

Activate Union Parishad to effectively face the disaster

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I have just returned from the cyclone Sidr affected areas. Along with a group of volunteers, I went to Borguna, Patuakhali, Pirojpur and Jhalakathi with some emergency relief supplies and much heartfelt empathy. There, I saw the devastation, which turned some areas into killing fields and shattered the lives and livelihood of so many.

A week after that fateful night of November 15, the smell of death lingers in the air as some of the dead still remained unburied, the wails of orphaned children are ever present, and the cries of widowed women pierce the darkness of the night. There is so much pain there that one's mind goes numb, and it becomes impossible to hold back the tears.

The number of deaths and injuries cannot accurately portray the devastation. Properties, houses, plants and crops -- almost all the worldly possessions of the residents -- were destroyed. Food from their homes, fish from their freshwater ponds, cows, buffaloes, goats, ducks and chicken were all wiped away by the tidal surge.

Fishermen lost their nets and boats. Where there was no high tide, the water contaminated by

fallen leaves and other debris, has become unusable and pond fish are dying. The environment of the affected areas is totally polluted. The victims are hungry and thirsty. Many are living under the open sky. They do not even have seeds to plant.

This scenario is common to almost all districts of the south. Conditions in the chars and near riverbanks are, however, most serious. Falishatoli village under Monsa Baliajoli union of Borguna Sadar is a case in point.

Almost no dwelling is standing there. Even the soil from the foundations has washed away. The top of the embankment protecting the village is gone; creating deep ditches every few meters. Twenty-two people from this location were reportedly lost, nine people being from a single homestead. A "war" appears to have been fought here, as very few things have remained standing.

Each story I heard in the Sidr affected areas was more horrifying than the one before. I heard of a 10-year old schoolboy whose dead body was washed into a house. His school backpack was still tightly strapped to his back. Clearly, he tried to flee from death carrying his most important possession!

I heard of a young man dying

under a fallen wall while trying to rescue his blind, aging mother. Instead of swimming away to save her own life, a mother embraced death holding her child to her bosom.

In Falishatoli, I heard of a mason who came home from his workplace in Dhaka to find that all four of his family members were dead. He was last seen leaving the area wailing -- "who should I live for anymore?"

This is not the first time that a natural disaster has hit coastal Bangladesh. They have occurred many times before. The great tidal wave of 1970 killed over half a million people. The loss of life and property in the 1991 cyclone was also enormous.

In addition, there have been many relatively smaller calamities. Even though the destruction from these smaller calamities was less, their cumulative impact is serious and far-reaching.

Because of repeated disasters in the past, many people were already in an awful state before Sidr arrived. Malnutrition, especially among the poorest segment of the society like women and the disadvantaged, is nakedly visible here.

The women of these areas are short and very thin. The effects of women's malnutrition are clearly

noticeable among the children. Because of malnutrition, their immune systems have not developed fully.

Given an outbreak of common diseases like diarrhea and pneumonia, they will, therefore, be the first victims. Even though malnutrition and lack of immunity are the real killers -- diarrhea and pneumonia are easily blamed for the deaths.

Clearly, the lives of the people of Sidr affected areas are once again shattered, but they are not defeated. In the past, these people, who lost their loved ones and much of their material possessions, have courageously fought back. They appear to be determined to do so again this time. Resiliency is a unique trait of the Bangladeshi, especially among the disaster prone people of this country.

Another distinguishing attribute of these people is that they have few worldly possessions and their demands are also very limited. Given rock-bottom minimums, they are satisfied. If they are able to feed and clothe themselves and have roofs over their heads, they feel "grateful."

They do not need fancy cars or extravagant palaces. Still, our policymakers have repeatedly shown indifference toward these citizens in the past. Our leaders have even ignored their survival needs during disasters. Thus, we don't even have enough cyclone shelters for the coastal areas. Only 2000 such shelters with stated capacity to hold 20 lac exist, although the population of the coastal region is several times more.

