

Farmers leading the way

Primacy of agriculture unquestionable

BUT for the boro bumper, good wheat crop and abundance of potatoes we would have been in dire straits in a food-short world today. Our farmers can be credited with rising from the catastrophic floods and Sidr with a firm determination to make up for the losses. They have proved that with their will and government's assistance, the farmers can work wonders.

The government should know exactly to what extent their fuel subsidy, distribution of seeds and fertiliser and special irrigation connections paid dividends. The overarching fact is, however, that the farmers diligently and prudently used every inch of land they could plough -- furrows, beels, haors and even some arid lands that were previously written off. That is where our potential lies for optimising land use in a situation where urbanisation, industrialisation, expansion of habitat and land erosion threaten to reduce land:man ratio even more adversely.

The global context marked by a shift from cereal to biofuel production has lessened food output in cereal exporting countries. Even their contribution to WFP is declining, not to speak of the export ban they have clamped. All this impels us to concentrate on and step up domestic agricultural productivity and maintain our own buffer stock of food to see us through rainy days. Even we can export rice for the good of others.

Thus, our national focus ought to be now on agriculture and alleviation of farmers' economic and working conditions. The pledge made by the chief adviser in Dinaipur who called farmers 'the national heroes' to prioritise agriculture in the national budget ought to be translated into reality in some identifiable areas of concern. First and foremost, soil fertility issue has to be addressed squarely. Over time, our land fertility has declined due to indiscriminate or erroneous use of fertilisers, pesticides and insecticides, or lack of nurture. Besides, importantly, the water table has gone down. Shrimp culture and surging tide in the sea have led to salinity intrusion into cultivable lands. The BRRI is credited with having evolved new water resistant varieties of seed. Its potential has to be fully realised in collaboration with successful rice institutes in the region. All these point to the pressing need for vigorous agricultural research with adequate budgetary provisions made for the same. No measly amounts would do any more, nor a visionless approach to the future.

One fundamental weakness in agriculture management has been the sidestepping of the agricultural marketing imperatives. The farmers must get remunerative price for their produces. This requires two things: one, keeping the cost of production low and allowing them to sell their produce without having to go through middlemen. The idea of having wholesale markets dispersed in closer proximity to farming households is a good one.

Last but not least, storage facilities will have to string out all over the country if we have to curb the huge amounts of crop wastes we incur every year.

Disaster relief in Myanmar and China

Government response is the key

THE recent natural disasters in Myanmar and China should be enough to give any sentient human being pause. After we register our shock at the extent of the calamity and extend our sympathies to the families of those who have been killed or are suffering, there are two further considerations that must be kept in mind.

The first is to what extent these natural disasters may actually have a man-made component. Certainly when it comes to an earthquake there is not much that can be done to prevent it; nevertheless it is brittle housing that turns what might have been a minor disaster into a major one. The link between more frequent cyclonic activity and global warming, however, is growing stronger every day, and it seems that more frequent and severe weather disturbances of this sort are yet another price that the planet is paying for our disregard of environmental fundamentals.

The second is to look at the duty of governments when disaster strikes. Myanmar has shown us how the tragic can be made magnitudes worse when the government of the day is callous or inefficient, or both. It has been the disgraceful mishandling of the tragedy by the junta in Myanmar that has turned a tragedy into a cataclysm.

On the other hand, it seems that the Chinese government has done a reasonable job of minimizing the losses caused by the recent earthquake. The loss of life is shocking in its scale, but there is no doubt that it could have been much worse had the response not been as timely and efficient.

The lesson to be learned here is two-fold. The first is that these disasters will continue to happen and that we all need to plan for them. That means addressing global warming without delay, having disaster warning and relief mechanisms in place ahead of time, and, in the case of earthquakes, it means ensuring that all buildings are up to code and earthquake-safe.

The second is that the difference between a tragedy and a calamity lies in how we respond. It is incumbent on every government to make disaster planning and relief a top priority. If this is not the function of government, then nothing is. All governments must understand that it is their sworn duty to take full care of their citizens in their hour of need.

ABDUL KHALEQUE

BANGLADESH proceeded with a multi-faceted form of education in deviation from the constitution which provides in Article 17 that the state shall adopt effective measures for the purpose of establishing a uniform, mass-oriented and universal system of education and ensuring free and compulsory education to all children to such stage as may be determined by law and relating education to the needs of society and producing properly trained and motivated citizens to serve those needs. Everybody knows how our governments have behaved with such a vital socio-economic necessity like education. The doldrums must end.

