

Coping with cyclone

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Z. A. KHAN

We have lost everything we worked for during our lives. We do not know when and where to start again" was what I heard from most of the people of the devastated areas that I visited last week. Manikhali, Betaki and Amtali are the three places that I along with a few others visited after the ravaging cyclone Sidr, which razed everything on the fateful night of November 15.

Most of the people who had to bear the brunt of the gusty 220 km per hour windstorm associated with 30-foot high tidal-bore were the poor people who occupied the most dangerous locations like flood

plains, riverbanks and reclaimed land (char). It is often said that disasters seek out poor people and ensure that they stay poor. What an irony!

We know that natural vagaries are "fait accompli," but efficient disaster management is very much in our hands. Vulnerability reduction is time consuming, but timeliness of response to disasters depends on detailed planning and committed implementation. Flawed planning exacerbates these factors and, thus, exposes more and more people to disasters.

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relief materials, disposal of casualties and clearance of lines of communication immediately after the occurrence of disaster to enable victims to overcome the psychological fear of becoming destitute, regardless of their pre-disaster economic status.

When we reached Manikhali under Burirchar union of Borguna upazila, we were awestruck at the sight of a plain piece of land beside Peara River, which we were told was a cluster village. It was quite a difficult journey as the road on the barrier embankment (Beri Bund) had suffered topsoil erosion, creating crater after crater.

Soon after, we stopped at a designated point, which had not been visited by anybody before us.



MINA/WAFERK NEWS

Houses had been razed to the ground, large trees were uprooted, and cattle and people were swept away. Thanks Almighty, only a few lives were lost. People were wailing for the loss of means of livelihood, and some were shivering because of the trauma, which was still persisting.

On enquiry, we found that even though nobody had visited them on the spot, most of the victims were taken to relief distribution points and were given adequate relief materials. They felt that they needed money and construction material more than anything else. They also told us that the medical support they received was negligible. Their need for pure drinking water merits mention here. Taltali of Amtali upazila and Betaki upazila of Borguna had a similar saga to narrate. Their suggestion for post cyclone Sidr disaster management is no different.

Some elderly people of the areas we visited complained that not enough workers were available to lend their helping hands to reconstruct the houses. When questioned about the reason, the reply was that so much food had been received that a part of the same was being sold to meet other household requirements, therefore, they did not feel the necessity of working on daily wages basis.

We met fairly large segment of cyclone stricken people who confined in them that they would not be able to pay their installments against the loans taken under microcredit scheme run by a few NGOs, and they did not hesitate to tell me that their experience pertaining to default in payment of installments was not pleasant.

We saw a few burials of cattle. The owners told us that some of them had stayed back in their huts to save their cattle, but their efforts ended in futility as the 20'-30' tidal bore simply swept those cattle away, and they themselves were lucky enough to be able to hold onto the branches

and trunks of trees or swim to safety. Some even told us that there were not enough cyclone shelters to house the people and cattle in the area. So they preferred to stay home and save as much of their belongings as was possible.

Although Bangladesh is known in the world as a success story in cyclone preparedness and post cyclone rehabilitation, our experience this time reveals that community response was not forthcoming. This brings to the fore the necessity of volunteerism on a large scale.

We met some young people, fairly well attired, in the makeshift tea stalls, who told us that they were yet to be marshaled to be assigned tasks. This statement is good enough to tell us that they were not imbued with the spirit of volunteerism (maybe due to the lack of inspiring local leadership).

We held a few opinion exchange meetings at Borguna and Betaki, where we gathered that they were happy about the prompt response of the government but were not quite sure about long-term commitment of both the government and other relevant agencies. Some even suggested the creation of a coastal affairs division on the lines of the existing Hill Tract Affairs Division, so that it can prepare the nation over months and years to ensure risk reduction and efficient disaster management.