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SDR affected areas is the lack of coordination. Many individuals, organisations, and the government are distributing emergency relief. They are doing it based on their own instincts and cursory information. As a result, even a week after the disaster hit, help has not yet reached some remote areas where the communication system has broken down.

In some locations, especially close to the riverbanks, relief supplies have been distributed repeatedly. Consequently, the right kinds of supplies are not reaching the right places. This is unacceptable in a country like Bangladesh, which has vast disaster management experience. In any event, the government will have to take responsibility for the coordination, and we are pleased that it has taken the initiative under a honourable adviser.

A prerequisite for coordination is reliable information. The number of dead and injured, where they are, what types of damage occurred in which location, and what type of help is urgently needed in different areas -- such information needs to be collected for each village. For example, information about whose dwellings were demolished, which families are hungry, who lost how many bulls and buffaloes, how many hand pumps are dysfunctional, which public institutions such as schools were destroyed, etc., needs to be collected.

With an appropriate format developed for this purpose, the local Union Parishad representatives could easily gather this information in a few days. It would only require the initiative of the UNOs. The help of the

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In the middle term, the Wapda embankments must be repaired, and they must be elevated and made stronger. Otherwise, salt water will damage the crops during the high tides in the rainy season.

In the long-term, many more cyclone shelters will have to be constructed. Houses for the victims will have to be built based on scientific designs so that they are cyclone-safe. A green belt will have to be built throughout the coastal line, for the Sundarbans had greatly protected some areas from the ferocity of the cyclone.

endeavour. NGOs must also work in coordination with UPs. Our experience of using this arrangement for distributing relief supplies has been quite positive and confidence inspiring.

Several priorities must be kept in mind in extending help to the Sidr victims. Emergency supplies of food, water, clothes, especially winter clothes, seeds, bullocks for cultivation etc., will have to be immediately arranged. Women, children, the old and the handicapped will have to be given priority. Damaged gardens and ponds need to be cleaned. Roads must be cleared and electricity connections restored.

People must be provided financial support to restart their livelihood efforts, which the government has already initiated. Books and supplies for students must be arranged and educational institutions renovated. We must not also forget the relatively better off families, who have lost everything and are hungry, but are uncomfortable about standing in line for relief.

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Unlike in the past, there are no parallel networks of "MP sarkar" to bypass them or make them ineffective.

Since human beings are not angels, in order to avoid "election politics" on the part of the UP representatives, distinguished local people and social workers must be tagged with them in this

However, caution must be exercised in planting trees. Cyclone Sidr damaged alien trees like Chambal, which are very soft. Many rain trees were also uprooted -- it is alleged that polyethylene bags from the bottom of the saplings were not removed, and sometimes roots were trimmed before they were planted.

While returning from the Sidr affected districts by launch, it occurred to me as I approached Sadarghat that I was returning from one devastated area to another. In contrast to the southern districts, the devastation in the capital city is in the values and norms of its residents.

This realisation becomes more acute seeing the continued competition among the rich to occupy the banks of the Buriganga River. It became increasingly clear to me that honesty, equity and fairness etc. -- the values based on which the liberation war was fought -- are no longer held by many who live in Dhaka's concrete jungle.

It is clearly reflected in one single political family's alleged plundering of nearly Tk 16,000 crores, which is apparently equivalent to the total loss of the cyclone Sidr. Thus, all the palatial buildings of the capital city appeared to me to be nothing more than monuments of the devastated values of their owners. If we are really to move forward as a civilised nation, we must urgently do something about restoring these disappearing values.

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Rehabilitation job cut out

There may also be development projects in the area, ready to start or already underway, that can be given priority attention. The point is not the projects themselves, but getting money into the hands of the population. To achieve this objective it is worth taking some risks with procurement.

