

## One Year of Caretaker Government

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muscle-power. The Election Commission has also announced a roadmap for holding elections before December 2008, after preparation of voter list with photographs is completed within October 2008. It is endeavouring to put in place a legal framework that would encourage honest and dedicated politicians to join the electoral race and ensure transparency and accountability in the workings of political parties.

The government has already lifted the embargo on indoor politics in order to facilitate holding of political discussions. A principal precondition for a truly democratic election is the participation of political parties which are run in a transparent and democratic manner in accordance with the country's constitution and law. For ensuring this, there is urgent need for internal democratic reforms within major political parties of Bangladesh.

**Anti-Corruption Drive:** Despite commendable efforts in the past by the public and private sectors for improving the lot of the common man, the country's socio-economic arena was perennially tainted by corruption. But the majority people should not be allowed to suffer due to corruption and irregularities committed by a minority. The caretaker government, therefore, declared a war on corruption since its very first day. Since then, highly corrupt people are being put to trial on a regular basis, irrespective of their status or position, under existing laws of the land.

The Anti-Corruption Commission was reconstituted by the government for taking preventive, curative and punitive measures against corruption. Its institutional structure has been strengthened and necessary rules and regulations have been approved for making it fully independent and effective. Special tribunals have been constituted at different places of the country for swift disposal of corruption-related cases. Trial and delivery of verdicts in these cases are now in full swing. Bangladesh has also signed and ratified the UN Convention against Corruption, which has brightened the country's image in the international arena.

**Separation of Judiciary:** After 200 years of colonial rule and 36 years of independence, the present government has completely separated the country's judiciary from the executive branch with effect from 1 November 2007. The magistracy has been bifurcated into judicial and executive ones, and all judicial courts have been placed under the direct supervision of the Supreme Court. The people are now more optimistic than ever before that justice would prevail at all strata of society and governance in the country.

**Good Governance:** The government has also taken multifarious measures for establishing good governance. Institutions like the Public Service Commission, University Grants Commission and the Telecommunication Regulatory Authority have been fully revamped. New bodies like Regulatory Reforms Commission and Better Business Forum have been formed to simplify official rules and regulations and strengthen the role of government as a facilitator of private initiatives. Constitution of a National Human Rights Commission has been approved by the cabinet for the first time in the country. Devolution of powers to local governments is underway within the framework of a strengthened 3-tier local government system. Concepts like citizens' charter, service standard, model police stations, help-desk, helpline and one-stop service centres have been introduced for improving services delivered by public sector organizations. Steps have been taken to process pensions and retirement benefits of government employees as quickly as possible. Passports can now be obtained within stipulated time from the offices of 17 district administrations, in addition to central and regional passport offices.

### Macro-Economic

**Successes:** On the economic front, a growth rate of 6.5 percent was achieved during the previous fiscal year, despite losing 3 valuable months on account of political unrest. In spite of various adversities on the global plane, export growth was recorded at 16 percent, while growth in remittances sent by expatriate Bangladeshis was an unprecedented 25 percent higher. Because of various bilateral and multilateral initiatives taken by the government, the number of Bangladeshi workers sent abroad has almost doubled during 2007. Foreign exchange reserve during the year has consistently remained at over 5 billion dollars, which is a record. Fifty-seven percent of the current year's revenue and development budget has been allocated for direct or indirect programs of poverty alleviation.

**Budgetary Measures:** The micro-credit and vulnerable group feeding programs have been expanded to cover marginalized population living in disaster-affected and Monga-prone areas. Budgetary allocation for social security and empowerment has been raised from 4.5 percent last year to 10.5 percent this year. Taka 350 crore has been allocated for agricultural research, keeping an eye on long-term sustainable growth of the sector. Initiative has been taken to restructure the country's ailing jute sector in order to enhance its viability.

Twenty-five percent of the current year's budgetary resources have been allocated for education and health sectors, considered most vital for human resource development. Sustained efforts have been made by the government for further mainstreaming of the disadvantaged population, such as women, children and the disabled. The government has ratified the UN Convention on the disabled. Maternity allowance has been introduced for pregnant women in order to reduce maternal and child mortality. The honorariums for war-wounded freedom fighters and the families of martyrs have been raised by 50 percent. Monthly allowances for insolvent freedom fighters have also been raised by 20 percent.

**Improvements in Ports and Power Management:** Significant improvements have also taken place in the management of the country's sea-ports as well as generation and supply of power. System loss has been reduced to a record level in the power

sector, while efforts are underway to build much needed additional electricity generation capacity. Whereas average production of electricity in the country was 2800 megawatt in January 2007, it is now around 3800 megawatt. An additional 1000 megawatt would be produced within December 2008. Besides, contracts would be awarded through tenders before the end of 2008 to produce additional 1350 megawatt of electricity in the private sector and 1450 megawatts in the public sector.

