

Sunderban and our survival

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ZULFIQUR AHMED AMIN

SUNDERBAN, a large block of littoral forests with thousands of meandering streams, creeks, rivers and estuaries that have enhanced its charm, was devastated by Cyclone Sidr leaving 30 percent of it severely damaged and another 30 percent partially spoiled.

According to the forest department's preliminary estimate, the financial loss caused by Sidr to the mangroves would top \$145 million. It saved many lives at a cost of its own death.

Of almost 10,107 square km of Sunderban, roughly 60% is situated in Bangladesh, while the rest lies in the state of West Bengal in India. At its maximum extent, the forest is about 70 miles wide from north to south and about 180 miles long from east to west.

Located at the mouth of the wide Ganges system, the forest thrives in a delicate balance of fresh water brought in by the Ganges and its distributing branches and the saline water brought by the diurnal tides that pass through the maze of creeks and estuaries that criss-cross the forest and cover nearly a quarter of its area.

The forest, as well as the tides, determines the environment and ecology of the adjacent upstream areas to a great extent.

The forest, that covers a large portion of the coastline of the Ganges delta, acts as a buffer

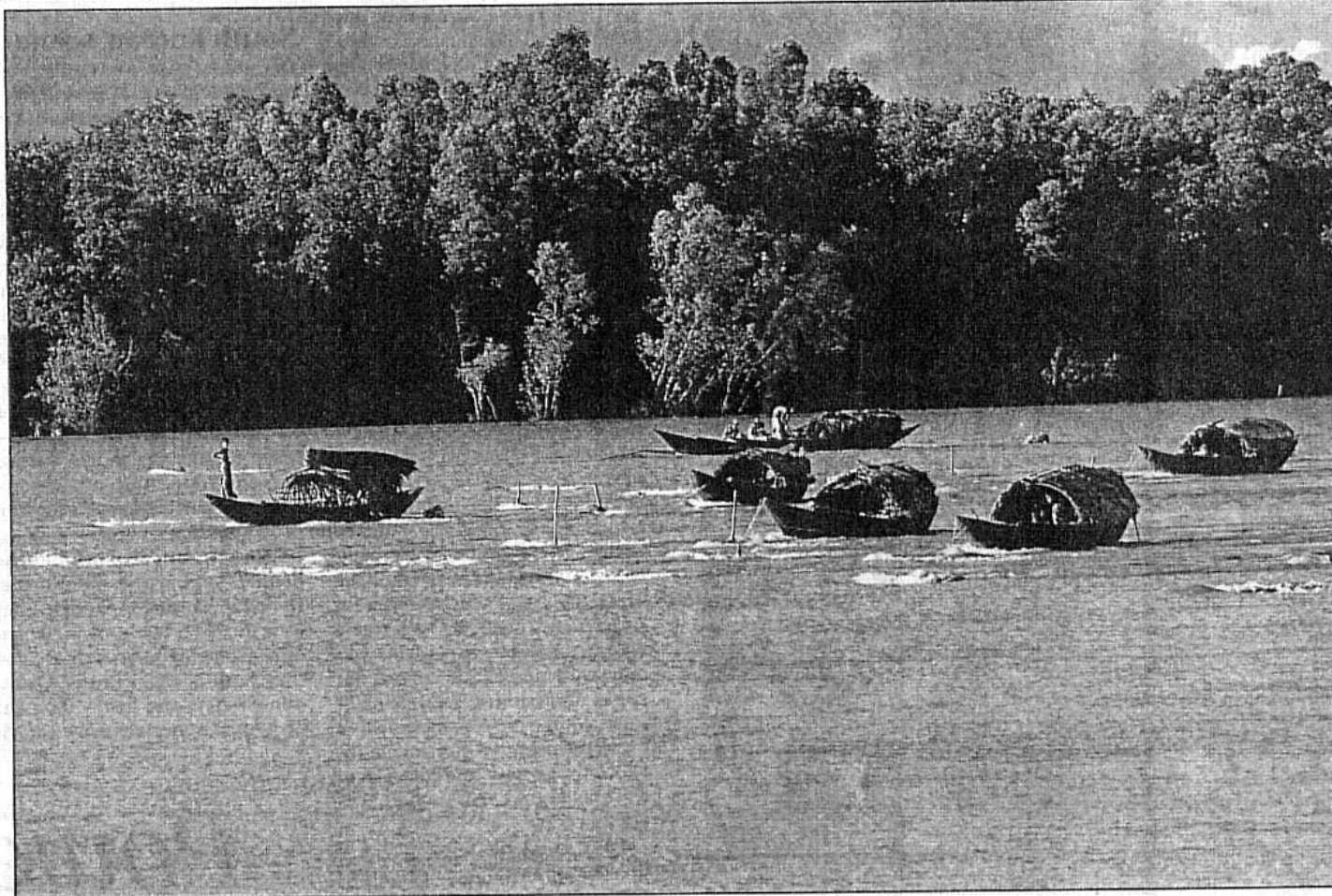
against erosion of the coast by sea waves, as well as against the cyclone-generated tidal surges, which can and do cause massive destruction of life and property.

