

NGO efforts should be mobilised

BAYEZID DAWLA

DUE to intermittent rain caused by the depression over West Bengal, India, recession of floodwaters in the central and south-central districts of Bangladesh is likely to be delayed," according to the Flood Forecasting and Warning Centre.

This report clouds the feeling of relief just breathed along with the media update that the overall flood situation across the country was improving. The common aspiration that the recession of floodwater would soon put an end to the endless miseries of victims seems to have disappeared.

Meanwhile, the majority of seedbeds have been destroyed, vegetable gardens damaged, livestock devastated, and the field crops and fish farms washed away causing terrific depletion of resource base of the victims, especially of the poor. Moreover, their sufferings have been intensified due to a lack of food and safe drinking water, giving rise to the vast number of diarrhoea patients across the country.

Taking the depressing condition into account, Army Chief General Moeen U Ahmed has termed the flood and diarrhoea situation a "national disaster." Calling for an emergency response to the "crisis," he said recently (August 12) at the ICDDR: "Tackling the flood

situation is the most important thing right at the moment ... One third of the country is under water. Our politics should, therefore, be to work together, stand by people and save them."

To help the victims out of this disaster, the three economists of the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) have proposed: "The government has to make it clear that it welcomes the participation of all NGOs, private sector and business, voluntary organisations, civil society organisations, professional bodies and associations, and citizens in the relief and rehabilitation activities ... The government will have to undertake an extraordinary effort to spearhead such a mobilisation."

The CPD argument is correct because it proved very effective to mobilise the NGO efforts at managing disasters that hit us in the past. It is evident that the NGOs undertook post-war rehabilitation measures for 10 million people, and later they worked during cyclone and floods, which eventually enhanced their disaster management skills and capacities.

The NGOs developed networks of grassroots community-based organisations (CBOs), which proved quite capable of reaching out to the remote rural areas. Many of them were able to start relief work with respective buffer stocks before getting donors' response. The NGOs

distributed tons of seeds among the flood victims at grassroots to help revitalise the agricultural sector and generated post-flood income through cultivation of fish which abounded in water-bodies.

Moreover, the services delivered through the government-NGO collaborative exercises reduced the chance of famine on the one hand and increased the possibility of a bumper harvest due to new silts deposited on the bed of cultivable land on the other. These efforts largely saved the victims from starvation and death.

On the contrary, the current flood has killed about 200 people and affected 12 million people in 40 districts out of 64 in Bangladesh, according to a WHO report. Compared to this, the magnitude of the 1998 flood was very high.

When the last century's worst flood hit Bangladesh in 1998, it was forecast that millions might die. However, the NGOs took active role in managing that disaster quite efficiently. For instance, as the flood approached, for emergency food and medicine distribution among the victims, Proshika instantly allocated Tk 2,971,500 which led to a total of Tk 205,123,724 over a period of two months during July-September 1998.

The organisation deployed 11 regional flood management teams which, based in different flood-hit regions of the country, facilitated relief operation by involving the

village coordination council and group leaders in the process of relief need assessment, procurement and distribution in 8,000 villages, 875 unions and 130 thanas. Together, they worked day and night, and distributed 2,700,000 kg rice, pulses, molasses, etc among 270,000 families. They also distributed 200,000 packets of milk powder and 335,000 packets of biscuits to 200,000 babies.

The regional teams also hired private physicians as well as mobilised government doctors for clinical health care for 25,000 people through 500 centres, provided 110,000 domestic animals through 200 veterinary clinics each run by a para-vet, and deployed the trained group members who disinfected 50,000 polluted tube-wells.

The teams also mobilised the members of parliament (MPs), local elites and the appointed and elected officials of the local government around their emergency responses even in the far-flung areas. A control room based in the headquarters was in operation round the clock to monitor the flood situation and relief progress.

Proshika undertook massive post-rehabilitation cash programs for cleaning roads, drains, and ponds in Dhaka slums. It also distributed 21,370 kg seeds and 71,700 kg black gram among 300,000 families, seeds for 700

farms and 85,000 farmers, and disbursed Tk 100,000,000 interest-free loans among 153,000 families for their rehabilitation. Moreover, it provided 101 small local NGOs with Tk 13,700,000 relief foods, medicines, seeds and cash loans for distribution among the victims in their respective areas.

It is, however, ironic and also tragic that with such vast experience, operational strength, and management expertise that Proshika is playing a limited role amid a disaster that has gobbled up almost one-third of the country. It is learnt that since 2001 the organisation has been denied access to its fund of approximately Tk 200 crore allocated by its donors and approved by the NGO Affairs Bureau for the development of the poor and the marginalised.

