

Learning to live with disasters

Learning is a continuous process, and we learn from every catastrophe that affects us to ensure a safer future. With Bangladesh being the most vulnerable country to potential natural cataclysms, with every chance to be another lost Pompey, no efforts within our ability should be left untaken to ensure the safety of our people and their scant property.

ZULFIQUER AHMED AMIN

FOR a poor country like Bangladesh, a natural disaster always means a huge death toll, displacement and inconceivable destruction. Of the 20th century's ten deadliest storms, seven devoured their victims at the head of the Bay of Bengal. Sidr was one of the 10 fiercest cyclones that had hit the region of Bangladesh in the 131 years between 1876 and 2007.

The coast of Bangladesh is basically a river delta, draining both the Ganges and Brahmaputra rivers, which extends into the northern Bay of Bengal. Sediment from these rivers has built up along a large and flat continental shelf, making the coastline a wide area of shallow water gently sloping into the Bay of Bengal far offshore. This makes for a highly efficient surge "brake," hence, the surge "potential" compared to the average for any tropical cyclone is very high. Add a highly populated coastline with no significant high ground for many miles from the coast, and one of the poorest countries in the world, and we get the perfect mix for a large disaster.

Many factors influence cyclone, but three factors must be present for them to intensify: warm ocean temperatures (more than 26 degrees Celsius), low vertical wind shear (i.e., no strong change in wind speed or direction between two different altitudes), and high humidity. As warm, moist air rises, it lowers air pressure at sea level and draws surrounding air inward and upward in a rotating pattern.

As the water vapour-laden air spirals in and rises to higher altitudes, it cools and releases

heat as it condenses to rain. This cycle of evaporation and condensation brings the ocean's heat energy into the vortex, powering the storm.

Two factors that contribute to more intense tropical cyclones -- ocean heat content and water vapour -- have both increased over the past several decades. This is primarily due to human activities such as burning of fossil fuels and the clearing of forests, which have significantly elevated carbon dioxide (CO2) levels in the atmosphere.

The world's oceans have absorbed about 20 times as much heat as the atmosphere over the past half-century, leading to higher temperatures not only in surface waters but also down to substantial depths, with the most severe warming occurring in the

first 1,500 feet below the surface. As this warming occurs, the oceans expand and raise sea level. This expansion, combined with the inflow of water from melting land ice, has raised global sea level more than one inch over the last decade. In addition, observations of atmospheric humidity over the oceans show that water vapour content has increased four percent since 1970.

Natural disasters have quadrupled over the last two decades because of global warming, from an average of 120 a year in the early 1980s to as many as 500 today. The number of people affected by all disasters has risen from an average of 174 million a year between 1985 and 1994 to 254 million a year between 1995 and 2004. Other figures from the

Oxfam report: Floods and windstorms have increased four-fold since 1980, from 60 in 1980 to 240 in 2006. A report says that more than 70 million Bangladeshis, 22 million Vietnamese, and 6 million Egyptians could be affected by global warming-related flooding.

As devastating as it was, Sidr has taken far fewer lives than 1991's Cyclone Gorky, which killed at least 138,000 people, and the 1970 cyclone in Bhola, which left as many as 500,000 people dead and is considered the deadliest cyclone, and one of the worst natural disasters, in human history. Thousands of people dead, millions of acres of cropland washed down by the sweeping ocean surge, one third of Sunderban, a world natural heritage, utterly torn down, and substantial infrastructural damages have caused combined losses of assets and agricultural output estimated at \$2.31 billion, amounting to 2-3% GDP loss.

After the shattering cyclone of 1991, around 2,500 cyclone shelters and 200 flood shelters were constructed in the coastal regions, but experts opine that an

additional 2000 shelters are badly needed. In Patenga, Chittagong, the coast has been heavily protected with concrete levees. In addition, forestation has been initiated in the coastal regions to create a green belt.