The efficiency of Chittagong sea-port has now improved by 40 percent compared to the past. The turn-around time for ships have been reduced to 3 days from the previous 11 days. Over 10 billion taka is being saved annually through various reform measures, including introduction of berth-operating system in place of traditional stevedoring. Customs formalities in the ports have been simplified. Decision has been taken to appoint a private operator for New Mooring Container Terminal at Chittagong, which would greatly enhance the port's capacity.

Development works have also been undertaken at the country's second sea-port of Mongla in order to make it viable. Initiative has been taken to develop and expand the infrastructure of the country's most important land-port at Benapole. Besides, private operators have been appointed for proper management of land-ports at Sona-Mosjid, Hilli, Banglabanda, Biral, Bibir Bazar and Teknaf.

**Natural Calamities:** The year 2007 brought more than a fair share



of natural disasters for Bangladesh. The country was hit by two consecutive waves of devastating floods in July and August. They took many lives and extensively damaged crops and infrastructure. Estimates of output costs from floods exceeded 27 billion taka. Loss of Aman crop was estimated at about one million metric tons. As people started to grapple with the aftermath of floods came Sidr in November, the fiercest cyclone since 1970. It ruthlessly robbed innumerable people of their lives, homes and all forms of savings and livelihoods.

Around nine million people were affected by the floods and more than eight million by the catastrophic cyclone. To tackle the post-flood situation, the government had reallocated a food safety net budget of Taka 21 billion for relief operations. After the cyclone, the government has been coordinating all public and private efforts to ensure maximum synergy in post-cyclone relief operations. Vulnerable Group Feeding or VGF cards numbering 2.6 million have been issued in the coastal districts to feed the cyclone victims for four months. Micro-credit lenders have eased their lending and repayment terms for the affected. Donors and development partners are generously participating in the relief and rehabilitation process.

**Long-term Disaster Management:** In addition to short-term measures, the government is also thinking of medium to long-term solutions for the country's recurring environmental challenges. Chief Adviser Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed has appealed to the international community for their support in undertaking a massive long-term plan to protect the coastal areas from the fallouts of recurring natural disasters. The one billion dollar program would include building road networks, 2000 new cyclone shelters, repairing and constructing new embankments,

rebuilding educational institutions and restoration of the world's largest mangrove forest? the Sundarbans.

**External Shocks:** External developments have also not been very kind to Bangladesh during the year. Oil prices approached US dollar 100 per barrel during the year, reaching an all-time high. So have many other energy products and basic commodities. Surging demand for bio-fuels has pushed up the prices of agricultural products. Food prices peaked globally, eroding severely the buying powers of consumers in importing countries like Bangladesh. The caretaker government took numerous measures to offset these external shocks, but those had moderate successes because of global constraints.

**Foreign Relations:** On the external front, Bangladesh has moved ahead with her policy of friendship to all and malice towards none. Economic diplomacy has also been geared up both on the bilateral and multilateral plane. Special initiatives were undertaken for closer ties with neighbours including India. Chief Adviser Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed took new initiatives for forging closer regional cooperation during the Fourteenth SAARC Summit held in New Delhi. The Chief Adviser also visited New York in September to address the United Nations General Assembly. He highlighted Bangladesh's quest for improving governance, leading role played by Bangladesh in the UN Peacekeeping Missions all over the world, progress made in achieving Millennium Development Goals, successes in micro-credit programs for poverty alleviation and the vulnerability of the country to climatic shocks due to global warming. He cancelled his visit to the Commonwealth Summit in Uganda in November, in the aftermath of the devastating cyclone 'SIDR'. Bangladesh has also remained steadfast throughout the year as a staunch partner of the international community in the global war against terrorism.

In living memory, the tropical cyclone Sidr, landslide in Chittagong and two devastating floods played havoc with the life and properties of the people particularly in the coastal region. In carrying out the relief and rehabilitation programme, the Food and Disaster Management Ministry obviously had to go through a most arduous and trying time in its career last year.

The catastrophic cyclone of November 15 that hit the 30 districts in the south-western coastal areas left a trail of unprecedented disaster. Of them, 12 districts suffered most and 18 partially. Four of the 12 districts were ravaged most. The Sidr critically affected 89 lakh 23 thousand and 259 people belonging to 20 lakh, 68 thousand and 26 families of 1,950 unions/pourashanas under the 200 sub-districts of 30 districts. Nearly 3363 people were dead and 871 people remained untraced. Presently the relief and rehabilitation campaign is nearing completion. The task was indeed a challenging one for any government to cope with. The disaster victims have now to return to their normal life and activate the economy in their areas.