Recently, the government endeavoured reforms to improve the examination systems of the country. The reforms are purported to commence by 2010 involving candidates of SSC examination. Generally, our students are accustomed to learning by committing to memory, and answering questions during examinations from memory. The reform purports to replace this system by an ideal system of learning lessons and answering related

questions by way of exercising well-grounded imagination, creativity, innovation etc.

In our opinion, the reform should start earliest in the learning career of a kid so that the kid may advance in a gradual process of adaptation. More importantly, teacher cadres also have to undergo a metamorphosis of their traditional teaching and examining system in light of the reform project. For any successful transformation of system, there is a need for a gestation period for adjustment. So, our children and their teachers may be formally brought under the proposed examination system in 2014, i.e. after a gestation period of 5 years to commence in January 2009. Any hurry may spell disaster.

We must not forget that it will be difficult to apply the time-frame for children of the landless, homeless, poor and illiterate families of Bangladesh. Such families do not have any environment for children's education. Children of such families will need a government economic programme to enable them to attend schools. If this is not possible, the reform zeal may fail and students may develop fear of school and its examination system under the proposed project. It

cannot be denied that chill of penury may freeze the genial current of the mind of millions of our poor students who will then be scared of the proposed examination system.

In Bangladesh's 68000 villages, one may find different grades of old scheme and new scheme madrasahs, totalling in all about 300,000 including more than 100 of them teaching up to Master's level. Most of these higher level madrasahs do not have any campus. Classes from Class-I to Class-XVI are held in the same establishment. Besides, almost every mosque has arrangement for teaching kids Arabic lessons. These kids are generally the children of the poor villagers who do not like to send them to primary schools after the mosque education. By and large, traditional Muslims feel that sending children to madrasahs will bring their parents spiritual bliss.

Curiously enough, Bangladesh follows a lot of forms of education, which create different types of citizens. The forms are, besides madrasahs: a) Bengali medium from primary and beyond; b) English medium from primary and beyond; c) Residential English medium from Class I to Higher

Secondary; d) NGO system of education (English and Bengali) up to primary levels; e) Private kindergartens in towns and rural areas; f) Government primary and secondary education and also higher level; g) Private primary, secondary education and also higher level; h) Tuition-free primary education, not compulsory for all; i) With-tuition primary, compulsory in High Schools; j) Cadet College for boys; k) Cadet College for girls; l) Adibashi language primary in major groups.

In recent years, Bangladesh took programme of developing human resources through Education strategy for alleviation of poverty. The problem of blending material and spiritual life through a general education system has surfaced as a great challenge. It is really a great problem to establish a balanced blend of material and spiritual education and life-pattern. A vastly illiterate and poor population like Bangladesh is faced with the problem of quality education of a correct blend. As such, it has not yet been possible to create a study-course for the nation in which there should be an amalgam of religious and non-religious subjects up to a particular stage after which stu-

dents may choose to go for specialized study. The broad national consensus on such a course of study is yet to be reached.

Since Bangladesh has about 50 percent of its 150m people in the age-group 1-18, an appropriate and balanced combination of material and spiritual syllabus of study for this age group needs to be carefully prepared and followed, in the interest of rapid human development to alleviate poverty and improve solidarity of mental frame of citizens. This age-group will cover the broad facade of schooling up to the end of secondary level. Such a balanced scheme of education would certainly need four clear-cut stages such as (a) I-V grade, (b) VI-VIII grade, (c) IX-X grade. Education beyond three grades may follow (d) a special fourth grade with combination of essentials subjects.

In our opinion, for a predominantly Muslim country like Bangladesh where madrasah education has been creating citizens with different frame of mind, the proper blend of secular and religious education is possible with scope for specialized higher education in theology which is needed in the modern world. As such a course

of study upto secondary level has been suggested in the CHART.

The chart shows the system of education we may follow as subject curriculum in secular, madrasah systems combinedly upto secondary level. We need to modernize our education system. Students at primary, secondary and higher secondary levels of general education are over-burdened with subjects of study. This calls for rational modification. Our proposed syllabus

may suffice this modification up to secondary level. We cannot lose sight of the fact that Bangladesh is a country of at least 150m people now. These people are highly divided in respect of belief, custom and economic stratification etc. In such a situation, the perception of democracy has been the victim of controversy and divisiveness. As a result, there is not much national cohesion and consensus among citizens. This has

Grades	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Mother language	5	5	5	5	5	5	5+1	5+1	5+1	5+1
2. English	1	1	1	2	2	3+2	3+2	3+2	4+1	4+1
3. Mathematics	3	3	3	4	4	5+1	5+1	5+1	5+1	5+1
4. History	-	-	-	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
5. Geography	-	-	-	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
6. Religion	-	-	-	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
7. Physical Science	-	-	-	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
8. Physics	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	4	4
9. Chemistry	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	4	4
10. Biology	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	4	4
11. Computer	-	-	2	2	2	3	3	3	3	3
12. Physical Education, Music, Games, etc.	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
13. Nature study	3	3	3	3	3	3	2	3	3	1
14. Shop	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	1
Total hours per week per grade upto secondary level	20	20	22	20	30	30	34	35	40	40

adversely affected the growth potential of the country.

