

Focus on floods

SHAMSHER CHOWDHURY

ALTHOUGH the flood waters have begun to recede at various locations around the country, there is no scope for complacency. As a matter of fact, as the water recedes we will be confronted with the gigantic task of dealing with "post flood rehabilitation." Incidence of diarrhea and cholera will increase and hunger will stalk millions as the waters keep receding in the coming days and weeks.

Already ICDDR, in Dhaka alone, has registered as many as 1045 patients in a single day (Friday, August 14), the highest ever since its establishment, as the Pakistan-SEATO Cholera Research Laboratory, in 1960. Incidentally, I had gone to the center that morning for some tests at its pathological laboratory. I was simply appalled by the sight of the patients pouring in and doctors and nurses of the center running around in a huge makeshift tent, doing their best in treating them and saving lives. The whole scenario was like a field hospital in a critical war zone.

In the meantime, I keep wondering about what is happening in the other districts of the country, including the remote rural areas, where the havoc caused by the floods is perhaps no less, and

where medical centers like the ICDDR do not exist.

Alongside diarrhea there is also this threat of pneumonia amongst the most vulnerable, the children. You may be aware that while pneumonia is the leading killer disease of the world today, cholera ranks as number two. There will also be the inevitable outbreak of skin diseases.

Honourable Adviser,

I only hope and pray that your government is prepared to tackle these vital issues of public health as they emerge, provide succor to the suffering teeming millions, and actually save lives.

You would also be required, as a part of the post flood rehabilitation, to help build homes for those rendered homeless, and also to create employment or alternative sources of income for the unfortunate victims.

Honourable Adviser,

Forgive me, I have this feeling that your administration is simply not adequately prepared to tackle the gigantic task that lies ahead. Although, very often, I hear lofty declarations over the media that the government is fully prepared and that there is enough buffer stock of food grains etc, I have a hard time believing them when your senior advisors, and I believe even you yourself, keep talking

about "setting up of monitoring cells and strengthening of Coordination Committees right through the district levels" while people still go hungry and have no homes or shelters to return to.

I see no real effort on the part of the administration to really help these unfortunate victims of the flood. Whatever is being done can best be described as a "drop in the ocean." What is also of concern is that in the midst of all these there is this issue of who is and who is not turning this issue of relief work into a political one.

It is my gut feeling that in dealing with the entire flood situation there is visible lack of urgency, as I could gather during the past weeks from various reports in the media. I am afraid that, despite the good intentions and the good work your government has undertaken since it took charge of the administering of the country, in the end all your good work may ultimately go unnoticed and wasted.

May I humbly put it to you that you and your government have made the cardinal mistake, from the very beginning, of unduly extending your agenda without taking into consideration the time and resources (money, men and material) available at your disposal. It is my opinion that you and I are here for "creating a level field"

for holding free and fair elections and, subsequently, handing over the reins of the government to an elected civilian government, more than anything else.

Fixing social, moral, and ethical parameters, however important it may be, should not have been a part of the agenda of your administration. These matters are only straightened through years of social movements initiated by the members of the civil society, eminent thinkers, and the intellectual community.

Honourable Adviser,

Linked with the post flood rehabilitation is also this matter of spiraling prices of essentials of daily use. Surely, you are already aware of the fact that it is causing havoc for the people all over the country. With the Ramadan approaching, and the receding of flood waters, we can visualize the situation turning from bad to worse. When an advisor says something to the effect that "there may be further spiraling of prices following the floods, but that would be only temporary," I cannot but be concerned and sad, and pity the fate of the teeming millions who have already suffered enough. This is nothing short of adding insult to injury of those millions who are already reeling under spiraling of prices. I am afraid the measures so far put in place, aimed at controlling

prices, are not only wrong but, in the long run, are sure to prove counter-productive.

Honourable Adviser,

It is all very fine and commendable that you and your government are making all out efforts to free Bangladesh from the evils of corruption, but let us also remember that it is also no less important to come to the aid of the suffering teeming millions who are poor and helpless, and to save their lives. Much of it also has not followed the due process of law of the land. I am sure you, too, are aware of that.

Because of the histrionics with which high profile corruption cases are being dealt with, I have this feeling that the entire exercise is slowly getting marred by the fact that a good deal of it has now turned out to be an exercise in advancing and projecting the personal profiles/images of some of your advisors, and playing to the gallery. Indeed, there is no collective thinking, nor the spirit, for the welfare of the people at large. Each of your advisors is busy trying to make a name for himself and creating a place in history.

