

Providing relief in flood-hit regions

Government should make it an all-inclusive effort

THE worsening state of floods in the country clearly calls for an intensification of relief efforts. While the government machinery has been trying to handle the situation, it is fairly obvious that the involvement of the wider community has now become necessary in order for succour to reach as many people as possible in the flood-hit areas. Let there be no mistake: the floods will increase before they begin to show any sign of receding. That being the situation, the conditions of those affected can only be imagined. More to the point, the limited resources of the government do not permit relief measures to reach everyone who has become a victim of the floods. Hence the matter of community participation in the provision of assistance to those hit by the rushing waters.

It has to be borne in mind that the government, not being a political one, needs the assistance of everyone who can complement its own effort toward relief. Its capacity to mobilise the nation is understandably limited, which is why it becomes necessary that political forces and especially NGOs come forth to play a definitive role in an amelioration of the existing difficulties. We are of course heartened by the fact that the army has been on the ground in aid of the civil administration, but the fact that the army chief of staff himself has noted that the authorities cannot do the job alone is an indication of how much more needs to be done, and on a wider dimension.

We at this newspaper feel that it is one of those times when the united efforts of all are needed to combat the danger. The entire nation must be galvanised in order to save itself. The government can take the lead in this regard through giving out unambiguous signals that everyone, including political leaders and workers, is welcome to undertake relief efforts. When the question is one of life and death for millions, such an approach to the issue will surely make a difference in the current situation. The government ought to reach out to the established networks that bodies such as NGOs have in place. In the overall sense, it will be quite logical to think that a combination of efforts by the government, political forces and NGOs could throw up a national coordination body, the better to beat the menace now threatening Bangladesh.

Listen to voice of business leaders

Yielding to IMF pressure bodes ill for economy

TWELVE top businessmen while waxing critical of 'undesirable interference' of the international financing agencies, especially the IMF, in Bangladesh's economic policy-making arena, have counselled the government not to succumb to any diktat. Otherwise known as our development partners, they have in the recent times, been too prescriptive about what we should do and what not in order to be eligible for their assistance without being sensitive to the need for protection of local industries.

The business leaders have woven their arguments around two basic trends being promoted by the donor community. First of all, they are opposed to the IMF suggestion that the government increase domestic prices of natural gas on what we think an unassailable ground that this will lead to increase in production costs due to rise in fertilizer prices. Consequently, the prices of essentials will go up. The pressure to increase fuel price will cause further inflation with attendant increase in the cost of doing business. Investment is likely to be affected, and with it employment creation.

Secondly, the IMF prescription for further trade liberalisation is not well-thought-out either; in fact, it is misplaced and superfluous. Bangladesh had actually lowered a series of tariffs ahead of many other developing countries at the expense of local enterprise and having caused hardship to common consumers. Under the World Trade Organisation (WTO) umbrella itself we could continue with domestic support measures to protect our industries. The point is: we have already done a lot of import tariff lowering, so we are in dire need of a safeguard body to boost local enterprise and business. Unless our industries are allowed to be competitive with fiscal support, we stand little chance of seeing export-led growth. Industries catering to local demands should also be bolstered to rev up domestic supplies.

An impression has gained ground lately that the government is showing signs of yielding to IMF pressures we can do without. Our economic policies and strategies will have to be homespun aiming at optimal utilisation of our own resources in the best interest of our people.

A US alliance with one man

Sadly, Pakistanis are as likely to blame the US as they are to blame Musharraf for this sorry state of affairs, and they're not entirely wrong. When security forces finally acted against the Red Mosque, bystanders were certain that Musharraf had acted on US instructions -- as they assumed he did when the army was called out in the Frontier. Since late 2001, the Bush administration has praised Musharraf for Pakistan's role in fighting terrorism, conflating the general with his country and US policy with Pakistan's.

PAULA R. NEWBERG

TROUBLE, we're told, comes in threes. But for Pakistan, this year has brought twice this number of problems -- with more, no doubt, to come. Rising border instabilities with Afghanistan, renegade Islamic militancy in the heart of the capital, and a resurgent Taliban -- the bread and butter of Pakistan's relationship with the US -- have been overshadowed by the deepening problems of Pakistan's failing governance.

