

# Post flood action plan: Some thoughts in retrospect



HUSSAIN MUHAMMAD ERSHAD

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 overpopulation 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

**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.**

back to their villages. As a result, the problems in the capital multiply in the socio-economic, political and administrative spheres. It is a fallacy to think that our population and economic problems are only temporary. No government can also solve it instantly. It needs long-term and down-to-earth planning. Let us remember that we live in a world of competition, and we have to survive by new ways of planning and new thoughts as others do, and how they have changed their fortune. We have to take lessons from other developing countries which have managed things and earned praise from all.

Some time back I proposed introduction of a federal system for Bangladesh in place of central administration. Dhaka alone must not be considered Bangladesh. The whole country must not wait or look for every single decision to be made by the Prime Minister's Office or the Secretariat. This devil of a system keeps Bangladesh clogged for a decision, which often comes out of one person's time, whim and sweet-will, from heaped up thousands of files clearance of which takes weeks, months and even years. Is this desirable for any country? In a small country of 56,000 sq-miles with nearly 150 million people this system is most unrealistic, impractical and unworkable.

Therefore, I suggested dividing the country into 8 provinces, entirely responsible for development, economy, employment etc. This would ignite competition among them, and the federal government would be there to oversee the merits and demerits of the decisions of the provinces. If implemented, this would simply mean that Dhaka is not Bangladesh. Many smaller countries even in our region, have taken to this system. I held a number of

seminars and meetings on the subject, and some political parties have welcomed the idea. In our party election manifesto this has been included.

Among all the good decisions taken by the caretaker government, I have liked the word "reform" the most. Reform has a wide connotation -- socio-economic, political, administrative, modernisation, and so on. Introduction of administrative reform falls in line with my proposal for federal and provincial system of government for the country, which the caretaker government can seriously consider. For the welfare of the country the present government is in the best position -- as it is highly difficult for any political government. I, therefore, implore the caretaker government to examine the pros and cons of the system and decide which is best for the country -- which has been run in a worse than autocratic manner in the name or garb of democracy.

About 99 percent of Bangladesh's population speaks Bangla, 88 percent of the people are Muslim and the rest are Hindus, Buddhists and Christians. Bangladesh is a country with excellent social harmony. As per the constitution, all segments of the population enjoy equal rights. Regional separation of any province is totally out of the question, keeping in view the percentage of population speaking the same language and following the same religion. In the system, national, provincial, and grass-roots people's representatives will devote themselves better for development of their own region. Pace of provincial development will attain a greater momentum. For monitoring the local development, advisory committees may be formed. This system will help accountability and transparency.

The MPs will vie with each other, by earning popularity with their performance and honesty, to come out victorious in the next election. As a result, local development will be strengthened, corruption will be diminished, the development budget will be well-utilised, the local population will be able to observe the activities of their representatives, public servants will remain alert in their responsibilities. Provincial capitals will be the centres of administrative, judicial and economic activity. Resultantly, the country's capital will get relief from the burden of a huge population, and the provincial capitals will grow into larger cities offering more job opportunities. The provincial administration will primarily handle natural calamities and the federal government will come forward when needed.

When I upgraded the subdivisions, or *thanas*, there was a lot of criticism, and many talked about failure in the long run. But, ultimately, the countrymen termed it as revolutionary. My proposal for a federal system may not be perfect in all respects, but it can be modified after threadbare discussion.

Well, now let me come back to the present flood situation. The following are some of the measures which helped to overcome the flood/tornado situation in 1988:

