

Curfew relaxation

Let RMG and emergency services perform unhindered

AFTER the two days of protest and anarchy the lifting of curfew for three hours on Thursday and for 14 hours on Friday came as a welcome relief to the citizens who were caught unawares in the changed circumstances. Thursday being a working day, people endured all sorts of troubles to reach office, only to find that a holiday has been announced. And our sympathy goes with the seriously ill people who required immediate medical help but remained stranded at various points as vehicles remained off the roads. Obviously it was for the fear of a frenzied mob that public and private vehicles avoided going out on the day.

It is now widely believed that the imposition of curfew has succeeded in reinstating peace and order throughout the country. But, what the government needs to consider at this point with greater urgency is the appeal of the business community, especially the readymade garment exporters, to keep them outside the purview of curfew. We believe it is a justified request as raw materials and finished products have to be transported on an emergency basis round the clock. It is common sense that any disruption in the chain would bring disaster to the sector that earns most of our foreign currency. We surely do not want to see the most thriving industry of the country suffer any such predicament.

The functioning of the essential utility services and the medical services has to go on unhindered, therefore, special measures have to be taken to see that the officials and staff can attend to their duties in the best of mental and physical state. At the same time we would like to stress that the traders of essential goods like rice, fish, meat and vegetables also need to move about freely early in the morning to keep the city markets well stocked. Law enforcing authorities will have to show more compassion to them at such difficult times.

Lastly, we can only hope that normalcy would be restored very soon with the total lifting of curfew. Only then the government will be able to concentrate on fulfilling its more solemn responsibilities that are expected of them.

Faulty buildings

Violators of construction code must be brought to book

A recent study by Transparency International, Bangladesh (TIB) revealed that as high as 90 percent of the buildings have been constructed violating the Building Construction Code 1996. Area wise statistics are alarming. About 96 percent of the buildings in city's Khilgaon and Taltala areas were constructed defying prescribed building code and designs whereas it is 92 percent in Lalmatia and Shyamoli, 96 percent in Mirpur, Kalyanpur, Bangshal as well as Nikunja. In Banani and Gulshan area it is 98 percent. Besides, an apparently 86 percent of the buildings in Uttara were constructed in an 'unauthorised' manner. It is also worth noting that among these buildings most of the commercial ones have no parking lots.

To top it all, sometime back an expert from the Bangladesh University of Science and Technology (BUET) also made the observation that in the event of an earthquake of moderate intensity most of the city's highrise buildings would collapse.

Observers and experts alike also confirm the popular belief that behind all this there exists a saga of corruption of all dimensions. Officials and employees of Rajuk lead the chain followed by construction companies including some influential people. Owners of some small size plots of 3 to 5 kathas are also to blame.

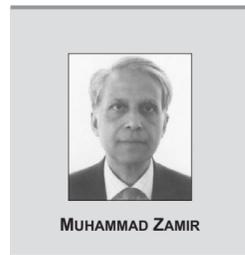
The TIB report further says, officials and employees of Rajuk alone collect in the form of bribe a sum of about Tk. 20 crore a year for approving the designs of the buildings where small size plot owners (3 to 5 kathas) have to pay Tk 15 to 30 thousand.

The situation is both alarming and dismal particularly for those who have invested their lifetime savings to live in apartments of many such highrise buildings. Admittedly there cannot be a reversal in the prevailing scenario, but we could however take firm measures to prevent recurrence of such faulty constructions.

We thus strongly recommend that all the corrupt officials and employees of Rajuk be identified and brought to justice. A similar action should also follow in the case of defaulting construction companies. Companies found guilty should be barred from conducting business for a stipulated period of time. Heavy fines could also be imposed.

Finally we urge that this matter of faulty construction of buildings all over the country be reviewed with utmost seriousness and urgency by the authorities.

The disastrous flood



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

NEARLY four weeks have passed since various factors induced the current serious flooding within Bangladesh. Huge swathes of our territory, as well as that of neighbouring India have been subjected to inundation, flood-related damage and loss of lives. This time round, the process has peaked once towards the end of the second week of August, receded slightly and then again gained strength because of renewed heavy rainfall in Nepal.

