

## Post flood action plan: Some thoughts in retrospect



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**The government has been able to handle the flood situation quite successfully. Post-flood actions are more difficult than during-flood operation. The government has to do it now. I am sure the government has some plans, and my past experience may be a guide. More attention has to be given to agriculture -- easy repayment loan without interest for the farmers, fertiliser, and seeds have to be provided. Donor agencies have to be involved. River dredging is a must. I hope our united efforts can solve the problems. New ideas and plans, and advice from others, may be borrowed or heeded to in larger interest of the country.**

I had previously expressed my experience of facing floods and how best it could be handled. Now I will discuss something on the issues when flood waters start receding. Hopefully, by the grace of Allah, very soon the flood washed land would again rise to normal. People will then start building their homes, and carry out programmes for harvesting their lands. In my experience, handling the post-flood situation is far more difficult than facing the flood when it starts engulfing areas one after another. I have experienced that myself in 1988 -- let the people recapitulate how it was done. I will now discuss how it can be done, not only during flood but also during other natural calamities when they come.

Our greatest problem is over-population in a small mass of land. The major part of this population is poor, and most of them live below the poverty line. Since 80 percent of them are dependent on agriculture, financial incapacity is the root cause of their misery. The agriculturists or farmers are busy in their work for one-fourth of the year, and the rest is more or less their idle-time. But agricultural activity is worst affected during a flood or some other natural calamity. This time, too, it has been no exception. The affected people naturally started running to the cities and towns in quest of food and work. But this influx is much less in the district headquarters as possibility of finding work is less there. Hence, the bulk of the affected population runs for the capital city, and its population rises many times more than the normal.

This problem gets worse by the day. This does not happen during the flood alone, as many of them necessarily do not feel like going

## Prices, politics and progress



ABDUL BAYES

### BENEATH THE SURFACE

**Bangladesh needs to develop a more pro-poor and pro-agricultural strategy to grapple with its food problems. By and large, greater investment in rural human capital, to improve labour productivity and mobility; more diversified and higher valued rural economies that provide the commodities needed by modern supply chains and domestic super-markets, and more efficient rural financial markets etc. should constitute a package to deal with the problem of prices.**

THE present perception of the people of Bangladesh is that the prices of essentials are going through the roof. Interviews of consumers by private TV channels tend to bear this out. Food (especially rice) price is the point to ponder as it has its historic relationship with poverty, political stability, and overall economic progress -- a topic we shall take up very shortly. Before we that, a comparative picture is worth mentioning. In 2000, a wage labourer could buy 6-7 kg of rice with his daily income (say Tk. 60/day). Now, less than half of that can be bought, even though the income has risen over time.

This implies that the real income of the poor -- spending 60 percent of the total income on food items -- almost halved, forcing them either to reduce per capita consumption of energy or using up whatever meagre amount was available for non-food purposes. In defending the development, the comparison of prices prevailing in some other countries should be done cautiously -- as per capita incomes vary sharply -- and it is better to estimate the share of the budget in item-wise expenses in comparable countries.

However, to add to people's miseries, some mills were closed down, creating unemployment. Informal markets were demolished to deprive the poor business community, and a number of poor-led activities faced debacles. On the other hand, political instability and uncertainties loom large on the horizon to adversely affect investments and employment opportunities. It is, perhaps, not true that the government has been oblivious of the price hike. Actually, it is concerned, but quotes the rise of prices in the international market.

The government has taken a number of steps to contain the price spiral, but the result is yet to

be felt by the common people. One of the factors working against the positive steps could be a sense of 'panic' prevailing among importers, businessmen, and citizens. Top government brasses and business bodies have already hinted at that. The fact remains that the government must create a congenial environment where freedom of transaction exists, so that supply is augmented in the market.

In Bangladesh, as elsewhere, politics revolves round the prices of staple foods. In this context, I intend to draw upon a research paper by C. Peter Timmer, a visiting Professor of the Stanford University, who spoke on the vital issue of "stabilising food prices and its implications." He presented it in a recent policy forum organised by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB). The professor points out: "The close historical connection seen in much of east and southeast Asia between improvement in food security and reduction in poverty has been a result of government efforts to link market-led economic growth to interventions that improve food security at both household and national levels. Food security at both levels enhances the prospects for rapid economic growth, poverty reduction, and broad-based participation by citizens in higher living standards."

Raising poor households above the poverty line does not guarantee their food security if food supplies disappear from markets or prices rise beyond their means. All government leaders recognise the impact of rice prices on the poor, and most countries stabilised their rice economy by keeping domestic rice prices more stable than border prices. Economic growth, poverty

reduction and stability are linked to each other through a set of 'virtuous circles.' Greater stability in food prices means a reduction in political instability."

Meantime, projections on world prices tell us that world commodity prices may go up by 20-40 percent within a couple of years. Especially, the already thin rice market might look thinner in the wake of demands from China and Indonesia, who are faced with lower output. Thus, Bangladesh needs to keep an eye on these developments to devise policies. The devastating flood has damaged rice fields (amon and aus), which is an ominous sign. But, hopefully, the government's efforts at supplying seeds, fertilizers, and credit in due time and appropriate doses will heal the wounds to a large extent. A bumper crop, in tandem with associated help, might keep us cool for a while. In this process, the government has to address two vital fronts: helping augment agricultural post-flood rehabilitation and opening up income earning opportunities (such as road maintenance, food for work) to increase the food entitlements of the poor.