General Pervez Musharraf's claimed prerogative has already provoked the judiciary to crisis. Rising civic opposition to the militarized executive branch exposed deep cracks in the army's edifice, and the mangled political system is ill-prepared to accommodate the return of civilian politics. Indeed, until the Supreme Court

reversed his dismissal of the chief justice, Musharraf appeared to believe that constitutional confrontation would give him control over anticipated elections. But it is the sheer absence of control -- even under conditions of army command -- that pushed Musharraf to open negotiations with exiled former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto for her return to Pakistan and made 2007 a critical year for Pakistan at home and abroad.

Phrased simply, Musharraf framed the vision of the state over which he now presides when he seized power in 1999. He has since created a political system that does not work and a political environment that fosters tremendous domestic confusion and unintentionally catalyzes the political opposition. In this, he has been aided and abetted, since 2001, by foreign allies who believe their own

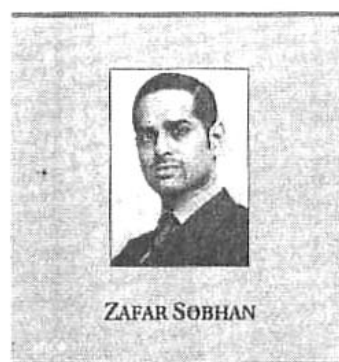
needs trump those of Pakistan's citizens.

As politics crumble in Pakistan, foreign support for Musharraf appears to brush aside Pakistan's needs. Those who consider withdrawing support for the general, however, may fear the forfeiture of their regional interests and perhaps the unraveling of Pakistan's internal security.

Until Pakistan resolves the question of how to govern the country, everything else hangs by an ever-thinning thread. Driven by the exigencies of the immediate and by inertia favoring the known, the general's foreign backers, including the US, may drift toward political tragedy.

In some ways, Pakistan's current problems aren't new. Military governments have taught Pakistanis -- and should have taught the world -- the futile art of

Unintended consequences



ZAFAR SOBHAN

I am not sure that I entirely follow the logic of the so-called "minus two" plan to remove Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina from the political arena. Actually, let me speak more precisely: I am not sure I follow the logic of the current plan as it appears to be being implemented.

I understand the theory that both have been a pernicious influence on Bangladeshi politics for the past fifteen years and that their continued leadership of their respective parties is the principal obstacle to the establishment of true liberal democracy in the country.

I understand the notion that as long as they remain at the helm that meaningful reform can never come to their parties, and, by extension, to the democratic culture of the country. I understand the idea that their leadership has stifled intra-party democracy and that they have instituted a culture of sycophancy and authoritarian rule by fiat.

I understand that in their attitudes and beliefs they per-

sonify the worst tendencies within the Bangladeshi body politic: the inability to accept dissent, the subordination of policy to partisanship, the you-are-either-with-us-or-against-us mentality, the equation of criticism with disloyalty, the contempt for public opinion.

I understand all these things. But there are two things about the current efforts that I do not understand.

The first is this: while their removal from the political scene may well be the sine qua non for meaningful change and sustainable reform and a necessary condition for things to get better -- why are we acting as though it would be a sufficient condition?

Retiring both from politics can only be the first step in refashioning Bangladeshi politics from the ground up. It does not appear to me that enough thought has gone into what might happen once they have passed from the scene.

Let us stipulate that Khaleda and Tarique and their

coteries were the fundamental problem with the BNP and that reform of the BNP would require, at a minimum, that they and their cronies be retired from politics.

That leaves what, exactly? A reformed BNP under the leadership of Mannan Bhuiyan? Col. Oli Ahmed? Dr. Badruddoza Choudhury? How popular would such a party be? Would any of these leaders be able to keep the party in one piece?

Now let us look at the AL. In the event that Hasina is sidelined from politics, who leads the party then? It is clear that the foursome of Suranjit, Tofail, Amu and Razzak entertain such ambitions. The problem is that each one of them is himself compromised and neither together nor separately can any of them hope to be able to hold the party together and command the support of the party faithful.