Bangladesh needs to streamline its chaotic system of various forms of education to achieve the constitutional objective. In this regard we may make the following broad suggestions to be pursued:

- Equitable opportunity for all citizens including ethnic groups.
- Single form for all upto class V.
- No dead-end institution.
- Unhindered advance after class V to any higher level of education according to choice of learner.
- Co-educational institutions.
- Educational institutions to be tuition-free as far as possible to cater to the needs of the nation.
- Requirement of teachers to be determined at least five years ahead.
- Teachers at all levels are to be treated as the window of dignity of the nation.
- No sanctioned post of teachers should remain vacant for a single day.
- Officials of non-educational cadres should not be placed in management and control areas of education.

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The humanitarian crisis of Myanmar's survivors



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

NATURAL disasters are something that the people of Bangladesh are familiar with. Floods and cyclones, death and devastation, associated with such occurrences, have become part of our lives. Over the last fifty years, in addition to many tornadoes, we have had massive cyclones that have at times killed more than one hundred thousand unfortunate people at a time and tens of thousands of livestock. I recall in this context, the cyclones of the sixties and the monster at the end of 1970. An entire generation of people living near the coast was seriously affected. After this was the disaster in the first quarter of 1991 and finally Sidr that hit our south western districts late last year.

There have also been periodical floods where tens of millions of people have had to undergo the misery of inundation. In fact, during some years, as in 2007, we have had not one, but two floods.

These disasters have wiped out crops and decimated infrastructure. They have also retarded socio-economic growth and development and halted the reduction of poverty. Such calamities also led to internal migration from rural areas to urban centres, thereby taxing further the existing weak infrastructure in the cities. Health centres and educational institutions have also suffered and we have had to begin all over again. For successive governments tackling natural disasters have been daunting tasks. Nevertheless, over time, the

resilient people of Bangladesh and the relevant authorities in charge of disaster management have learnt how to prepare themselves not only for effective tackling of natural disasters through pre-emptive measures but also in the carrying out of post-disaster relief and rehabilitation programmes. Our expertise in this regard was best exemplified during last year's cyclone Sidr. Careful planning and urgent steps enabled us to save tens of thousands of lives (including

nized fittingly by the UN agency FAO and the then Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was awarded the important Ceres medal.

Last year after cyclone Sidr, as had happened during 1991, our government received cooperation and technical aid from the international community. This helped us to tackle the emergency and the short terms aspects of the emergency successfully. The assistance received by our armed forces (in charge of coordinating relief) from

toll has risen to nearly 31,000 with another 33,000 missing. Relevant UN agencies have however suggested that the death toll is over 1,00,000 with about 220,000 missing. Their statistics are based on informal assessments carried out in 55 townships in the ravaged delta. The UN is also claiming that almost 1.21 million people have been directly affected by the cyclone and that the survivors face a massive crisis unless they are urgently delivered aid. It has also

capacity to handle the scale of the relief efforts needed. Richard Horsey, a spokesman for UN humanitarian operations, has quite understandably added that an international presence was needed in Myanmar to look at the logistics of getting boats, helicopters and trucks into the worst affected delta area. There is apparently a critical bottleneck that must be overcome (due to breakdown in road communications).

Unfortunately, unlike

It is difficult for us in Bangladesh to understand this form of governance. Myanmar should have taken a lead out of our book of experience and acted accordingly. It is also disappointing that some of the other neighbours of Myanmar belonging to ASEAN could not influence Myanmar to take a more pro-active and positive attitude immediately after the disaster.

Nevertheless, it is fortunate that there has been a delayed realisation within Myanmar policymakers that US aid should be allowed entry into the affected area. It has nothing to do with politics. It is all about saving precious lives and bridging mental borders. USA has the necessary structure and capacity available in the region and can provide the required logistical support. This will reduce the prospect of a humanitarian crisis and needs to be availed of. That is all.

