

Flood is here

Prioritise relief work

THE desperate entreaties of a woman living in a near-submerged state for the last seven days to approaching newsmen whether, "you have any information that might save us" sum up the immediate tasks that the government should take up in hand to attend to the requirements of the flood affected people of the country. The affected people want immediate succour, and that is what the government should concentrate upon.

A good part of the country has been affected by flood, and there was forecast early enough about its imminence, and our records of handling disaster situations are well known. There is little time to waste on wrangling over whether people living in some of the inundated areas really fall under the category of flood-affected people or that they are in such a state because they have been living in low lying areas etc. The fact that a large part of our population finds itself in distress with nowhere to go and no succour at hand, should get the agencies to move full swing into relief and rehabilitation operation.

However, it's good to see that the army has swung into action in certain areas in aid of civil authority in tackling the deteriorating flood situation. Evacuation of the marooned as well as opening up of gruel kitchen should be undertaken without further delay. We are glad that a control room will be established in the CA's office. What is needed is coordination of efforts between all the agencies after having identified the worst hit areas and those that are likely to be adversely affected in the near future, to tackle the relief and rehabilitation efforts accordingly. The need for providing food and water as well as preventing the outbreak of enteric diseases must be part of the government's priority.

We feel that the government's efforts should also be supplemented by the NGOs, particularly those that are engaged in, and are very adept at, involving the community in humanitarian tasks. They should not wait for call up from the administration and instead employ their workers who are already present in many cases up to grassroots. All the rivers are rising and it seems, without sounding alarmist, that we may be in for a big bout with floods this year. We would expect that preparatory planning for post-flood measures also to be taken up to obviate any delay in their implementation.

Skeleton in the closet revealed

Clean up the mess in BSMMU

ANGABANDHU Sheikh Mujib Medical University (BSMMU), supposed to be a prestigious seat of medical treatment, research and learning, has been a den of corruption, malpractice and administrative irregularities. That this is no overstatement is made clear by the findings of a probe committee constituted at the initiative of the health ministry under the direction of chief adviser to go into the institution's affairs.

Ranging from recruitment of 3600 teachers and employees, far out of proportion to 1600 sanctioned posts, to commission of financial irregularities in the procurement of costly instruments and equipment, the anomalies speak of complete lack of accountability within the institution as well as to the government.

It is extremely relevant to note that the probe report has been submitted internally to the Vice-Chancellor Prof Tahir and not to the health ministry or the government. Prof Tahir who was pro-vice-chancellor during the period of the former BNP-led coalition government which came under review of the probe committee wants to place the investigation report before the syndicate. Some members of the probe committee have expressed an apprehension that the recommendations may get diluted in the hands of several members of the syndicate, formed during the previous government's tenure, who might be supportive of some of the administrative officials found involved in corruption. So the report may not be sent intact to the health ministry. And leaving the decision-making on the report to the syndicate to that extent could be injudicious.

We insist that the vice-chancellor send a true copy of the investigation report to the government, if he has not already done so. Let's not forget, the investigation was ordered by the government and not initiated by the institution as such. A high powered committee may, therefore, be constituted by the government to suggest follow up measures on the contents of the report. We underscore that investigation is only the first step. Implementing the recommendations is the real challenge and the only way the institution can be saved.

Should we not stand beside the marooned people?



SHAHNOOR WAHID

SENSE & INSENSIBILITY

Where are the political people who had been voted to power again and again by the same people who are wading through the flood water today? The armed forces are there. Voluntary organisations are there. But where are the politicians? Why are those public representatives sitting in their luxurious homes in the city instead of being by the side of the flood-stricken people of their constituencies? Is this the time to do politics? Is this the time to conspire and connive against others? Is this the time to be cunning and clever?

the Flood Forecasting and Warning Centre (FFWC) said that water flow in the major rivers was likely to rise further in the next few days.

So, it is bad news coming from all across the country. We are saddened by the spectre of rising water, and in our despondent mood we ask: What are the reasons for the quick rise of water in our country? Why water becomes unstoppable even after a little rain? Why canals, rivers and water-bodies get filled up, and water spills over and enters high lands so fast? In our quest for an answer, we learn that according to common knowledge, besides excessive rainfall in the adjacent countries or excessive melting of snow in the Himalayas, the other reasons for fast rise of water and water-logging in Bangladesh are entirely man made.