FORREST COOKSON

HERE is vast discussion of what to do for rehabilitation of the reported 1 million households that have been devastated by Sidr. In addition to the households there are many SMEs that have had assets destroyed. These discussions focus largely on giving grants or loans of food, water and materials to households and to SMEs to enable them to rebuild and replant.

This approach assumes that providers of grants have vast amounts of information on the needs, which they do not actually have. Hence, what is provided may not match what is needed. Every household faces particular, unique difficulties. But the managers of the grants will always work in fixed packages. One household needs to rebuild bunks in the paddy; another needs to

prop up damaged trees. One needs to build a new house; another needs to replace a roof. One needs to buy fishing nets; another needs to drain and clean a fish pond. One needs to repair a tubewell; another needs to dig a new pond. One SME has lost its stock and has to procure; one SME has lost its machines and has to repair or purchase replacements.

The obvious solution was long age explained by Amartya Sen -- provide income through public works or, in a few cases, cash grants. The available purchasing power will cause the private sector to locate, transport and sell the things that the households and SMEs need.

Information is generated through the market, efficiently and cheaply. The bureaucratic approach will never collect the real information needed and will not know the actual needs of the households. While loans will help

the SMEs, without purchasing power in the hands of the public they are not going to get much business.

How to get money into people's hands? People will send money to the distressed, but it will not be enough. Further, the affected households need to rebuild self-confidence and pride. Handouts have the opposite effect; people must be empowered to tackle their own problems, not be made into beggars. Here two government actions can play key role.

First, to facilitate private cash transfers into the region the mobile telephones must be working, and ways to transfer cash accomplished with the assistance of banks and mobile phone companies. Second, there must be a massive public-works program. The government must put aside the public procurement rules during this emergency.

One can identify up to 500 contractors that the government has dealt with before. Identify sites for 2,000 shelters in the devastated areas; use designs that are already available (2,000 shelters holding 500 persons each provides additional shelter for 1 million persons). The quantity surveyors can recalculate the costs with current construction materials' prices. Then the contractors are invited to sign contracts to build one or more shelters at an agreed price.

Payment may include a bonus if completed early. Supervision teams comprising officers from LGED and the Bangladesh military may be formed to ensure quality.

The important thing is that workers are hired locally (a contract condition) and money flows into the local economy through their wage payments. The financially empowered local households will undertake to sort out their own problems.

There may be other construction projects -- repairing highways and bridges, rebuilding schools or clinics -- that can also be started quickly. Shortened procurement procedures may be followed. There may also be development projects in the area, ready to start or already underway, that can be given priority attention.

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reflect decisions and standards stipulated by Bangladesh. If the partners will not participate say, "thank you, but do not bother." In the past the rehabilitation programs have been slow; here the objective is to spend rapidly. The key point is to empower financially the distressed households by generating immediate employment opportunities. This will revive the local society and economy. The government has already authorised increased lending. But lending without income generation is dangerous.

If this accelerated public works program gets underway, bank lending will become effective. Rescheduling micro credit becomes meaningful. Without employment generation we will end up with greater household debt and the poorest households will not receive much help.

Sen's insights into disaster management, particularly families, have shown the way. Handouts and grants are needed in the immediate aftermath, but a public works program generating employment is the most effective solution to getting through the next year. Let the government commission the projects; the

private sector organise and carry out the construction; the workers buy what they need for survival and rehabilitation; and the private traders respond to the demands and supply the materials.

The government should avoid getting involved in long term programs of supporting the population, but a public works program achieves this support and generates economic activity to restart the economy.

There may be some households so badly struck as to require grants. That should be arranged through the local authorities in appropriate cases. Eligible households may include a single mother with small children, or an elderly couple etc.

How much is involved in this program?

One million households need assistance. Household consumption expenditure in the area we estimate at Taka 50,000 (this is probably on the high side but reflects the Khulna-Barisal divisions average household consumption according to the HIES 2005).

