

Flood challenge too serious for recrimination

Total national effort needed to tackle it

It is disquieting to note that some government functionaries and politicians are blaming each other for lack of cooperation in addressing the flood-relief related tasks. At a time of national calamity when 47 districts out of 64 are facing varying degrees of inundation endangering life and property of at least ten million, this trading of blame is both distracting and obstructive to the tasks at hand.

There is crying need for shelter, food, potable water and medical help including IV saline. Every hour 19 diarrhoea patients are crowding into Dhaka hospitals, let alone those in the outlying areas. Five hundred schools and colleges have gone under water implying they could no longer serve as shelter centres in addition to education coming to a grinding halt. Seventy-five percent embankments have been severely damaged. Receding waters will breed their own problems: damaged infrastructure, quantifiable magnitude of crop losses, high incidence of water borne diseases, all becoming pressing issues of post-flood rehabilitation.

We need hardly labour the point that government alone cannot handle such a massive task. All the actors like political parties, NGOs, voluntary and philanthropic organisations, community leaders and student groups must come forward in aid of the flood victims -- not only out of their own sense of social responsibility but also be welcomed by the government to do so. The government should give a robust signal -- we note that the chief adviser has already put across one -- to the private sector and all other potential players who could work shoulder to shoulder with the district administrations to help mitigate the sufferings of flood victims.

Let's face it that they have been somewhat hesitant in coming forward in an emergency after their Chittagong experience in which their attempt to lend a hand was somewhat frustrated. Now, that the government at the top level says that emergency is no bar to participation in relief operations, this should clear the air. Much shouldn't be made about political parties giving relief with their identification in some form or the other.

Political parties have networks up to the grassroots. The NGOs have a strong database and links to local communities. They not only have the right to stand by the flood victims in their hour of need but also a competence to do so. Add to this, the pressing into service of the government's disaster preparedness and mitigation frameworks, we have a complete flood alleviation strategy in hand to be harnessed for the good of the people. At this hour of need people crave for full scale national endeavour, not piecemeal and fragmentary efforts, for tiding over the crisis they face today.

Biman flight schedule

Move fast to retain goodwill

It is disconcerting news indeed that when many regional airlines are expanding and enjoying bigger slices in market share, our national carrier Biman Bangladesh Airlines Ltd continues to nose dive in a haze of its own creation. With some large aircraft sitting idle following accidents and other mechanical troubles, the authorities are struggling to maintain Biman's schedule with only 4-5 aircraft in operation.

The nation would find it difficult to accept that out of sheer desperation Biman authorities took the decision to cut as many as eight international flights and reduce flight frequency on some profitable routes like Dhaka-Riyadh, Dhaka-Kuwait, Dhaka-London and Dhaka-Rome. A large number of expatriate Bangladeshis in these routes prefer to fly the national airline. Surely by backtracking from such prestigious routes we have only exposed our inefficiency in managing our affairs and how much we lacked in vision.

Biman Bangladesh Airlines is our national flag-carrier and the successive governments have pumped in colossal amounts of money to keep it floating. But rampant corruption, nepotism, recruitment of inefficient manpower, purchase of faulty aircraft at double the price and corrupt management by unskilled hands damaged the very foundation of the organisation in last 35 years. Biman's market share in recent times has shrunk to around 32 per cent from 57 per cent in 1991. The recent decision to turn the organisation into a public limited company came as a last minute bid to save the airline from a major crash landing. With not so encouraging stock in trade to start with, the new company will have to build the airline brick by brick to face the challenges in a competitive market.

We strongly feel that there is no option left but to rescue the national flag-carrier from the present moribund state by adding more aircraft, firing all corrupt elements, improving passenger services and restructuring the international flight schedule. The option of hiring management consultants of international repute can be kept in view for the greater interest of the airline.

The dwindling goodwill of Biman Bangladesh Airlines has to be stemmed at all costs and its potential for commercial viability has to be fully realised.

Harder times ahead



M ABDUL HAFIZ

THE proverbial last straw has been placed on the camel's back: sky-rocketing price hike, surpassing all records of the recent past and double digit inflation that is wreaking havoc in the lives of the people. It's a mind-boggling proposition to survive with the double demons constantly cracking our back.

