

Floods around the corner

Early warning sounded

WE believe, given the latest information, the flood situation seems to be unfolding rather rapidly in the country. We should face the facts squarely that large areas under Netrakona, Pabna, Rangpur, Faridpur and Khulna districts are getting inundated as water level of the Padma, the Jamuna and the Teesta is rising steadily. Already 10,000 people have been affected in Faridpur and hundreds of acres of cropland have gone under water. In Khulna district a number of embankments have been washed away by floodwater thereby rendering hundreds of people homeless.

The Flood Forecasting and Warning Centre (FFWC) has warned that flooding of low-lying areas in Munshiganj, Manikganj, Faridpur, Madaripur, Shariatpur, Dohar and Nawabganj of Dhaka district is likely to continue. At the same time, the water level of the Brahmaputra-Jamuna is likely to start rising again after dropping off for two days.

It is an established fact that flood is a yearly phenomenon in this country but some floods turn out to be more menacing than others. Therefore, no way can we sit around and watch from the distance, as water level will go up. The situation is aggravated by the intermittent rainfall and cascading water from the hilly areas on the other side of the border. Since the rainy season is expected to continue till September, we apprehend floods might take a turn for the worse in the coming weeks. While hoping for the best, we must at least be prepared for the worst.

The district authorities need to come out of the denial mode about the imminent threat of flooding. Once the reality is faced in its true perspective, appropriate measures will follow in terms of evacuation of marooned families from near the embankments or riverbanks. At the same time shelter houses need to be made ready with food, medicines, clothes and emergency healthcare. The government should allow itself sufficient lead time to formulate an effective operational strategy and act accordingly to provide succour to the flood affected people.

We also urge the water resources ministry, or for that matter, the meteorological authority to place flood forecasting mechanism on a stronger footing in coordination with neighbouring countries so that we are in a better position to effectively analyse flood trends and calibrate our responses accordingly.

A useful scheme at risk

Raise salary of community school teachers

THE grim prospect of seeing the community schools closing down entirely is becoming a reality. Already such schools in 10 districts have been unofficially closed. And the reason is that the teachers are no longer able to make both ends meet with the paltry sum that they get as pay. One is at a loss to understand how such a meagre amount of Tk1200 was determined as their monthly pay in the first place? The pattern would appear even more ridiculous when one considers that Tk. 500 was the pay of these teachers almost a decade ago, and increased to the current level of 1200 from Tk 750 in 2007.

The idea behind setting up the community schools was laudably need-based. Through this the underprivileged children could be brought under the mass education programme. But what the government seems to forget is that while it wants to offer certain services almost at no cost basis, perhaps the most important input, good teachers and quality teaching, do have a minimum cost. And if the teachers cannot have the bare minimum to survive, why any of them, who had gone through a selection process, and most of whom are graduates, should wish to serve as community teachers at all? They are paid less than peons, or government office drivers, or even day labourers.

The community teachers had in the past made efforts to make their point. But they have been only partly successful. The amount fixed in 2007 is absurd given the manifold rise in the cost of every single essential item. One wonders why the finance ministry has shown no interest on the proposal of primary and mass education ministry, which had recommended an increase in the salary.

The education sector gets the chunk of the national budget, but the plight of the community teachers is rather pathetic, to say the least. There is very little doubt as to who will suffer in the long run. No doubt the quality of the teaching at the very basic level, which is very poor even now, will suffer even more. But more than that, a million children, particularly in the remote areas of the country that the scheme brings under its ambit, will be deprived from the benefits of primary education. The consequence is imponderable.

The finance ministry should wake up to this reality, sooner rather than later.

The mystery of nuclear proliferation



M. ABDUL HAFIZ

IN 2004, a scandal originating from the nuclear Shangrila of Pakistan's Kahuta was first spotted by the IAEA, the international nuclear watchdog. It exploded like a bombshell, and an embarrassed Pakistani establishment quickly swept the whole shady affair by making Dr. Abdul Qadeer Khan, the nuclear scientist behind Pakistan's bomb, responsible.

Now, making a volteface, the same man has stirred up fresh controversy with his sensational disclosures while appearing in a television channel after the restrictions imposed on his access to media were relaxed by the newly elected government few weeks ago.

