

Relieving hunger for flood victims

GINA DIZON

FOR some 6 million flood-hit victims facing severe food shortage in 47 districts of the country, food relief is essential. In the northern rice producing districts, hit by flood for the past three weeks, the demand for food is high and will last for at least two months after the floodwaters recede, especially in areas near the Jamuna river.

Here, at Taras upazilla of Sirajganj district, nearly 4 lakh people who rely on farming as their major source of livelihood could only eat once a day due to loss of work. Most of the population here are farm workers, earning Taka 80 to 90 per day, and not going to work means no pay and no Taka. This means hunger and further suffering for family members.

Rehka Boshak, an adivashi here at Taras, said her family ate once a day for the past month when the floods submerged her village knee-deep. Because her husband was not able to go to work for a month, they had to take loan from micro-credit organizations in order to get by. And until now, they are still repaying the loan.



With limited relief goods, beneficiaries were selected from adivashi residents coming from 50 villages/grams located in 8 unions of Desigram, Mathanugor, Taras Proper, Talong, Barobash, Naoga and Magwabiroad.

At least 30,000 adivashis including Mahato, Orao, Singh, Maldi and Boshak, live in the borderlines between Sirajganj and neighbouring Bogra. The majority of them are day labourers, and relies on farming as their source of livelihood.

In the neighbouring union of Dhonot of Bogra upazilla, each of at least 600 adivashi families received 5 kg rice, 2 kg potato, 1 kg dal, 1 kg salt, saline packets and water purifying tablets from Baoo, VSOB, and GBK, a programme partner of VSOB. Locally based Jatiyo Adivashi Parishad – Bogra chapter, assisted the three organisations.

Ratun Robidash, president of JAP-Bogra, said that they based their identification of beneficiaries on state of landlessness, extreme poverty manifested by some begging members, and handicaps in the family.

Most of the residents in these adivashi villages have not received relief goods from the government or any other NGO during the floods. Beaming with happiness, Niyuti Minuti a Mahato from Dhonot, said she received relief goods for the first time ever.

Food relief recipients came from 56 villages located in the unions of Dhonot, Sariakandi and Kazipur. These areas locate adivashis belonging to the tribes Chandal, Partni Robidash, Baddi, Robidash, Zele, Malo, Zoguinath, Pazvon, Mahato, Hazar, Mahali, Zunihari, Nunia, and Boshak.

Like adivashis from Taras, they too are mostly day labourers earning Taka 80 to 100 per day. How they lost their land is a different story.

The Taras Thana Officer, Khalilur Rahman, who graced the relief distribution, said that his office with its limited funds will try to attend to needs of the adivashi families. Rahman said that he has already given out Taka 7 lakh for adivashis including, educational subsidies for primary schoolchildren, health care and the building of a temple.

lost due to the flood, 23 year old farmer-fisherman Muhammad Nazrul Islam said.

Three-month-old fertilized riceplants got swamped and ricefields practically turned into a vast expanse of floodwaters, which will recede in the next two months.

Not only crops have been devastated. Household furniture, food, and clothing worth at least Taka 3,000 to 4,000 were lost by each household, Alyah Khatun of Taras Propersaid.

It is interesting to note that residents of this flood-vulnerable area prepare before disaster hits them by building compartments close to their ceilings to store some food and other things. Yet, floods waters may rise to the ceiling, so raised platforms are not secure enough.

Food is scarce and prices of commodities have shot up high, which makes living doubly difficult for this farming and fishing community. A kilogram of rice, which was formerly sold at Tk. 23 a kilo shot up to Tk. 35 a kilo during the floods.

And while fishermen like Nazrul are happy with their catch, which doubled to some 50 kilograms during flood times, this happiness does not however stay long as prices of food items rise too.

The people who live on embankments and in shanties perched near the char areas were identified as priority recipients of a Tk3 lakh relief mission conducted on Sept 1 by Volunteer Services Overseas-Bangladesh and Gono Kalyan Sangstha (GKS), a locally based development NGO. GKS is a programme partner of VSOB.

While there were so many people to be given relief goods, Selim Jahangir, GKS founder, said that beneficiaries have to be prioritised considering the shortage of the food items. He said a Citizens

Committee took care of the identification of recipients based on the need level of the household. The households showed that either one or both of the spouses were jobless, have more mouths to feed, are elderly, and/or disabled.