It has not only devastated standing crops but also existing infrastructure related to communications, education, healthcare and the rural economy. Bangladesh and its citizens are used to floods and to coping with such natural disasters. We have over time also realised that the level of our vulnerability increases in the post-monsoon period when seasonal reversals of wind direction caused by temperature differences between the land and the sea can dump enormous quantities of water from the sky.

We have with resilience and patience also proved that we are able to regenerate after the country has been subjected to severe flooding (as happened in 1988 and in 1998).

This time as well, all concerned

are trying their best to salvage a situation that has been triggered by heavy monsoon rainfall not only in Nepal (worst in the last 40 years) but also in the upper reaches of the foothills of the Himalayas both in the northwestern (Himachal Pradesh and the United Provinces in India) and northeastern flanks of Bangladesh (bordering Bhutan and Assam in India). It has caused hardship and affected

approach, for obvious reasons, caused debate. Some pointed out at that time that the government was being naive.

Well, a few weeks later, the government has finally acknowledged that the matter is more serious than what was anticipated. They have now decided to ask the donor community for US dollar 150 million in budgetary support and flood aid. Ostensibly, such a sum will be critical for

has been education, with almost all the educational institutions turned into relief camps and schooling being suspended for nearly one month. Repair of damaged infrastructure will take quite some time. Meanwhile, for all practical purposes, students at large in the flood-affected areas will be falling behind others in the non-flooded zones.

This time round, misunderstandings and communication

even by political activists at the grassroots level.

We have many challenges ahead of us. I am however confident that we will be able to overcome them through discussion and inter-active practical engagement. We need to restore normalcy in governance as soon as possible and practicable. We have a fixed time frame with regard to the electoral agenda. Effective addressing of this will

to include direct intervention by the government in providing credit extension support to the flood affected farmers and micro entrepreneurs whose crops, livestock and seedbeds have been destroyed either by water or sand brought in by flood waters. In this context, an efficient food grain distribution system will have to be set up as a supporting mechanism till the next harvest comes home. Without this measure, we will have a huge movement of population to urban areas from affected rural hinterland. The damaged transportation networks, both roads and rail ways, will also have to be repaired.

Natural calamities always have a bright side. They provide the general population with opportunities for unity. We should try to find least common denominators irrespective of professional background and political persuasion and join hands to mitigate the sufferings of the distressed. It would also be pertinent for the business community to shoulder part of this responsibility by trying to contain profiteering and hoarding that has been the bane of our consumers in the recent past.

We as a people have courage and fortitude and must again demonstrate to the wider international community that Bangladesh can face natural disasters and quickly return to business as usual. We can show once again that natural hazards are a way of life, but we, with careful disaster management of meager resources, can rise above a disastrous situation without falling prey to mutual recrimination and corruption in matters of rehabilitation.

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POST BREAKFAST

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over 15 million people in Bangladesh alone. The death toll has reached nearly 600. Rural housing has been particularly damaged and meagre savings in terms of livestock and poultry washed away by the swirling waters. Crops worth nearly Taka 2,000 crore have also been lost.

It has been interesting watching the government gradually evolve its position with regard to the disaster. In the beginning there was hesitation in declaring the flood as a national disaster. Relief efforts and temporary rehabilitation was undertaken, but at every turn, it was stressed that the interim Administration was not willing to 'politicise the flood' and use it to seek necessary foreign assistance. It was also stressed that people could support the providing of relief without identifying such efforts under political banners. Such an

meeting the post-flood situation.

The floodwaters might be receding slowly, but as explained by Bahatun, a flood-hit old woman from Hazaribagh, hunger is on the rise. This is something that is clearly staring us in the face. To this has been added the acute shortage of pure drinking water. This in turn has led to severe presence of water-borne diseases. Critical need has surfaced for shelter, food and medical help including IV saline. Electronic media have informed that, on an average, more than 35 diarrhoea patients are crowding into Dhaka hospitals every hour. I can only imagine the seriousness given the fact that 47 districts out of 64 have faced varying degrees of inundation. Hundreds of thousands of internally displaced persons have also sought temporary shelter in relatively urban areas.

