

## Earthquake preparedness

*Our lack of it spells danger*

BAKLADESH is widely believed to be one of the most earthquake-prone countries in the world. It also faces risks of Tsunami and storm surge, the former because of probability of submarine landslides and the latter on account of climatic changes.

How ill-prepared are we to meet the challenges has come to light. At the launching ceremony of Earthquake and Tsunami/Storm Surge Preparedness Component under Comprehensive Disaster Management Programme (CDMP) on Wednesday, experts portrayed a very bleak picture of our state of preparedness. In the process, they recommended certain remedial measures.

There has been a boom in high-rise constructions in the major cities, especially Dhaka, Chittagong and Sylhet. These are mostly made of low quality materials without earthquake-resistant features. Actually, even the buildings of normal height making up the concrete jungle in Dhaka are weak constructions. It was once stated by a government minister that if an earthquake measuring 7 on the Richter scale should hit Dhaka, 90 percent of its buildings will collapse. Imagine the horrific loss of human lives in as populous a city as Dhaka, let alone the damage to property.

Bangladesh National Building Code with its guidelines for earthquake resistant design of steel and concrete structures is not properly followed. There are three steps that we need to take: a) we identify the buildings through a survey, marking off the constructions that are safe from those that are not; b) we ask the unsafe building owners to retrofit their vulnerable constructions with minimal earthquake resistant features; and above all c) Rajuk must henceforth make it a point to strictly enforce the building code, so that no unsafe construction, the high-rise in particular, is erected.

One of the principal elements of preparedness agenda ought to be civil defence training to improve the reflexes of the citizens in terms of rescue and evacuation operations in the event of an earthquake.

Simultaneously, the government must build a strong equipment base to clear the earthquake debris to reach and rescue the victims trapped in a fault.

It is good to learn that the preparedness component supported by the European Commission is preparing a seismic hazard and vulnerability map for Dhaka, Chittagong and Sylhet. When done, this should be widely publicised.

Finally, a modern warning system will have to be put in place.

## America's Super Tuesday primaries

*The battle is not yet over for Clinton and Obama*

SUPER Tuesday in the United States has come and gone. In what was clearly a carnival spirit, both in the American media and among American citizens, the question of which politicians will end up being the candidates for the White House at the November election was wrestled with. The Republicans have all but formally made it clear that John McCain, a respected senator and former POW in Vietnam, will be their standard bearer. He has clearly left all his rivals, including the high spending Mitt Romney, well behind.

But if the Republicans now have a clearer sense of where they are going in the run-up to November, the Democrats know only that much uncertainty about who will be their nominee for the presidency still prevails. Hillary Clinton has surely won some of the more important states --- California, New York, Massachusetts --- and has thus shown that her hold on the public imagination is yet strong. But, then, Barack Obama is also beginning to demonstrate a remarkable capacity to loosen Mrs. Clinton's grip. He has won in thirteen states compared to eight for the New York senator; and in terms of delegate count has almost come level with her. What will surely be more worrying for Hillary Clinton is that Senator Obama has his coffers overflowing with money, with campaign donations coming from nearly everywhere. His oratory and theme of change have sent millions of Americans, especially blacks and the young, flocking to his campaign offices around the country. Moreover, an analysis of the results in the states he has won shows that his appeal stretches to all shades of Americans. In the next few weeks, therefore, it is a formidable Obama bandwagon that Clinton will face. The battle between the two may well lead up to an intense, perhaps even vicious, Democratic convention in August.

In short, for all the clarity of purpose in the Republican camp, the battle for the nomination, where the Democrats are concerned, is far from over. What might be true, however, is that Americans could see, in January next year, a black or a woman take charge as president. All of that possibility will come to nought, though, if John McCain, having demolished Romney and the others in his party, repeats the performance against whoever becomes the Democratic candidate for November.

## Perspectives: The questions after the landmark High Court verdict



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

SO what happens now? With the High Court having quashed the Tk.2.99 crore extortion case against former prime minister Sheikh Hasina as being outside the purview of emergency laws, it is now time for the powers that be to ponder the legality and constitutionality of many of the measures they have undertaken so far in respect to the prosecution of corruption charges against a whole class of individuals.