**Volunteering**

"Now, my family can eat," Muzdarbagia, one of the food relief recipients happily said to Jonathan Larocque, a VSO volunteer from Canada who works with Shatkhirabased Institute of Development, Education, for the Advancement of the Landless (IDEAL) as organisational development adviser. Ideal is a programme partner of VSOB.

Larocque, along with Canadian, Kenyan, Ugandan, and Filipino VSO volunteers, packed and distributed 400 bags of relief goods, each containing 10 kgs of rice, 1 kg salt, 1kg dal, 1kg flour, 1 kg sugar, 1 bottle of oil, 2 packs of biscuits, saline packets, 1 bottle of vitamins, and Taka 100 to 400 households.

Larocque was then visiting co-VSO volunteer Kenyan Pius Mbaya, who works with GKS, during the height of the floods when he thought of giving some help to the flood-hit victims.

Larocque's family and friends solicited support for flood-hit victims by going door to door to their neighbours' homes. With the help of a Canada-based magazine, Le Journal de Montréal, a raffle draw generated some money, which added up to an equivalent of Taka 2 lakh. An additional Tk 84,000 was added to this amount, sourced from salaries of VSOB staff and from VSO volunteers themselves.

VSOB country director, Shahana Hayat, said: "VSO Bangladesh is very pleased to provide help to its partner organizations and flood victims, with significant support from volunteers.

VSO's long term vision is to develop people's optimum capacity so that the country can flourish with human resource."

**Rehabilitation**

The majority of the people of Taras, and practically most of the people of northern districts, will be waiting for the water to recede. Then they will be able to plant new rice seedlings of the major Aman variety again. Most of these areas are rice and jute producing fields.

According to earlier news reports, at least Tk 72 crore worth of crops, including paddy, jute, sugarcane, and vegetables on 47,407 hectares were damaged by the flood here at Sirajganj. This means additional capital is needed for fertilisers and rice seedlings.

Asked what the residents would do while waiting, resident Alyah Kathun said that they wouldsit and wait. Yet, the GKS founder said that a self-help programme was being designed to let residents do some alternative work while waiting for the waters to ebb. For an agricultural and fishing community, animal raising is also thought of as alternative livelihood. Taras is a new program area of GKS.

"VSO, with much hope, gives a hand to its partner organisations in relief and disaster management activities so that community people can be supported to cope with the food crisis and get back to their normal activities soon," Shahana Hayat further said.

Jogen Toppo, who is not particularly keen on relief work, also said that more sustainable programmes like alternative livelihood for farmer adivashis should be supported.

The author is a VSOB volunteer from Philippines, and is currently assigned at Rajshahi-based Adivasi Unnayan Sangstha.

Is misgiving about EC's proposed dialogue justified?

However, many have misgivings about the very intention behind the Commission's initiative. Some even view it as a part of a conspiracy designed to put into practice the so-called "minus two" formula. Such misgivings are uncalled for in that the electoral reform ideas have not been conceived to exclude anyone, nor have they suddenly fallen as manna from heaven. In fact, ideas of reform have evolved over time and they have a celebrated history.

BADIUL ALAM MAJUMDAR

THE Election Commission (EC) has invited 15 political parties for dialogue on electoral reforms, which is to begin from September 12. Some political parties have already expressed their hesitation to participate in the dialogue. Others are demanding the lifting of the existing ban on indoor politics as a condition for their participation.

However, many have misgivings about the very intention behind the Commission's initiative. Some even view it as a part of a conspiracy designed to put into practice the so-called "minus two" formula. Such misgivings are uncalled for in that the electoral reform ideas have not been conceived to exclude anyone, nor have they suddenly fallen as manna from heaven. In fact, ideas of reform have evolved over time and they have a celebrated history.

Over time, they have been sharpened by the contributions of many, including the media, and now they have, for all practical purposes, become a necessity. Political parties have also played a significant and praiseworthy role in advancing and popularising the demands for reform. Our left political parties, including the Communist Party, have been for a long time demanding reforms of the electoral process and democratic institutions. Fair Election Monitoring Alliance (FEMA) also advanced some important reform ideas in 2000. Many conscientious citizens have also been proposing reforms with a view to cleaning up our criminalised political system. In recent years, Shujan -- Citizens for Good Governance -- has initiated a systematic and serious discourse on reform. The most significant initial step in this regard was a roundtable discussion on "Political Reforms in Bangladesh," held in September 2004 in partnership with *The Daily Star*.