Bangladesh Space Research and Remote Sensing Organisation (SPARRSO), a government agency under the Ministry of Defence, provides storm predictions and early warnings using feeds from Nasa and NOAA satellites. About 3,931 km long coastal embankment to protect coastal land from inundation by tidal waves and storm-surges, and drainage channels of total length of 4,774 km have so far been constructed, but lack of maintenance has rendered them almost ineffective.

A Comprehensive Cyclone Preparedness Program (CPP) is jointly planned, operated and managed by the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief and the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society, and a volunteer force of more than 32,000 has been trained to help in warning and evacuation in the coastal areas.

A month back before the Sidr onslaught, a warning was issued for taking safety measures to face an imminent disaster. Fortunately, it did not come, but harmed us by making the people living along the coastline, specially the fishing communities, sceptical about the reliability of the forecasting system. Finally, when the cyclone headed towards shore, many people did not believe the warning because the number 10 warning (which means "great danger") had been issued on several occasions prior to this event, with no cyclone occurring.

Much of the past investment had been in shelters, which, while multi-purpose, have had male-dominated uses, while the specific needs of women were appallingly ignored. Thus, many women this time refrained from taking shelter, putting themselves at risk. While studies have shown that unless a cyclone shelter is within 1.5 km of a house it may be too far, most of our shelters are placed more than 5 km from the community, which is why many local people postponed their withdrawal to the

shelter till the last minute.

There are several compelling reasons why people do not go to cyclone shelters. The majority of the inhabitants in the high-risk areas (HRAs) are the extreme poor, with bare minimum assets that they struggle until the last hour to hold on to. For the poor, a life without the meager assets is no different from death. Appallingly enough, our society has miserably failed in many decisive situations to ensure adequate safety of their property when disaster had not struck.

According to recent reports, when local people are convinced that they should evacuate, they will only do so if there is time to put their livestock in a safe place and then reach a known refuge.

Accurate forecasting is of no benefit unless the information can be conveyed to the people at risk in a timely and lucid manner. The ability of a cyclone to quickly change its direction and/or intensity makes it particularly important to disseminate updated forecasts promptly. Despite extensive mobile and radio coverage, the danger signal

failed to reach them all in time. While the tackling of Sidr has shown a high measure of preparedness, there is little, however, that any government can do if people do not heed the warning.

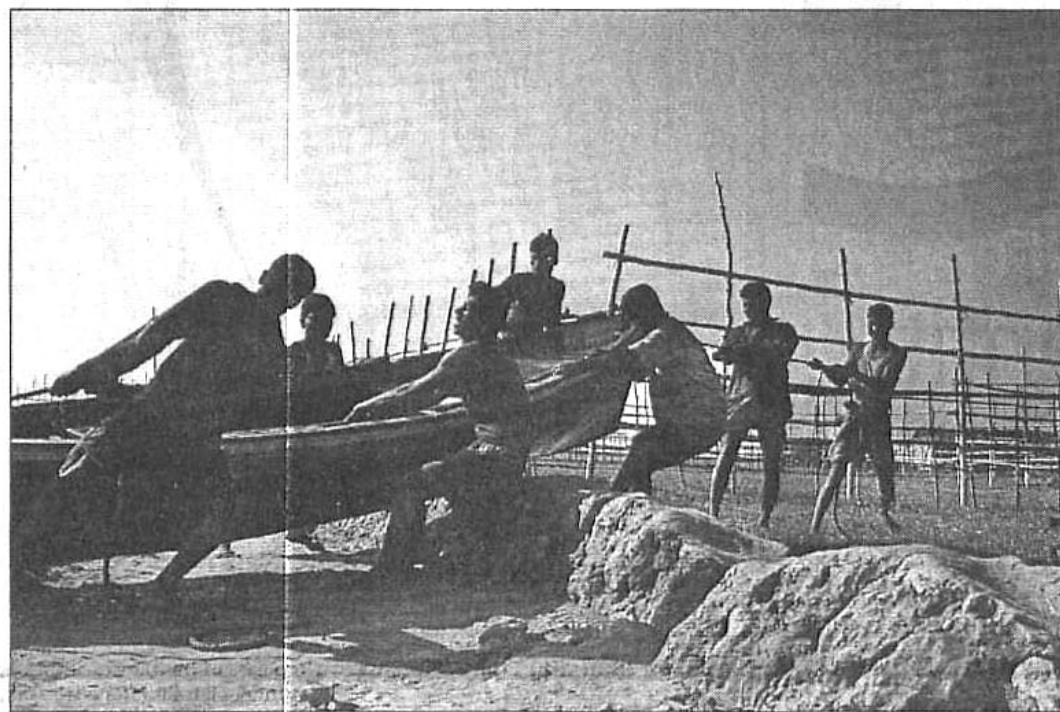
The cyclone has passed by and we will try again to bring life back to normal. But the cyclone has left behind a legacy of pain, sorrow and memories which are never to be erased. It has left behind orphans, cries of parents, and millions benumbed by the horror of death. Mother Nature turned so destructive that we just stood as mere spectators when our near and dear ones were being swept away from us.

