

Disaster issues must be high in Saarc priorities



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SOUTH Asia is currently in the grip of severe floods that are causing havoc in three regional countries -- India, Bangladesh and Nepal. Millions are badly affected and authorities in these countries are sparing no effort to mitigate their sufferings, which is certainly a gigantic task. The catastrophe is seen as the worst in the region in several decades, and the international community, including the chief executive of the United Nations, has also expressed grave concern and anxiety at the situation in the three countries. Several countries and agencies have also announced assistance in cash and kind, which is only natural when a large segment of fellow humans is mired in great hardship.

Natural disasters are not a new phenomenon, as countries -- rich or poor, big or small -- are victims of the fury of nature. Despite tremendous technological and other advancement, the human habitats are still helpless against natural onslaughts, and cannot offer much resistance. People can, at best, know in advance about the impending disaster and take some precautionary measures, and this preparedness helps them to contain to some extent, or minimise, the consequences of disasters. In some cases, significant progress has been made in combating natural disasters but, by and large, people remain only spectators before nature that can cause devastating losses.

It is a matter of common knowledge that South Asia, along with adjacent regions in South East Asia, is a disaster-prone area, and the countries here have had enough of the onslaughts of severe proportions in recent history. Catastrophic floods, storms, hurricanes, droughts, earthquakes, and other colossal problems caused by the whims of nature are a regular phenomenon in this part of the world, while many other regions are also vulnerable to various disasters.

An early warning system, adequate pre-calimity preparedness, and a speedy post-disaster management system are some of the measures that can definitely reduce the chances, and more importantly lessen the scale, of devastation likely to be wrought by the disaster. It is not that these possibilities are not being thought of, or efforts are not being made in this line, to save the calamity-prone nations as far as possible. But what is urgently needed is a more serious attempt in that direction on the basis of utmost priority, and placement of resources, even if there is constraint on part of the countries that desperately need protection from natural disasters. It appears that such a

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drive is somewhat lacking, even though there is no dearth of anxiety and concern as well as talk of probable steps to mitigate the causes and consequences.

Not long ago, the tsunami tragedy, which occurred just before the scheduled 13th summit brought to the fore once again the dire need of anti-disaster measures on a regional plane, and this has received particular attention since the occurrence of unimaginable magnitude that took the lives of more than a quarter million hapless people in South and South East Asia. The Tsunami that struck mainly three South and two South-east Asian nations, leaving a trail of devastation, caused postponement of the summit. Indeed, such a postponement was the logical development of the situation caused by the disaster.

In the past, Saarc summits had been deferred several times owing to man-made crises like political problems among the member states and, hence, there was no reason why the event should not have been called off temporarily when nature had inflicted three of its seven members and friendly nations of nearby areas. The nations affected by the disaster obviously needed to focus on domestic relief operations at that critical hour of national tragedy. The summit took place later, and it was heartening to note that when the leaders met the issue of the natural disaster was fresh in their minds, and the tsunami figured prominently in the discussions in the context of natural disasters causing huge destruction in the region.

Bangladesh is vulnerable to natural disasters, which are highlighted by the catastrophes of 1970, 1988, 1998, and other occasions. Our country is often described as calamity prone by the international world, and the world conference on disaster management in Kobe, Japan, two years ago focused especially on the hardships caused by nature in such nations. The conference was participated by most of the world's countries, and opened by no less a person than the Emperor of Japan as a rare gesture. The former chief of the UNHCR, Dr. Sadako Ogata, was an attraction in the high profile event which drew world-wide attention. The Bangladesh delegation was given importance as a disaster-prone nation.

The 13th Saarc summit in the Bangladesh capital, coming almost immediately after that global conference, picked up the thread of that conference suiting the regional requirement and priorities. This idea was beneficial for individual nations as well as collectively. It goes without saying that a venture like disaster prevention in South Asia needs collective endeavour, and larger international support and assis-

ance are also required for the purpose. It can be concluded that international help will not be absent, as evidenced by the fact that the sympathy demonstrated in the aftermath of Asia's tsunami was more appealing in the Western nations, particularly among the people, whose hearts went out in consolation with the dead and affected.

