

Fury of nature

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MOHAMMAD AMJAD HOSSAIN

THE year 2007 has been a year of natural disasters. Starting from earthquakes in Japan, Indonesia and Peru, floods in US, Europe, China, India and Pakistan, wildfires in Greece, US and Portugal, and ending with a devastating cyclone in Bangladesh. God only knows what's next!

The devastating cyclone in Bangladesh, with thousands dead or missing, apart from loss of property and standing crops, drew scant attention of the media in the US. It is natural that cyclone or flood will take human lives and destroyed property, but the destruction of the Sundarbans means destruction of a natural barrier to such calamity; it also means the destruction of bio-diversity in the area.

A Bangladeshi economist, Dr. Atiq Rahman, while speaking in the first Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, noted that the gene pool in one square mile of the Sundarbans area may have greater bio-diversity than that of the whole of North America.

President Bush Sr. did not agree to sign the convention on biological diversity, which was adopted to

prevent eradication of the diversity of biological species. The famous mangrove forests in the Sundarbans is having serious problem. This world heritage needs to be preserved.

The present situation is so devastating that Joseph Crowley, co-chair of America-Bangladesh caucus in the Congress, has appealed to the US Agency for International Development to go above and beyond duty to address this extraordinary life-threatening crisis that has left millions without shelter, and poses a major health risk to people throughout Bangladesh and the region.

The international community has responded generously after the devastating cyclone. The Bangladesh community in the United States is collecting money to provide relief to the affected people in Bangladesh.

We depend so much on the charity of the international community whenever the country is affected by natural disasters that we have not yet been able to find our own ways to help ourselves even after 36 years of independence.

This is primarily due to our lack of science and technical education,

which has created a generation of intelligentsia with low level of expertise in all fields of national significance. Somehow, we, as a nation, have not come out of our "relief mentality," and appear to need both financial and intellectual support from outside Bangladesh.

Floods and cyclones have been associated with the lives of the people of Bangladesh since the sixteenth century, but the effects of the natural hazards were not felt as severely in the past as they are now. There are several reasons. Among them, density of population was very low at that time and secondly, the people did not build houses around the coastal belt or rivers in the past.

The trend has now been reversed in Bangladesh. The population has been growing at around 2 per cent every year, and the density of population is one of the highest in the world. According to United Nations World Populations Prospects report of 2004, density of population in Bangladesh is 1,045 per square km. Thirdly, land to population ratio is very critically low. Fourthly, to meet the needs of a continuously expanding population the people are left without any choice but to build

houses around coastal belt or rivers. One school of thought holds the opinion that the ominous cycle of poverty is also obstructing the movement of the people from rural or coastal belt areas towards safer zones in urban areas. Bangladesh, as a matter of fact, is

desertification, deforestation, CO2 emission, greenhouse gas emission, industrial pollution, and large scale shift in weather patterns. Industrialised countries are mostly held responsible for these. According to a UNDP report,

Moreover, global warming is a reality, and will bring irreversible changes unless immediate actions are implemented. It is predicted that global warming of 3 or 4 degrees Celsius would be an insufferable burden that human society and other species would have to carry.

Because of this changing scenario, the government of Bangladesh should concentrate on developing infrastructure for disaster preparedness to save the lives of the people in coastal areas. Historically, the coastal belt in Bangladesh is a cyclone prone area. Bangladesh depends on Nasa and Noaa's satellite to give warning about cyclone.

The government needs to develop an improved satellite system to provide warning much ahead of the cyclone. Actually, a cyclone forms in the Bay of Bengal and takes about a week or so to hit Bangladesh or any other part of the region. The advanced warning system must give time to the people to move to higher ground shelters.

Large-scale forestation of the coastal belts is also a solution. It is suggested that measures should be initiated by the government to re-locate accommodation of the people from the coastal belt to a safer zone, where two storied buildings should be constructed within 100 miles from the coastal belt as school-cum-shelter centres.

Secondly, the government should forfeit all char lands for cultivation only. Food banks should be built to

save food to meet the challenges during a natural calamity.

Thirdly, elevated concrete embankments may be built near the river and seaside to stop high-speed surge of water from spilling over.

Fourthly, huge numbers of trees like coconut or pine should be planted around the coastal belt to check the speed of the wind when the cyclone moves to land.

Fifth, the cyclone warning system needs to be improved. Last but not the least; cheap radio sets should be distributed to the families residing near the coastal belt, to listen to the weather forecasts in particular. Better housing construction methods should be developed by engineers to reduce property damage.