It simply does not make sense that a large organisation like Proshika, with its educated, trained and skilled staff based across the country, stays handicapped at this juncture of the nation. Given this context of human miseries, which naturally calls for emergency responses from all quarters of a society, it is imperative that the NGOs, especially those having acquired disaster management experience and efficiency, are mobilised without any delay to unleash their huge potential to stand by the government at this moment and provide humanitarian support for securing protection of



Rowing towards flood relief.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

the poor victims of the devastating flood.

In this regard, the NGO Affairs Bureau may take a pro-active role in mobilising the efforts of these NGOs, facilitate the delivery of administrative support for required rehabilitation measures, forge coordination among them at this

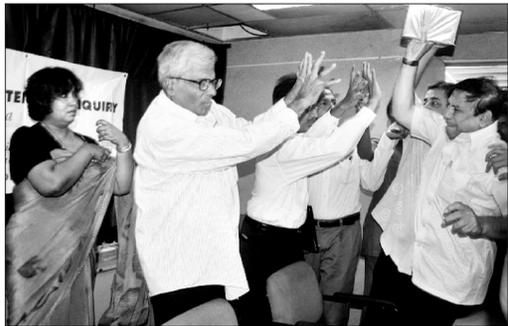
hour of "national crisis."

Nonetheless, it is encouraging to note that in the meantime the health adviser has called for coordinated efforts among the government, semi-government, and non-governmental agencies to prevent the spread of diarrhoeal attack. If it is really meant and if efforts are

coordinated indeed, the victims now living in distress will derive a lot of rehabilitation benefits. And it appears that this step if taken by the government that it will win wide appreciation at home and abroad.

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Is it Islamic?



M SHAMSUR RABB KHAN

LET the world know: this is outrageous and inhuman. Let the Muslims know: this is not Islamic. Rather the act is totally against the spirit and essence of Islam. Neither Allah nor Prophet Muhammad approves this. Nor any legal system, ideology and civil society the world over would approve this. And such acts lower the image of Muslims in a world already surcharged with anti-Muslim sentiment due to the community's link with terrorism. And more so, Taslima is living in exile, she is going to score more sympathy out of it.

The TV footage was so barbaric: bullish men were throwing slippers and bouquets and the helpless Taslima, being surrounded by men, was taking evasive action to avoid the hits. It was so pathetic to watch and perhaps I cannot feel the pangs of humiliation Taslima might have experienced, but I can show

solidarity with her. I have full support and sympathy for her, not because whatever she has written is right, but because she seemed helpless. Outraging the modesty of a lady who has already suffered enough is like rubbing salt to the wounded body. Will she feel the least good of Islam and Muslims any more? Or will her hatred of Muslims increase to a new limit? Not only it strengthens Taslima's long nursed views on Islam and Muslims, but also cements her vehement opposition to male-dominated and dictated Muslim society. Now she has the reason to voice her views even more vehemently.

There is not an iota of the great Islamic tradition of tolerance among these fundamentalist Muslims throwing slippers at a woman who dared to speak against Islamic tradition. We agree Taslima has hurt the sentiments of Muslims by her blasphemous writings. We agree she has challenged the Quranic wisdom. Still, she is not supposed to be

attacked in such a manner. What Muslims like the members of Majlis-e-Ittehadul-Muslimeen (MIM) of Hyderabad have learned from religion is almost nothing but sheer display of reactionary and uncivilised behaviour. By such barbaric acts, they think they are showing love to their religion or Prophet. They are not. Instead, they are making the world more hostile because of their VHP-like stance. As true believers, Muslims should leave her to face Allah on the day of judgment.

Should we take it as bravery of some MLAs of MIM, who tried to defend Islam by beating her? Or sheer cowardice of a few men, who tried to take publicity out of religious fanaticism? Or was it a well-planned conspiracy to dishonour Taslima? Or was it a sudden rage at seeing the lady in person? By the statements that followed, it does seem a conspiracy to kill her. Now, any act of aggression from Muslim fanatics would put Islam in a backward position.

Interestingly, those who hit her or reaching out to slap her were people not from village. Neither were they illiterate goons from urban slums nor the Shiv Sainiks of Mumbai, who go on rampage on every February 14 (Valentine's Day). They were well dressed, educated MLAs, who can claim to be civilised and who represent the people.

Condemnation of the act is the least we can do, if we assuage the hurt psyche of Taslima. While behaving in such an uncivilised manner, the members of MIM

should not forget that they are living in a secular, democratic country that provides freedom of expression. These self-styled men and their equally fanatic followers must learn to behave, else the world will not forget and forgive them. And sooner they do so, the better it will be for the society whom they mislead and misguide on petty issues. These self-imposed guardians must be put under some sort of legal strictures as well.

