The looming water crisis

The reasons for the water crisis are the rate at which its population is increasing and the myopic planning, muddled policies and misguided perceptions. As towns sprouted, no thought was given to the emerging mismatch between demand and supply. Because of this Dhaka, situated on the river Buriganga, has to think of piping in water from the river Jamuna.

MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

ATER is fundamental to the survival of human beings but, every summer, Bangladesh discovers that life with water shortages is increasingly becoming commonplace. This year it has become the country's most serious crisis, more than dal-bhat. From being a necessity, water has now become a luxury.

With pipes running dry, our urban centres are turning to tankers provided by Wasa, which cannot cope with the demand. Villagers continue their old practice of digging deeper and deeper for decreasing groundwater. The tragedy is that Bangladesh has enough water for its 150 million people, but has not made enough effort to make it available to them.

The reasons for the water crisis are the rate at which its population is increasing and the myopic planning, muddled policies and misguided perceptions. As towns sprouted, no thought was given to the emerging mismatch between demand and supply. Because of this Dhaka, situated on the river Buriganga, has to think of piping in

water from the river Jamuna.

Ground water was pushed as a solution, while storage and distribution projects were neglected. Industrialisation saw no checks on pollution of water resources. Industries are not obliged to re-use water, and continue to be the biggest polluters along with pesticide and fertiliser-ridden discharge from fields.

As Bangladesh became urbanised, traditional systems of managing water resources were thrown by the wayside. Today, the very development, growth and security it sought to build while neglecting the ecological side effects are under threat. Most shockingly, even as the country continues to face severe crisis of water in both agriculture and household use, no projects for utilisation of water from river basins have been undertaken till now.

Bangladesh has an annual surface flow of about 1073 million acre feet (MAF), of which about 870 MAF are received from India as inflowand 203 MAF as rainfall. This is enough to cover the entire country to a depth of 9.14m. Another statistics says that about 132 MAF of rainfall are lost in evaporation and the rest flows to the Bay of Bengal. This under-

scores the fact that investment in storage and distribution needs a boost to halt ground water depletion.

There is also the need for technology to increase efficiency. It is time Bangladesh shifted from the concept of yield per hectare to yield per cubic metre of water. While waterscarce regions all over the world adopt microand drip irrigation, micro irrigation accounts for zero percent in Bangladesh as against 49 percent in Israel. Farmers in Meghalaya have devised a drip irrigation method by stringing together split bamboo sticks that carry water over hundreds of metres to betel and black pepper orchards.

At the macro level, the government needs to redefine the need-availability paradigm. Demand management now means "redesigning and restructuring demand" to suit need and availability. We have to think about which type of crops we should grow where after assessing the availability of water.

While industrialists here are rich enough to support a several crore taka bottled water industry and consumers can also afford the high price, no effort either by the government or private entrepreneurs has been made so far to conserve surface water. Uttara lake in Dhaka, a water body almost 5 km long and 200 m wide, could have been a pure surface water source along with Gulshan-Banani-Baridhara lake. The enormity of the crisis dictates urgency -- in thought and action.

The water crisis is the single biggest crisis facing Bangladesh today, and the stress is showing. Reports on TV and in newspapers reveal the horrendous water problem in Dhaka city. It is most disquieting to see that

some areas are going without water supply for days. In such an appalling situation, Dhaka Wasa has the capacity of supplying 194 crore litres per day against the demand for 205 crore litres, as revealed by their sources. It is most unlikely that with just a shortfall of 11 crore litres there could be such a crisis.

Dhaka's ground water aquifers were emptied so drastically that harmful deposits and toxic substances rushed in, posing threat to human health. These aquifers take decades to recharge, while population growth is exponential. With pipes drying up, the search for water is frenzied. With Buriganga water polluted beyond redemption, Dhaka Wasa can now supply only one crore thirty lakh litres with 45 pumps now being used to lift water from underground. With more tankers muscling their way into Dhaka city, the situation is set to deteriorate.

The situation is no better in rural Bangladesh. Despite the spread of bore wells, the number of "no source" villages has burgeoned because of contamination, drying up of sources and system breakdowns. Water van is the most visible evidence of the country's thirst even in villages. Rural Bangladesh, yet to be acquainted with water-tap, is worse off as groundwater levels have plunged in almost all the districts.

The demand for water -- for drinking, irrigating fields, industries -- is skyrocketing. Unhappily, instead of focusing on longterm solutions, every government has found it easier to allow exploitation of groundwater. True, the country's food security was propelled by the "tubewell revolution," but it led to long-term damage as the pump culture has wrought havoc on

Digging deeper to his dismay?

the hydrological cycle. How did we get here? Since the 1990s, service but get into action. the governments have focused only on demand --getting pipe lines to more and more places -- but the crux of the problem, supply, has not been addressed. Most cities and towns are not based on river-banks, and rapid pace of urbanisation has led to the drying up of traditional water sources like tanks and lakes. Dependence increases as surface water sources are sullied by sewage and industrial pollution. The past governments were largely to blame for their failure to assess the gravity of the situation and curb siphoning of groundwater. And the present Al-led government that came to power with some

firm pledges must not indulge in lip-

In view of the lingering crisis that seems to be increasing by the day, the government needs to introduce measure like drip- and micro irrigation systems, ensure roof-water harvesting in cities and towns, arrest leakage from pipeline networks -- which accounts for huge wastage -- and must design a demand to match the availability of water. This essentially means that policies should be tailored to curtail demand in agriculture and domestic sectors.