For example, for the last three decades, local political powers in cahoots with some corrupt government officials have spent crores and crores of Takas in constructing embankments, dams, roads, industries and households by filling up low-lying areas, and all these structures contributed to blocking excess water from finding its natural outlet to the sea or major rivers.

The construction projects have been taken up with the ulterior motive of making some quick bucks and not to help the local people. Embankments have been made at wrong places, often acquiring poor people's land by force. Roads have been made where these were not required. Industrial plots have been created on agricultural lands, here again acquiring poor people's land by force.

Hence, the pertinent questions of the moment are: What have the past governments done in last thirty plus years to pinpoint the problems, taking a foot down approach, without fear or favour? Did they make laws to demolish harmful structures from rivers and canals, construct permanent embankments where these were necessary, build water reservoirs, dredge canals, and recover low-lying areas from encroachers?

We are not in the know of any such measures taken by any government of the past decades. Maybe a lot of plans are there, but existing on paper only. Maybe both the government and non-government sectors received

billions of Dollars to undertake some permanent projects to improve the situation, but our experience says that mostly spontaneous, impromptu, makeshift, and ill-designed short-term mea-

sure had been taken up by the government of the day. It was more like wishing the water away.

But, dear readers, have you noticed something beautiful amidst the chaos? Our flood-stricken fellow citizens have lost homes, personal belongings, cattle, grains, seeds and crops, and yet they smile when you go there to take their pictures. Even in the face of uncertainty they do not forget to smile. How beautiful these people are! And how forgiving they are, too! They never complain about the way we have treated them for years together.

Here are some more questions for the road. Where are the political people who had been voted to power again and again by the same

people who are wading through the flood water today? The armed forces are there. The NGOs are there. Voluntary organisations are there. But where are the politicians? Why are those public representatives sitting in their luxurious homes in the city instead of being by the side of the flood-stricken people of their constituencies? Is this the time to do politics? Is this the time to conspire and connive against others? Is this the time to be cunning and clever?

No, this is the time to be compassionate. This is the time to act.

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NDA floundering

PRAFUL BIDWAI
writes from New Delhi

This betrays a misunderstanding of the role of the president in the Indian constitution. The president is not an alternative power-centre, supervisory authority, or last court of appeal. S/he enjoys only two prerogatives: appointment of the prime minister, and dissolution of parliament. Even these have to be exercised according to well-established norms. Otherwise, his/her role is largely ceremonial.

In Bihar, Karnataka and Orissa, where the BJP rules in alliance, MLAs cross-voted for Ms. Patil. In Karnataka, she bagged 83 votes in place of the expected 65.

This erosion was the least of the losses of the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance. Its biggest loss was political-moral. It ran a vicious, no-holds-barred campaign, raking up largely fictitious charges about Ms. Patil.

The NDA stooped low because it knew that the numbers were loaded against its candidate. It had earlier insisted on a second term for president APJ Abdul Kalam, although that's against the accepted convention. The NDA was bent on confrontation with Ms. Patil.

Ms. Patil won 442 votes from parliament, 16 more than the combined strength of the three supporting groupings. There was cross-voting for her in Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Jharkhand, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu.

Cross-voting was particularly strong in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Gujarat where the Bharatiya Janata Party rules on its own. In MP, she polled 53 votes in place of the Congress alliance's strength of 38; in Gujarat, 57 as against 51; and in Rajasthan 63 instead of 61.

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An assertive president who interferes with the Council of Ministers can paralyse governance. We witnessed signs of this in the 1980s when President Zail Singh launched a confrontation with Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. Mercifully, this wasn't repeated.

The presidential election also exposed deep fissures within the BJP, especially in Gujarat. Gujarat is due to have Assembly elections this year. It has long been Hindutva's laboratory, headed by Mr. Narendra Modi, infamous for the 2002 butchery of Muslims.