Some leaders of powerful nations were criticised by their people and the press for either not acting immediately, or adequately, for the calamity hit countries. School children, top celebrities of the cinema and music worlds, sports figures, and heads of government of some countries spared no efforts to stand by the suffering humanity. Many of the

conference of the Saarc leaders in New Delhi in April this year, discussed the natural disaster issue as a major area of cooperation among the member states. However, the Saarc must take a new look at the issue of disaster management and related matters in the wake of the current flood situation in South Asia, which has displaced millions apart from killing many.

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damage and even, at times, wipe out assiduously built developmental infrastructure.

This destruction covers agriculture, road, and other communications, as well as some other vital sectors which are critically important for the welfare and well-being of the people. Such catastrophes obviate progress being made in different fields, and it is imperative that anti-disaster plans be taken up with all seriousness for socio-economic uplift. It also needs modern and external technological and financial



Asian countries lagged behind in this regard in contrast to European, and several other nations.

Bangladesh was definitely narrowly spared by the tsunami. Had it hit, the destruction could have been of unimaginable proportions. The Kashmir region in Pakistan and India was extensively damaged by severe earthquakes, and now parts of three countries -- Bangladesh, India and Nepal -- are in the grip of floods. The woes of the people in the affected areas naturally know no bounds, and the government, the armed forces, and people of all walks of life throw their weight behind the relief operations, which is no doubt a gigantic task.

The Kobe conference threw up several effective ideas for disaster prevention, and mitigation of their consequences. The Dhaka conference, and the subsequent 14th

ing the natural disasters in the region in a concerted manner. They should discuss the issue soon, and not wait for the next summit in Male, or the next meeting of the council of ministers that generally takes place midway between the summits.

As the South Asian nations under the banner of the Saarc are sparing no efforts to improve their economic and social condition through collective endeavour, despite occasional strain in the Saarc and the sluggish progress made by the forum, all avenues are being explored for multi-faceted cooperation in various fields. The last summit in New Delhi was quite productive in this direction. But the disaster-prone South Asia must take up the issue of cooperation in this field as a priority. It is just not that disasters bring human tragedies of enormous proportions, but they also badly

support, which should not be lacking since many quarters are keen to assist Saarc for the larger good of the region, particularly when related to the direct interest of the vast multitude living in the most populous region in the world.

Meanwhile, the UN has expressed fears that the flood-hit countries in South Asia may face food shortage and other problems. Saarc should discuss all these issues so that timely and concerted measures can be taken to minimise the consequences.

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Bangladesh needs duty free access to US market

Bangladesh is exporting ready made garment and frozen food to and importing cotton and machinery from the United States. Both countries benefit from this trading. Bangladesh is following the market economy and conducting reforms in macroeconomic policies. In the field of micro credit, the Grameen Bank has brought revolution by strengthening the social and economic position of women, especially in rural areas. If the flow of trade increases, it will benefit both countries.

MOHAMMAD AMJAD HOSSAIN

BANGLADESH is a good example of how a country could pull itself up from economic entrapment -- making transition from a predominantly agricultural economy to a globally diverse one. Today Bangladesh has joined the global trade and commerce as a significant and engaged player.

It is an axiom that poverty is responsible in breeding corruption and terrorism in the under developed and developing countries. While awarding Nobel Peace Prize last year to Bangladeshi economist Dr Muhammad Yunus, founder of Grameen Bank which has been providing micro credit without collateral to the poor with a view to eradicating poverty, Nobel Committee recognised poverty as a threat to both national and world peace. More employment to skill and semi-skilled working force in these countries would reduce the risk of corruption and terrorism. Poverty should not be considered a national or regional affair. It is a global phenomenon. Therefore, developed rich countries in the world should think and do something to stop this unhealthy breeding of corruption and terrorism.

According to the UN, Bangladesh is in the category of Least Developed Country (LDC) since its birth in 1971 along with 50 other countries. Bangladesh is a poverty stricken and densely populated country of 150 million whose per capita income is approximately \$480.