Prof. Timmer argues -- and I paraphrase -- that as a commodity rice is different and the difference has powerfully influenced economics and politics throughout much of Asia. The differences are seen in three ways: First, rice is the dominant food staple throughout the region, often accounting for more than half of normal energy intake. Daily access to rice is essential for survival, especially for the poor. Second, rice is predominantly grown by small holders who have been adept at adopting new technologies when market signals were favourable. In many countries, rice farmers are the single

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T HIS time the Buleshah's 250th birth anniversary

took me to Pakistan. He was a sufi poet whose body could not be buried for seven days because Kasur, the city he lived all his life, was dominated by fanatics. They had not liked his poetry which challenged them as custodian of Islam. One of his couplets said that you could not come near to God by merely going to Mecca or by having dips in the holy Ganges. You should shed prejudice and hatred from your heart if you wanted to be near the Almighty.

His message of universal peace attracted 65 of us, including eight MPs, from India to Buleshah's mazaar (grave). Although eventually buried some seven kilometers from Kasur, his mazaar was now in the midst of the city. This was people's catharsis of their prejudice and bigotry. It was partly his message and partly the desire to have friendly relations with India that made nearly the entire population of Kasur to come on the streets to welcome our delegation.

It was a tumultuous reception. Rose petals were showered all the way to the mazaar. We were loaded with garlands. "India and Pakistan dosti zindabadi," was the slogan that rented the bazaars. Subsequently, at a large meeting the entire gathering raised its hands in response to a question posed by Manzur Ali, a local MP, how many would like to visit India?

There is no doubt that the desire to visit Pakistan in our country is equally strong and wide. But the bureaucracy in India, as in Pakistan, has a mindset and lives in an age gone by. Intelligence agencies on both sides rule the roost. Bomb blasts by terrorists have made New Delhi rethink about the initiative it was

taking to relax the visa system. Strange, the authorities should have realized by this time that the saboteurs or militants do not use the regular entry points. They have the miles of unguarded border with Nepal, Bangladesh and even Kashmir to sneak in.

In a way, the few hundred saboteurs are holding the millions in the two countries to ransom. It is a vicious circle we are in. Instances of terror do not allow the governments to relax visa and the common man's wish to normalize relations is not taken into account.

New Delhi should take the first step and break the vicious circle through relaxing visa system, lifting ban on the entry of newspapers and books and having a substantial exchange of students, scientists, film stars, doctors, lawyers and such other people.

For the participation of some 15 MPs and 40 others from Pakistan at the night vigil on 14-15 August, I had to speak to the National Security Adviser and the foreign secretary. The visas, held up for two months, were cleared within a few hours. At fault was the Home Ministry which was clearing the antecedents of applicants, including MPs and top media men.

Manzur Ali had to sit at Islamabad for three days to get the Indians a visa for Pakistan a few hours before their departure.

If visas can be issued at the last hour, it is not only shows the cussedness of authorities but also the connivance of political leadership. I have not heard of any government official being punished for not issuing a visa within a few days of the submission of the application. The establishment on both sides knows how keen is the common man to foster friendly

relations with the people across the border. But the governments have not yet decided how far to go. Maybe, they are afraid of people's joint pressure to have a soft border.

I have been struck by the overwhelming desire of the Pakistanis to bury the hatchet, to let bygones be bygones and to open a new chapter in friendly relations. That kind of upsurge is lacking in our country, except some parts. Pakistan's feeling is that the people coming from the same stock and culture should come together. But this togetherness should not be interpreted as the two tams becoming one. In fact, they have a lurking fear of the majority wanting to absorb the minority.

When Union ministers like Lalu Prasad Yadav remarks during a television interview that the two countries would unite, they provide ammunition to the fears spread by the fanatics: the Indians may be talking about friendship but they indeed want to embrace Pakistan and have not accepted its entity. People in India should go out of the way to clear this suspicion. They should never mistake the increasing desire of Pakistanis to be India's friends. The Pakistani sovereignty and its separate entity should be as sacrosanct in India as in Pakistan. Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, said in his speech in December 1947, within six months of Pakistan's creation that even if (Pakistan) were to ask for a merger with India, he would not agree to it because it would create "some other problems." I recall when I met General Ayub Khan after the creation of Bangladesh in 1972, he said that he feared that the Indians would some day "try to

capture this part of Pakistan but they must understand that we would be a thorn in their flesh."

My feeling is that the Indian people do understand the Pakistani sentiments. People should not confuse the efforts at conciliation with a few lunatics who want akhand bharat (United India). Friendly relations with the Islamic state of Pakistan are crucial for strengthening secularism in India. We have thousands of Muslims who have relatives across the border. The terrorists and jihadis who are originally Pakistan's crop be better cut by Islamabad itself. India's secular polity would gain by it. President General Pervez Musharraf looks like doing a lot.

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Yet if the ISI remains important in the scheme of things its chief was in London for political negotiations with Benazir Bhutto over the deal with Musharraf all his claims to fight against terrorism would be taken with a pinch of salt. When the ISI is found mixed up with the recent blasts in Hyderabad people in India wonder how far Musharraf is sincere about his action against terrorism or a desire for peace with India.

The verdict of history is going to be against Musharraf. A bit of credit may be given to him for persisting in negotiations with the estranged India after he overthrew Nawaz Sharif who had entered into a time frame settlement with India. Has Musharraf been running with the hounds and hunting with the hounds?

Kuldip Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.



## Musharraf: Hunter or hound?



KULDIP NAYAR

writes from New Delhi

### BETWEEN THE LINES

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