Honourable Adviser,

There is yet another issue I wish to dwell upon. What is happening with the Election Commission? To the best of my knowledge, no tangible progress has yet been made in



Flood victims on way to hospital, Sirajganj, August 4.

preparing the critical voter list. The Commission is still talking about procuring certain vital equipment. To me, it looks as though all it has successfully done so far is periodically talk to the media and give statements that have confused people more than ever before. And now there is this insistence by the Chief Election Commissioner that dialogue with the political parties will begin some time during

September. I doubt that very much. Do you think it will take place? It is my impression that, to this day, the Election Commission is far from being independent, and continues to be as weak as ever.

Honourable Adviser,

I would like to conclude this humble submission by saying that from here onwards your government's priorities should be confined to post flood rehabilitation,

bringing down of prices to a tolerable level and, finally, turning the Election Commission into an independent and strong institution capable of delivering without fear or favour.

Frankly, everything else can wait until the above objectives are achieved to the fullest.

Shamsher Chowdhury is a contributor to The Daily Star.

The stress and strain of a nation

Apparently, the way the PDP leader and his fellow party men and women are having a come back, seems a disaster waiting to happen. Why? The way this party has been behaving even before its legitimate birth has taken everyone by surprise (demonstrating and distributing sweets when a former PM is taken into custody and recently making a broad daylight show of muscle during a so-called relief operation). Are we heading "back to the future"?

MOAZZEM HOSSAIN

THE joint forces-backed caretaker government (CTG) is approaching another milestone. They will make sure that the recent flood victims have been rehabilitated quickly with whatever resources in hand without giving any opportunity to pilfer relief goods and money as was witnessed during the political regimes. The devastating flood put extra burden of stress and strain on the nation. With the current volatile world in both political and economic terms, this is by all means, a worst of times for all the nations rich and poor alike. Certainly, the recent flood inflicted a major blow to this nation in the present global environment.

We know, immediately after January 11 there came a great relief. Except the corrupt politicians and some officials of the Khaleda-Nizami regime, everyone, from a day-labourer to the president, was relieved. The day-labourer hoped that finally the price of essentials will come down after getting rid of the clutches of business syndicates

from the market. The president was relieved since he finally saw a window opened through which he would be in a position to exercise his constitutional role without fear.

Unfortunately, the honeymoon did not last long. The dreams of the day-labourer never came true. The prices of essentials let alone reducing, have been rising unabated over the last seven months. Now, the flood has made it an impossible task to do anything better until a normal year returns. The nation has to wait for another good harvest after the present cycle of floods. I am sure the international community knows this very well.

How is the honourable president doing? It is impossible to tell. Unfortunately, he made the position controversial before the weeks and days of January 11 that it is not clear how serious he was then in exercising president's authority. Apparently, he seems relieved and is enjoying the life at Bangabhaban by keeping arms length distance from his former political masters.

However, this cannot be said by seeing the faces of the CA and his rest of the advisers. Of course, the recent flood has made their posi-

tions and roles even harder. We argued in this forum in the past that it is humanly impossible for eleven people to manage more than fifty departments for such a long period of time. It is now clear that the constitution becomes a hurdle in increasing the number of advisers. One wonders: which come first, the constitution or the nation? A layman could ask, is not a smooth running of the nation also a constitutional priority? Certainly, the advisers' life would have been less stressful if they were given the chance of co-opting few more members in the cabinet.

Some, however, argue that the CA must be enjoying his job since he has the rare opportunity to serve this impoverished land with a status of a PM. He would not have got this opportunity if 1/11 had not taken place. While this is true, one can also provide a counter argument that the CA has been doing this out of his love for the nation having no monetary gains what so ever unlike his politician predecessors.

Let's not forget that the major mission of the CA and his cohort with the support of the joint forces is to bring back the order in

our morally crumbled society.

It is now clear that all the political governments in the past had two missions in mind: love for power and love for money. Some, however, strongly argue that they do politics nothing but love for the people. Unfortunately, this does not buy anymore. With the recent events surrounding tax dodging by both the immediate past PM and her right hand man for the last 20 years, it is now clear like crystal that they did not love the nation and they did not love the people unlike their political-son (Ziaur Rahman in mind). Once again, Professor Yunus is proven to be right when he was on the record in saying that the politicians of the present era took politics as a business and for making more and more wealth. It is indeed getting clearer day by day and night by night that the current day talk politicians had nothing but betrayed the nation.

Natural disaster is not uncommon in this land. We experience this with regular intervals during our life time and so did our forefathers and their forefathers. We also know well that a help is rare to come by. Indeed, the nation knows, it has to stand on its own feet when flood water recedes.

Historically, from the days of British Raj each and every flood made many people destitute and some people better off out of hoarding and pilferage of relief goods and money. Why this time it should be different? Every one, however, wishes that the CTG is not

a political government and there is a strong force behind them in eradicating corruption, thus, they must not fail in managing such a chronic disaster. It is sure flood has made their work even harder and it is also sure that the relief officials have not become angels overnight. It is much more stressful in watching the plight of the people and having not enough resources to offer help.