Immediately after the cyclone, the government urgently launched its relief and rehabilitation programme. The civil administration and the military jointly took part in the task of providing relief and succor to the cyclone victims and also in finding out the bodies lost in the wake of cyclone. Along with the public and private organizations, international relief organizations too came forward to provide relief to the cyclone victims.

Initially, the government started its relief activities with its own resources. Later, realising the extent of the damage, different international development agencies extended their supportive hand. Till date, they have promised support of nearly 223 million US dollar. The World Bank and the Asian Development Bank too have promised 250 million and 20 million US dollar respectively.

The government, besides providing emergency relief, also took steps to rehabilitate the cyclone victims without any delay. It also approved a short and long term plan to face such natural disasters in future. An amount of Tk 1 crore 54 lakh in cash as gratuitous relief, Tk 67 lakh for relief and 17 thousand 290 metric ton rice as gratuitous relief have been distributed among the victims by the Food and Disaster Management Ministry. Besides 4,500 packets of dry food, 450 metric tons of dates, 1200 metric tons of gram, 18,000 pieces of blankets, 16,256 pieces of tents, 13,000 bundles of corrugated tins, 24,504 packets of household utensils, 13,000 pieces of bed sheets and many other relief goods have been distributed. Financial assistance and relief goods of various kinds including 15,000 blankets have been distributed on behalf of the Chief Adviser's relief and welfare fund. Various private organisations came forward to supplement government's efforts in this humanitarian service. According to the NGO Affairs Bureau, the NGOs have provided relief assistance worth nearly Tk 177 crore which has been spent to meet the urgent necessities like food, clothes, drinking water, sanitation, agricultural and house-building materials. The government distributed the relief materials and started the relief and rehabilitation work efficiently and timely. The Chief Adviser's Secretariat, Food and Disaster Management Ministry, Army and other related Ministries and institutions took part in the relief and rehabilitation work with a sense of dedication. A regional co-ordination cell was set-up at Barisal with the Communication Advisor as principal coordinator of the relief operations. The Army performed a splendid job in transporting and distributing relief goods. People in areas not hit by the Sidr also came forward spontaneously in aid and of their fellow brothers and sisters. This gesture by people in safe areas has surely earned them a gratitude of the nation and will serve as a bond of national unity.

The government have already drawn up a number of short and long-term plans for disaster management. The implementation of these plans shall help not only the rehabilitation of cyclone victims but also will be of much help in confronting any future natural disaster.

**Development in disaster forecasting:** The geographical location and change in world climate have significantly contributed to the increase in natural disasters. Our country almost routinely face natural disasters each year. In such a context, it is imperative to improve the disaster forecasting system urgently for saving the lives and properties of disaster victims. Presently, a special plan is being implemented for the purpose by the Food and Disaster Management Ministry. Initiative has also been taken by this Ministry to simplify and modernize the disaster forecasting. Cyclone Preparedness Programme is also being strengthened with funds provided by the government.

**Construction of cyclone-shelters:** In coastal areas, 2,000 cyclone-shelters are being constructed as per recommendations made in 1993 by a committee headed by Prof. Jamilur Reza Chowdhury. Presently there are 1,800 cyclone-shelters in the area. The experts are now preparing the design for construction of new cyclone-shelters according to the plan. Along with it, the subject of constructing shelters to protect the animal resources from the natural disasters is also receiving urgent attention.

**Construction of embankments:** In the sixties embankments were constructed in the coastal areas to protect human lives, resources and harvests from the onslaught of recurring floods.

Over the decades those embankments were left uncared without any corrective measure or repair due to financial limitations of the government. Other than these, embankments, the need for constructing embankments in some char lands and islands is new being felt urgently. Water Resources Ministry has drawn up necessary plans for repair of old embankments and construction of new ones.

**Afforestation plans:** The tropical cyclone Sidr hit the largest mangrove of the planet and, the world heritage, the Sundarbans in the southern coasts and devastated it badly. This forest had been

serving as a protective shield for the people living in the region. This important forest must return to its natural beauties and characteristics. Aside this, the people and the resources of the region need to be saved from the vagaries of nature through large-scale afforestation in the entire coastal area including the inaccessible char lands. The Environment and Forest Ministry shall prepare a special plan for the purpose.

**Reconstruction of homesteads:** Nearly 5 lakh homesteads have been totally demolished by the cyclone Sidr and many more partially. Unless those homesteads are reconstructed or repaired the cyclone victims cannot return to their normal life.