Then what? Perhaps a new AL with neither Hasina nor the STAR (incidentally, that is only the most polite acronym for the four -- there are others)

foursome at the helm -- but instead a compromise candidate. Would that work? Would he or she be able to keep the party together and win elections? Impossible to say.

But I see no evidence that anyone currently calling the shots has grappled with this issue with much rigour. The assumption seems to be that if Hasina and Khaleda are retired from politics that everything will improve dramatically. Well things might improve, but, then again, they might not.

In any event, it seems to me that the likeliest outcome of a political future without the two ladies would be that their parties would split up into factions. Let me forget, it was to keep their parties together that both were drafted into politics in the first place in the 1980s.

The ultimate upshot of both AL and BNP breaking up into squabbling factions would be, after elections, a split parliament filled with small parties or independent candidates. Would this be better or worse

than what we had before?

On the one hand, it might lead to a new culture of parliamentary functionality due to a superior calibre of representative, voting his or her conscience for the public good and not following the party line.

But, on the other, it might lead to policy-making paralysis. In a worst-case scenario, things could descend to such depths of chaos that it could lead people to start considering the need for a more authoritative chief executive or to look elsewhere for strong leadership. It seems to me that if we are not careful, we could be opening the door to all sorts of damaging repercussions.

The second issue I have with the "minus-two" plan, such as it is, is that it is not clear to me exactly what would constitute "removing" Khaleda and Hasina from politics. Right now, if current maneuvers are anything to go by, it seems that this means to convict them of wrong-doing in a court of law and to put them behind bars.

Well, at least for Hasina. Khaleda remains more or less at large. One can only conjecture that the reason is that with one son in custody and with charges pending against the other, that this is sufficient leverage to keep her quiet for the moment. But I would imagine that eventually the government would need to move against her, too.

But the immediate question is: what about Hasina? Let us

say she is convicted of the crimes she is charged with and sentenced to prison. How long is it realistically possible to keep her incarcerated? Will she kept in jail until after the next elections. That would mean 18 months. But what would happen after that? Unless the plan is to keep her in jail for the rest of her life, she is going to have to be let out at some point eventually.

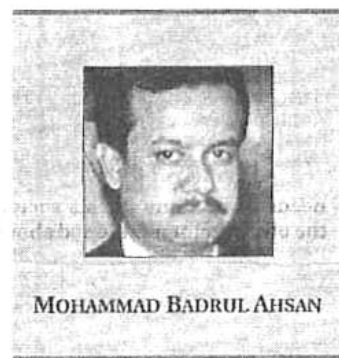
The 64 million dollar question is: what happens then?

Nor is this merely a question of how legitimate the charges against her are. Even if truly substantive charges are brought against her and the evidence against her is clear, it may not be sufficient to discredit her in the eyes of the public, a significant number of whom will continue to rally behind her come what may.

So, one way or another, dealing definitively with Hasina and Khaleda may well require more than merely locking them up. It might require coming to some kind of accommodation with them. It seems to me that with the consequences of any actions taken by this government so hard to predict, that every effort should be made to bring some certainty to the proceedings. And that means entering into some kind of settlement or plea bargain with the two ladies and not leaving matters to chance.

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A suicide by train



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

NINE members of a family, stitched together by their death wish, hurled themselves under a speeding train and died like a ripped quilt. They left behind a long trail of blood, broken bones, mangled flesh, scattered hairs and tattered cloths, until their bodies could no longer feed the stains of life to the crushing wheels of the train.

It was a collective suicide. A group of men, women and children vowed to perish together and stuck it out till the end. Taken by age, size and gender, it was a landscape of humanity, which took a single plunge, and obliterated itself.

There is no reason to mourn their deaths. They had the choice to live, yet they squandered the gift of god in an awkward hurry. They chose to die in an anticlimax to the familiar world, which seethes with hunger and greed, the unquenchable thirst for more, the lust for life

No coroner, police, judge or social thinker will ever know what happened. The secret, which they held within the bounds of their bodies vanished into the thin air as soon as it was released like compressed steam when the wheels of the train cut open their flesh. Is this what they wanted, to be chopped and mauled so that the secret which had soaked them was squeezed out of their flesh and bones? May be that is why they chose such a grisly, gory death.

that surpasses everything.