Remember the Prophet who endured the highest possible antagonism and yet forgave the perpetrators: revenge had never been his way of life. Rather, he won hearts of those who were his staunch enemies. The companions followed the Prophet verbatim. Then, why does this outrage from contemporary Muslims? In practice, Muslims of today take more pleasure in taking revenge in the name of Prophet than following him.

Remember, Taslimas, Rushdies, and Naipuls will continue to attack Islam in order to gain instance fame and riches. Any reaction to them or their writings will ultimately help enhance their fame to the sky. This is exactly what they want. And this is exactly what Muslims do. The only answer is: just let the issue die down to a natural death. Else, more Taslimas will be born.

But who will listen to this?

Economics 101

If our economist-turned-chief advisor, Fakhruddin Ahmed, does the diagram on a piece of paper in his office he will find out that the policy he is trying to institute is going to have the exact opposite intended effect.

ARIANA AHMED

IN today's article, I want to focus on three price-fixing stories. The examples have to do with price enforcement of the current government. Furthermore, the examples show a complete misunderstanding of the basic market functionality of a market economy. The stories are:

- "Joint forces yesterday arrested four retailers from different kitchen markets at New Market and Shahbagh in the capital as they were charging high prices for essential commodities." (The Daily Star, July 5)
- "The Chief Advisor urged the business community to show their social obligation keeping the prices of commodities at tolerable levels." (The Daily Star, August 6)
- "The joint forces will take actions against businesses guilty of increasing the price." (New Age, August 15)

Before going into details of the examples, let's do a quick Economics 101 recap. Economics 101: In an efficient (or somewhat efficient) market, price makes supply and demand come to an equilibrium. As prices increase, suppliers, in lure of profit, increases supply. As prices decrease, consumers end up buying more (as they can afford more).

These two curves are oppositely sloped (in other words, they will intersect somewhere). The point of intersection is when supply and demand matches up (i.e. market is at an equilibrium). The point of equilibrium determines the price.

Price fixing: Hypothetically, let's say, someone with a gun comes along and says, price must be fixed at a point lower than the equilibrium. Producers will produce less (as chance of profit is less), however consumers will demand more. If there is a mandated price that is lower than the equilibrium, there will be a market shortage, a logical action will happen: the price will push up until it reaches equilibrium.

If the price cannot push up (because of the man with the gun) then a different kind of price will come into play: the price of opportunity cost. In other words, we will see queues/lines in front of shops as consumers will make the market come to equilibrium by figuring out who can wait the longest in line (effectively giving up something else they can do instead of standing in line).

Now that we have covered basic economics, let's analyse the stories I mentioned earlier.

Arrested for charging high prices

Effectively this translates into the man with the gun saying: Mr. Retailer you are under arrest because you are charging too much. Following our basic economic behaviour, this is tantamount to the government setting a price less than the equilibrium. This, as we have seen, results in shortages and ends up in equilibrium through opportunity cost.

This is a distortion of the market mechanics that defies even the basic economic sense. To top it all, we have a World Bank economist as a chief advisor. Either he is running the show without understanding economic principles or he is not running the show.

Keeping the prices of commodities at tolerable levels

Let's translate the CA's statement. Effectively what he is saying is: "Mr. Businessman, please don't try to make too much of a profit." Most businessmen I know (local and international) would laugh at such a statement. They would laugh for two reasons: if they are not making a profit, someone else will try to take their place. The other reason they would laugh is that the statement makes no sense in an industry where no one really has exclusive rights to a particular product.

Actions against busi-

nesses guilty of increasing the price

The same economic misunderstanding underlies the above threat as well. But let's think through a bit more. His comment was relevant to medicine and oral saline. Floods are widespread currently, hence demand has spiked for medicine and oral saline.

Consequently, price has spiked as well. The role of government in this scenario would be not to dampen price (as that will not help increase supply), but to provide relief that allows flood sufferers to afford the higher priced medication or try to increase supply through some other means.

If the government actually carries out this threat and starts arresting these "socially irresponsible" middlemen and retailers, the situation will turn for the worse. The effect would actually be decreased supply of medicines if the government arrests these market conscious retailers.

Consequently that will lead to what we crassly call a double-whammy left shift of the supply curve (less supply) along with a right shift of the demand curve (more demand).

If our economist-turned-chief advisor, Fakhruddin Ahmed, does the diagram on a piece of paper in his office he will find out that the policy he is trying to institute is going to have the exact opposite intended effect.

Bangladesh a case of professional bankruptcy

The government on various occasions has declared corruption as number one enemy of the society but has never taken any bold steps to curb the evil. The reason is simple math the puppet masters not the puppets run the show. The caretaker government should realise the danger of being turned into a mere puppet by the bureaucracy.