The government have already allotted Tk 150 crore for this purpose. Tk. 5 thousand has been given for each of the homesteads affected by the cyclone. The brotherly government of Saudi Arabia has agreed to reconstruct 20,000 houses. The friendly country India have assured to reconstruct 10 villages that had suffered most and the UK government assured to rebuild one village. A number of NGOs and private organizations have also come forward to help the housing sector.

**Agricultural rehabilitation:** The cyclonic storm Sidr caused widespread damage to agriculture. It is now apprehended that the production of rice in the 30 cyclone-hit districts will be less by 12 lakh 95 thousand and 315 metric tons. The Agriculture Ministry has approved a well co-ordinated plan for rehabilitation of agriculture and also for extending support and cooperation for the availability of high-yielding paddy seeds, fertilizer and water for irrigation. Banks are also providing loans for agriculture on easy terms.

**Returning to normal life:** The cyclone Sidr has affected mostly the lower middle class and the middle class in the rural areas. Their business establishments and agricultural lands suffered much. This particular class of people, does not benefit much through emergency relief that are given to cyclone-hit people in general. This being so, they need to be provided urgently with the easily available financial assistance. The Food and Disaster Management Ministry have allotted Tk 10 crore for rehabilitation of cyclone victims under its programme for risk-reduction. The cyclone victims are allowed to take loans ranging from Tk 5 thousands to 20 thousand under the programme. Twenty percent of the loan is not returnable while the remaining 80 percent are to be paid back as required under the prescribed rules.

### Structural Reforms:

With a view to assisting the disaster victims to return to their normal life and to pursue the economic activities, it is urgent to rebuild the ruined infra-structure with changes, if necessary. The Sidr has caused colossal damage to roads, bridges, culverts, educational institutions, mosques, temples and other places of worship, and to rebuild those is a gigantic task confronting the nation. The concerned Ministry has already prepared

plans and the implementation strategy, in this regard.

The Education Ministry has allotted Tk 36 crore for repair of the damaged high schools, colleges and madrasahs and for purchase of books for students appearing in the S.S.C and H.S.C examinations. Aside this, Tk 45 crore has been provided by the Directorate of Primary Education for repair of the partially damaged primary schools. A scheme has been prepared to rebuild the totally damaged schools at a cost of Tk 743 crore under the second programme for development of primary education.

**Food Security:** In the badly Sidr-hit areas of 12 districts, the government have, along with the emergency relief assistance, introduced special VGF programme that will continue till March next. Under the special VGF programme each of the 25 lakh 90 thousand families shall get 15 Kg rice every month. For this purpose, the Food and Disaster Management Ministry shall distribute 1 lakh 50 thousand 270 metric tons of rice. Besides this, as in other parts of the country, the regular test relief assistance and Food for Work programme have also been started.

Bangladesh have earned good reputation in international arena for successfully tackling natural disasters at different times. An efficient manpower have also been created through the disaster management campaign. The permanent orders for disaster management serves as an extraordinary directives in combating natural disaster. The directives are prepared to confront the natural disasters on war-footing, and it provides for building of a network for the purpose right from the lowest level to the disaster management centre. It also provides for a national council to be headed by the Chief Adviser/Prime Minister, inter-ministerial coordination committee headed by the Advisor for Food and Disaster Management Ministry and district committees headed by the Deputy Commissioners. Similarly there are disaster management committees at sub-district and union levels. This time, all such committees went into action as per directives given in the permanent orders regarding disaster management as soon they received the forecast of the coming cyclone.

Furthermore, control rooms were set-up for continuous monitoring of the disaster situation at the office of the Chief Advisor, Armed Forces Division, Press Information Department, Food and Disaster Management Bureau.

It is urgent that we pay special attention to the following for reduction of losses we suffer in the wake of natural disasters. (a) Steps need to be taken so that the people in the concerned areas get disaster warning message speedily. (b) To expand and develop the Cyclone Preparedness Programme. (c) To expand the Disaster Management Network. (d) To invent new strategy to combat the natural disasters and strengthen the institutional training for the purpose.

We have been facing natural disasters each year. But this year it had become more difficult to operate the relief and rehabilitation programme in view of the severity of the cyclone Sidr. Our national legacy has always been to stand by the side of the distressed, and we maintained it unflinchingly this year too. This fellow-feeling displayed by the entire nation has obviously been a great source of inspiration for the disaster victims to return to their normal life.

—Secretary In-Charge, Ministry of Food & Disaster Management

## Sidr Ravaged Bangladesh Reconstruction Work Moves Ahead

Dr. Mohammad Ayub Miah