The simultaneous price rise for the utility services, already on the cards, hangs like Damocles' Sword over our necks. The advent of Ramadan, usually accompanied by a fresh spate of price rise, is only weeks away: The gathering gloom has been thickened by devastating flood, taking its tolls in terms of human miseries as well as death and destruction of lives and properties.

It has already obliterated, in its cruel sweep, numerous hamlets and homesteads and levelled the standing crops with muddy sheets of water. The post-flood prognoses by the

experts and economists are equally depressing.

incurred to the people. As a result, the relief materials being distributed are just drops in the ocean.

As was experienced in the past, the disaster management of this nature had always been a matter of great mobilisation, with broad-based participation. This time it seems to have been controlled by the establishment alone.

Anything that involves public relations between the ruled and the rulers needs to have some chemistry between the two. Or else it becomes a mechanical exercise tinged with an apathy on the part of all who carry out the exercise willy-nilly. That's the problem with the dispensation and their crisis management or relief operation.

This is not the first or last time that the interim government is stuck with the problem not designed for resolution.

It is not for nothing that there is clamour from different quarters, both at home and abroad, to restore political order in the country.

It is only the political patrons of

the distressed people in a crisis like the present one who would care to soothe their bruised psyche resulting from the catastrophe. An executive or technocrat government cannot possibly have the wherewithal to address hard issues of the public arising out of a disaster like this. Consequently their efforts are sincere but unsuccessful.

As reported by TV channels, the marooned people only heard about some kind of relief being distributed but they did not receive any.

The need of the hour is to be able to reach out to the people. One of the advisers rightly admitted that the government did not have a network of activists like the political parties. Then why keep them under leash? Even if the present dispensation deserves credit for being the champion of justice and crusader against corruption, there are areas where it keeps stumbling.

By prolonging its writ, the interim government will only complicate problems for the nation and for



PHOTO STAR

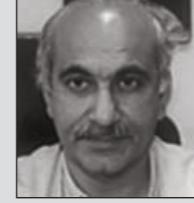
Flood situation in the country deteriorates, leaving the people helpless.

Without a proper political government in place, the problems are piling up and reaching a point where any future government will find them insoluble. It would be a disservice to the nation for any dispensation to bring the nation to such a dire strait.

Part from problems on many fronts, the investment has been shrinking for years while the public enterprises of great repute are closed down. Where will the vast multitude of people sustained by those enterprises go? Can an interim government think about them? Let the process be hastened for the people who can.

Brig (retd) Hafiz is former DG of BISS.

A good deal walks on two legs



M. J. AKBAR

MUCH to my regret, I cannot change my nose into one of the Seven Wonders of the World by calling it a pyramid. Spin, make-up or clever photography might disguise its excesses, but in the loneliness of the morning mirror, I have to admit that it is nothing more than a slightly protuberant outcrop on a fairly arid base.

The principle of the nose extends to the text of agreements. The manipulation of words, or their contrived omission, does not deny fundamental facts.

There is still some way to go before the proposed nuclear deal between India and the United States becomes operational, but it is very clear that the two negotiating teams, and their governments, have agreed on one thing: that they will sell different narratives on home turf, even when the narratives contradict each other.

Delhi to give the most obvious instance, is massaging the media and trumpeting the absence of any reference to the consequences of a new nuclear test by India as a triumph. Delhi is treating this as de facto American recognition of India's right to resume testing if it so

decides.

Only a very foolish person advocates enmity as a national objective. It is utterly stupid to seek the hostility of America, a genuine great power, not because of its military might (which it is squandering in Iraq) but because it is the true fountainhead of technology, education, economics, and democracy. India has exactly the same passions, and no two modern nations are better designed for true friendship. America became, in my view, the oldest country of the modern world because its democratic constitution is the template on which nations must find their future in an age of liberal freedoms.

The 123 Agreement was announced on Friday, July 27. On August 2, just six days later, Nicholas Burns, undersecretary of state and chief American negotiator was asked by a journalist, Robert McMahon, in a recorded interview: "Some say that under the deal, if India holds a nuclear weapons test, the US would delay its own nuclear fuel supplies to India but the US would help India find other sources of fuel, which violates the spirit of the Hyde Act. What do you say to those concerns?"