Of the industries, the ready made garment has distinguished itself as an industry with the highest potential of growth. This particular industry, which accounts for the major share of exports, employs two million young women as they have been increasingly participating in the work force. In Bangladesh, young men and women are increasingly adapting to modern technologies. That is really amazing.

Since the development of this industry, Bangladesh has been receiving friendly treatment from major industrial countries of the world, but not from USA, unfortunately. It has been treated unfairly by tariff structure of the United States. Nevertheless exports to the United States has increased

manifold and the US turned out to be the biggest destination for Bangladesh's exportable products followed by Germany and the Great Britain.

Bangladesh has been enjoying duty free entry into European Union with effect from mid 90's while Bangladesh was granted duty free entry into Canadian markets since 2003, a close door neighbour of USA, although two way trade with Canada stands at 429 million dollars only. Bangladesh exported-goods worth \$ 333 million to Canada from 2006 until March, 2007 while she imported from Canada goods worth \$ 96 million during the same period.

From January, 2005 all quota imposing countries have lifted it as per WTO agreement on textile and clothing. This has put Bangladesh along with other LDCs in a competitive environment. The system actually provided security to enter US or European markets. Now Bangladesh has been competing with developed countries like China and India. If tariff on products from LDCs is not withdrawn by USA, the stiff competition will have to be confronted with by the LDCs, including Bangladesh. Possibility of the survival of the garment industry in Bangladesh may appear bleak if we do not keep on improving.

The government of the United States has shown magnanimity towards countries in Latin America, the Caribbeans and Africa either by reducing or eliminating tariff on products from these countries. The United States may consider adopting lenient view on the ready made garments, and in particular on products from Bangladesh and save this industry by introducing laws that would reduce or eliminate tariff. Nobel Laureate Professor Muhammad Yunus and representatives from Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association gave testimony to the Senate Finance Committee in May this year to explain the reasons for offering duty-free excess to Bangladesh products in US markets.

A bill in the Senate sponsored by Senator Gordon Smith, Republican, along with three other Senators was introduced on January 26, 2005 to accord duty free access to textiles and other

exports from 14 least developed countries of Asia and the Pacific region while Congressman Joseph Crowley and Congressman Jim Kolbe placed similar bill in the House of Representatives in February, 2005.

Trade, not aid plays a very important role in enhancing bilateral relations and improving the condition of downtrodden people in a poverty-ridden country like Bangladesh. Bangladesh has been receiving aid from the United States since its birth. Presently the flow of aid has been drastically cut. Aid is one of the financial incentives that contribute to the breeding of corruption. Hundreds of politicians, bureaucrats and businessmen are facing the consequences now in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh is exporting ready made garment and frozen food to and importing cotton and machinery from the United States. Both countries benefit from this trading. Bangladesh is following the market economy and conducting reforms in macroeconomic policies as noted by World Trade Organisation in its 2006 Report. In the field of micro credit, the Grameen Bank has brought revolution by strengthening the social and economic position of women, especially in rural areas. If the flow of trade increases, it will benefit both countries.

Further scope of expansion of industries and opening up of back up industries, such as more spinning mills and accessories factories exists. These intricate global trade developments and relationships create jobs and wealth. In the case of Bangladesh, it would increase employment opportunity and take young men and women off the streets and channel them into productive and meaningful lives. In the process corruption and scope of terrorism will hopefully be wiped out over a period of time. Therefore, the United States Congress should consider offering duty-free access to products from LDC, especially Bangladesh, in line with Canada or European Union.

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SOLID WASTE MANAGEMENT

Recycling and composting should be preferred processes

MOHAMMAD ASRAFUR RAHMAN

PERILOUS waste and its disposal perhaps is the greatest problem before the mankind in today's world. Increasing waste generation in the present time is associated with voracious consumer culture and human greed, which have done irreparable damage to the environment.

Human activities generate wastes. Most of these wastes are normally solid and the meaning of the word waste suggests that the material is useless and unwanted. But many of these waste materials can be reused and thus can become a resource. Environmental pollution due to waste, whatever may its source be, has reached menacing dimensions. The wastes associated with environmental problems have revealed that greater emphasis must be given to the management of urban solid wastes and their by products.