Our wealthy, friendly nations can only provide us relief and generous donations after every disaster, but mere sensibility to prevent the disastrous fate that befalls us as a consequence of their extravagant life and indiscriminate exploitation of nature is a far cry. Until then, we shall be always exposed to the rage of nature, our population will dip more in poverty from the existing extreme poverty line, and lie in the thin line between life and death.

It is our life and our battle for existence. We have to learn to live with natural calamities as our companions. Despite the enormous achievement of reining in the death toll, in comparison to past disasters of similar scale, there is room to further minimise casualties and property damage.

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PHOTOS: DEBASISH SHOME/CRK NEWS

Tackling the most critical phase of the economy

Most factors behind today's distress being out of reach, the government should run a SWOT (strength, weakness, opportunity, and threat) analysis of the situation, and thereby translate a problem into a prospect and a sorrow into a solution. For example, aid of a hundred million dollars after the loss of thousands of lives is not a desirable gift. However, once we receive it on humanitarian grounds, we need to focus on building infrastructure and hiring technology in the coastal areas in order to prevent further losses in the future. Thus, we can translate a sorrow into a solution and assistance into power.

BIRU PAKSHA PAUL

THE Asian Development Bank (ADB) Country Director, Hua Du, said that the Bangladesh economy is currently going through the most critical and challenging period since independence because of the extensive damage caused by natural calamities and the increase of oil price in the international market (Daily Star, November 11). Here we outline how the government should revise its strategies for reform and prevent the downturn.

The ADB chief said: "I have studied about Bangladesh for several decades since its independence, but I have never sensed such difficulties as the country is going to face this year." Though the comment is more panicking than encouraging, the time has come for the government to accept this warning as a challenge to growth, and revise the action plan accordingly.

The ADB's latest economic update on Bangladesh has covered the mid-November cyclone and estimated growth for 2008 to be below 6 percent. If that turns out to be the case, the GDP growth will slow down. However, it does not necessarily mean that the economy will encounter the most critical phase since 1971. The ADB country director's comment seems to have portrayed a much gloomier picture than the actual ADB report did. An economy enters into the most critical phase during a recession, and Bangladesh is not likely to see that consequence by 2008.

Bad governance, civil disorder, famine, hyperinflation, negative growth, capital market crash, and depletion of international

reserves are the main symptoms signaling the most critical phase of the economy. We have experienced these in the past. In the 1970s we had the lowest growth of negative 14 percent in 1972, and the highest inflation of 54 percent along with famine in 1974.