In interviews to foreign media and local television channels, Dr. Qadeer Khan said that the military had played a direct role in transferring centrifuges capable of enriching uranium to North Korea in 2000, alleging that

Yet, it will be difficult for Pakistan's new dispensation to conclusively deal with the issue. The mystery around the scandal has only thickened over the years. There is also the problem of public perception, with Dr. Qadeer built into a national hero by some political parties and presented as such to people -- even though his true role in developing Pakistan's troublesome nuclear bomb is lately being questioned and appears somewhat dubious. But the fact that Dr. Khan enjoys such a status provides him a measure of immunity.

President Musharraf was himself involved in the transfer and had full knowledge of it.

In support of his remarks, he pointed out that it would have been impossible to send sensitive nuclear equipment aboard military or foreign aircraft usually used for the purpose. He regretted that he was made a convenient scapegoat for the sordid affair after being coerced into making a false confession for protecting national interest, and that he was promised freedom in return.

Earlier in the month, government circles were seized with panic that Dr. Khan's revelations would bring new reprisals from the international community, as well as revive concern over Pakistan's exact role in the proliferation and safety of its "strategic assets."

However, fierce denials that Dr. Qadeer's accusations have any factual basis have already begun

to come in, although there are few to believe them, because there is no reason to doubt the bits about the generals knowing about, and facilitating, Khan's nuclear she-nanigans. Despite the generals' tantrum at the disclosures, to many it's a good thing that no one believes their denials.

For, if the generals are believed on this count, it will mean that the military is so incompetent, so easily duped, so staggeringly clueless that its most prized assets -- nuclear paraphernalia -- could be merrily shipped around the world without its knowledge. According to Dr. Khan's revelation, the military of a nuclear power is at least spared of that slur.

Looking at the issue from a neutral perspective, it cannot but be admitted that, even without his statements in self-defence, he (Dr. Khan) could not have been able to single-handedly transport a centrifuge or any other nuclear

parts to North Korea or any other country.

Smuggling such items abroad obviously needed the support and cooperation of a larger ring of participants in the exercise. The possibility of such a ring including intelligence agencies and military personnel were hinted at earlier, but to no avail.

The taboos that still prevent reporting on military involvement in any kind of criminal act have been a key factor in the fact that the many questions lurking in the minds of investigative reporters about the televised confession four years ago couldn't be brought to light. By breaking that taboo, Dr. Qadeer has, in one sense, served a useful purpose.

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Dr. Qadeer Khan: The man behind the proliferation?

built into a national hero by some political parties and presented as such to people -- even though his true role in developing Pakistan's troublesome nuclear bomb is lately being questioned and appears somewhat dubious. But the fact that Dr. Khan enjoys such a status provides him a measure of immunity. Voices are, off late, being raised in Pakistan to not only free him from house arrest but also to rehabilitate him in the society by according him honour due to a hero.

As a result, it is doubtful at this stage that a fresh investigation can be launched to enquire into the extent of his complicity in the proliferation scandal -- notwithstanding the possibility that even Washington may be willing to support such effort.

Many, however, have come to

understand that the whole dirty matter is like that, and it is made dirtier by over-churning its ugly details.

It is now rather fashionable in the West to denounce countries like Pakistan for the nuclear leakages to "rouge states" -- totally ignoring the fact the advanced countries, arms dealers and mafia operatives are much more responsible for proliferation activities in spite of umpteen number of sanctions, checks, inspections, restrictions and treaties.

The atomic era has been privy to the growth of nuclear arsenals around the world, especially in Israel, through the most clandestine means, while the Big-5, the self appointed nuclear arbiters, looked the other way.

Brig (ret) Hafiz is former DG of BISS.

The headmaster of a school for scandal



M.J. AKBAR

IN the end it's the jokes that get you, isn't it? SMS, that deadly virus, has been spreading sound bites like "Sting is King." Its first cousin, email, has been circulating emotional pleas to the heartless finance minister: "Don't you know how old MPs are? They have bad backs! Can't you print Rs 100,000 notes instead of measly little thousand-rupee notes? Do you know how heavy a sack of 30 crores is?" There are heart-rending stories of MPs breaking down because they did not know how to take their loot, collected in Delhi, back to the security of their small towns.

One email was untouched by levity and weighed by hurt and anger. Dr. Manmohan Singh had repeated Guru Gobind Singh's famous battle hymn, in which he asked the Lord to ensure that "shubh karman mein kabhu na darun (may I never be afraid to do right)" before the debate began. How could the prime minister have recited this just before he launched into unprecedented "dushkarman (misdeeds)"?

The prime minister won his battle in July. He may have lost the

war that is only a few months away. He won the confidence of the House only to lose the trust of the nation.