Mr. Modi is probably the BJP's most important leader after the Vajpayee-Advani duo.

Dissidence in the Gujarat BJP isn't limited to cross-voting. Five MLAs allied to former Chief Minister Keshubhai Patel who cross-voted have been suspended.

Mr. Modi has antagonised whole communities like the Patels and Kolis. His authoritarian style, his personality cult, and his interpersonal relationships, have earned him the hostility of the RSS. Ultimately, no BJP leader can thrive without RSS support.

The presidential election also saw BJP allies Shiv Sena, Trinamool Congress and Janata Dal (Secular) deserting it. The NDA failed to get support from the newly formed United National Progressive Alliance.

The UNPA is in tatters after Ms. Jayalalithaa voted for Mr. Shekhar in violation of the decision to abstain.

Particularly stark is the BJP's leadership crisis and its erosion as the NDA's nucleus. As BJP vice president Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi admitted (July 22): "We will have to face the questions raised by the presidential election squarely; otherwise the NDA will cease to exist by 2009."

Party president Rajnath Singh is a disaster, which proves that low cunning is no substitute for political skill, experience or stature. He tried

to marginalise Msrs. Arun Jaitley and Narendra Modi by dropping them from the parliamentary board. But Mr. Jaitley has made a comeback, and was put in charge of the Gujarat elections.

The Advani group's intimidatory campaign during the presidential election only brought the BJP ignominy. Its vice-presidential candidate Najma Heptullah's defeat seems almost certain, given the 401-to-240 support among MPs for the UPA-Left's M.H. Ansari.

The RSS is itself a divided house. It has sacked five pracharaks, including the veteran Mahesh Sharma, general secretary of the important Vanavasi Kalyan Parishad, active amongst Adivasis.

They were charged with "straying from the RSS ideology" and "leading a lifestyle" incompatible with their positions (read, corruption).

A silent but major change seems to be taking place in the RSS-BJP relationship. Its dimensions aren't fully understood, but the RSS seems utterly disoriented. It has abandoned its trademark Swadeshi and accommodated itself to the BJP's neoliberal orientation.

Because the RSS benefits from the loaves and fishes of office held by the BJP, it cannot convincingly preach moral virtue and discipline to it.

The RSS is only left with its virulently anti-Muslim platform and social conservatism. The latter is on full display in the Shiksha Bachao

Andolan Samiti's hysterical drive against sex education for adolescents.

The RSS no longer effectively plays its earlier role as the BJP's ideological mentor, political strategist and organisational gatekeeper.

The BJP can be expected to take increasingly sectarian and virulently chauvinist positions. Take the India-US nuclear deal. It wrongly contends that the new "123 agreement" will cap India's nuclear arsenal.

In fact, as this column has argued, the agreement will allow India to build more nuclear weapons, including those of the US. But that is not the BJP's criticism. The BJP-NDA took the initiative to align India politically and strategically with the US. It's pure hypocrisy for the BJP-NDA to rail against it.

The agreement must be faulted for being silent on disarmament, and for legitimising nuclear weapons, including those of the US. But that is not the BJP's criticism. The BJP-NDA took the initiative to align India politically and strategically with the US. It's pure hypocrisy for the BJP-NDA to rail against it.

But then, hypocrisy is the stuff of Hinduism. In the past, double standards helped the BJP play both sides of the street successfully.

Today, they ensure that it falls between two stools. Demoralisation and defeat stare it in the face.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.

Japan tunes out

A full revolution probably isn't in the cards -- not yet, at least. The LDP is still well entrenched and won't be easily dislodged. Yet the mere fact that Japanese voters are finally growing less predictable promises to make life more interesting for the political establishment here in the years to come -- and a lot less comfortable for Shinzo Abe and his allies.

AKIKO KASHIWAGI

IT'S election time in Japan again, yet Kazuyoshi Arima, a 25-year-old systems engineer, still doesn't know whom he'll vote for -- if he goes to the polls at all on July 29. "I know I should be more engaged, feel more strongly about exercising my right to vote. But these days I'm getting to the point where I just have to vote 'no.' It was easier to stay involved in politics a few years ago, he says, when the charismatic Junichiro Koizumi led the country.