The forest also produces about 3.5 million tons of detritus, which, falling in the water, is carried to the farthest reaches of the tidal prism, and decomposed in the water, produces nutritious organic food for all species of aquatic animals. This decomposed organic matter, when deposited along with silt on the low-lying tidal flood plains immediately upstream of the Sundarbans, enriches the soil and restores its fertility. As a result, the inland waters is a favourite feeding ground for all species of aquatic animals, as well as protected breeding ground for many varieties of fish and shrimp.

The jungle is also a magnet for over 200,000 impoverished villagers who live along its boundaries and work there as fishermen, or collect honey or wood. The annual economic value of mangroves, estimated by the cost of the products and services they provide, has been estimated to be \$200,000-\$900,000 per hectare (Wells et al. 2006).

During the 1950s, Sundarbans, by and large, was not inhabited at all, and most forest areas were virtually inaccessible. However, mass destruction of the forest environment by humans began during the early 1960s.

Unfortunately, we have lost



PHILIP GAN

more than one-third of its area during the recent past. A major recent change in the physical environment of the Sunderbans was a reduction in the amount of fresh water flowing into the area,

which resulted in a considerable increase in salinity level. This is due to natural changes, river diversions, construction of dams and withdrawal of freshwater for irrigation.

The problem is likely to be aggravated by the rise in the sea

biodiversity. Added to it, repeated cyclones and tidal surges continuously cause utter damage.

Research indicates that a network of coastal defences, specially a belt of mangroves, is capable of absorbing 70-90 percent of the energy of a normal wave and 30-40

destroyed tens of thousands of buildings in Thailand, Indonesia, India, the Maldives and Sri Lanka. It has been reported that damage in terms of loss of lives and properties in the villages which were behind mangrove wetlands and shelterbelt plantations, was limited as the

offshore mangrove forests.

Kapuhenwala and Wanduruppa, two villages in the lagoon of southern Sri Lanka, show the importance of mangroves in saving lives. In Kapuhenwala, surrounded by 200 hectares of dense mangroves and scrub forest, the tsunami 2004 killed only two people -- the lowest number of tsunami related fatalities in a Sri Lankan village.

The first few rows of the mangrove trees alone bore the brunt of the tsunami waves, and the friction created by these trees and the trees of subsequent rows reduced the speed of the water. Wanduruppa, surrounded by degraded mangroves, was severely affected, with 5,000 to 6,000 people killed.

The powerful cyclone that hit India's Orissa coast in October 1999 provided another powerful example of deforestation and disaster vulnerability. Much of the damage caused by the cyclone occurred in the new, extensively deforested, settlement areas along Orissa's coast as the storm surge ripped through a 100-km long denuded stretch, the Ersama block, killing thousands of people within minutes.

In 1996, the Leizhou Peninsula, located near South China's Hainan province, was hit by a violent typhoon, causing economic losses of more than \$ 1.2 billion. The counties of Doulun and Jinbang were unaffected because a mangrove belt that measures 4 to 160 meter across sheltered them.

The raging Cyclone Sidr, with a diameter of about 500 km and a wall of clouds about 200 km tall, seen in satellite images as a colossal swirling white mass bearing north from the Bay of Bengal, smashed into the south-western coast of Bangladesh. The fury of the

cyclone can only be comprehended by one of many evidences in Charkhali ferry ghat in Pirojpur district, where two ferries had been blown off like toys, one landing in Vekutia almost two miles away, the other in Togra almost one mile away from the place of impact.

The uprooted, torn-headed and twisted trees along the whole coastal and adjacent areas of Bagerhat, Pirojpur, Jhalokathi, Patuakali and Bhola are a vivid evidence of its utter destruction.