These are the basic necessities for controlling the effects of the cyclone, but man can do nothing against natural disasters. The frequency of cyclones or floods could be reduced with the cooperation of the industrialised and developing countries like India and China.

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Mohammad Amjad Hossain, former Bangladesh diplomat, writes from Virginia.



affected frequently by tropical cyclones coupled with tidal surge due to the funnel shape of the Bay of Bengal. According to the Saarc Meteorological Research Centre, the cyclone that made landfall in Bangladesh in 1982 took 200,000 lives. In 1970, a cyclone, which was known as Bhola Cyclone, took 500,000 lives. This calamity caused widespread condemnation, and political clamour for separation of East Pakistan from the West because

Post cyclone recovery and mitigation: Past and present

We have earned our reputation in disaster management but coming days might be more critical. In fact, we could not sustain our growth rate due the disasters and calamities of 1985, 1988, 1991, 1998, and even two times during this year. Time has come to assemble all wisdom to address the disaster management issue on a priority basis.

DHIRAJ KUMAR NATH

IMMEDIATELY after the devastating cyclone and tidal bore on November 12, 1970, I received a transfer order to move to Patuakhali Sadar from Pabna Sadar to facilitate the coordination of relief and rehabilitation activities as deputy magistrate and deputy collector.

I did not like such an order from the Department of Services and General Administration [former name of the Ministry of Establishment]. Pabna was a much better station, having an officer club with facilities of billiard and lawn tennis, and, above all, it is culturally an enlightened locality.

The deputy commissioner of Pabna, late Noorul Quader Khan on receipt of the order, asked me to move quickly to Patuakhali. In his view, I should not miss the chance of getting myself acquainted with the hardship of habitants in the coastal belt and the sorrows and sufferings of the poor there.

According to him, this was an

opportunity for me to realize the challenges of bureaucracy and realities of life. Besides, Patuakhali as a newly created district demanded more magistrates to impress the people the benefits of a new district.

On arrival at the Dak Bungalow of Patuakhali near the jail gate, the chawkidar had drawn my attention to the water -- markings of the tidal bore up to the roof of the building and described at a nutshell the horrible story of his survival on the night of the cyclone. I got so horrified that prompted me to write to my mother a letter not to look for any bride for my marriage until I return from Patuakhali safe and sound. My mother never got the letter since communication between Patuakhali and Noakhali was almost like Hatiya and Hawaii of US at that time.

Within three days of my joining, deputy commissioner of Patuakhali Mr. Abdul Awal assigned me a task to conduct a magisterial inquiry into the allega-

tion of misuse of relief goods, favoritism of local administration, and alarming condition of poverty prevailing at the Galacipha thana.

With a speedboat, I reached a worst affected village near the thana along with district public relations officer [later killed by Pakistani army]. Within few minutes, thousands of flood affected people assembled to complain to us of massive scarcity of relief goods, starvation of poor people and protested against the nepotism and discrimination of chairman and members of U P in the distribution of relief goods.

Major problems, I could understand from their description and demonstration were mostly on the following:

1. The acute scarcity of food items, safe drinking water, housing and shelter were prominent. There was no food for works programs, no vulnerable group feeding program or old age benefit or widow allowance or any social

security system as of today. The operation of NGOs was unknown at that time.

2. Almost 70% of the houses were dilapidated or damaged and poor people were living under the sun without any shelter overhead. Some people have started to build their houses with golpata and bamboo.
3. About 60% of the children and women were suffering from the diarrhea, dysentery, skin diseases, high fever, cold and cough. The supply of medicine and other drugs were almost absent.
4. The distribution of relief was without any system and absolutely managed by the local government who followed no decorum except supporting their followers and their kith and kin.
5. The movement of officers in the affected areas was very few and far between since there was very little quantity of relief materials to distribute entailing the risk of being looted and harassed. Most of the time, there were meetings and report writing to the provincial head quarter and office of the governor. There was a post of chief relief commissioner in the Department of Relief and Rehabilitation who was the focal point for relief work.

It may be recalled that the cyclone of 1970 took the toll of about 5 lakhs of people with colossal destruction of houses, cattle and livestock and damage of crops. The response of the central government for the recovery and mitigation of the disaster was almost absent. General Yahya Khan, the president, who was at Dhaka on the night of the cyclone, left for Islamabad the next morning without asking any question about the damage although he felt the strength of the wind and force of the tornado.