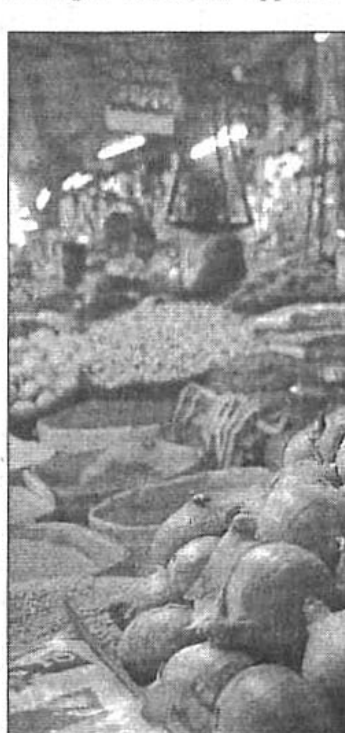
We experienced bad governance, very poor or zero growth, and alarming lows of international reserves many times in the 1980s. The current situation in Bangladesh is by no means comparable to any of the situations stated above. Nevertheless, Hua Du's comment should be treated as a well-wisher's concern and the government should prepare accordingly.

Before suggesting strategies, we need to know which factors are contributing to this downturn. Four domestic factors, inflation, anti-corruption drive, floods, and cyclone are working behind this slowdown of the economy. Additionally, two international factors, the oil price hike and the US mortgage crisis, aggravate the situation. Out of these six factors, the present government can be held responsible only for the anti-corruption drive, and partly for inflation. Everything else is beyond its control.

The Bangladesh government cannot solve the US mortgage crisis, which led to a fall in import demand, neither can it pressurise the Opec to lower oil prices. Natural calamities are, no doubt, random, but devastating. External shocks like these are mainly responsible for dragging the economy down. As a result, the government can do little to prevent the probable downturn. Despite considerable management, India faced economic

crises in the wake of droughts in 1966, 1972, and 1979.

Most factors behind today's distress being out of reach, the government should run a SWOT (strength, weakness, opportunity, and threat) analysis of the situation, and thereby translate a problem into a prospect and a sorrow into a solution. For example, aid of a hundred million dollars after the loss of thousands of lives is not a desirable gift. However, once we receive it on humanitarian grounds, we need to focus on building infrastructure and hiring technology in the coastal areas in order to prevent further losses in the future. Thus, we can translate a sorrow into a solution and assistance into power.



From one point of view, the current policymakers have been

unfortunate in facing a large number of adversities in less than one year. On the other hand, we cannot downplay the strength of the regime, though it is not an elected one. Being backed by the civil society and supported by the patriotic forces, this regime is the strongest government Bangladesh ever had. And this makes us hopeful of reform for growth along with combating corruption.

The government has to be careful with foreign exchange reserves, which need to cover at least two to three months' imports. In 1991, when India's foreign exchange reserves went

dollar itself is weakening in international markets.

Conversely, the appreciation of our currency would be detrimental to the balance of payments and reserves. As a result, devaluation, or even pegging to the existing rate, is the best alternative. Incentives like faster services and better rates can be designed to attract remittances. The central bank should revise its rules to avail this opportunity.

Inflation is a potential monster that can jeopardise macroeconomic stability at any time. People in our country think that bad governance causes high inflation although this reasoning

the high-powered money, or the monetary base of the economy. Import of essentials and checking high-powered money are the two vital ways of keeping inflation under control today.

When economic slowdown becomes reality, the best strategy is to mitigate it. In the past, counterproductive activities in the name of democracy took a heavy toll of national wealth. Rehman Sobhan rightly asserts that the malfunctioning of the democratic process, which culminated in emergency rule on 1/11, remains part of our living history (DS, Nov. 30).

Changing institutions is the toughest job in developing countries, and the present government is accomplishing that with the smallest possible cabinet, which, in turn, minimises fiscal spending. The anti-corruption drive will definitely augment national revenues and change the political and business culture. The slowdown in private investments is inevitable but temporary. Corruption and growth can never coexist in the long run. Thus, a simple cost-benefit analysis will show that the current regime is the fittest authority for minimising the downturn of the economy.