In this context, it would be pertinent to thank our Administration for responding quickly to the humanitarian disaster in the Irrawaddy delta. The scope and nature of our assistance could be further expanded by including the dispatch of 5,000 tons of potato by sea from Chittagong. That would provide immediate succour to the starving population. We could also send half a million sachets of oral rice saline powder for those suffering from diarrhoea. Two other items could be collected and sent -- mosquito nets and lungis (worn by both men and women in Myanmar).

We must all work together within the BIMSTEC family to ensure that the natural disaster does not turn into a humanitarian catastrophe of genuinely epic proportions. Myanmar faces a daunting task ahead. Many of its roads and bridges have been washed away, and if heavy rain continues in the coming days, it will further complicate relief efforts in the delta of despair.

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POST BREAKFAST

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ing hundred of fishermen), prevent the spread of post-disaster diseases and also to provide necessary relief. As a result the people living in the cyclone-hit areas were able to receive on time basic food, shelter, clean drinking water and medicine. Many did not die unnecessarily due to lack of care.

The classical case was the manner in which the then Awami League government dealt with the terrible prolonged floods of 1998. Nearly 40 million people were directly affected. Most of them lost their food reserves, many of their thatched huts and their livestock. Foreign analysts predicted that at least fifty thousand would die. That did not happen. Good management at the ground level by the then administrative structure helped the government to overcome the disaster. Contrary to predictions less than thirty perished -- mostly from drowning and snakebites. It was an example of good governance and coordination at work. The contribution of the government was recog-

the contingent of the US armed forces dispatched to Bangladesh for this purpose, was most useful and timely. The availability of US air transport permitted the joint operation to deliver urgently required food, tents, drinking water, water purification tablets and medicines to villages as well as isolated shoals. This was vital given the total breakdown of communication infrastructure and our inherent resource constraint. The private sector and the NGOs also stepped in to carry out their own relief operations based on donations. The whole nation worked as one and we could overcome the crisis.

I am writing today about natural disasters because of what happened on 3 May in the southwestern Irrawaddy delta of Myanmar. Cyclone Nargis decided not to tread the cataclysmic path of Sidr and instead slammed into Myanmar. The enormity of the tragedy is slowly unraveling itself. The state owned TV in Yangon has officially reported that the death

been reported that more than two weeks after cyclone Nargis struck, only about one-third of survivors have received any aid so far. The military government is being blamed for this.

Sarah Ireland, UK-based Oxfam's East Asia director has also claimed that the disaster was a "perfect storm" which bore "all the factors" for a "public health catastrophe." The UN, which has launched a \$187m appeal for aid, has stated that the worst-affected areas are receiving deliveries of aid only sporadically, with correspondingly saying some aid is reaching survivors, but not nearly enough. The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies have also commented that thousands of people are homeless and living in pitiable conditions. Hospitals, schools, monasteries and other large buildings are also crammed with the displaced.

The aid agencies have also warned that the Myanmar government does not have the

Bangladesh, our neighbour has been handling the evolving post-disaster crisis poorly. Paranoid about possible external influence and desirous of clinging on to power at any cost, the ruling junta has been slow in giving visas and allowing foreign experts to travel to the disaster area and managing relief operations. We have also seen how wrong priorities have been accorded and focus given more on holding a stage-managed referendum on controversial constitutional principles rather than activating grass-roots relief operations and the burial of the dead. The insensitive Myanmar Administration has also been insisting that others can give aid but only official Myanmar personnel will distribute it without any scope for accountability. Despite the small window of opportunity for providing meaningful relief, such an attitude can only be interpreted as a desperate attempt by that government to turn the relief effort into a charm offensive for the unpopular regime.

Disposable commodity called editor



KULDIP NAYAR
writes from New Delhi

THIS is not the first time that an editor in India has been sacked unceremoniously. Nor will it be the last time. But the case of M.J. Akbar, who was till recently the Editor of The Asian Age, raises certain fundamental questions. Does the owner have the right to dismiss his editor whenever he wants or however he wants?

Akbar was on way to his office a few mornings ago, as usual, when he heard on his mobile a staff member telling him that his name had been removed from the print line. He went to the office, picked up his papers and walked out. There were no second thoughts by the owner, nor any letter of explanation -- much less an apology.

I believe the owner, a senior Congressman from Hyderabad, was under pressure from party president Sonia Gandhi to get rid of Akbar who, according to 10 Janpath, was vehemently opposed to her.

