

Natural calamities and Bangladesh growth potential

Bangladesh has demonstrated high degree of resilience to natural calamities over the years. We have always stood up on our own feet, but sometimes it takes time and that slows down our growth. In a competitive world, we can not afford to remain behind and hence we have to factor these calamities and restoration costs into our growth plan.

MAMUN RASHID

BA^NGLADESH is widely known as a flood or natural disaster prone country for many years. In recent times many European countries have also experienced floods. Once United States was free from natural calamities, but not now. US people are also afraid with possible revisit of hurricane Katrina. Why is the world facing such calamities? Environmental depletion and global warming are identified as the prime reasons for world wide natural disasters. United States did not take these factors into consideration until recently, though they are one of the accused for these causes. However, though delayed, people all over the world are now concerned about the environmental depletion and global warming. But the irony is that prime victims of these two disasters are nations which are not really responsible for the creation of these disasters.

Flood hit Bangladesh in the past and also may hit in the future. But, the nature and duration of flood are changing day by day. If heavy rain-

fall occurs in a year due to global warming, floodwater inundates Bangladesh. On the other hand, if there is no rain or less rain in other year, the irrigation is hampered and so is food production.

Cyclones happened in the past and it is also happening now. Whether the nature of cyclones has changed that is something scientists will be able to answer. But Bangladesh is only at the receiving end when it comes to man-made disasters. We, the people of the world, are polluting the sea, and the sea in return gives us Tsunami, we are drilling polar areas to explore minerals, and melted ice of those areas are increasing the water level of the sea, which may even cause our beloved country to sink in the sea in future.

Apart from natural calamities we are facing two other disasters in Bangladesh: (a) our agricultural land is reducing, almost 1 percent per annum. As a result, we would not be able to increase the production of food grains beyond the limits supported currently available by high yield varieties, (b) the high growth of population is hin-

dering all our development plans. If we could control the population growth from the time of our independence, there would not be any people below poverty level at this point in time.

We have always heard that manpower is an asset. However, it is only true when the ratio of land and population is right. In recent days, birth control is again somehow neglected. If the NGOs who are spending hefty amount against HIV/Aids could spend a fraction of that for birth control measures, the benefits would have been greater.

Our economy has already suffered two floods in a row this year. Post-flood initiatives were taken in the form of distribution of new seeds to farmers, exemption of repayment of agri-loans and distribution of subsidised food. And now comes the cyclone. The consequences of cyclone are even more severe than the floods. We could not arrange adequate shelter for everybody. It is not also possible as we have so much of population in such a small country.

The amount of loss we have incurred due to such calamities is

huge in monetary terms. However, we cannot measure the loss of lives in monetary terms. The government has requested for financial aid and has already received favorable response from both domestic and international arena. We are optimistic that the affected people would be able to recover the loss. The government has to conduct a survey to assess the actual amount of loss.

However, if the figures turn out to be even five lakh metric tons, that would be even a big sum for Bangladesh. Bangladesh could never attain self-sufficiency in agriculture. So far we have only been able to reduce the gap between the demand and supply of food grains. For the last two years, this gap has been widening further. As a result, we have to spend a huge portion of our foreign exchange reserves to import food grains.

Another problem is that earlier we could import food grains at lower costs but now we have to spend a lot to import rice and wheat, especially wheat price is highest now in 27 years. It is likely that the cost of sugar and edible oil would also increase as a result of these being used to produce bio-fuel. So the liberalisation of trade in agriculture sector would not help our country because Bangladesh will not be able to import at the subsidized or reduced rate.

This is time to tighten the belt of

our economy. It is not possible for us to increase agricultural production drastically. We have lost that opportunity a long time back. We cannot produce more jute even if the price of jute increased to three times in the international market. The same reason applies for production of food grains. We can try to increase production by using better quality seeds and applying advance technology; however that would not meet our demand.

If we want to live decently, we have to do that as a part of the global community. We should not depend on the donors. It is good that today we can afford to import food grains from international market even at higher rates. If the country's GDP would grow at 8%, it would be even easier for us to meet the demands. Despite having enormous potential, we could not achieve the growth rate of 8% due to destructive nature of politics and failure of the policy makers.

We have ignored the necessary reforms for many years, rather we implemented unnecessary projects at higher costs without national economic benefits. Before making any investment decisions we need to evaluate the economic benefits of it. The country would not face shortage of power now if we could involve the private sector in production and distribution of power. Similarly we could have improved our road and other infra-



structure by engaging the private sector.

A question that is hanging over the economy now is whether we will face inflation due to the recent cyclone. It is evident that as the production is hampered, the price of the commodity will be increased due to scarcity of supply. We can import the commodities at higher price, but this will again increase the price level. Besides, there are growing supply side constraints in the international markets. However, if our economy pro-

gresses well, the inflation will be tolerable to the consumers. So we need to concentrate on the overall growth of the economy. If we can achieve the expected level of growth, we can solve the shortage of production in other manner.

