation in South Asia. Like the EU, Asean was conceived in the context of the Cold War compulsions as an attempt to forestall any extra-regional security threat and to link noncommunist economies of this region with global capitalism. Asean entered the global economic expressway when the going was fast and smooth. Another advantage that Asean had over Saarc was the geo-political harmony of its member-states which were also smaller in size and had comparatively more efficient and centralized system of decision-making.

The closest that Saarc can compare itself with is the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), headquartered in Tehran, which I had the privilege of transforming during my tenure as its Secretary-General from a small trilateral entity of Iran, Pakistan and Turkey, originally called RCD or Regional Cooperation for Development into a major regional organization of ten-

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member states with the inclusion of Afghanistan and six newly-independent former Soviet republics of Central Asia and Caucasus.

In order to adapt itself to the new challenges after its enlargement, ECO went through a comprehensive reform and restructuring with the help of an inter-governmental group of eminent persons. I recall within one year of the establishment of the group of eminent persons, we not only received its report but also had it approved at all competent levels with its recommendations on various aspects of the organization's reform, including their vision of the charter, fully implemented and legally enforced.

We had to revise the ECO Charter only because the original charter in the form of the Treaty of Izmir had become redundant with the transformation of the organization from a trilateral entity into a major regional grouping of ten member-states.12 Within one-year span, we were able to completely restructure the organization, including its regional policy framework and socio-economic development strategy.

We also started implementing the major plans of action, which included the Quetta Plan of Action, the Istanbul Declaration and the Almaty Outline Plan for Development of Transport Sector. In terms of priorities, the development of a modern transport and communication infrastructure linking the ECO member-states with each other and with the outside world was at the top of our agenda.13 An elaborate plan for developing regional network of oil and gas pipelines was also formulated.

Among the various regional projects finalized during that period were ECO Trade and Development Bank, ECO Reinsurance Company, ECO Shipping Company and ECO Air.

After intense negotiations, two regional agreements, one on transit trade, and the other on simplification of visa procedure for the businessmen of ECO countries were concluded.

These are concrete projects with regional scope and dimension, which have their location and equity already approved and committed, and which on implementation will contribute significantly to the region's economic cooperation activity. Two regional institutions, namely, ECO Science Foundation and ECO Cultural Institute have already been established.

One must admit, however, that like Saarc, ECO's real potential as a regional cooperation organization remains captive to the geopolitics of the region. With Afghanistan still in turmoil, there is no prospect of an early break-through toward a meaningful economic integration in this part of Asia.

Meanwhile, the newly-independent republics of Central Asia are grappling with the challenge of bringing their political and economic systems in the global mainstream.

Despite their structural economic and political problems inherited from their previous system, the newly-independent members of ECO are gradually moving towards market and export-oriented patterns of development. ECO offers them not only a vast market in close proximity for their natural resources including gas and oil but also the only nearest outlet to other markets of the world.

The regions covered by Saarc and ECO are contiguous and mutually complementary in terms of their potential for regional cooperation. Both are vast and rich in natural and human resources. Their geography and strategic location is an asset that perhaps no other region of the world has. Our common civilizational experience and cultural heritage are unrivalled anywhere in the world. We have an enormous untapped economic potential, which, if exploited properly through innovative national and regional strategies, could transform this part of Asia into an economic power house, besides making it a major factor of regional and global stability.

Parallel to intra-regional cooperation, Saarc also needs to pursue a

process of mutually beneficial cooperation with other major regional organizations, including Asean and EU.

Annual consultations with Asean, ECO, South Pacific Forum, and Escap at the level of executive heads were institutionalized in 1994 which should be continued with special focus on such areas of common interest as trade and investment, transport and communication, human resource development and energy. This process would also enable the participating organizations to benefit from each other's experiences in these areas.

Saarc-EU cooperative links initiated in 1994 involving annual Troika ministerial meetings need to be further expanded so as to strengthen closer interaction in areas of mutual interest. EU could help Saarc in its capacity building and also "facilitate the ongoing integration process through its economic influence in the region and by sharing its own experience of dealing with diversity and its interests in crisis prevention." More specific initiatives should be considered to overcome the political inertia in this cooperative process, and to expand the scope of EU technical assistance for Saarc programs.

There have been welcome calls for expanding Saarc's economic links with other regions of the globalized world. In his address at the 12th Saarc Summit, the Prime Minister of Pakistan had suggested that besides deepening cooperation within South Asia, we should also encourage "strong linkages with other regional enterprises, enabling Saarc to leverage the economic complementarities" between Asia's different regions.

India also seems to be supportive of such linkages, especially with the economies of South East Asia, and with Japan, China, and South Korea, "to create a community of Asian dynamism."

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