It ought to have been for the government to read the writing on the wall where the case against Sheikh Hasina was concerned. Nearly everyone who is anyone in Bangladesh has been pointing to the vast loopholes in a case tried under the Emergency Power Rules. That said, there was also the

The problem that we are now left facing is one of what we as a people need to do about all the individuals who, as we recall only too well, indulged in sordid, manifest corruption. These are people who require to answer to the law about the bad governance they subjected the country to in their days in high office. And that is something which could have been and may yet be possible if they are tried under existing laws. Obviously, at least at this point in time, the Emergency Power Rules vis-à-vis trials on charges of corruption, do not apply. Are we then to suppose that those against whom accusations of manifest bad conduct have been made will walk free and perhaps even make a triumphant entry back into politics? It is a sad question, made absolutely pathetic by the inability of the authorities to foresee the consequences that might arise out of short-sighted actions.

grave matter of bringing a case on charges stemming from alleged crimes allegedly committed eight years ago under the purview of rules put in place a mere year ago.

It is not just surprising, but mind-boggling as well, knowing that the legal luminaries of the government, of the Anti-Corruption Commission, did not know what people around the country already knew. And it was that the case against Sheikh Hasina rested on shaky legal foundations. It would be difficult to sustain it.

Justice Shah Abu Nayeem Mominur Rahman and Justice Shahidul Islam have, in the higher interest of the law and in the broader interest of the

country, made it clear that measures instituted against individuals in a particular situation can only go thus far and no further.

It should have been for the authorities to comprehend, long before Wednesday's judgment on the Hasina case came to pass, that a moment might well arrive when the entire edifice of the charges brought against detained politicians under EPR could crumble. If the judgement stands, what happens to those, or about those, individuals who have either been judged guilty or await trial on charges of corruption under the EPR?

The caretaker government needs to go for a change of

course, one that it should not have ignored in the first place. It would have made a whole lot of sense if, following the declaration of a state of emergency last year, the government had opted to bring individuals accused of corruption to trial under the existing laws of the land. Nothing can be more substantive, nothing can be more foolproof, than for a state to pursue the normal, accepted legal procedures in matters that relate to crimes or alleged crimes.

And there have been precedents in our time when an application of accepted and due process of law has allowed little room for any question to arise about the morality or

ethics of a case. There is the instance of the case relating to the assassination of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The government of the day surely demonstrated sagacity in not adopting measures that would have circumvented due process of law and thereby weakened the fundamentals of justice.

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to foresee the consequences that might arise out of short-sighted actions.

The lawyers who have been assisting the Anti-Corruption Commission, or have been associated with it, need to develop clear perspectives on the legal efficacy of dealing with politicians the way they have been dealt with in the last one year.

There are other questions as well, notably those relating to the grant of bail to detained individuals. To what extent prosecution lawyers' appeals against bails granted to detained political figures, thereby not allowing them to walk out of prison, amount to an upholding of the law is an issue that must now be broadly assessed within the corridors of the administration.

The High Court judgment has simply put paid to a case pursued in a shoddy, unthinking manner. The government must understand that taking a shortcut in legal matters can boomerang. That is the lesson to be learnt from the HC verdict.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Current Affairs, The Daily Star.

## Is the government winning the civil war in Sri Lanka?



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

SRI Lanka -- the embattled south Asian country -- has just celebrated its 60th anniversary of independence. The occasion this year has a special significance, since the government appears to have accomplished significant gains in the war against the Tamil militants. The government in Colombo seems upbeat about its ultimate success in the drive against the militants.

President Mahinda Rajapakse went to the extent of saying that the government troops were "winning the war," and he expressed no doubt about the eventual outcome. Addressing the Independence Day celebrations, the president gave the impression that it might not take long to achieve the objective, although independent observers are not sure about the veracity of the claim.

However, there is little doubt that the government side had made some gains in the last few months, and that the rebels were on the defensive. The record of the more than two decades long civil war would suggest that the fortunes in the battlefield are often marked by

ups and downs, with the pendulum swinging in both directions. Nevertheless, it is somewhat clear that the government is at the moment in the driving seat.

Sri Lanka is definitely embroiled in full-blown war, following a number of developments that clearly indicate the hardening of the stances of both -- the government and the Tamil militants.

The peace process has been in tatters for long, but mediators hope that it can still be revived if the warring sides respond to their calls for reversing the current trend of hostilities.

Contrary to this expectation, the belligerence is increasing with full intensity. The Sri Lanka monitoring mission (SLMM), put in place by peace-broker Norway to supervise the 2002 ceasefire agreement, has said that it is "alarmed" by the developing situation.

Others, in and outside the country, feel the same way, and are concerned about the shape of the things to come in the days ahead --

which, obviously, is more bloodshed and destruction. In fact, the comments by President Rajapakse make it abundantly clear that the civil war continues with full fury.

The peace talks have been stalemated for long, and have a beating following the exit from power of former prime minister Ranil Wickramasinghe, whose government had initiated the dialogue with the rebels but was dismissed by President Chandrika, evidently for being "soft" to the Tamil militants.