Employment in public works projects must replace 50% of this expenditure during one year for

50% of the households. This implies Taka 1,250 crore should be paid as wages to the labour force. Total construction cost would be about Taka 3,750 crore.

A program with two thousand shelters at Taka one crore each would produce about half of the needed public works. Including multiplier effects such a program would generate Taka 3,000 crore in demand, 75% of what is needed. There will be additional amounts from other programs, cash grants from friends and relatives etc. But the proposed insertion of cash can be met.

Such a program would not be perfect: There will be corruption, neglected areas and households not covered. But most of the damaged area will be served and the population will be able to get their lives restarted through their own work.

Start an emergency public works program to construct 2,000 shelters at a price tag of Taka one crore each. This will generate the cash wages needed to restart the economy. It will also provide protection against future cyclones.

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Where the jobs are ...

In today's world of technology, information, and globalisation, a lot more than a university degree is required to be a successful corporate executive. Each year, more and more local graduates, armed with a basic degree from makeshift local institutions, enter the race for employment with hopes of landing the dream job as a corporate executive.

ASIF ANWAR

OST middle-class parents wish to see their sons find employment in the corporate world. They imagine him browsing through files behind a desk, dressed in slacks, shirt, and a tie (I don't mean to be sexist, but most parents still prefer the role of a housewife for their daughters, even after higher education). We don't hear children, regardless of economic background, aspiring to become anything less than a doctor, engineer, architect, civil servant, teacher etc.

Even the picture of a future graduate, as seen in newspaper advertisements of private universities, colleges, and job sites is usually that of a corporate executive

dressed in French cuff shirt and a sharp tie.

But there are hardly any advertisements from institutions offering education leading to future careers as nurses, chauffeurs/professional drivers, auto mechanics, electricians, carpenters, masons, etc. These professions have no glamour, but imagine a world without them. People engaged in these lines of work are the ones that build a nation.

And interestingly, both demand for employment and wages in these sectors are growing at a faster rate than that of the corporate world.

The number of educational institutions in Bangladesh, which offer higher studies, has grown significantly in recent years.

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said about the quality of the educa-

tion executive. Each year, more and more local graduates, armed with a basic degree from makeshift local institutions, enter the race for employment with hopes of landing the dream job as a corporate executive.

Unfortunately, most join the glut of "university educated" unemployed youths, since the limited number of available corporate jobs goes to the top graduates from a handful of institutions. Even expatriate Bangladeshis and foreign nationals, due to the dearth in locally available qualified personnel, are filling senior level corporate openings.

It took me more than 2 weeks to find someone, and once satisfied after having tested his driving skills, I was faced with an array of decisions to make, like: How much do I pay him? What would be his/her responsibilities? Working hours and holidays? Bonuses? Meal breaks? Rest periods? What should my chauffeur expect from me? What kind of working environment must I provide?

An anomaly indeed, considering the growth in demand and rising wages in jobs related to such specialised education/training. Part of the reason could be the lack of respect we have for such careers, and our fascination with corporate desk jobs.

The rest can be attributed to the

lack of government and private initiatives, co-ordination amongst labour related government and semi-government agencies, and most importantly, absence of legislation regarding vital labour issues such as minimum wage, employee rights, employer responsibilities, working conditions, worker's protection, etc.

I was clueless when it came to hiring a chauffeur recently. The most effective method seemed to be "word of mouth" spread through other drivers in my apartment complex and those working for other members of my family.

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It may seem insignificant to discuss the employment of a chauffeur but, lest we forget, a large number of individuals are engaged in

the profession (even if we were to assume only 50 per cent of the number of cars registered in this country are driven by chauffeurs), earning an average of \$ 1,000 or more per year.

I was guilty of the common prejudice towards certain professions as a result of growing up in a third world country. But my views changed when I landed in the US as a student at the age of 17, with just enough money to cover tuition and boarding for the first semester only.

Since then, I worked as a cleaner, day labour