The monstrous strength of the cyclone was like that of the 1991 cyclone, but our coastal vanguard, the Sunderban, applied the brake to the advancing slayer, resisting its killing power but bearing the massive brunt, with one-third of it badly mauled.

Better preparedness and an advance warning system helped save many people this time, but the vast mangrove forest had also largely offset the impact of the cyclone.

Forest ecosystems play a dominant role in reducing the vulnerability of communities to disasters, both in terms of reducing their physical exposure to natural hazards and providing them the livelihood resources to withstand and recover from crises. A comprehensive measure to restore and protect our mangrove forest is vital for our existence.

A scientific, planned approach, supported by strict compliance, is the need of the time. So long as rich countries violate the environment, there is no alternative to a mangrove swamp around the coastal belt for our survival.

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What a difference ...

LENNOX SAMUELS

A year ago, Shura Chamal-Eit (Elizabeth Street) in downtown Fallujah was a lethal place for American troops attempting to tame the city, a center of lawlessness and defiance by insurgents. Terrorists from Al Qaeda in Iraq and other groups attacked Coalition troops on the street and around the city, killing some and injuring many.

But as US Marines here pass yet another Christmas fighting a war few expected to last this long, Fallujah is on the verge of becoming a success story and symbol of a new, cooperative paradigm for winning Iraq.

Fed up with the wanton assassinations and summary executions by Al Qaeda in Iraq and alarmed that the group was strangling Fallujah's economy, city leaders and residents joined forces with the Marines to expel the group. Many Fallujah residents once offered help to insurgents or at

best looked the other way when they fired rocket-propelled grenades, mortar and artillery at Marines and killed or maimed them with the dreaded improvised explosive devices (IEDs) that became commonplace.

The same residents now identify insurgents to the Iraqi Army and Iraqi police force, who kill, capture or drive them from the city. Many of the terrorists have fled into the desert, often into Tharthar, an area also in Anbar province, north of Fallujah.

Marines who once passed their days trying to stay alive now work as virtual municipal employees, trying to restore and expand services like electricity, trash collection and water treatment. "I'm getting ready to go sit in on a political meeting at city hall," says Lt. Col. Christopher Dowling, commander of the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines Regiment.

"The norm for Fallujah a year ago was that if I halted my patrol or vehicle for anything more than 10

minutes I would get hit with RPGs or small-arms fire or an IED within the next five minutes. I truly did not know if that would be the last patrol I went on," says Capt. Sean Miller, also of the 3rd Battalion. "What's normal for me now is I believe I can walk down the street without getting killed."

US and Iraqi officials have divided the city, American-style, into nine precincts to better deliver services. Miller's precincts include Sina'a, a once-industrial area now littered with debris and twisted metal. He envisions investors coming back to the area once it is rebuilt.

In Andaloos precinct, which includes Elizabeth Street and is also part of Miller's domain, Marine 2nd Lt. Chris Caldwell leads his men on foot patrols, walking around the old souk, or market, which he expects to be fully open in a matter of days. He says progress is such that he has to remind his men that "compla-

cency kills."

Marine Sgt. Richard C. Laster just began his third Iraq tour -- all of them in the Fallujah area. "I've seen it go through all these phases," he says. "Three days after I arrived (this time), the first thing I did was talk to civilians and ask how they were, what they thought about us. It was such a relief to know they were finally coming around."

On Elizabeth Street, Iraqis say they are pleased the city is reopening for business. "You see my two sons here," says Kalad al-Kabasah, who owns a tailor shop. "They are 12 and 15. I couldn't get them to the store before. Now the Iraqi police control the street and the situation. Nobody's shooting anybody; nobody's planting IEDs. We can come back and work."

Miller and his lieutenants can recite the number of construction trucks that have come through town recently (45, up from three during the previous seven



months) and the number of dumpsters (1,500), as well as open schools and mosques in their precincts. Miller knows the number of neighborhood watch people and Iraqi police operating in his precincts. He meets seven times a week with various sheiks, imams, school officials and mukhtars, or notaries public. "I feel I should run for mayor," he quips.

If he does he may find that the Anbaris are like constituents everywhere, constantly asking "What have you done for me lately?" As Caldwell walks along Elizabeth Street, a merchant approaches and complains that the electric power does not work all the time. He realizes there was no power at all just weeks ago, but he demands to know what will be done about the spotty coverage.