SADIA HASSAN

ON January 11, a new order was declared in the country with the promulgation of the emergency order. Earth shattering events had ushered in a new period of history where the "war against corruption" would become paramount. The new national direction was born out of chaos, and tough measures would have to be carried out to ensure its survival. Strengthening of the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) and arrests of prominent national figures all draws steam from the "New Order." But this is not what it seems.

forces is money and management of finance for personal gain crucial to the general health of the bureaucracy and their masters. Alas, with all the money transactions from small and personal payments to the largest national and international payments, there are always opportunities for the criminals to abuse the system. Theft is not the activity restricted to the dark alleyways of Dhaka, Chittagong, Khulna, etc but is all too common among the various rooms of secretariat, government and private offices, and the amounts are almost incredible to believe. The recent news of discoveries of corruption by ACC and law enforcement agencies in news media is only the tip of the iceberg.

The old knights of crime are all safe and continuing their old dirty business in the cozy rooms of secretariat. The seed of corruption is sown deep inside our society by the colonial rulers. Our bureaucracy siphons of millions of taka through mismanagement and corruption of "Locally Raised Fund" popularly known as LR fund. These funds have been kept outside the purview of audit to breed corrupts. The deputy commissioners (DCs) posted outside Dhaka maintains a glamorous life of a lord with family living in capital Dhaka and him plundering the district LR Fund. It is widely known in the bureaucracy that poorest DCs plunder the minimum of around Taka ten lakh annually. These corrupt

bureaucrats are the root of all evils in the society. They taught the politicians to drive on the highway of corruption and sharing booty amongst themselves. These bureaucrats became powerful because of being the custodian of all dark records of the politicians; the bureaucrats even dictated their mass promotions to the rank of deputy secretary to end up in 1500-plus against a sanctioned post of around 800. These corrupts have grabbed the posts in autonomous organisations and are squatting these organisations, resulting in blocking the promotions of competent and dedicated officers of those government organisations. These squatters being ignorant of the work of these specialised autonomous body also are creating bottlenecks in their operational posts, these postings at times even violate the service rules of the organizations which do not permit such postings on deputations. The corrupt bureaucrats are

ruining the fabric of honesty.

The world has long changed to knowledge based society; these misfits of the society called bureaucrats unsuitable for the present society have ruined national institutions like Bangladesh Biman, jute mills, nationalised industries, banks, and the emerging ICT sector. The time has come to weed out the root of corruption the bureaucrats. The excess of deputy secretaries over the sanctioned posts should be retired immediately and autonomy of autonomous organisations be restored immediately. The government has done such forced retirements in 1960 and in 1969 after the change to curb corruptions. The government has taken strict stance against squatters in general and has evicted squatters who had occupied government, private lands and the footpath. Now, the real test for the government lies in its ability to evict the squatter bureaucrats, squatting the autonomous organisations.

The government on various occasions has declared corruption as number one enemy of the society but has never taken any bold steps to curb the evil. The reason is simple math the puppet masters not the puppets run the show. The caretaker government should realise the danger of being turned into a mere puppet by the bureaucracy. The glaring example of rehabilitation of the proven corrupt accountant as executive director of Bangladesh Computer Council, for instance, is the ominous sign of the power of puppet masters. In today's world, no country can dare to ignore science and technology and information and communication technology. Unfortunately for Bangladesh S&T and ICT are victim of deep rooted conspiracy of the puppet masters. The ministry of science and ICT has been turned into the dumping ground for the misfits. The money collector and former PS of former housing and works minister of the immediate past

alliance government famous for his involvements in numerous scandals has been posted in the ministry of Science & ICT as Joint Secretary, Science & Technology Adviser. Incidentally, he also happens to be an accountant!! The whole drama of governance by the incompetents portrays the picture of professionally bankrupt nation. In fact the truth is Bangladesh has never been financially bankrupt rather the country suffers from professional bankruptcy due to the interference of incompetent civil bureaucracy.

It is impossible to comprehend the reasons behind sabotaging of the government from within the government itself. It is obvious from the signs that our patriotic armed forces, trained to protect the boundaries of the country from external threats, are susceptible to the internal threats from within the ranks of the bureaucrats. Considering the above facts, it is clear that cleansing of the civil

bureaucracy is the only way to stop the decay in the society. In such case, ICT being the key to bring transparency in the society, the Ministry of Science & ICT and Bangladesh Computer Council (BCC) should be cleansed first and the corrupt and illegal squatters in BCC should be withdrawn.

The national issue deterring the development of Bangladesh has been clearly identified: professional bankruptcy. Now it is up to the courageous caretaker government to take step to stop the rot of professional bankruptcy. I urge the government to let the national airlines be headed by an experienced person from international airlines industry and let someone like the current head of Bangladesh Telecom Regulatory Organisation be appointed to head BCC. I hope the government will realise past mistakes and take appropriate measures.