Burns replied: "That's absolutely false. I negotiated the agreement and we preserved intact the responsibility of the president (of the United States) under the Atomic Energy Act of 1954 that if India or any other country conducts a nuclear test, the president -- he or she at that time in the future -- will have the right to ask for the return of the nuclear fuel or nuclear technologies that have been transferred by American firms. We're releasing the agreement on our website on Friday afternoon (August 3) and people will see that when they cite the text."

The answer could not be more

categorical: "absolutely false." That is the American position, and it is being enunciated for the record, without any ambiguity. The message is clear, and it is loud. America will demand fuel and technology back, and probably not return the still-uncounted billions of dollars we paid for it either.

India is pretending as if the Hyde Act does not exist, or at least is not binding upon India. But it is, as Burns has repeatedly and publicly insisted, binding on Washington.

Why is this a vital fact? Because of the nature of the agreement. This is not a two-way deal. India is not selling something of critical interest to America in return for nuclear fuel or nuclear technology. India is a buyer. It is a one-way transaction. America can sell only if India is in compliance with the conditions imposed by the Hyde legislation, which was specifically designed for this deal, and which makes no bones about its intention to place Indian nuclear activity as well as Indian foreign policy on watch.

This is why Burns added: "[W]e hope very much that India will not conclude any long-term oil and gas agreements with Iran. The Indians, as

you know, have voted with us at the International Atomic Energy Agency board of governors against Iran on two occasions." This is nothing to do with his personal views; he is enjoined, as a public servant, to place these issues on public record.

India has formally accepted this obligation in the 123 Agreement, a point that seems to have escaped the notice of some, but certainly not all, instant analysts. Article 2.1 says very specifically: "Each Party shall implement this Agreement in accordance with its respective applicable treaties, national laws, regulations, and license requirements concerning the use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes."

The Hyde Act is the national law of the United States, and any perceived violation would give any "future president" -- he or she, as Burns wisely pointed out -- cause to declare the agreement null and void and demand American fuel and technology back.

I suppose we could retaliate by banning the export of mangoes to America, but there would not be much else that we could do.

The question is a simple one. America is the supplier; has it made India a supplicant?

Only a very foolish person advocates enmity as a national objective. It is utterly stupid to seek the hostility of America, a genuine great power, not because of its military might (which it is squandering in Iraq) but because it is the true fountainhead of technology, education, economics, and democracy.

India has exactly the same passions, and no two modern nations are better designed for true friendship. America became, in my view, the oldest country of the modern world because its democratic constitution is the template on which nations must find their future in an age of liberal freedoms.

India is the ideological leader of the post-colonial world, because our constitution is proof that independence is the birthright of a nation, and freedom is the birthright of the people. But a sustainable friendship can only be built between equals. One might be tempted to wink one's way past potentially conflicting interpretations of clauses, but this would at the very least sour relations between India and the United States.

India is the ideological leader of the post-colonial world, because our constitution is proof that independence is the birthright of a nation, and freedom is the birthright of the people. But a sustainable friendship can only be built between equals. One might be tempted to wink one's way past potentially conflicting interpretations of clauses, but this would at the very least sour relations between India and the United States.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, architect of the nuclear deal, made a small but perhaps significant mistake when trying to persuade us of its merits. He suggested that it would be unpatriotic to oppose it. I believe that the mistake was unintentional, for I cannot doubt his sincerity or his excellent manners.

Perhaps the problem is that language can sometimes be an impediment to understanding. He probably wanted to suggest that it was in the national interest to accept this pact.

There is a way of ensuring national support: by making this a national, rather than merely a gov-

ernment, decision. How?

For a start, the pace of implementation must slow down. There is no reason why this agreement should be signed within four weeks. What is the hurry? The text will not change. America will wait until we have concluded a safeguards agreement with the IAEA and convince the 45 Nuclear Suppliers Group to give it acceptable terms in civil nuclear trade.

When India's parliament convenes, the prime minister should take the initiative to set up an all-party committee that would be tasked to take

evidence from experts, examine the implications of each clause and arrive at its recommendations by the end of the year.

It will be a bipartisan process without rancour and politics, and each section of the House will be co-owner of the consensus. So far, the whole process has been handled by a small group around the prime minister, consisting primarily of bureaucrats.