Bangladesh has demonstrated high degree of resilience to natural calamities over the years. We have always stood up on our own feet, but sometimes it takes time and that slows down our growth. In a competitive world, we can not afford to remain behind and hence

we have to factor these calamities and restoration costs into our growth plan. We have to ensure clean water, health and good education for our future generation to survive in the future world of growing scarcity. The country has to project its GDP considering such spending for major reconstruction work since this will come back again and again and we have to face it realistically and united.

Mamun Rashid is a columnist.

Jogger's tale

The daily commuters know why the day is not bright. The bus service has become deplorable. Many of the sleek buses are in bad shape or out of operation. The battered ones are having a heyday. Three-wheeler CNGs are now few in number, I am told. Those that ply are everybody's guess where they are willing to go. Meters are held in contempt and the fare is for them to demand to the passengers' plight.

SYED MAQSUD JAMIL

G^ULISTAN Square falls in the route I take for my evening walk. The sight is so familiar to me. It is normally a busy thoroughfare of the city even in the evening. After 1/11 a change took over the place. The footpaths were cleared for the pedestrians. The floating vendors were evicted to restore order to the city.

While I wanted that order should

prevail in the city, I felt bad for the floating vendors for the loss of their livelihood. Under the rule of the time the vendors occupied the footpaths and even greater part of the road under the patronage of the combine that operated from the bottom up to the highest echelon.

We saw a thing called holiday market when the vendors returned to the place on Friday. It covered a large swathe of territory stretching up to Baitul Mukarram in the north

and crossed Gulistan in the south.

With the first anniversary of 1/11 just a month away, Gulistan Square has returned to its familiar scenario. The floating vendors are back on the footpath in full strength. Even the road is swamped with a melee of vendors and wayward pedestrians. The vehicles negotiate it at their own risk. I tried to understand the laxity in view of the stagnation and the rising prices of daily essentials. My discretion

however told me that laxity of such scale could become a licence of pestilential proportion. My fears found their marks in the badly-lit diversion road that bisects the park in front of Bangabhaban. Large number of wrought iron fencing was gone, leaving gaps (the gaps have recently been patched up with bricks that look so oddly out of place). On the Bangabhaban side, the wooded park looks more like an eerie jungle.

While the nearest neighbours, the police sentries are guarding the south-eastern corner of the arch blocking the passage to the boulevard in front of Bangabhaban. The park that spreads up to Gulistan Square is shrouded in darkness for the lack of lighting. The ghostly figures that prowl the park don't look like citizens out for a whiff of fresh air. By now I have reached the other park so nicely named after the commander in chief of our liberation war, I mean Osmani Udyan. A state of the art mosque is raising its head. It is illustriously placed between two corridors of power, the Secretariat and the colossus of a Dhaka City Corporation building. Sadly, the park now has a bedraggled appearance with many trees felled and those that survive look so unhealthy and ungainly. The artificial trough does not hold water. The renovation work plaque bears the name of a notable educationist of the country that of Dr. Sirajul Islam Chowdhury. It appears that the renovation work has fallen into bad time like the beleaguered mayor.

Like the one in front of Bangabhaban, Osmani Udyan

remains engulfed in darkness and understandably attracts the floating vices of the city. The paved footpath is badly scarred by missing blocks and gleefully used by fruit vendors, floating tea stall owners, etc. And the portion right opposite the City Corporation building is running rivulets of open-air urinals. The cannon Kale Zamzam that once mightily sat in the middle of the Gulistan languishes as a solitary destitute. It surely demands a wake up call. I am walking towards Curzon Hall and Fazlul Huq Hall more fondly FH Hall draws my wistful attention. The tennis court is overgrown with grass. Never once did I see anyone playing tennis. The badminton court is also deserted. The green house of Soil Science department is in dilapidated condition (Our president, Dr. Izzuddin, himself a soil scientist, will surely bemoan the plight of the green house). Lord Curzon would be amused to find that the pavement in front of the historical building he founded is holding a real life enactment of Oliver Twist with all its characters in it. It is a human assortment of all sorts of characters, lame, deaf and dumb, addicts, pimps, pleasure girls, etc.

If the night is dark the days are not bright either. Living has become dear. The price that goes up does not come down! The Karwan Bazar Road is surely among the broadest roads of the city, measuring 80-100 feet in width. Thankfully the road was reclaimed from the kitchen market after 1/11. One month to the anniversary the road has returned to its previous kitchen market mess.

Only a narrow sliver of road is open for vehicles to negotiate with vegetables, their leftovers minivans and municipal trucks occupying it. The stretch of road from Tejgaon rail crossing to Satrasta was a no man's land before 1/11 with trucks and covered vans massed on it. The grabbers again started coming back but it was thankfully rolled back by timely newspaper coverage citing the importance of the road in view of making the stretch from Satrasta to Mohakhali off limit to rickshaws.