The solid wastes generated from different sources are highly heterogeneous in their physical, chemical and biological properties and call for different methods for their safe disposal. Solid wastes comprise countless number of different components: dust, discarded food, papers and boards, metals, plastics and glass, cloth and furniture, garden wastes, and many hazardous substances. In most cities of Bangladesh, the decomposable organic matter is the major component of the municipal refuse and makes up nearly 70

to 80 percent of it. This component of solid waste when left uncleared starts decomposing emitting foul odour and it also leads to breeding and proliferation of undesirable and disease causing organisms. The most poignant environmental damage caused by solid wastes is to its aesthetics and hygiene.

Many people feel that solid waste management is a simple affair -- simply putting it onto a vehicle and unloading at a dump. But successful solid waste management is rarely achieved without thought, effort and learning from mistakes. Solid waste management is much more than a technological issue -- it usually involves managing a large workforce and working closely with the public. Waste generation should be avoided as far as technically possible and economically acceptable, and waste must be recycled unless this is economically not feasible. Low waste technologies deserve priority over customary waste disposal.

According to Chittagong City Corporation source, the total generation of solid waste from all possible sources (industries, markets, clinics and hospital, households and travellers) is 1069 tons per day. It is mentionable that the amount of solid waste produced from industries and clinics added are negligible. A study was conducted from September 2004 to June 2005 to identify the most potential source and composition of biodegradable solid waste generated in the Chittagong metropolitan area, without which any

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energy recovery plan from solid waste tends to be trivial. The composition of the domestic source along with their sub-sources (done by systematic sampling) and physical and chemical properties were studied. Pertinent domestic source was found as the most potential (75.75%) biodegradable solid waste, which is a very good sign for its composting.

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There are many factors that vary from place to place and that must be considered in the design of a solid waste management system. Amongst them are:

- The waste itself: The waste contains large amounts of moisture because of the high usage of fresh fruit and vegetables and due to the high proportion of

sand particles it become very dense. The combination of the extra weight, the abrasiveness of the sand and the corrosive-

ness caused by the water content, can cause very rapid deterioration of equipment used for transportation and disposal.

- Access to waste collection points: Many sources of waste might only be reached by roads or alleys which may be inacces-



sible to certain kinds of transport because of their width, slope, congestion or surface.

- Public awareness and attitude: This can effect the readiness to carry waste to a shared container, the willingness to accept the proximity of a shared container, the willingness to segregate waste to assist recycling, the frequency at which wastes should be collected, the amount of litter and animal excreta that are left on the street, the willingness to pay for waste management services etc.

- Selection of equipment: The types of vehicles and chassis that are already widely used and for which spare parts and maintenance expertise are available should influence the selection of waste collection vehicles. Institutional issues include the current and intended legislation and the extent to which it is enforced. The policy of government regarding the role of the private sector (formal and informal) should also be taken into account.

In Chittagong Metropolitan area previously there was no recycling process for the huge amount of solid waste produced but recently one recycling plant has been installed in Halisahar dumping site to produce fuel wood charcoal from freshly dumped wastes. Collecting and processing secondary materials, manufacturing recycled-content products, and then purchasing recycled products creates a circle or loop that ensures the overall success and value of recycling.

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Considering the nature of the waste, its generation rates, density, composition, moisture content, size, distribution of waste materials, pH level, climatic and geographical situation to recover and recycle acceptable biodegradable materials from agricultural, municipal, institutional, commercial and industrial organic wastes in an environmentally acceptable and cost effective manner, and to produce a marketable end product, we can suggest composting as the recycling procedure for the solid waste management. Composting has the following benefits:

- Conversion of a reusable waste resource to a stable and useful product as a soil amendment and mulch medium; reduction of the pollution potential of organic waste; considerable reduction in organic waste volume and weight enabling more economic handling and utilisation; destruction of various nuisance insect pests; elimination of most pathogenic organisms, rendering a pasteurized compost product; and destruction of the viability of plant seeds, particularly weed and other obnoxious plants.

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