Subsequently, in another roundtable discussion on April 10, 2005, organised with the assistance of *Prothom Alo* and *The Daily Star*, the reform ideas were made concrete and specific. Following that, the discourse was carried forward in countless discussions, seminars and roundtable meetings organised by Shujan volunteers throughout the country. This author also wrote many newspaper pieces on various reform issues. One important milestone in the advancement of the reform discourse was a news conference by the Awami League president and leader of the opposition in parliament, Sheikh Hasina, on July 15, 2005, on behalf of the 14-Party Alliance (Alliance).

In the news conference, she proposed a unified "outline for reforming the caretaker government, the Election Commission, and the electoral process for free and impartial elections." In the unified outline, she offered 15 specific commitments to make the EC independent and effective.

At the same time, she made 30 specific promises under 11 headings to reform the electoral laws and rules. The headings included: eliminating the undue influence of money in elections; publishing the statements of wealth and antecedents of candidates; qualifications of candidates; making elections free of hooliganism, muscle power and hoodlums; stopping the use of religion and communalism in elections; giving everyone equal opportunity in elections; ensuring transparency in elections; role of the law enforcement agencies during elections; ensuring internal democracy and democratic practices within political parties; and increasing the number of women's seats in parliament and ensuring direct elections. Sheikh Hasina also made reforms proposals in parliament. Later, on November 22, 2005, "a unified minimum programme" was announced on behalf of the alliance at a grand

well individual citizens and citizen groups. Broadly speaking, the EC's proposals can be grouped into five categories: the standards of qualification and disqualification of candidates; the disclosure requirements for candidates; empowerment and independence of the EC; and the resolution of election disputes.

In addition, the EC proposal dealt with the issues relating to the number of polling agents, forfeiture of deposits, and the submission of reports of election expenses. It also proposed some changes in the *Conduct Rules*.

However, the EC proposal contained nothing about the election expenses. It should be noted that the Commission held dialogues with the representatives of citizens groups as well the media, and based on their recommendations brought about some changes in its original reform agenda. Clearly, the goals of the EC, the citizen groups and the political parties are similar -- the ensuring of free, fair and meaningful elections. However, the reform proposals of political parties include some changes, which would require amending the constitution, for which we will have to wait until the 9th parliament comes into session.

The EC, however, has proposed only those reforms, which can be put into effect by amending the *Representation of the People Order* and the *Conduct Rules*. In most cases, there is no conflict between the reform ideas proposed by political parties and the EC, although the Commission's proposals are generally more detailed and specific. However, there are divergences between the two proposals in two areas. The Commission proposed the compulsory registration of political parties, but political parties are silent about it.

Nevertheless, section 9(a) of the unified programme of the alliance declared on November 22 states that "the functioning of political parties contesting elections in accordance with democratic principles and the regular election of party leaders would be ensured, and the submission of the financial reports to the Election Commission would be made compulsory." These are, in essence, the main conditions for registration proposed by the EC.

Thus, the political parties, especially the 14-party alliance, should have no objection to compulsory registration of political parties. It may be noted that similar registration requirements are in force in many other countries, including neighbouring India. Another important difference between the two is that the EC proposal requires the banning of front organisations, especially the student and labour organisations. The constitutions of the main political parties have made their front organisations totally subservient to the main party. For instance, according to section 25(1) of the Awami League constitution, the party will, through its designated official, supervise and coordinate the policymaking of its front entities.

Because of such controls, student politics, for example, could not develop to protect and promote the interests of students, and there is growing public sentiment against such proxy politics.

In addition, Sheikh Hasina, while the Prime Minister, once proposed, subject to the agreement of the opposition, the banning of student politics. It is clear that the 14-party alliance, including the Awami League, is committed to major reform. Even the two factions of BNP have in recent times claimed that they want reform.

Given this, we hope that our political leaders will respond to the EC's invitation and participate in the forthcoming dialogue. We also hope that they will give their considered opinion on the EC proposal, and put forward, if necessary, new reform ideas, based on which the Commission will be able to finalise its agenda.