There are those who will do anything to live, but nine people gave up their lives in the twinkling of an eye. They died many deaths in one form, suicide and sacrifice, at once violent, senseless and shocking, at once contemptible and lugubrious. Nevertheless, they died with an impact. Ordinary people died extraordinary death.

Mass suicides are not new to mankind and it has been practiced like a ritual of some sort across the world. When Bahadur Shah, the Sultan of Gujarat, attacked Chittaur, Rani Karnavati and other women immolated themselves in the fire. Rajput women practiced this ritual of jauhar throughout history to avoid dishonor by an invading army.

A spiritual leader named Reverend Jim Jones gave poisonous potion to his followers in the jungles of Guyana and led 913 people

to their deaths. David Koresh, leader of the Branch Davidians religious sect, believed he was the final prophet. He chose to die with 53 adults and 21 children when the US law enforcement agencies burned down his ranch.

There are many instances when distraught parents killed their children before taking their own lives. Suicide does its own calculation of the Internal Rate of Return. When the net present value of dying exceeds the expected return from all future streams of staying alive, the business liquidates itself.

Nobody seems to know enough about these nine souls except that they belonged to a family headed by a retired army man, who had a delusion that his family was the best amongst all. We also know that in his inordinate passion for humanity, he gave Adam as the last name to every member of the family.

The neighbors misunderstood it as his conversion to Christianity. He was a mystic of some kind, who had probably gone into cult practice. A recluse by nature, he stayed away from other people and kept others away from his family.

Still it isn't clear what pushed them over the top. What Freudian eclipse had darkened their minds? It couldn't be attributed to mental disorder alone, which afflicts one or two members, but highly unlikely to run in the entire family. There is one surviving daughter who shows no strain of mental illness. There were children amongst the suicides who were too young to lose their minds.

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the train cut open their flesh. Is this what they wanted, to be chopped and mauled so that the secret which had soaked them was squeezed out of their flesh and bones?

May be that is why they chose such a grisly, gory death. Taking poison or slashing their wrists would have been less appalling and messy. Each of them would have gone to grave in one piece.

Instead they chose to be carted off like crudely sliced animals in a butcher shop. And one wonders what burial must have been like for them, lowered in grave as a jumbled mix of broken bodies. For as many reasons as we may think, it simply eludes the mind that they should have gone like this instead of taking a less painful course. But lots of people go like them these days, specially the suicide bombers, who disintegrate themselves in order to integrate a manifold revenge against their enemies.

But suicide bombers explode, while the regular suicides implode. These people take their lives when they are bombed, when their dreams are spent and hopes are lost, their inner strength depleted by doubts and despair, when the prospect of life looks grim in the face of escalating pain.

People always enjoy doing things with their families. They like to go to picnic, travel together, watch movies, and these days even

go to jail. They work hard to support their families, raise children, then perpetuate the illusion that they will live in their children after they are gone.

But taking the family to the railroad, preparing them mentally to keep tight when a racing train comes in sight, rehearsing their step by step for the moment of truth so that adults and children will perish at the same time, the whole thing was outrageously pathetic.

Albert Camus writes that there is only one serious philosophical question and that is suicide. Whether life is worth living or not answers the fundamental question in philosophy and everything else follows from that. And that question gets louder when a group of people commit suicide.

It gets even louder when that suicide takes place on the railroad, when the tragedy of someone taking his own life is multiplied by headcounts and compounded by the brutal intensity of meat-grinding death.

It was Socrates who said that an unexamined life wasn't worth living. But those nine people proved it wrong. They found it meaningless and hollow, unworthy of further examination. Freaked out, they looked for the fast way out. They took the train.

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illegitimate army rule. Since the 1950s, promises of military discipline and praetorian strategy have never been fulfilled, even though foreign allies often encouraged this form of central rule.

Musharraf, a self-described moderate modernizer, created a new kind of corrupted politics by appropriating the vocabulary of generals Ayub Khan, founder of Pakistan's handshake military-industrial complex, and Zia ul Haq, founder of reconduct military-mullah relationships.