One of the biggest casualties

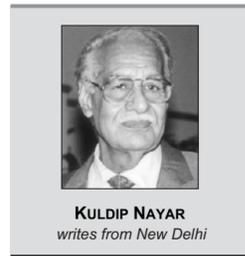
gaps between the relevant government authorities and civil society and political parties have led to the latter taking a back seat and playing a less than enthusiastic role. The government must not allow this situation to continue. It has to visibly demonstrate the inclusiveness of other stakeholders. One way out might be to ask civil society representatives to be part of government post flood rehabilitation teams. It should not be overlooked that NGOs, because of the nature of their functions always maintain a strong database and links to local community leaderships. Political party networks should also be encouraged to participate in relief operations along with the armed forces (who traditionally have better logistical support). The government needs to make it clear that emergency is no bar to participation in relief operations,

require functional and meaningful resolution of the post-flood travails. It is one thing to say that correction of electoral rolls and preparation of ID cards will continue without interruption. That will however be difficult if the post-flood short-term and immediate rehabilitation is not completed by end of October at the latest (despite the many holidays associated with Ramzan and Eid-ul-Fitr).

I am expressing this anxiety because government officials have to be free at the lowest administrative levels to carry out their expected functions pertaining to the preparatory steps associated with the holding of a fair and credible parliamentary election.

This will be the only way forward in our ongoing effort towards eventual poverty reduction within our development agenda paradigm. This will have

Storm in a tea cup



KULDIP NAYYAR

writes from New Delhi

Iwish the Left had made national development, not the Indo-US nuclear deal, an issue for parting ways with the ruling Congress. Probably, the Left felt that it would not be convincing if it were to do so after having dotted i's and crossed t's in more or less all the decisions that Manmohan Singh government took in the past three and a half years. Till now, the Left, particularly the CPI (M), has been having vicarious satisfaction of governing, sorting out names for India's president and appointing the vice-president.

Even today, the Left could have created a rumpus over the increase in the number of poor in the country. It could have taken the government to task on the data revealed by its appointed commission on the Unorganised Sector. The report says that 836 millions, 87 percent of India's population, live on Rs 20 (half a dollar) or less per person per day.

For reasons best known to the Left, it chose the nuclear deal. Politically, it misfired. One, the Left found itself on the side of the BJP. Two, a few hours before the Left rejected the deal, China had

threatened that "either the Indo-US nuclear deal will fall or the Manmohan Singh government." Was there any telepathy?

If any country, leave America apart, had made the observation which China did, the Left and its camp followers would have been up in arms. The remark would have been considered interference in India's domestic affairs. Yet, there was not even a whimper in the Left quarters, much

including the Hyde Act, put together cannot enslave us. Nor can Washington's warnings deter us from doing what we want to do. The Left should judge the government on the basis of the steps it takes to implement the prime minister's statement in parliament in July 2005.

We stand by "no-first use," the undertaking given by BJP prime minister Atal Behari Vajpayee. He even announced a morato-

ambassador in New Delhi warns us not to vote against America on the issue of Iran, and we obediently do so. We, too, do not want Iran to have the bomb, and we should support all steps to stop it from developing one.

But what is disconcerting is the general perception that America is dictating us. In the renewal of the cold war atmosphere, New Delhi has to play a role, the independent one that we played when

the thermal or the hydro one. Billions of dollars need to be invested in nuclear energy. And all this will be in the public sector. We should have concentrated on harnessing water, including the Brahmaputra, with the help of Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh. It would have benefited us all economically.

However, the Manmohan Singh government's mind is made up on nuclear energy. In a

policies has eroded its base. This is true. Yet, it looks as if the present crisis over the Indo-US nuclear deal will blow over. The Left is beginning to realise that it would lose heavily if the polls were to take place immediately. Still, as things look today, it is only a matter of time when the distance between the two would become unbridgeable.

A mid-term poll may become unavoidable because even if the government is not pulled down, its credibility would lessen if it is reduced to a minority in the Lok Sabha. The Congress, without majority in the House, can rule as Narasimha Rao did for full five years. The president, who is the Congress nominee, will come in handy. But that does not solve the problem. The minority does not become a majority.