The daily commuters know why the day is not bright. The bus service has become deplorable. Many of the sleek buses are in bad shape or out of operation. The battered ones are having a heyday. Three-wheeler CNGs are now few in number, I am told. Those that ply are everybody's guess where they are willing to go. Meters are held in contempt and the fare is for them to demand to the passengers' plight. The black cabs are a pitiable sight. Most of the yellow cabs are no longer in a shape to offer the luxurious ride one expects.

The polls are around the corner. Believing that city corporation polls will be held early next year. Ordinary citizens believe that this government is here to build a new order. We understand that a little bit of laxity is needed for politics to breathe into activity. But if this laxity is not tempered with discretion it can become a licence to trash the new order. Meantime we still believe that the government here has enough goodwill to allow the drift to return.

Syed Maqsud Jamil is a freelance contributor.



Don't give up on Afghanistan

KHALED HOSSEINI

E^VERY time I step before a podium, someone will inevitably raise his hand, and say: "So, Mr. Hosseini, are you optimistic or pessimistic about the future of Afghanistan?" The first thing I do is remind the audience that I am a novelist. If I have any expertise, it is in the inner lives of the characters I have created in my books -- which makes me spectacularly underqualified to answer a question of such magnitude. But even as I say these words -- and they are true -- I know that I am stalling because I do not have a ready answer. So I do give an answer, but one that in the end amounts to the verbal version of a shrug.

To say you are optimistic about Afghanistan opens you to charges of being hopelessly naive. I can hear the retorts in my head: Do you need reminding that there is a raging Taliban insurgency in the south that has taken nearly 6,000 lives this year? Don't you know that your country produces 93

percent of the world's opium? Are you not aware of the corruption in the government, the still-powerful warlords, the rampant poverty in the provinces, the illiteracy rate, the persistent oppression of women, the suicide bombings that kill children?

Yes, I am aware of these things. I traveled to Afghanistan this past September with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and I saw for myself the high blast walls on the streets of Kabul, aimed at protecting against suicide attacks. Those walls did not exist the last time I was in Kabul, in the spring of 2003, and I didn't feel then the unease I did this time when I walked through crowded streets and bazaars. I saw thousands of young people in Kabul living in slums without work, without direction. In the north, I met homeless families of 20 or more who had spent the past two winters cooped up in holes they had dug underground. In village after village between Kunduz and Mazar-e-Sharif, I met

people who had no access to clean water, to a school for their children, to a clinic for their sick; families who lived on less than \$1 per day -- that is, if they could find work -- and who received little or no help from a central government still struggling to meet the basic needs of its people.

Perhaps, then, I should be pessimistic about the future of Afghanistan. But that hardly takes an intellectual leap. And besides, what about the positive developments that have taken place over the past six years? When I visited Kabul in 2003, it looked like a war zone, a grim landscape of jagged debris, flattened buildings and roofless walls. The Kabul I saw in September is dramatically improved. Many of its neighbourhoods have been rebuilt. I was happily surprised to visit cultural landmarks, like the famed gardens of Babur, and find them successfully renovated. In many towns, I saw children in uniform walking to school. School enrollment, in fact, has increased to more than 5

million children over the past five years. Land mines are being cleared, the press is relatively free (if under attack by religious conservatives) and telecommunication is booming. (Even in the poorest, most remote villages, I had the surreal experience of seeing old men in tattered clothes speaking on cell phones.) The rebuilt roads I traveled in northern Afghanistan were in excellent shape, and traffic on them was brisk, boding well for commerce.

And what message does relentless skepticism send to all the people -- both Afghan nationals and expatriates who are risking their lives trying to rebuild the beleaguered country? People like Dawood Salimi, an Afghan UNHCR worker I met in Kunduz, who has decided to remain in Afghanistan and help refugees even though a suicide blast in July barely missed his 3-year-old son. Or the countless rural teachers who refuse to leave their classrooms despite death threats from the Taliban.

Pessimistic or optimistic? Maybe it is too early -- a handful of years after 9/11 -- to ask such a question about a country that is still recovering from nearly 30 years of war, famine, drought, extremism, lawlessness and massive displacement. Or maybe I, and even legitimate experts on Afghanistan, are the wrong ones to ask. Maybe someone should ask the Afghans.

Earlier this year the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission conducted a survey in 32 out of 34 provinces in Afghanistan, and found that nearly 80 percent of Afghans polled said that they felt optimistic about the future. Nearly 80 percent. I find this to be an extraordinary statistic (I suspect far fewer in America would say the same about our own future). This finding isn't proof of a dramatic improvement in Afghan standards of living. Rather, it reflects the constitutional ability of Afghans to remain hopeful and optimistic in the face of overwhelming hard-

ship. Which, to me, makes it a moral imperative that we in the West not give up on a people who have not given up on themselves.