On the other hand, chief of our army staff, chief of the caretaker government, and the president of the country rushed to the Sidr affected places immediately after the cyclone this time. One adviser has been placed to coordinate the rescue and mitigation operation. International agencies realized the gravity of the occurrence since government mobilised all resources to address this calamity.

The strategy adopted by the government was timely and appropriate containing a few basic principles such as:

- Livelihood Restoration.
- Health and Nutrition services.
- Infrastructure Rehabilitation.
- Import financing to overcome the shortage of food items, etc.

These initiatives of the government have been highly applauded by

media at large and people felt the government as their own. This is the benefit of independence. Of course, a few quarters was critical about the role of civil society organisations, responsibility of local level bodies including upazilla administration, micro-credit providing non-government organisations, and, above all, bureaucracy, termed as inexperienced.

It is interesting to note that in 1876, after the Bakerganj cyclone when 1 lakh people died due to cyclone, another 1 lakh died due to the negligence of the authority and desertion of officials from the station out of the fear of cholera, dysentery, and other diseases.

One major threat to this delta basin is the climatic change and possible repetition of the same in future every year. Bali conference might take the note of our grievances but we should also come out with long-term plan. We have earned our reputation in disaster management but coming days might be more critical. In fact, we could not sustain our growth rate due the disasters and calamities of 1985, 1988, 1991, 1998, and even two times during this year. Time has come to assemble all wisdom to address the disaster management issue on a priority basis.

Dhiraj Kumar Nath is a former adviser to the caretaker government.

border that now separates Pakistan and Afghanistan. The migration of narcotics, arms and fighters long supported insurgents, irredentists, and ideologues Islamabad -- and often, Washington -- took advantage of the deniability the permeable boundary afforded to cross-border activities well into the 1990s.

When war resumed in Afghanistan in 2001, the Pakistan-Afghan border should have been closed to all but legitimate refugees. This did not happen. Afghanistan's impeded recovery, and Pakistan's imploding domestic security, arose from Musharraf's reluctance to plug the holes in the border, take on cross-border tribes and stop illicit contact between the militants, intelligence agencies and security forces. Instead, he chose the appearance of short-term stability over long-term security by bargaining with religious parties, tribal leaders and militants -- all of whom he finds easy to betray. Broken agreements and damaged credibility, as much as jihadist -- doctrine, have provided political space for militants to fill.

Musharraf's only real constituency, the military, has been unwilling to sustain casualties. He therefore removed the army from the tribal region of Waziristan, persuading the tribes -- historically resentful of army presence -- to secure their territory against militants. This bargain on the cheap, like 19th century British efforts to

buy off the tribes, quickly failed. The government has since forced villagers out of their homes and harassed legitimate tribal businessmen with little regard to the law. So many tribal leaders have been killed by militants in retaliation for their collaboration with Islamabad that few are left to anchor a new political environment (and work with American

policy is not. Musharraf finally admitted this summer that Afghan militants have been sheltered in the tribal areas -- a place that departing US Homeland Security Advisor Frances Townsend called, with curious understatement, "something of an ungoverned space."

Until recently, however, the government barely acknowledged

of government has displaced thousands of Swatis. Killings are on the rise, the army has sustained substantial casualties, and Swat, like the Northwest Frontier, has become a no-go area. Like Swat's Mullah Saïdullah, whose 1897 jihad against the British contested the border between Afghanistan and British India (now Pakistan), Fazlullah seems unlikely to succumb to Musharraf's faux bargains. He may broadcast the language of conservative theology, but his canny rhetoric reflects a politician's hostility to the US-Pakistan alliance.

This is no small crisis, and reinforces the difficulty of the counter-terrorism challenge. Militancy in Pakistan is not a simple outgrowth of Afghanistan's war, or even of the army's favored Kashmir jihadis. Pakistan's army cannot control extremists -- even those it once patronised -- in Swat, Kashmir, the Frontier or the Punjab. No doubt the US believes that its own forces can counter terror more efficiently than Pakistan's army can.

Pakistan's failing governance is bound inextricably to policies that alternately symbolise, determine and undercut its capacity to secure its territory, citizens and instrumentally, its alliance with the US. If the new Pentagon plan is any indication, however, the US military doesn't believe that rising militancy has anything to do with Pakistan's fragile governance, or that US assistance -- which has

consistently strengthened the central, militarised state as a matter of operational convenience -- has contributed to the current governance crisis.