Already moves are afoot to cobble together an alternative. The BJP-headed NDA is willing to extend support to any group that can show how it can reach the magic figure of 273 in the 545-member Lok Sabha. The third combination (United National Progressive Alliance) is all for ousting the Congress-led coalition at the Centre. Again, its problem is that it cannot have a majority.

However uncertain the future scenario, the bottom line is that no political party wants a mid-term poll. The Left has said that it will oppose the government without being a party to the toppling move. There is more heat than substance. When the chips are down, the political crisis may turn out to be storm in a tea cup.

Kuldip Nayyar is an eminent Indian columnist.

BETWEEN THE LINES

The BJP-headed NDA is willing to extend support to any group that can show how it can reach the magic figure of 273 in the 545-member Lok Sabha. The third combination (United National Progressive Alliance) is all for ousting the Congress-led coalition at the Centre. Again, its problem is that it cannot have a majority. However uncertain the future scenario, the bottom line is that no political party wants a mid-term poll. The Left has said that it will oppose the government without being a party to the toppling move. There is more heat than substance.

less criticism. They felt important by giving repeated statements on how India's sovereignty would be circumscribed if the deal went through. Little did they realise that sovereignty rested with the people in a country. It was from within, not without. How could America or, for that matter, any other country take away, whatever the wording of the deal, our sovereignty?

India became sovereign after untold sacrifices. The nation knows how to defend itself against the different challenges. In their shoddy wrangling, the political parties should not drag in sovereignty, which is something sacred. All American laws,

rum on nuclear tests. The BJP's turnabout, like that of the Left, is political. It has nothing to do with our sovereignty. The Left's animus against America is understandable, but what is the BJP's problem? The latter initiated the whole thing following the unending talks between BJP foreign minister Jaswant Singh and America's I. Talbot, a top functionary in the Clinton government.

The point of concern is not the deal but the manner in which New Delhi is watering down its independent foreign policy, which had come to be known as non-alignment. We, as a nation, lessen ourselves when the US

the world was divided into two hostile blocs. How to win back the confidence of small and weak countries is what New Delhi should be thinking, instead of demolishing the consensus on foreign policy we have been having. I am personally against the entire nuclear programme, starting with the bomb. Both Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru were against making the bomb. I am not sure whether we should have nuclear energy.

Nuclear power houses will be a big hazard. Any leakage, as happened in Europe and Russia, can kill thousands of people. I do not know whether nuclear energy will turn out to be cheaper than

country like India, where the marginal group consuming less than Rs 15 per person has increased from 290 million to as high as 392 million, nearly 40 percent of population, the priority should have been livelihood, not energy, however important it is for development. The same question arises again: Development for whom?

The political fallout of the nuclear deal is what seems to worry the Congress-led government. Some sort of mechanism has been established to allay the Left's fear. But the confidence between the two has been shaken. The Left also feels that support to the Congress and its

OPINION

Overcoming problems in agriculture

MD ZAFAR SADEQUE

IT is undeniable that Bangladesh has made remarkable progress in agriculture specially in cereal production in post independent era. Population of Bangladesh was 75 million just after the liberation and production of food was 10 million tons with a deficit of 3 million tons. Nowadays the population is double touching the tune of 150 million and food production is about 30 million tons. Apparently there is no deficiency. It is a great achievement! The half-fed farmers can claim the lion's share of this success. But beside the successes there are some identified and conventional problems in the agriculture sector of Bangladesh. Some new and strategic problems in agriculture are emerging parallelly alongside the conventional and century old ones. It is a matter of regret that these new problem fail to attract the attention of the policy makers.

Use of appropriate technology can play an excellent role in the extension of agriculture in Bangladesh. Use of drum-seeder is gaining popularity as an appropriate technology in different countries including Vietnam. Drum-seeder was first innovated at the International Rice Research Institute in Manila, the capital of the Philippines. Production of rice has increased enormously in Vietnam using drum-seeder successfully. There is a huge potentiality of producing more rice in Bangladesh too using drum-seeder. Production of rice in Bangladesh can at least be increased by 2.5-3 million tons valued at Taka 20,000 million if successful use of drum-seeder is ensured keeping other factors unchanged. Again Taka 20,000 million can be fetched by saving Taka 2000 per hectare.