The elections that followed brought Chandrika's supporters to power under Prime Minister Mahindra Rajapakse, and the chances of a settlement of the more than two-decade-old civil war through discussions have since become more remote. President Mahinda Rajapakse, who succeeded Chandrika, followed the same hard line with the rebels, and no progress has been made towards a negotiated settlement of the civil war. Occasional moves for dialogue

have collapsed, making no headway at all.

Earlier, several rounds of talks between the Colombo government and the Tamil Tigers during Ranil's time raised hopes for a negotiated settlement of the contentious civil war in Sri Lanka, which was virtually bleeding white because of the long drawn conflict centering minority Tamil's armed struggle for a separate homeland in the north of the country.

There was no decisive outcome of the civil war, as both sides blamed each other for the situation. However, overall conditions marked a qualitative change when the government of Prime Minister Ranil Wickramasinghe took an active pro-peace policy with the rebels, which facilitated a dialogue that went for several rounds in different venues abroad, making some progress in the vexed problem.

While it was the height of folly to expect an easy resolution of the Sri Lankan imbroglio, given the complexities involved in the issue, the

dialogue gave hope since both sides made significant concessions. The government conceded to some demands of the Tigers, while the latter abandoned their main position -- an independent state for the Tamils -- and agreed to autonomy.

The road to peace through negotiations was undoubtedly bumpy, but what was remarkably encouraging was the marked willingness to find common ground for a permanent settlement of the problem. Notwithstanding differences on some key areas, both sides demonstrated eagerness in carrying forward the parleys. But the scenario has now changed; as the government is not keen on discussions and is even giving a cold shoulder to the peace process.

In the last few months, several incidents contributed heavily to the worsening of the situation, including the killing in air raids of S.P. Tamilselvan, who was the political adviser of the militants. Clearly, this came as a big setback for the rebels, who vowed to avenge this killing; and an attempt on a minister, George Devanand, certainly further queered the pitch of government-Tamil militant relations. Violence has increased, and the celebration of the Independence Day was also marked by killings and suicide bomb attacks.

The latest developments have frustrated the mediators, who have hopes of resumption of the dialogue despite yawning differences in the positions of the two sides. Norway, Japan, and several other

nations, are keen to see that the belligerence is at least minimised. But that will be quite tough, and obviously makes the resumption of the peace moves extremely difficult.

Despite the claim by President Rajapakse that the government was moving very close to winning the civil war, the scenario in the battlefield is not one of easy achievements by the government troops.

The determined Tamil militants, understandably, will spare no efforts to overcome the losses, which, however, is a Herculean task. In any case, even at the present stage of setbacks, a cakewalk is not possible for the government side. The militants will evidently fight to the last, and it will be the height of folly to assume that they are on the verge of total defeat.

Even in the present favourable situation, the government needs to demonstrate maturity to resolve the crisis. Sri Lanka needs prudent policies and, obviously, the onus largely lies with the government, while the militants are expected to demonstrate a rational attitude.

The claims of big gains by the government side may not be baseless, but this, in itself, is nothing to boast about in resolving a national problem. The Colombo government is not expected to bask in the glory of the destruction of an ethnic population of its own country. What is needed is statesmanlike sagacity on part of the president of the country to bring about a just end to the civil war.

Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury is a senior journalist.

## Japan aspires to become a low carbon society

### CLOSEUP JAPAN

The ongoing campaign to save the environment received a much-needed boost in Japan during the administration of Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi. It was towards the end of his tenure that the government launched the "Cool Biz and Warm Biz" campaign that has brought about a 2.55 million ton reduction in the emission of carbon dioxide during the winter of 2005 and the summer of 2006. The campaign calls for setting the air-conditioners at a higher level in summer and a lower level in winter, thereby reducing the emission of carbon dioxide through lowering the consumption of electricity. Offices, where regular and virtually non-stop usage of air-conditioning units emits a significant amount of greenhouse gases, are particularly encouraged to follow the recommendations.

MONZURUL HUQ

AS evidence of what we have done to our planet earth during the last three centuries in the name of progress is becoming clearer everywhere around the world with the passage of time, issues related to global warming, too, are becoming almost a common household topic of discussion in each and every corner of the globe. How to tackle the problem in a meaningful way is gradually becoming the focal point of attention in such discussions, though disagreements on what needs to be done abound.

Japan was rather slow, compared with some other advanced nations, to discover the environment. But once the Japanese became convinced of the damage the process of industrialisation and our extensive dependence on fossil fuel are inflicting on human habitat, the country started to move fast to catch up with others in tackling the problems of global warming.

As a result, new initiatives and ideas to find a durable solution to environmental problems are being floated in Japan almost on a regular basis, both by the government and the private sector. All such efforts essentially try to address the issue

from a broader perspective.