Today, the diffuse relationship between religion and the state has become dangerously unstable. Almost all civic institutions and many of the country's largest businesses are run by military men. As malign as the global anti-terror campaign may have been to Pakistan -- where the war on terror is a serious war -- Musharraf inflicted the primary injuries when he appropriated the offices of president and army chief.

Such tactics create vulnerabilities where they are most hazardous. Political manipulations led to the rise of Islamist parties in the Frontier -- beyond the control of Afghanistan, the US and, ultimately, the army. Claiming to neutralize politics, Musharraf exiled party leaders Bhutto and Mian Nawaz Sharif, found a pliable

prime minister; mimicked a 1960s-era electoral system that effectively disabled political parties; and then patronized the rudderless Muslim League, along with the Karachi-based and occasionally gun-happy Muttahida Qaumi Movement, to achieve a limp parliamentary majority.

Every action failed. Parliament is restive, party members clamor for the return of their leaders and younger generations -- the majority of Pakistanis -- may well turn their backs on old-school politics anyway.

For foreign interlocutors -- the US, China, the European Union and Japan -- such machinations may seem old hat: As long as Musharraf copied the familiar, the outcomes were not surprising.

To the degree that policies based on fear and convenience underscored government actions, they, too, were familiar -- fear that militant Islamists would rise if the army did not keep them at bay, fear that a return to party politics would compromise Pakistan's security.

But Musharraf's judgment backfired, and the creeping blandishments of impatient authoritarianism wreaked havoc. Four months after Musharraf fired the chief justice for giving a judicial forum to legitimate questions, the Supreme Court stood its ground,

unveiling the lie beneath his veneration and giving sustenance to Pakistan's civic opposition.

The next day, the government proved incapable of restraining the extremist Red Mosque in Islamabad, and bloodshed was the result. The Taliban and Al Qaeda quickly responded with retributive killings, and Washington has revived old talk of military action inside Pakistan. Musharraf's agenda and his remaining credibility imploded.

Sadly, Pakistanis are as likely to blame the US as they are to blame Musharraf for this sorry state of affairs, and they're not entirely wrong. When security forces finally acted against the Red Mosque, bystanders were certain that Musharraf had acted on US instructions -- as they assumed he did when the army was called out in the Frontier.

Since late 2001, the Bush administration has praised Musharraf for Pakistan's role in fighting terrorism, conflating the general with his country and US policy with Pakistan's.

The problem the US now confronts is more dangerous than public diplomacy, however. Its security relationship with Pakistan is grounded in profound illegality. Pakistan's constitution, upheld by its highest court, forbids Musharraf

from holding concurrently the offices of president and army chief. Despite promises to withdraw from one or the other -- and should he wish to remain president, to run for re-election -- he has not stepped down.

The Bush administration has indicated -- in public, at least -- that the choice is Musharraf's. But the math is simple: Were the offices to be separated, a new president could replace the army chief; a new army chief could refuse to act on the orders of the old president; and both would serve at the will of the parliament.

Moreover, if Musharraf were to run for president, he could lose. Constitutional manipulations required to accommodate his need to remain in office and Bhutto's ambition to return to power -- allowing her to stand for a third term, while waffling on his status as army chief and president -- substitute a short-term fix to a deeply seated governance problem.

In each instance, Pakistan's cooperation with the US and others would no longer be a done deal. In this sense, the current US-Pakistan alliance clearly acts against Pakistan's constitution, continues the structural disruptions that military rule visits on the state and ultimately undercuts the

substance of alliance between the two countries.

The US could fix its part of this existential problem, of course, by stating outright that the rule of law is a greater long-term interest than any one political or military actor, its alliance is with Pakistan, not Musharraf.

This won't dispel the likely contrivances of ambitious politicians in both countries willing to deal with opportunistic generals and politicians and doesn't necessarily bring about conditions that help Pakistanis return power to legitimate civilian government.

At best, this is a first step toward a rational policy that recognizes Pakistan's profound difficulties as it tries to correct the desperately complex political and military environment wrought by US complicity with the worst of military rule. But it is a critical step for both countries. Without a change in posture, the US will be unprepared to reap the benefits of inevitable changes in Pakistan. Then, no one's interests will be served.

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