This decision will influence Indian policy for the next half century, and must have the legs to walk for fifty years.

A partisan approach would give this decision but a single leg, and how far can you travel with a crutch? The American administration has taken care to use the House of Representatives and the Senate to make it a bipartisan decision, compromising with the likes of Senator Hyde when it had to. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh can afford to do no less. You cannot run a marathon at the speed of a hundred-metre dash; there could be a grievous injury en route.

It is in the national interest to make the Indo-US nuclear deal a national decision.

M.J. Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.

A badly beaten Abe refuses to go

CLOSEUP JAPAN

The extension of the anti-terror law bill, as a result, might turn out to be a catalyst in the process of initiating changes at the top. The government is desperately trying to win over support of even a few DPJ upper house members to ensure smooth passage of the bill in the house. But how far that backdoor maneuver turns out to be viable in the post-election scenario remains to be seen. The most plausible outcome, therefore, might be a negotiated settlement that would see the bill going through the house at the expense of Abe and his cabinet.

MONZURUL HUQ

EVEN those who did not doubt the plunging popularity of the Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe did not expect the outcome of July 29 upper house election of the Japanese Diet to be as bloody for the ruling camp as it has turned out to be.

Towards the fag end of the campaign period, the top leadership of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and its junior partner in the coalition government, the New Komei Party, sensed some kind of debacle in the election. But the debacle would turn out to be an outright rout was beyond their imagination.

So, too, was the extent of surprise for the leadership of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), the main beneficiary of the people's eroding trust in the prime minister and his policies that, in recent days, created so much controversy. The top leadership of DPJ proclaimed until the voting on July 29, that the party would be satisfied if it got 55 seats out of a total of 121 at stake.

Winning 60 seats, or almost half of the total seats at stake, has so far been the best result shown by any opposition party in the upper house elections throughout the post World War II period.

The bicameral Japanese Diet has

been not moving that smoothly for the ruling camp. But there was hardly any hint that things were, indeed, that bad.

The final results show that LDP could only manage 37 seats out of 121 at stake, down from its pre-election share of 64, and falling far behind the main opposition DPJ, which to its own surprise, bagged 60 seats. As a result, including seats that were not contested this time, DPJ has emerged as the largest block in the upper house, dislodging LDP from its number 1 position in the house for the first time since the party was founded in 1955.

The LDP's junior partner, New Komei Party, also suffered a setback. Though the ruling alliance has 70 percent of the seats in the lower house, its loss of control of the upper house will radically alter the way the Diet activities have been managed by the coalition. And the first confrontation is not far off, as the ruling coalition is getting ready for the deliberation of a bill during the extraordinary Diet session in autumn, which would allow the extension of a special-measure law to keep Japanese Self Defense Forces deployed in the Indian Ocean for the US-led war on

terrorism.

Soon after gaining majority in the upper house of the Diet, opposition leader Ichiro Ozawa put the ruling coalition on the spot by vowing to block the planned legislation. His strategy is to force a confrontation between the ruling coalition and the opposition camp, which he hopes could lead to a dissolution of the more powerful lower house.

Earlier the opposition leader called on the cabinet of Prime Minister Abe to resign. Speaking at a party meeting two days after voting, Ozawa strongly criticized Abe's decision to remain in office despite the crushing defeat suffered by the LDP, and termed the decision as a selfish one that lacked common sense.

But the prime minister seems to be holding his position firmly, and was not bothered at all by the rhetoric of the opposition leader.

He didn't waste much time in declaring that he intended to remain in office, and both the LDP executive board and New Komei leadership too had given their go ahead for Abe to stay on.

But how long he will be able to hold power remains an open ques-

tion, as there are already growing calls, even within the LDP, for initiating the process of looking for an alternative.

Though the upper house of the Japanese Diet has little leverage in deciding the fate of the cabinet, the LDP's defeat in the upper house poll, in fact, forced the prime minister to bow out at least twice in the recent past. After the 1989 election, which left the party with only 36 of the seats at stake, then prime minister Sosuke Uno stepped down. Then again in 1998, then Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto left the office after LDP could gain only 44 seats.

So, many in Japan now sees Abe's announcement of keeping his post as a desperate attempt by a besieged leader to keep his