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The brief tenure of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, which came to an abrupt end last September, also had a new environment initiative of its own in the form of a "Cool Earth 50" plan.

The plan called for a fifty percent reduction of greenhouse gas emission by 2050, taking 2012 as the base year; hence the catchy name. It should be noted that 2012 is a landmark year for global environment, as it will mark the expiration of the Kyoto Protocol that was worked out in 1997 after very extensive and lengthy negotiations.

The Protocol compels the signatory nations representing the advanced industrialised block to bring down their greenhouse gas emissions to 6 per cent below the level of 1990.

With the departure of Shinzo Abe from the political arena of Japan, his environmental initiative, too, suffered more or less the same fate, though the concept it heralded has not been forgotten or abandoned totally. The new Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda has come up with his own idea of giving a boost to the

environmental issues, soon after assuming office last September.

Japan is now trying to draw global attention to the country's environment initiatives by placing Fukuda's recommendations at the top of the agenda of the July summit of Group of Eight industrialised nations that Japan will be hosting in a resort town in the northern Island of Hokkaido.

In his policy speech delivered last Friday at the opening of the regular session of the Diet, Fukuda stressed specifically on issues related to global warming and consumer protection, and pledged to work on making the country "a low carbon society."

The measures Japan is now taking to deal with environmental issues include defining specific steps in realising the objectives of the long-term strategy for countering global warming in line with the "Cool Earth 50" initiative of the previous administration; compiling a plan for environmental and energy technology innovation that would help in achieving the zero emission target; and creating model environment cities in cooperation with local governments.

The prime minister, in his policy speech, also emphasised the importance of Japan's role as an "environmental power," and urged maximum use of that power so that the energy saving and energy conservation

technology of Japan could be used widely in the country and beyond.

Japan has, in fact, made significant breakthroughs in moving towards fulfilling the aim of becoming a low carbon society in the true sense. In steel and cement production, for example, Japan has achieved the world's highest level of energy efficiency.

Nuclear energy, considered to be the most eco-friendly way of generating power despite the risk of radioactive fallouts in case of accidents, is a core power source in Japan, accounting for one-third of the country's total electricity generation.

The concepts of recycling and green consumerism made significant headway in recent years, and public awareness of the problems related to the environment and the role of citizens in countering such problems, too, gained widespread support.

Solar power, another environment-friendly device for generating electricity, is gradually gaining ground among consumers, and Japan has already become the largest producer of solar cells in the world. The total sales of Toyota's hybrid automobiles in Japan and overseas reached 1 million units in April 2007, and the energy efficiency of Japanese air-conditioners is considered to be at the highest level.

The country is now aspiring to

become a low carbon society in the true sense by the year 2050, which would mean making extensive use of solar energy and greenhouse gas free energy sources, as well as widespread use of fuel-cell vehicles to realise zero emission in the automobile sector.

Automobiles are widely seen as one of the main culprits responsible for polluting the earth, as they alone account for nearly 20 percent of the global emission. A low carbon society will also have an extremely efficient production process, making efficient use of energy in homes and offices.

Earlier this month, an expert panel of Japan's environment ministry said that global warming could raise the country's average annual temperatures by up to 4.7 degrees, from 1961-1990 levels, in the last three decades of the current century. The panel has now launched a study on how the higher temperatures could impact on or damage the environment between 2020 and 2030.

The environment ministry also thinks that widespread efforts by individuals could reduce Japan's emission of carbon dioxide by up to 10.5 million tons in fiscal 2010.

The measures that individuals need to take for ensuring that gain are not something big or difficult to achieve; they include such small steps like turning off tap water when

not in use; driving in economic ways, such as switching off the engine at red lights; choosing to buy environment friendly products; bringing their own shopping bags to stores; and frequently unplugging electrical appliances to reduce standby electric consumption.

People in Japan are generally becoming aware of the severity of environmental problems, and are ready even for bigger sacrifices. In an Asahi Shimbun poll conducted in November last year, 76 per cent said that they thought that the earth was ill or seriously ill, and nearly half supported a "green" tax on consumption of petroleum, coal, and other fossil fuels.

The government of Yasuo Fukuda is hopeful that, at the G8 summit, Japan will be able to lead the way in deciding a post-Kyoto framework that would tackle environmental problems successfully.

Setting a numerical reduction target is considered by many as a key component of any such initiative, and how far Japan will be able to convince the United States about the need of numbers remains to be seen. As policy makers in Washington have made it clear that they are not willing to abide by any decision that would compel countries to follow a set target fixed in numbers.

Monzurul Huq writes from Japan.