Under Koizumi, says Arima, Japan's direction was clear: toward economic reform, deregulation and the remaking of the sclerotic Liberal Democratic Party. But now, under Koizumi's successor, Prime

Minister Shinzo Abe, "it's just so hard to decide who to vote for," Arima says. Both the LDP and the opposition Democratic Party of Japan seem rudderless and mired in mud.

Arima is not alone in his disillusionment. Recent opinion polls suggest that more than half of the Japanese electorate now share his view that neither party offers convincing solutions to problems that worry the public.

While that's bad news for everyone, it could prove particularly devastating for Abe, who is facing an important parliamentary election later this month. That's because undecideds or swing voters are historically more likely to back for the opposition, whomever it is -- if only to say no to the ruling party.

The LDP's membership has fallen from 3.3 million to 1 million in the last decade. And the conse-

quences of this shift could be long lasting. Unaligned voters -- who Ray Christensen, a political scientist at Brigham Young University, says "are the key to the election" -- could switch to the opposition en masse. The result? "A big loss would not mean the fall of the LDP, but it would push Japan further toward a two-party system," says Ikuo Kabashima, a political scientist at Tokyo University. And that would be a huge change for a place that's been ruled by the LDP for most of the last 50 years.

It must be a bitter irony for Abe that he faces this predicament today. After all, his immediate forebear, the swashbuckling Koizumi, was a reformer who bolstered the LDP's sagging popularity by promising sweeping change within the party and Japan at large.

His camera-friendly "political theater" (as it was derided by his opponents) won over hosts of young disaffected voters. Koizumi also attracted large numbers of swing voters who might otherwise have backed the opposition.

One of his first steps as prime

minister, for example, was to readmit to the LDP a group of politicians who'd been kicked out by Koizumi for opposing his reforms. Then Abe's cabinet was rocked by a string of corruption allegations; one of his ministers even committed suicide in late May in the midst of a scandal.

Most recently, the government was forced to confess that it had mislaid or confused more than 50 million pension records. Even though that mess wasn't directly Abe's fault or that of his cabinet, the prime minister has been hit by a wave of public outrage. (Pensions are a hot-button issue in this country where the population is rapidly aging.)

And then there's the general lack of direction. Yasuhiro Kudo, from the policy watchdog group Genron NPO, says Abe has failed to present a clear message to the public and has lost voters' support by claiming Koizumi's reformist mantle while pursuing an archconservative agenda.

To be fair, the public's sense of disillusionment isn't all Abe's fault. The LDP's support has been falling

for years, particularly in the rural areas that were once its stronghold.

Koizumi's reforms,

while popular in the cities, angered rural voters and weakened the LDP machine in these areas by reducing the public works programs and subsidies on which the countryside depended.

But the fact remains that more votes are now up for grabs than ever before. Ichiro Ozawa, the leader of the Democratic Party, has started assiduously courting disgruntled rural districts -- the "swing states" of this election. And the LDP is clearly worried, knowing how unpopular its chief has become (Abe's popularity rating has dipped to 28 per cent, according to some political scientists).

An LDP leader was once caught observing aloud that he hoped floaters would "be taking a nap on Election Day" -- betraying his belief that high voter turnout will only hurt the party.

This view is now widely shared. According to one recent survey conducted jointly by the Asahi Shimbun newspaper and Tokyo University, a full quarter of voters

who supported the LDP in 2005 say they would not vote for the party today.

If the DPJ can capitalise on this trend by making inroads into the countryside, it could well produce a major shakeup. Since their founding in 1998, the Democrats, who have pressed for liberal reforms,

have generally enjoyed little popularity outside of their urban bastion. If they can change that now, the party could truly threaten the LDP's half-century-old stranglehold on power.

Brigham Young's Christensen cautions that a full revolution probably isn't in the cards -- not yet, at least. The LDP is still well entrenched and won't be easily dislodged. Yet the mere fact that Japanese voters are finally growing less predictable promises to make life more interesting for the political establishment here in the years to come -- and a lot less comfortable for Shinzo Abe and his allies.

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