This reminds me of the days before the emergency. I was then working with The Indian Express. Ramnath Goenka, its proprietor, would tell me that he had been told again and again by several top

Congress leaders to sack me. At that time, he was in a mood to take on Mrs. Indira Gandhi and, hence, the question of my removal did not arise.

In any case, the emergency was imposed soon after, and the press just became a palpable commodity where it did not count for anything, not only because of its servile obedience but also because of the press censorship.

The Editors' Guild of India took up the case of Akbar at my initiative

Verghese through the Press Council of India. One had to compromise with the management and, in the other's case the government dissolved the Press Council.

The message it sent out was that an editor was a disposable commodity. He accordingly trimmed his sails. After the emergency, things became worse for the editors because, when proprietors found that they had caved in before the government. They (the proprietors) thought that the editors only

remember C.R. Irani, managing director of The Statesman, asking me: "Why don't ministers call me instead of you, because I can do much more than the editor?"

Yet Akbar's case raises important questions. The Constitution guarantees the freedom of expression. Jawaharlal Nehru even had legislation enacted to ensure that working journalists were not fired at the proprietors' will. He thought that journalists, while pursuing their jobs, could hurt the people in

tune. If this is so, then the time has come to reconsider the original constitutional guarantee.

Since neither the rulers nor the proprietors have respect for the sanctity of press freedom, the nation faces a challenge that a democratic society has to take up in the interest of its polity, which has the free press as one of the pillars on which the structure stands.

In fact, this principle was defeated by Mrs. Indira Gandhi,

BETWEEN THE LINES

The question is, if the freedom of expression is to be used as a weapon by the proprietors through journalists on whose heads the contract hangs like the sword of Damocles, what happens to the freedom of the press, which the Constitution framers had guaranteed? They could not have imagined a time when a piper would call the tune.

this week. There was hardly any speaker who did not express regret over the fate of Akbar. A committee has been constituted, not only to look into the proprietor-editor relationship, but also into the misuse of power by journalists who allegedly took money for using or not using news items.

Talking generally, other editors have also been fired in the past. Frank Moraes, Khushwant Singh, George Verghese, Pran Chopra, S. Mulgaokar, H.K. Dua and Vinod Mehta have all been victims of political pressure. If I recall correctly, the only two editors out of these who joined issue with the proprietor were: Pran, directly against The Statesman, and

needed pressure which, when applied, would make them surrender abjectly.

The proprietors and the government came closer because the government found it could deal with them more easily since they had other interests. Editors, increasingly, were reduced to the position of a liaison person between the government and the proprietor. Proprietors were now seen at government VIP receptions, banquets and such other places, which had previously been the exclusive domain of the editors.

The profile of the proprietors also changed. The new generation returning from abroad was sophisticated and socially ambitious. I

the Establishment and they could, in turn, punish journalists through their proprietors.

In a way, he insulated those working in the pursuit of reporting and commenting. This practice has, however, been circumvented by the scheme of contracts which proprietors have introduced.

The question is, if the freedom of expression is to be used as a weapon by the proprietors through journalists on whose heads the contract hangs like the sword of Damocles, what happens to the freedom of the press, which the Constitution framers had guaranteed?

They could not have imagined a time when a piper would call the

Nehru's daughter, when she first talked about "commitment" and then imposed the emergency to gag the press.

The scenario after her departure has become grimmer. Except for a small interlude when the Janata government was in power -- and it was such a divided house that it did not know what its right hand was doing, never mind the left -- the nexus between the proprietor and the government became more intense. Critics of the government would not be hired whatever the colour of the regime, whether it was the Congress or the BJP.

Still worse for the Fourth Estate was the incipient influence of the

corporate sector. Freedom of the

press began to have another meaning: the corporate sector was more important than the government. Now it calls the tune. What sells is the corporate sector's principle of peddling goods for maximum profit, and the press has duplicated the same thing.

While journalism was a profession at one time, it has now been now reduced to an industry.

Newspapers are a product, just like a soap or talcum powder. No idealism is involved and no social obligation is respected. It is just what sells that counts.

The result is that the press as the propagator of ideas -- TV networks are worse -- is more or less dead. The media is now simply a vehicle for title tattle. Stars in film and in the cricket field are the icons for the media, and you can see them splashed all over newspapers and nauseatingly repeated on TV screens.

The casualty in this whole process has been the credibility of the media. People believe less and less in the printed word and what they see on the screen. They are confused and lost.

One thing is sure: the media has lost credibility, which it cannot get back. People do not trust it any more. Its right to advocate the aspirations of the common man has been forfeited. If the flame of press freedom were to ever burn again, many Akbars will come back.

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For a cohesive blend of all types of education