1. I realised that flood devastation was a common phenomenon in Bangladesh, hence I went for international cooperation for a permanent solution; 2. The UN held a special session to discuss the flood situation at my initiative, and the UN Secretary General himself came to Bangladesh; 3. DND dam was constructed to save Dhaka city, and a concrete wall was constructed along the river; 4. I made arrangement for 325 helipads in each *upazila* to reach relief goods; 5. I started dredging of rivers, and it

was done in 33 places; 6. I constituted a National Disaster Committee with people from political, social, professional platforms; 7. At my initiative, an international seminar was organised, which was participated by 182 specialists including 35 from abroad; 8. I waived agricultural loan interest up to Tk. 10,000 for the affected agricultural farmers, which amounted to Tk. 600 crore; 9. A special session of Parliament was called to create national awareness; 10. Partial restriction was

imposed on less important development works; 11. Arrangements were made to plant rice/other crops which could withstand hazards during floods in the future; 12. To overcome sufferings of the farmers plenty of money, seeds for rice, wheat, winter vegetable, animal feed, etc. were given to the farmers;

13. After the tornado in 1988, affected people and farmers were given easy-term loans from the banks and other lending organisations for reconstruction of their homes and as compensation for crop failures; 14. After the tornado and tidal waves in Urichar, each family was given a registered piece of land. 15. With the help of friendly countries a concrete house was donated; 16. I involved the armed forces to help people affected by the flood, tornado, tidal bores and such natural calamities; 17. For permanent solution of our natural calamities I visited India, Nepal,

China, Bhutan etc. to collect first-hand knowledge and help from the specialists. A European delegation on water management visited Bangladesh; 18. Through my efforts, the US passed a law to help Bangladesh. The French government came forward for rehabilitation of the affected;

19. In order to preserve water for the non-monsoon period, I made water preservation schemes, both big and small, throughout the country. Flood prone rivers were protected by dams on both sides, and river erosion schemes were taken in scientific ways. 20. In the newly raised islands, forestation and salt-water prevention arrangements were planned by building dams; 21. Irrigation scheme of Pabna was completed at a cost of Tk. 800 crore; 22. Flood rehabilitation centers were built in 4500 Unions.

I appreciate that the present government has been able to handle the flood situation quite suc-

cessfully. If relief operations could be started from the beginning the affected people would be more benefited. I said earlier that 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, keeping in mind the vulnerable situation we have been in during the past few decades. May Allah help us and our posterity!

Hussain Muhammad Ershad, a former President, is chairman of Jatiya Party.



## Prices, politics and progress



ABDUL BAYES

THE present perception of the people of Bangladesh is that the prices of essentials are going through the roofs. Interviews of consumers by private TV channels tend to bear this out. Food (especially rice) price is the point to ponder as it has historic relationship with poverty, political stability, and overall economic progress -- a topic we shall take up very shortly. Before 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 setbacks. 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

## 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.**

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 the household and national level.... 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

largest identifiable voting group, and catering to their interests has been important even in non-democratic societies.

Third, international rice markets have historically been thin and unstable, causing all Asian countries to buffer their farmers and consumers from fluctuating world markets and, thus, making the fluctuations worse in an even thinner market. These characteristics of rice based food systems forge a strong link between politics and economics, a link that policy makers, elected or not, see as a public mandate to deliver food security in the form of stable access to rice. Without understanding this link, it is difficult to understand Asia's economic progress.

Bangladesh needs to develop a more pro-poor and pro-agricultural strategy to grapple with its food problems. Recent years have revealed the weaknesses in the agricultural and rural development strategies adopted. Some of them are worth mentioning: budgetary allocation to agricultural science and technology has been reduced, and within the food sector, non-rice commodities witnessed less of technological innovations; subsidies to irrigation, fertilizer, and other inputs were drastically reduced; rainfed areas are still lingering due to the lack of appropriate technologies. 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.

Abdul Bayes is a Professor of Economics at Jahangirnagar University.

## Musharraf: Hunter or hound?

KULDIP NAYAR  
writes from New Delhi

THIS 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 zindabad," was the slogan that rent the bazaars. Subsequently, at a large meeting the entire gathering raised its hands in response to a question posed by Manzoor 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

## BETWEEN THE LINES

**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.**

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 unprotected 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. Manzoor 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 Lal 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 Pakistanis 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 it (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. Once in a while there are expressions like those of Lal Prasad Yadav, they are for proximity and should not be mistaken for a desire to merge Pakistan with India. 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.

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 hare and hunting with the hound?

Kuldip Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.