Having said all that, it is time to rethink strengthening the CTG by co-opting or else more manpower to face the present crisis. This will not only help rehabilitate flood victims with an orderly fashion, will also release stress from the body and minds of the advisers, in turn, of the nation. One would certainly hope that the president will take an appropriate step to bolster the administration. It is still 18 months when a political regime is likely to take charge if and when election held by 2008, which both the CA and the chief of the army staff reiterated once again.

One must not forget that this nation is not only natural disaster prone it also suffers from man-made one since its very inception. The man-made disaster began from the period when this land was part of the eastern wing of Pakistan. Over the last sixty years, including since the period of liberation, we hardly enjoyed a year of peace. Nobody knows what kind of disaster is waiting in the wing during the next political cycle. In this regard one reminds the comments made

by the immediate past US Ambassador in Dhaka before her departure. She was in the view that (if I can recall correctly) "Bengalies are a great nation, however, they are conspiratorial too." Who can blame her? The events unfolded since our independence or even over the recent months certainly are mind-boggling.

I was not sure whether the politicians of all persuasions yet realise this. Whatever the case, a nation cannot live without politics whether a democracy or, a managed one. The strain and scares the politicians left to the face of this nation over the last 15 years cannot be overstated. Having said that, is post-2008 looking brighter? Witnessing the recent events one cannot be felt reassured. In this regard, a born again politician in this era of banned politics and institutions, refurbishing democracy in Bangladesh will not only remain a mere dream, but the nation will also suffer from a more fatal catastrophe which I call "demo-crisis."

One of the long-established political cultures developed in Bangladesh over the last three decades can be termed "structural opposition" culture. Prominent British Anthropologist Evans Pritchard found this culture in Africa. There was hostility between the Nuer and Dinka tribes, but their hostility turned into unity when they faced a concerted challenge/opposition from the Egyptian government. What is important in "structural opposition" is that the unity of a group or groups is contingent upon, or maintained by, an opposition to others. The more opposition the group faces, the more unified it becomes.

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Democracy or demo-crisis?

MD. SAIDUL ISLAM

THE caretaker government is determinedly trying to overhaul what it called the "destructive political culture" developed over last three decades, and to refurbish democracy in Bangladesh. While the war on corrupt political leaders has received accolades and applause from different quarters, the government's collective silence on corrupt bureaucrats and political leaders with military backgrounds has generated doubt and skepticism.

If the government targets only people -- such as "minus two" approach -- and not the long established grimy culture and institutions, refurbishing democracy in Bangladesh will not only remain a mere dream, but the nation will also suffer from a more fatal catastrophe which I call "demo-crisis."

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While there are internal tensions and feuds within most political parties in Bangladesh; however, those feuds turn into unity when they face, or manage to create, opposition to other political parties. Historically, the unity and solidarity of a particular political party in Bangladesh has been maintained through its opposition to others.

A leader in Awami League, for example, becomes prominent only if he/she can oppose and attack his/her rival political parties, and vice-versa. The more bitterly he/she can manage to oppose or attack his/her political rivals, the better political career he/she makes. Though opposition is apparent in most democratic societies, the kind of opposition and bitter rivalry developed in Bangladesh politics is absolutely unparalleled.

There are some obvious consequences of this "structural opposition culture" in Bangladesh. First, it subverts peaceful coexistence and cooperation within political parties as "opposition" remains the main political agenda. Secondly, as opposition to rival political parties gets the highest market currency, the political leaders remain obsessed with finding newer and newer issues and methods to attack their political rivals. It brings to politics the practice of false-

hood, concoction, active denial, fabrication, and construction of new realities.

During speeches in political gatherings, as political leaders spend more time on attacking political rivals rather than talking about pragmatic agendas for the nation's development, the practice of lying and concoction not only becomes normalised, but also more sophisticated "methods" of concocting or fabricating facts and realities to attack political rivals are always welcomed and applauded in the realm of politics.

Political rivalry and bitterness sometimes reach to such an extreme verge that some political leaders lose their last iota of patriotism and discursively concoct the nation as a "fundamentalist" or a "breeding ground of Talibanism" and so forth in order to invite foreign intervention.

Third, it generates fanaticism within politics. Since leaders are engrossed with attacking political rivals as a paramount route to become more popular, they not only suffer from human deficit such as a dramatic decline in appreciating good deeds and contribution of political rivals but also lose their far-sighting vision needed for country's development.

Consequently, no culture develops based on future vision as leaders are over-obsessed with attacking others. Country's development and progress then not only become secondary, but political realm also does not allow visionary and honest leaders. It then creates "demo-crisis" in which the country is deprived from not only pragmatic and visionary leaders but also conscious citizens and a vibrant civil society.