Keeping the findings in mind, I have the following recommendations:

- Larger areas should be brought under disaster preparedness and mitigation programs.
- Local coping strategies should be worked out keeping in mind resources available locally.
- More multipurpose shelters are needed in the coastal areas of southern Bangladesh for both human beings and cattle.
- Self-financed micro credit schemes should be undertaken within a certain radius around the shelters. Service charge for the borrowings should be minimum. A borrower would lose membership of the



TANVER AHMED/DRK NEWS

scheme if he failed to return the loaned money within the stipulated time, and this decision would be announced in an open meeting of the people of the catchments area so that it shamed the defaulters.

- A large volunteer force should be raised. Students from secondary grade to Baccalaureate should be allowed to graduate only after they produce certificate of attendance in the first aid and evacuation programs.
- Capacity building for rehabilitation should be ensured. This is possible by training able-bodied people in masonry, carpentry, tube-well sinking and road repairing using the local resources. This should help sustainability and growth.
- Coordination bodies should be formed at each union in the coastal area, and they should meet from time to time at the union council office even if there is no cyclone, so that esprit-de-corps is promoted and leadership is established and recognised by the commu-

nity based, and will subsequently be verified by government agencies.

It is indeed a gigantic task to cover every detail in the brief expunge of this article. It is the author's conviction that if these suggestions are followed many lives will be saved and damage to property will be controlled. Last but not least is the necessity of good governance, which can be ensured by social cohesion and solidarity that can be achieved through self-help and citizen-based social participation at community level.

Trust among the authorities and civil society, investment in human development, investment in social capital, institutional capital, transparency, attention to vulnerable groups, political commitment to risk reduction, effective risk communication system and attention to lifeline infrastructure are a few key points that should be ensured to mitigate human suffering in disasters.

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Basket case or recipe for success?

Far from being a basket case, Bangladesh should be held up as a model for poorer countries worldwide that will suffer from worsening global conditions. If this country can do it, with a massive poverty-stricken population, widespread corruption and a history of intermittent political instability, then surely any can.

DOUGLAS BRODERICK

OUT in the ravaged fields, days after Cyclone Sidr hit Bangladesh, the devastation was everywhere. Flattened houses, crops, trees, dead livestock and, sadly, also people. Yet even more evident was the resilient Bangladeshi spirit.

Traders had already started selling rice with little or no increase in price; villagers were salvaging what they could and rebuilding their fragile homes while children

dried textbooks, unsure of when schools would restart. There before my eyes was the intriguing Bangladesh, resilient and vulnerable, secure and insecure, developing and regressing, all at the same time.

The Bangladesh puzzle has two distinct dimensions. One goes back to a remark by Henry Kissinger in 1971, in response to an assertion that "Bangladesh would be a basket case." His reply that it would "not necessarily be our basket case" still sums up many people's

views of the country and can be heard quite often, whether in expatriate clubs in Dhaka or even among policy circles in OECD countries.

The recent macroeconomic trends of creeping inflation, rising inequality and the sluggish economy, topped by the two neck-to-neck disasters give these Cassandra-like voices more credence.

The other is the one provided in recent analysis, including that by Amartya Sen, that the country has

reduced social poverty better than some of the regional giants like India. The 2005 UNDP Human Development Report catapulted the country from the low development group to the one with medium development indicators.

Bangladesh has been dealt body blows several times throughout the last century.

Cyclones, floods and famine have killed millions. In recent years the incidence of serious disaster has increased. The November cyclone follows massive flooding in July. Near-famine situations in the north are a perennial problem. 2004 saw almost fifty percent of land submerged for more than two months.

The future may hold more of the same, with poorly planned construction and urbanisation clogging the natural drainage systems

and aggravating the localised droughts in the north and the north-west -- exacerbating existing problems and adding new, such as expected subsidence in Dhaka due to the lowering of the water table.