Thus Bangladesh can accrue Taka 40,000 million yearly from internal source ensuring use of

drum-seeder. For this, all the rice farming of Bangladesh should be brought under drum-seeder cultivation at the earliest possible time. At the same time use of urea can be controlled by using leaf-colour-chart and gooti urea. Then demand of urea could be met by the production of the urea factories of the country. There will be no need of importing urea from abroad rather it could be exported to some extent.

It is customary that transplanted Aman season is considered as the main rice producing season of Bangladesh. But it is being noticed in the last few years that Boro season is turning into the main rice producing season. Transplanted Aman season is stepping down to 2nd rice producing season. But this Boro occupying the main season defeating Aman is rather deadly. Priority for Boro is because of the corresponding shrinkage of land under pulses, oilseeds, wheat and winter vege-

table. Attention should be given for increasing the land under cultivation of pulses, oilseeds, wheat and winter vegetable for more production by stopping this terrible trend. Transplanted Aman season should be reinstated to its main position. Transplanted Aman is more or less rain-fed and there is no need of supplementary irrigation.

Gradually decreasing cultivable land is yet another burning problem for agriculture in Bangladesh. 212 hectare land per day or 77,380 hectare per year is being lost which is approximately 1 percent of the total cultivable land in Bangladesh. All the cultivable land will be lost by the year 2092 at this rate. Appropriate measure should be taken at once for not losing any further patch of cultivable land. Steps should be taken to construct multi-storied houses in the villages too. Perhaps there is no alternative to multi-storied houses in the villages, though it

may not apparently seem realistic in the background of the prevailing socio-economic condition of rural Bangladesh. Experts calculate that 1.2 million hectare three-crop cultivable land can be recovered by constructing multi-storied houses in the villages.

Poverty reduction is yet another incarnate problem of Bangladesh. To speak the truth, agricultural development and poverty reduction are supplementary to one another. Permanent poverty reduction is indeed possible by distributing all the khas land, land recovered through constructing multi-storied houses in the villages and land recovered through implementing land ceiling of Bangabandhu. By these measures poverty reduction will attain 100 percent success in the year 2008 instead of 50 percent target of the Millennium Development Goal (by the year 2015) as stated in the Poverty Reduction

Strategy Paper. Food security can be ensured by eradicating poverty for good.

Another problem may emerge due to the increasing production of rice in 2 to 3 years. Total production is likely to surpass the requirement due to the increasing use of hybrid seeds. Then there will be a crisis of storage facilities and packaging gunny bags. Policy makers should be cautious about this ensuing problem right now.

Flood is another yearly problem. Bangladesh must suffer the havoc due to its geo-physical position and flowing of three great rivers over its territory. So in Bangladesh development plans should not be made on the concept of "flood control" rather the concept of "controlled flood" should be given preference in implementing future infrastructural development plans. Due to the "controlled flood" 2500 million tons of silt

may be deposited evenly on the cultivable land all over Bangladesh which will play an important role in increasing food production.

It is noteworthy to mention about the recent and amazing development of agriculture in the Indian state of West Bengal. During the period of 1980's West Bengal was one of the backward states of India. Situation started changing after taking necessary radical land reform and agricultural development by the left front government. Political stability returned to the state and wind of development started blowing in economic arena. Due to this the left front government in West Bengal is passing its glorious 30 years in power. West Bengal now is one of the advanced states of India. The radical land reform and agricultural development could be an ideal model for Bangladesh too.

It is a matter of regret that even

after 36 years of independence, the country has no mention worthy agriculture policy though Bangladesh is dependent on agriculture. During the Awami League government a very simple 35-page agriculture policy was adopted which too has never been followed in its true sense. Bangladesh needs a comprehensive agriculture policy.

For ensuring the food security in the coming days for the ever increasing population the policy makers should pay attention to the emerging problems in agriculture. If agriculture in Bangladesh is made dynamic by following a comprehensive agriculture policy, the dream of a prosperous nation will come true by the year 2021 when it will celebrate its golden jubilee of independence.

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