Dr. Manmohan Singh's reputation for personal honesty was the last remaining undiluted asset of the Congress after four years of government. The voter did not ever believe his ministers to be clean. Some of them have established fresh records in corruption. But he was certain that the prime minister was an honest man.

After the cash-for-votes-and-hide-the-tape scandal, Manmohan Singh is just another sullied politician, willing to feast on Grub Street in the company of the most famous bagmen, and travel the Gravy Train chatting with fixers and pushers in order to remain in office.

As the cash disbursers have proved, the Congress is full of calculators. It needed a mathematician. A strategist would have analysed the cost-benefit ratio and sabotaged the cash-and-carry operation on grounds of common sense. What has been won is nothing compared to what will be lost.

There is enough evidence that the voter punishes corruption and rewards probity. Leaders like

Buddhadeb Bhattacharya, Naveen Patnaik, Nitish Kumar and Narendra Modi have won support because they are believed to be personally honest. It may not be the only reason for re-election, but it is a primary reason. The Congress had that advantage in the image of Dr. Singh. That reputation has self-destructed.

Inflation had already weakened the voter's confidence in Dr. Singh's abilities as an economist. His second asset was wiped off the books in July.

The prime minister cannot hold his nose above the stink anymore. He was personally involved in the purchase of MPs. He was visibly uncertain at his own dinner on the eve of the debate, despite the fact that Shibu Soren had already been bought in what should be called the real "1-2-3 Agreement" -- the cash-stoked coal portfolio for Soren, deputy chief ministership of Jharkhand for his son, and a second ministerial berth for a party MP in Delhi. By Monday morning, the prime minister was smiling, and waving the V sign as he entered parliament.

Late at night he received word from his money-managers that

enough MPs had switched, or been neutralised, to ensure a comfortable victory. Parliament had become a sleaze house, but so what? The mask of morality used to fool us for four years now lies in that great receptacle called the dustbin of history.

There is a problem when you tread on sleaze. You can slip on it, hurting yourself badly, even as your fall becomes the source of cynical laughter.

The prime minister's face turned visibly ashen when three BJP MPs threw bundles of currency notes into the well of the House. For the nation, that was the turning point of the debate. They may or may not have understood the intricacies of the Hyde Act. But they did recognise the corruption that had been hidden.

Sections of the urban middle class, which welcomed the idea of closer relations with America (you could call them the Green Card Party of India), felt utterly betrayed by a man they had trusted, and besmirched by corruption.

In the process, Dr. Manmohan Singh has one remarkable achievement: he has united the opposition. For the last three decades, this has been the most

difficult act in Indian politics. The irony is that he subverted what Mrs. Sonia Gandhi had woven in order to bring the Congress back to power: she had used the Gujarat riots to create a formidable coalition against the BJP.

Dr. Singh has destroyed that framework by breaking with the Left and turning the Congress into an irredeemably right-wing organisation, with a foreign policy to match its economic thrust. This turn to the right will change the character of the Congress irrevocably.

By opting for the Samajwadi Party in Uttar Pradesh, he has catapulted a dynamic agent of social change, Mayawati, into the leadership of the Third Front. Mayawati is the only regional leader with a national base, for she has a constituency in every constituency of India. She can lend Dalit support to an ally in Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh as easily as in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Maharashtra. Her candidates do not have to win; by contesting, they slice enough Congress votes to ensure its defeat. It would have made more sense for the Congress to keep Mayawati as any ally, but that would need a leader who was a mathematician instead of a cash-broker.

The government is trying very hard to "prove" that Mayawati is corrupt. Mrs. Sonia Gandhi and Dr. Singh must be regretting deeply that they let her off the in the Taj-market development case during those happy days when they were attempting a deal with her instead of Mulayam Singh.

The important fact is that Mayawati's voters are unimpressed by such accusations against their leader. She has empowered them and they are grateful to her.

Corruption is not a sudden swerve into perdition for the Congress: the first jeep scandal (an extremely innocuous, by today's standards, desire for vehicles) broke out before the first general election in 1952. But flexibility in election expenditure is one thing; the purchase of elected MPs at exorbitant rates quite another. Venality turned into a rot when P.V. Narasimha Rao purchased Shibu Soren and his MPs in order to save his minority government.

Dr. Manmohan Singh was finance minister, and no one heard the mildest protest from him. Perhaps he thought that he could repeat what his guru Narasimha Rao had managed. What was it that Marx said? History repeats itself, first time as tragedy and the second time as farce. But Dr. Singh does not read Marx.