The only certain thing about Afghanistan is this: without a genuine and sustained long-term commitment on the part of the United States and its allies, Afghanistan is doomed. Though Afghans take pride in their sovereignty, polls have repeatedly shown that the majority of Afghans view the foreign presence in their country favorably. They know that a weakened Western resolve will mean that the gains made so painstakingly will vanish swiftly. I suppose that then, if someone were to raise his hand and ask me about the future of Afghanistan, I would have a ready answer. For now, I will settle for the shrug.

Hosseini is the best-selling author of *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. He has served as a good-will envoy to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees since 2006.

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What we can do

For a woman like me, it was indeed a tough journey, but it was possible. I noticed with surprise that I was only the woman volunteer to be there. I am grateful to all who kindly responded to my appeal for donation in cash and kind to my relief fund. December 5 was the International Volunteers Day. I appeal to all to come forward and personally help the restoration operations going on in the Sidr-affected area.

SHAHIDA AKHTER

I^N the aftermath of the devastating Cyclone Sidr, millions of people are now homeless, surviving without food, clothes, drinking water, medicine, etc. Many of them are living under the open sky or tents or shelter centers.

The disaster upset me greatly. Previously, I visited different coastal areas, including Barisal and Patuakhali district, during my work with NGOs. So my heart was mourning for the destitute people whom I have seen before.

Moreover, being a UNV, I couldn't keep silent at this crucial moment for my country, and felt the responsibility to help the disaster victims as much as I could. Meanwhile, I got a phone call all of a sudden from a folksinger of the fishermen community of Kalapara Upazila, Patuakhali. He informed me about the desolation caused by the cyclone. This persuaded me even further to do whatever I can do for them. Then I contacted the local correspondent of a daily newspaper and he assured me of all support during my visit.

Initially, when I announced my plan to visit the Sidr-affected areas, my family members were worried. In fact, they were concerned about my travel and security, because the Sidr-affected areas are far away from Dhaka. But when they saw me determined to go, then they all came forward to help me by giving donation in cash and kind.

I got response from many other kind hearted people. I rented a big ambulance-cum-microbus and took mineral water, clothes, blankets, and shawls for men, women and children, biscuits, soap, oral-saline, medicine, etc.

We started our journey from Dhaka on November 30 at 9 a.m. After crossing many ferries and driving on the bumpy roads, we reached Kalapara, where people were waiting to take me to go to relief spot in Kuakata. From Dhaka it took 12 hours to reach our destination at Kuakata, a coastal fishing village where we spent night.

The next morning, December 1, we started our relief distribution operation in three villages of Kalapara Upazila -- West Sonatola, Karampur, and Majidpur. On the roadside, we saw some tents, where a few destitute people were trying to survive in a miserable condition. We gave them blankets, clothes, money, etc.

Then we had to cross two ferries

from where there was no access to any vehicle. So we had to use luggage van up to some spot, then walked on the narrow and rugged road, and finally reached to a place where many people including children were looking for relief. They were excited and glad to see me among them. In fact, it was a kind of solace to them.

On the way to the fishermen villages, I didn't find any standing house. I saw many injured people. I heard so many shocking anecdotes from the victims about how they survived and how many of their fellow victims lost their lives. A man was crying as he could not save his only daughter. He was holding a photo of his 5 year-old daughter. The man was seriously injured and needed immediate medical treatment. I gave him a blanket, money, and a woolen shawl for his wife, who went to a relief camp for help.

It was difficult to control my tears. But I felt helpless when I saw hundreds of victims surrounded me soliciting relief. My relief ability fell far short of their demands. The people of this remote area complained to me that no relief from the government or any other organisation had reached them.

Then we went to the next village. Before my relief got exhausted, I rushed to the next selected village and distributed the rest of relief items to the victims. A boy was badly injured and now under treatment at the Orthopedic Hospital, Dhaka, and I donated some money for his treatment.

Then I rushed back to Dhaka for collecting more relief goods and funds. It was a misty night and driving was risky. But we had no other alternatives. The local situation was so desperate that we couldn't manage even food for ourselves. At 10 p.m. we reached Barisal and due to much pressure on hotels and guest houses, I didn't find a place to pass the night, and came to Dhaka straightway in the night.

For a woman like me, it was indeed a tough journey, but it was possible. I noticed with surprise that I was only the woman volunteer to be there. I am grateful to all who kindly responded to my appeal for donation in cash and kind to my relief fund, December 5 was the International Volunteers Day. I appeal to all to come forward and personally help the restoration operations going on in the Sidr-affected area.

Dr. Shahida Akhter is a United Nations Volunteer Specialist.