The way Bangladesh is fighting corruption has drawn international attention. The image of the country has never been so high since 1971. If the next democratic government can continue the trend of combating corruption, strengthening judiciary, and expediting market economy the way it is moving now, more foreign investments (FDI) are likely to deluge the country in future.

Tapping international capital flows is impossible without institutional reform. Better macroeconomic management with international reserves, inflation, and fiscal spending, along with institutional reform on judiciary, tax, employment, and education will definitely empower Bangladesh to overcome the critical phase of today's economy.

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The case for facing facts

CHARLES PETERS

I have been troubled by the reluctance of my fellow liberals to acknowledge the progress made in Iraq in the last six months, a reluctance, I am embarrassed to admit, that I have shared.

Giving Gen. David Petraeus his due does not mean we have to start saying it was a great idea to invade Iraq. It remains the terrible idea it always was. And the occupation that followed has been until recently a continuing disaster, causing the death or maiming of far too many American soldiers and Iraqi civilians.

Still, the fact is that the situation in Iraq, though some violence persists, is much improved since the summer. Why do liberals not want to face this fact, let alone ponder its implications?

The problem is one that I have seen cripple our political life again and again and that seems to grow steadily worse. Liberals and conservatives are equally guilty. Neither side wants to face facts that don't fit its case.

Consider abortion. Too many pro-lifers and pro-choicers seem determined to ignore the other fellows' points as they cling to their own rigid positions. And abortion is just one example.

Conservatives refuse to face the fact that free markets need to be regulated to guard against chicanery, and to protect the health and safety of consumers, workers and the public in general. Liberals are too prone to see government as the solution, which of course it can be, and not as part of the problem, a role in which it has also demonstrated impressive potential.

I have yet to find a conservative who acknowledges that our lowest unemployment rates since World War II have come in years when we had the highest income-tax rates, but it is a fact. And I have yet to hear a liberal express regret that it was not one of our own who had the courage and imagination to challenge Soviet leaders "to tear down this wall."

Conservative and liberal rigidity joined to create a tragic end to the war in Vietnam. Liberals became so antiwar that they could not admit that every South Vietnamese was not a closet Viet Cong; in fact, a significant number of them did not want to live under the communist North. The Nixon administration

could not admit that South Vietnamese leaders were too inept to prevail. This meant that neither the administration nor its liberal critics planned for our exit. In our chaotic departure, we abandoned hundreds of thousands of South Vietnamese who could only escape across the South China Sea in boats so rickety that many did not survive. Many of those who could not flee languished for years in North Vietnamese prisons and "reeducation camps."

This sad story should inspire us to face similar facts in Iraq. General Petraeus has proved that many Iraqis will respond to the kind of empathetic approach with which he has replaced the previous strategy of banging down doors and shooting first. At the same time, we have seen Iraq's politicians remain unwilling to get their act together. I agree with other war critics who believe these politicians will be motivated to reconcile their differences only when they know we are going to leave on a date certain and they will no longer be able to dither, endlessly under our protection in the Green Zone.

Nonetheless, General Petraeus's success provides important lessons. By talking to enemies like the Sunni tribal leaders, and by taking his troops out of isolated bases and putting them into Baghdad neighbourhoods where they could learn to understand the people and the people could see them as human beings, he has taught us how to deal effectively with insurgents. And liberals should be the first to point out to George W. Bush that talking to our enemies is a good idea.

Finally, the Iraqis who have responded to General Petraeus remind us of our obligation to all Iraqis who have helped us. Even believing as firmly as I do that we must leave, I recognise our duty to try to do so in a way that poses the least danger to our friends. Above all, we should never repeat the shame of Vietnam. We should make plans now so that if the worst happens we can extricate the Iraqis who have stuck their necks out for us.

Charles Peters is the founder of The Washington Monthly and president of Understanding Government, a foundation dedicated to better government through better journalism.

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