Power seems to have changed Dr. Singh's character and temperament in crucial ways. Was it too much to expect some grace from him in this purchased victory? Instead, in his reply to the House he descended to the personal. That is not done.

But what is the point of expecting decorum when parliament has been turned into a School for Scandal?

M.J. Akbar is Director, Covert Publications.

Manmohan government survives ... for now



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

EVEN before the dust raised by the confidence vote in the Indian parliament, that saw the survival of the Dr. Manmohan Singh government in tense and dramatic conditions, could settle down, unexpected incidents were unfolding in the political scene of the world's largest democracy.

The gravity of such occurrences is such that the outcome of the confidence vote has not ended the speculations on the raging suspense about the shape

MATTERS AROUND US

Indian politics is witnessing a polarisation as a new front has also sprung up in the backdrop of the confidence vote with secular parties including BSP of Mayawati of Uttar Pradesh, who aspires to become prime minister. Other developments as well are also discernible. All these promise an eventful phase in Indian politics in days to come, where clean politics and ethical standard in public life will also be a factor against the backdrop of the confidence vote.

of things, but new developments are unfolding, indicating an interesting phase in the days ahead even though the national elections are not round the corner.

Any vote of confidence is understandably a matter of enormous interest in any Westminster type of democracy, and the balloting in the lower house of the Indian parliament (Lok Sabha) was no exception. On the contrary, the result of the voting was so unpredictable that excitement and curiosity had

reached fever pitch till the outcome was announced.

In 1999, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government lost the confidence of the house by a single vote, and at that time too the matter was the cynosure of all eyes. This time, the interest was much more for the simple reason that a much talked about agreement with the world's only superpower was at the heart of the nerve-racking political developments, and discussions and debates surrounding the confidence vote

transcended Indian boundaries.

The balloting in 1999 was essentially a matter of domestic developments. But, this time, the ramifications of the situation were far wider since a very sensitive and widely debated issue was inextricably linked with the existence of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) coalition government headed by the Congress. As such, the confidence vote has myriad implications for Indian and the international arena.

The voting was seen as "too

close to call," but it turned to be an easier win for the government than many had anticipated. The incidents that occurred in the house, like flaunting of cash by the opposition BJP members charging that these were given as a bribe by the ruling high-ups, were also something never seen before.

Government circles denied allegations that Sonia Gandhi's political adviser Ahmed Patel and the ruling coalition's new found ally Samajwadi Party's Amar Singh offered these bribes. But the allegations -- regardless of their authenticity -- represents sordid conditions hitherto unheard of in India at such a level.

Many had called this as an ignominy for democracy, and a large section of the media also smelled a rat in the cross-party voting by several opposition members. It is difficult to vouch for the rationale of the cash that

was shown on the floor of the house, but there is hardly any doubt that "horse-trading" did take place in the critically important voting.

As expected, the BJP has expelled eight of its parliament members for voting against the party line. Two members of the Tengu Desam party also faced the same punishment. This will undoubtedly have an impact on the democratic pattern of India.

But more interesting is the melodramatic developments relating to the leftists, who are credited for strict adherence to party diktats. The leftists, whose withdrawal of support from the UPA government triggered the confidence vote, acted swiftly against senior party leader Somnath Chatterjee, who presided over the voting.

His CPI (M) party wanted him to relinquish the Speaker's chair and vote against the motion, which Chatterjee was unwilling to abide because of his "neutral"

position. It is clear that the communists do not take things kindly when members go against party discipline, no matter how important they are.

No doubt, the win in the confidence vote is a big shot in the arm for the UPA government, particularly for alliance chief Sonia Gandhi and Prime Minister Singh. They are ardent supporters of the nuclear deal, which still has to see the light of day since clock is ticking for the Bush administration.

Barring the time constraint, there is no major obstacle for the American side. The hurdles are on the Indian side, and the government has certainly overcome a major one, although it is not certain if the accord will finally be implemented. Nevertheless, the ruling alliance has survived a test of paramount significance, and it can now go ahead with it.

Would the election have taken place earlier had the government lost the confidence motion? The

conditions also brought strange bedfellows together, like the communally perceived BJP and the secular leftists voting against the secular government.

For the communists, they were hell-bent on preventing the government from taking the country too close to the Americans, and for the BJP and allies it was opposition for the sake of opposition.

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Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury is a senior journalist and analyst of international affairs.