Finally, the structural opposition culture generates hatred, division, mistrust, unrest and continuous political tension. Sometimes political tension turns into violence and "corps politics" (lash rajni) emerges. If any political activist is killed out of any political violence, it is not generally regarded as a political loss, but the corpse becomes political capital to generate a new issue in political rivalry.

Because of the decades-old structural opposition culture, a healthy political atmosphere with viable democratic practices did not develop, and the country remains retrogressive in a deeper manner. It permits foreign diplomats to poke their noses into the internal affairs of the country.

Eliminating some corrupted political leaders may shake but will not root out the long-established foundation of structural opposition culture. The current caretaker government -- if it is truly sincere to eliminate filthy political culture -- should pay more attention to culture and institutions than to individual persons.

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The message is obvious

It is a clear message that after all reforms and other actions, democracy must be restored and politics must be returned to politicians. Truly, Bangladesh politics had reached the crossroads before 1/11. People were, thus, expecting a lot from this government. However most of it remains to be fully realised. Hopefully, the concerned will not risk their hard-earned image by being oblivious of the obvious.

KAZI S.M. KHASRUL ALAM QUDDUSI

WHILE responding to a tricky question regarding the difference between commando training and making a century, our national cricket team captain, young little master Mohammed Ashraf, came up with such a mature reply that it can further enrich many wise men's mental faculties.

He very intelligently replied that commando training requires some courage, but making a century requires something more than that. I have no intention of claiming that statecraft is more difficult than making a century. But, it can be said with conviction that statecraft, too, requires something more.

Increasing use of arbitrary power rather than wisdom in managing the state affairs of Bangladesh reminds us of the Shakespearean remark that it is excellent to have a giant's strength but it is tyrannous to use it like a giant.

It has been repeatedly claimed that this caretaker government came to bring back peace in the country by averting an impending civil war in the wake of unprecedented confrontation among political parties. It, however, does not give it the license to steer the matters as per their whims. Our armed forces have received worldwide accolades for their role in bringing peace in many war-torn countries.

Thus, it will be doubly painful if their activities create problems in their own country. The

role of police in further aggravating the situation should also be seriously looked into for the greater interest of our otherwise disciplined army.

However, the students and, subsequently, the teachers demand for withdrawal of the army camp from the campus was more than justified and we happily noted that the army camp was withdrawn quickly. Its installation on the campus was a mistake in the first place. Truly, our army did not intend to come into the scene. Many claim that the miserable failure of our politicians forced them in.

If put in the proper perspective, however, it was the BNP-Jamaat regime's insatiable greed for clinging to power despite turning the country into a den of corruption during

their immediate past regime, and Iajuddin Ahmed's usurping of caretaker chief's role and mindless loyalty to BNP-Jamaat clique, that forced the army to salvage the situation.

Unfortunately, however, backers of the government seem not to understand that simple background and are now engaged in a dangerous game of playing with the sentiment of the people by being capricious. Yes, the government's uneven treatment of Hasina and Khaleda has already turned outrageous, and it is just digging the grave of its credibility by its conspicuously partisan role towards Khaleda, her family members, many party men and Jamaat.

It, thus, makes one wonder whether the government has come to power to rehabilitate and canonize Khaleda Zia and revive her party and alliance, which would have been bruised in future free and fair elections. Meanwhile, the people directly or indirectly involved with government have also intensified the use of words. The people in the government are supposed to know that actions

speak louder than words. Thus, gratuitous use of bombastic words is not serving any genuine purpose, rather it is creating more discontentment among the people.

One particular advisor's relentless comments, sometime laments and sometime complaints, have already created plenty of confusion and ridicule among the people. While his fear of failure is not tolerable to the people, his complaint of the jailed politicians' involvement in trying to make the government fail sounds really ludicrous.

Although it is, perhaps, a little too early to say whether this government has succeeded, it will, perhaps, not be a hyperbole to claim that the government is becoming increasingly careless of people's feelings. The monster of price-hike is about to suffocate the people of all walks of life except the high class of the society. Yes, not only the poor ones, the middle class are also very much in the quagmire of price spiral now.

A few days back, a group of people severely criticised Dhaka University teachers for protest-

ing against the treatment of Hasina and Khaleda. I believe those people utterly failed to comprehend the implicit message of that protest. Surely, the teachers' point was not to spare Hasina and Khaleda for their past misdeeds.

Rather, their message was that there was no alternative to democracy. Thus, the spontaneous protest of students, though vandalism is deplorable, across the country following the Dhaka University incident cannot be taken to be a gut reaction or an isolated event.

Rather, it is a clear message that after all reforms and other actions, democracy must be restored and politics must be returned to politicians. Truly, Bangladesh politics had reached the crossroads before 1/11. People were, thus, expecting a lot from this government. However most of it remains to be fully realised. Hopefully, the concerned will not risk their hard-earned image by being oblivious of the obvious.

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