Even without projected sea level rises, predicted to displace 30 million within the next 40 years, Bangladesh has severe natural phenomena to conquer. The expected impacts from climate change worsen all of the above, affecting the basic food security and hunger status of a country that has struggled hard to attain near self-sufficiency in food production.

Things going wrong in Bangladesh should and would be of concern for all of us, as a country of almost 150 million people cannot be ignored.

But wait. Bangladesh has weathered every storm, reduced poverty,

improved life expectancy and living standards and is performing well on many of the Millennium Development Goals. The frequency of disaster is increasing but the cost in lives is nowhere as high.

Disaster preparedness and early warning has worked. Food security has improved. This cyclone has killed thousands. If it had hit thirty years ago it would have killed hundreds of thousands.

Far from being a basket case, Bangladesh should be held up as a model for poorer countries worldwide that will suffer from worsening global conditions. If this country can do it, with a massive poverty-stricken population, widespread corruption and a history of intermittent political instability, then surely any can.

But again it stands at the crossroads and needs more friends,

especially those who are long term and will assist the country to deal with the challenges of geography, changing climate and human mistakes.

The methods and practices for effective disaster preparedness and disaster risk reduction are known and in part put into great effect. But erratic commitment and present-day needs mean that it is always at the bottom of pressing

priorities like importing food grains and fuel, supplying electricity or expanding education. That future needs to be secured through planned, external assistance.

Seeing the damage, I realise that we in the humanitarian community have a hard road ahead. At the World Food Program, we are well known for providing emergency food assistance in the aftermath of emergencies. What is less well

known is the fact that we are working to expand programmes to help the population become less vulnerable to shocks and to start vital public works projects to secure both the short-term and the long-term prospects of these people as we have successfully done in the past.

But more is needed. Bangladesh has always had to prove what existed before, it must swim quickly just to stay afloat. Like anything, this requires commitment and support. History shows that neither are squandered when given to Bangladesh -- and the benefits could spread across the region and the world as a whole.

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Forget war with Iran

Other reporters heard similar things. Surely, if mere journalists were hearing it, America's intelligence analysts and top officials were getting wind of this consensus as well. So what changed? Simple: the politics surrounding a war with Iran, the departure of ideologues who habitually bent facts to fit prefixed views, and the chastening of a president who, until now, has let them do it.

MICHAEL HIRSH

PRESIDENT Bush, in his news conference this week, said "nothing's changed" about the U.S. approach to Iran. On the contrary, everything has. What the U.S. president failed to acknowledge was that there had been an earthquake in Washington, which came in the form of this week's new National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on Iran. The most immediate impact is that the NIE resolved the big question hanging over the last 12 months of Bush's troubled tenure as president: will he attack Iran? The answer now is almost certainly no. The report also means that a host of international actors who are not necessarily friendly to America -- from Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to Russia's Vladimir Putin to Mohammed ElBaradei, the controversial head of the International Atomic Energy Agency -- come out looking like winners. America's reputation in the world is the biggest loser.

Most importantly, the new NIE

means that the case against Tehran that Bush was busily building up as recently as October 17, when he warned that Iran could start "World War III" if it obtained the bomb, will now be resolved through slow and subtle diplomacy, not war. (That's assuming the Israelis don't act on their own.) In 2005 America's 16 intelligence agencies allowed Bush to keep that "option on the table" by concluding with "high confidence" that Iran was "determined to build a nuclear weapon." Now the spy agencies have concluded with the same "high confidence" that Tehran halted its nuclear weapons program -- to the extent it had one -- back in 2003.

While the president said yet again Tuesday that "all options" remain open to him, the new NIE's conclusion suggests that another war would be not only foolish but probably an impeachable offense. In addition, the president will not now be able to marshal the public support he needs for another conflict. All of this may be just the result Bush was looking for, since he knew

he would be facing a full-scale rebellion in the Pentagon if he undertook such an action, possibly even the mass resignations of his defense secretary, CENTCOM commander, and director of national intelligence.