However, the Commission must not allow political parties to veto any of its proposals, for, as a constitutional body, its solemn duty is to protect the public interest. At the same time, we request that the government, in the interest of facilitating the dialogue, consider the EC's proposal to lift the ban on indoor politics.

We further hope that our respected politicians will prove Aristotle right and show that "the good of man must be the end of the science of politics."

Dr. Badiul Alam Majumdar, Secretary, SHUJAN (Citizens for Good Governance).

The comeback artist

Sharif's possible comeback is due to the bungling of Musharraf, who tried to sack the Supreme Court's top judge this past March, sparking huge public protests. An inconsistent policy of scorched-earth military attacks against militants, followed by surrender-like peace deals, have further damaged his image.

RON MOREAU

HE bravely fought terrorists, who twice tried to kill him. He had a strong authoritarian streak. He tried to crush the political opposition and turn Parliament into a rubber stamp. He attacked the Supreme Court and intimidated journalists. He frittered away the enormous popularity he once enjoyed.

This sounds like the recent political career of Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf, but also describes the lamentable track record of former prime minister Nawaz Sharif. In a surprising turn of events, Sharif may return from exile in London this week to a hero's welcome.

His aides hope to organize a rally of tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of his supporters for his arrival this week at the Islamabad airport.

Sharif met his political end during the second of his two terms as P.M., when he badly overplayed his weakening hand and tried to sack Musharraf, who was then (as he is now) the powerful Army chief of staff. The military revolted.

Musharraf quickly overthrew Sharif in a bloodless coup in October 1999, sending him into exile -- good news to Pakistanis fed up with Sharif's autocratic ways. Now, as Musharraf's own popularity and power have plummeted, Sharif, 58, has seized the moment.

Musharraf and the president's men are scrambling to thwart his return, appealing to Saudi Arabia (which brokered the deal to get Sharif out of jail in 2000) to prevent the homecoming.

The government could arrest him on recently reinstated corruption charges, or deport him immediately to Saudi Arabia. But Sharif says he's determined to come home. "(Musharraf's) tactics don't scare me anymore," he told Newsweek. "We want to fight a decisive battle against dictatorship. Democracy has to win, dictatorship has to lose."

Sharif, certainly, could win if he returns. Musharraf's political party, the Pakistan Muslim League, is



largely made up of defectors from Sharif's faction of the league. If they rally to Sharif, as analysts predict, he immediately becomes the front runner in the next parliamentary elections to be held later this year or early next year. "I have a gut feeling the political scales are tipped heavily in favor of Nawaz Sharif," says retired Pakistani Lt. Gen. Talat Masood.

Sharif's possible comeback is due to the bungling of Musharraf, who tried to sack the Supreme Court's top judge this past March, sparking huge public protests. An inconsistent policy of scorched-earth military attacks against militants, followed by surrender-like peace deals, have further damaged his image.

Polis show his job-approval rating at 34 percent, and that more than 60 percent of Pakistanis do not want him re-elected president. Antimilitary sentiment is running high, says Masood. "People want the rule of law and for the military to go back to the barracks." That's exactly what Sharif's line is as well. "The Army needs to go back to its defense role," he says.

Right now, Sharif is seen as the man standing up to Musharraf. But while he was in power, Sharif mismanaged the economy and tried to force Parliament to make Sharia the law of the land. Sharif quickly lost an unprecedented two-thirds parliamentary majority. "We all make mistakes," Sharif

says. "We have to learn from them and see that they are not repeated in the future."

Arguably, his successor has not done that. Under Sharif, Parliament and the courts challenged the disastrous invasion of Kargil in Kashmir, led by Musharraf as the then chief of staff. "The system of checks and balances had started to operate," says Samina Ahmed, South Asia director for the International Crisis Group.

But the coup, also led by Musharraf, derailed that progress, as well as Sharif's bold peace overtures to India, says Masood. Sharif was a strong US ally in the fight against terror. He moved forcefully against Sunni extremists in Pakistan, pressed the Taliban to deport Pakistani terrorists from Afghanistan and allowed the Clinton administration to use Pakistani airspace in the 1998 cruise-missile attack on Osama bin Laden's bases in Afghanistan.

Today, he says, US strategy relies too heavily on a dictatorial leader -- Musharraf. "Extremism and radicalism thrive only under dictatorships," says Sharif. "You need the support of the people to counter terrorism." And you need leaders who really can learn from their mistakes.

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