"They want everything in a month," Caldwell says with a sigh.

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Populism vs. elitism

During the 1960s, Pakistan's urban middle class preferred Ayub Khan and his top-down Convention Muslim League, only to find that the party had no roots by the time of the 1970 general elections. After the peasantry had voted the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto into office during the 1970s, the middle class preferred Air Marshal Asghar Khan and his Tehrik-e-Istiqal (TI).

HUSAIN HAQQANI

THAILAND'S parliamentary elections on December 23 provided fresh evidence (if evidence is still needed) of the futility of military intervention as a means of changing the fundamental political trends of a nation.

Thai voters gave the largest number of seats in parliament to the People's Power Party (PPP), which comprises supporters of exiled former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra who was overthrown in a September 2006 coup.

The Thai military barred Thaksin and 110 of his closest associates from contesting the polls. His Thai Rak Thai party (TRT) was also disbanded by the generals on grounds of "corruption."

But the PPP, which campaigned on a platform of ending Thaksin's exile and exclusion from politics, won convincingly despite the military's opposition. Quite clearly, Thai officials did not go beyond skewing the election rules against Thailand's PPP, and the actual

balloting was not significantly rigged.

Thailand has witnessed 18 military coups since 1932. The *Economist* recently referred to Thailand as "Southeast Asia's Pakistan."

According to the British newsweekly: "Pakistan is not the only Asian country where a dodgy military regime is running a general election under dubious electoral rules in the hope of keeping out a similarly dodgy civilian whom it overthrew."

The fundamental problem in both countries is the same. It has an overbearing military, which often receives support from the urban elite and professional middle class, and argues that the poor peasants simply do not elect the right people.

Thailand's civilian politicians, including Thaksin, are obviously not perfect. But isn't it the point of democracy to let people choose whomever they like, and then vote them out of power upon discovering that their chosen leaders did not fulfil their aspirations?

The problem is that populist politicians like Thaksin (and in Pakistan's case the Bhutto family, or even Nawaz Sharif), whom the army and the professional elite dislike, do not necessarily disappoint their voters.

As *The Economist* explains: "Middle-class Bangkokians, who are as snooty about their country cousins as any metropolitan elite anywhere, often say that 'uneducated' rural voters ... were bribed and tricked into voting for Mr. Thaksin. But rural voters were quite rational in handing him landslide victories in 2001 and 2005. He was Thailand's first party leader to promise and deliver a comprehensive set of policies aimed at the mass of voters. The allegations of corruption, conflicts of interest, and vote-buying that surround him are serious but hardly unusual: such practices are endemic in Thai politics."

In other words, the poor who vote for populist leaders actually benefit from their policies, even though these might not impress army generals or World Bank economists.

Successful third world democracies are born out of cooperation between politicians with vote banks and middle class professionals with ideas about good governance. In countries like Pakistan and Thailand, however, such cooperation is scant.

The middle class dismisses

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After the end of Ziaul Haq's military dictatorship in 1988, and a concerted decade-long effort by the military-intelligence combine to break the back of the PPP, Benazir Bhutto still commanded more votes than the middle class's new choice, Nawaz Sharif.

By the time Nawaz Sharif created

after the 1999 coup has now shifted its loyalty to the anti-politician politicians rather than putting their support where the majority of voters seem inclined.

In the aftermath of the Musharraf regime's attack on the Supreme Court there is opposition to military rule among the middle

of constantly judging politicians with an unrealistic yardstick, urban professionals should embrace the political process.

They can act as pressure groups within the major popular parties rather than a loose grouping that helps discredit popular leaders only to pave the way for further



politicians with refrains like "they are all the same," but is unable to create an alternative political leadership because vote banks are not easy to create or destroy.

During the 1960s, Pakistan's urban middle class preferred Ayub

preferred Air Marshal Asghar Khan and his Tehrik-e-Istiqal (TI).

The 1977 Pakistan National Alliance (PNA) campaign revealed that the anti-PPP vote bank was mobilised not by TI or Asghar Khan but by the Islamist religious parties.

his own vote bank, the urban professionals had turned on him and preferred Imran Khan and his Tehrik-e-Insaf.

Even now, it appears that the educated elite that supported General Pervez Musharraf right

class, but there has been no softening of attitudes towards the populist politicians.

Popular politicians may not rise to the "high" standards of the educated elite, but they have a way of connecting with the people. Instead

military intervention in politics.

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