The second, and less noted, effect of the new NIE is that the already tattered credibility of this administration over its assessment of dangers abroad is now shredded -- simply gone with the wind. Whether Bush's earlier assertions about Iran's nuclear program were based on hype or bad information doesn't really matter; all that matters is that Washington has once again demonstrated to the world that it doesn't have the evidence it said it did. And it will be years before future American presidents rebuild that credibility -- before they can again lay claim to the kind of trustworthiness that, say, John F. Kennedy had in 1962 when France's Charles de Gaulle declined to examine Washington's photographic evidence of Soviet missile sites in Cuba, declaring that the president's

word alone was good enough. "The president's actions have made it far more difficult to get other countries to work with us on Iran or to believe us about anything else," said Sen. Joseph Biden, chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee. "It's hard to think of a more serious and self-inflicted wound to our national security."

The problem we have created for ourselves is not so much with the new NIE, which seems sober and sound -- if sometimes self-contradictory. (How can it assert so confidently that Iran has halted its weapons program when Tehran is still enriching uranium and, the report concludes, "Iranian entities are continuing to develop a range of technical capabilities that could be applied to nuclear weapons?") The real question is what possessed Bush and other senior administration officials -- and the writers of the 2005 NIE -- to be so confident of their earlier conclusions that Iran was pursuing a weapon? Because now we know that the intelligence they were citing was, at best, mixed.

We should not be fooled by the spin out of the White House that "new" intelligence alone prompted the reassessment. What has changed at least as much as the intelligence is the cast of characters, and the political atmosphere. Gone are ideologues like John Bolton and Scooter Libby, unremittant hardliners

like Bob Joseph, the State Department's counter-proliferation chief after Bolton, and politically driven officials like former CIA director George Tenet; newly arrived are pros and pragmatists like Robert Gates, CIA Director Michael Hayden and Director of National Intelligence Michael McConnell, who have successfully de-politicised intelligence assessments, as they're supposed to be. The 2005 NIE, by contrast, was likely to have been politically influenced. Over the past several years, while administration officials asserted confidently that Iran was pursuing a bomb, both outside experts -- chief among them IAEA head Mohamed ElBaradei -- and Iranian officials have consistently told reporters that there was little hard evidence of this. On the contrary, there was ample evidence that a real debate was underway in Tehran about whether pursuing a nuclear weapon was wise in the face of international isolation and opprobrium -- and this was pretty much the conclusion of the new NIE yesterday.

"We don't see a strategic need for a nuclear weapon right now," a senior Iranian official told me two years ago. "That would change, of course, if America attacked. Then we would need one." Or as S.M.H. Adeli, Iran's moderate former ambassador to London, said when I visited Iran in June: "Iran would like to have the technology, and that is

enough for deterrence." Other reporters heard similar things. Surely, if mere journalists were hearing it, America's intelligence analysts and top officials were getting wind of this consensus as well. So what changed? Simple: the politics surrounding a war with Iran, the departure of ideologues who habitually bent facts to fit prefixed views, and the chastening of a president who, until now, has let them do it.

What of the fallout? And the winners and losers? The administration has handed a huge propaganda

victory to the Iranians at a time when they are less compromising than ever on their "right" to enrich. ElBaradei, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, has won another windfall in credibility, and may bring more countries over to his view that Iran should be permitted to keep some enrichment capability as long as it comes under strict international monitoring. Putin, coming off a questionable election victory, looks positively statesmanlike. Losers may include the Mideast peace process, which was energised by a common sense among the Arab

states that they needed to align with the United States and Israel against Iran. Another loser may be Hillary Clinton, whose alignment with hardliners on Iran looks even less perspicacious today, and whose rivals for the Democratic presidential nomination piled on her again today in Iowa. Finally, Washington's moral authority in the world is as low as it has been in memory. Still, if it all goes to preventing an unnecessary war, perhaps it's worth the price.

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