Instead, USAID is spending \$750 million to help Islamabad bring the tribal areas under direct rule, and facilitate military control over a restive border region. The Defense Department plans to provide direct assistance to civilians on the border, and central government ministries, in aid of similar goals.

By militarising its relationship with the Interior Ministry, the US extends the reach of army rule at the very moment that civilian governance has been suppressed. By transferring funds and technology directly to the Frontier Corps, the US jeopardises India's hard-won, if limited, rapprochement with Pakistan, including over Kashmir -- a valley perilously close to Swat's, enmeshed in sectarian battles, and a trigger for conflicts large and small. US soldiers may defeat a few militants, but they will almost certainly alienate Pakistan's forcibly disenfranchised voters, who rightly disdain America's alliance with Musharraf in the last days of his rule.

Paula Newberg has covered Pakistan's politics for almost three decades and is the author of *Judging the State: Courts and Constitutional Politics in Pakistan*.

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American Special Forces in Pakistan: Back to the future?

Ignoring the blowback lessons of its earlier interventions, the US plans to fund Pakistan's paramilitary Frontier Corps -- a civilian force whose members are recruited from the very tribes whose adventures it hopes to quell and place soldiers from the US Joint Special Operations Command "on the ground" with them. This is a script for political tragedy.

PAULA R. NEWBERG

LAST week, a Cold War breeze swept across South Asia when the US military revealed unofficially that it is making plans for direct action against militants in Pakistan's unruly tribal areas. The area that prompted one-time British viceroy to India Lord Curzon to caution that "frontiers are the chief anxiety of nearly every Foreign Office in the civilised world" is once again a battleground for competing ideologies and proxy fighters. Sad to say, we've seen this show before.

Some two decades ago the US and Pakistan nurtured some of the same individuals and groups -- then called "fiercely independent Afghan mujahideen" against the Soviet Union -- that are now its counter-terrorism targets. The "success" of those operations in the 1980s sowed the seeds of today's combative radical cleric's intent on destabilising both Afghanistan and Pakistan, and created conditions for the return of US intelligence, and now US soldiers, to the tribal areas.

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This is a script for political tragedy. American soldiers, heading toward combat with militant groups whose anti-Americanism is fueled by the US-led war in Iraq (and US failures elsewhere in the Middle East), are bringing with them a plan adapted from their Iraq strategy.

For Muslim clerics and their followers, who believe the US-led war is a fight against Islam, this is deliberate insult added to profound injury. For Pakistan and Afghanistan, both Muslim majority states coping with long histories of sectarian conflict, the burden of this policy will complicate difficult state-building challenges.

In India and the spillover states of Central Asia, where back-burner insurgencies and latent anti-

Americanism have already joined forces, the presence of American soldiers will add fat to the fire. And the specter of a nuclear state whose assets can be compromised, whether by militants or their sympathisers in government and the army, is a frightening one.

The first place to shoulder the burdens of this new initiative, of course, will be Pakistan. Coming on the heels of Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte's fruitless efforts to persuade General Pervez Musharraf to lift Pakistan's state of emergency, the Defense Department's disclosure highlights three dangerous trends: ineffective alliances that have spawned chaos on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border; ongoing crises within the Pakistan state and government; and deep divisions between America's soldiers and diplomats over the way to handle Pakistan's current emergency.

Fatigue, frustration and failure dog Pakistan's counter-terrorism campaign. For centuries, the absence of state control was the proudest feature of the porous

soldiers, should they arrive). Waziristan today is like the West Bank in the early 1990s, when the assassination of liberal Palestinian mayors left politics to extremists.

The foolhardy policies that have brought unrest to Pakistan's borders and fear to its citizens have paralyzed the frontier -- not because militancy is popular, but because Pakistan's proxy for US

the rise of militants like Maulana Fazlullah -- so-called "Pakistan Taliban" -- who have steadily gained territory elsewhere in the Frontier. Musharraf's proclamation of emergency refocused attention on the broad, radical challenge to the writ of the Pakistani state.

Today, Fazlullah's crusade to remove the Swat Valley from the ambit of modernity and the reach

of government has displaced thousands of Swatis. Killings are on the rise, the army has sustained substantial casualties, and Swat, like the Northwest Frontier, has become a no-go area. Like Swat's Mullah Saïdullah, whose 1897 jihad against the British contested the border between Afghanistan and British India (now Pakistan), Fazlullah seems unlikely to succumb to Musharraf's faux bargains. He may broadcast the language of conservative theology, but his canny rhetoric reflects a politician's hostility to the US-Pakistan alliance.

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