Md. Asadullah Khan is a former teacher of physics and Controller of Examinations, BUET. e-mail: aukhanbd@gmail.com

Iran's pro-active foreign policy

It is clear that, for Tehran, the most important step right now, is not only to invest in the Middle East and in its regional geopolitical environment -- which encompasses Central Asia and the Caspian Sea region -- but also to extend its influence beyond its traditional area of reach through political-economic alliances.

MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

RAN has been in the news for the last few weeks -- particularly so after the recent overture made towards it by the new US administration. US policymakers are taking special interest knowing that Iran's neutrality is crucial not only for continuing stability in Iraq, as the US disengages from that country, but also to contain the deterioration in Afghanistan, a consequence of a resurgent Taleban. The US government has also said that it is going to join the talks between Iran and Britain, China, France, Germany and Russia over the Islamic Republic's nuclear program. Syria and Turkey have also lent their support to bring about a rapprochement between Iran and the USA.

Their efforts have, however, not been an instant success. Iranian clergy as well as their political leaderships till now have been playing hard to get and reiterating that their foreign policy is based on "morality" and "principles." Their political narrative suggests that they are not ready for concessions, particularly ahead of their June 12 presidential race.

Iran has a reputation of being cautious, and it is being especially so at this time. It has stressed on the need for concrete details as to the future dynamics of their expected relationship with the USA. Iran has also pointed out that it is not happy

that cooperation is being offered against the background of warnings that there might be more comprehensive sanctions if Iran does not toe the line.

It is this scenario that has persuaded Iran to seek its own strategic path to increase its political capital and international standing. Reports coming out of Tehran indicate that Iranian economic cooperation and energy policy within the developing world is now being used as part of its foreign policy planning. This is being dovetailed within its quest for regional hegemony in the greater Middle East and its position vis-à-vis the international community in the context of the ongoing nuclear crisis.

It is clear that, for Tehran, the most important step right now, is not only to invest in the Middle East and in its regional geopolitical environment -- which encompasses Central Asia and the Caspian Sea region -- but also to extend its influence beyond its traditional area of reach through political-economic alliances.

This approach has led Iran to strengthen old alliances and seek new partners in a paradigm marked by diplomatic, political and economic global partnerships. In Asia, this has persuaded Tehran to expand its tactical realignment (by ditching North Korea) and reach out to less controversial countries, like China, Pakistan and India.



Reaching out to the world.

Iran, according to European analysts, also appears to be "investing heavily in existing structures to facilitate continental cooperation, trying to capitalise on the recent diplomatic and political gains obtained in the Caspian Sea area (where Tehran succeeded in consolidating an embryonic cooperation and security organisation with the neighbouring littoral states)." This has persuaded it to push for a greater role within the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). The SCO is a permanent intergovernmental organisation that was created in 2001, with six permanent members (China, Kazakhstan, Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan). Since 2003, five states have been granted observer status (Iran, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Mongolia). Iran is now lobbying with the permanent members to gain full permanent membership.

Iran is also focusing on its bilateral relations by leveraging its energy resources to create powerful economic incentives to increase state-to-state cooperation. An important example of this development was the recent finalisation of an agreement between Pakistan and Iran to proceed with the creation of the Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) pipeline. This so-called "peacepipeline" will be over a 2,600 kilometer long and will cost nearly \$7.4 billion. It will initially bring gas from Iran's South Pars field to Pakistan and India. Subsequently, there will also be consideration as to whether such transfer can include China. There has been US opposition to this scheme but it appears that it is very much on the cards.

Sources have also suggested that Pakistan-Iran energy cooperation will also include a \$60 million, 100 kilometer elec-

tric line that will allow Pakistan to import an extra 100 megawatts of electricity from Iran. Consolidating economic ties and increasing the level of inter-dependence with Pakistan is being seen by Iran as possessing high strategic value. It is also clear that Iran thinks that an economic alliance with key regional players, particularly, an emerging global power such as India, will have a highly positive impact both in terms of breaking the "policy of isolation" adopted against Iran, and will also gain for it additional leverage with regard to its stand on the nuclear program.

Cooperation with China is also assuming a strategic priority for Iran. Together with China and Malaysia, it has recently agreed on a joint development project of the Iranian Ressalat oil field. China and Iran have also just signed a Memorandum of Understanding to store Iranian oil in Chinese strategic reserves, which would further enhance economic relations and interdependence between the two countries, and which would tie Iranian oil exports to Chinese interests. Their twoway trade hit \$20 billion at the beginning of 2007. China is now Iran's top trade partner. Its support has also enabled Iran to effectively diminish its economic vulnerability to sanctions. It also guarantees, together with Russia, an increasingly friendly power within the UN Security Council.

Iran has also been monitoring the changes in bilateral relations between the USA and Venezuela and Bolivia and their impact on the political configuration within Latin America. Iran is fishing in this sea of troubled waters and understandably trying to establish important regional ties and partnerships, with the objective of improving its international credibility and relative power. With this objective, Iran has joined as an observer, at the invitation of Venezuela, the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA), which includes the

main allies of Venezuela and is perceived as an "alternative" to the US-supported Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA).

Although the majority of the Latin American cooperation projects are not substantial in scope or magnitude, the geopolitical significance of Iran's policy of penetration in the Latin American continent should not be understated, as it contributes to its international standing. President Obama's latest overtures during the OAS Summit in Trinidad appear to have taken this into account. Iran would obviously like to restore normal relations with the USA and some countries in Europe, but does not feel pushed about this right now.

Iranians no longer appear to be looking for "ideological counterparts." They have, instead, introduced within their foreign policy an element of practical pragmatism. I believed that the possible after-effects of such a strategy might eventually have implications at the local and the regional levels.

Regionally, the increased political capital and international standing might ultimately be leveraged by Iran in the greater Middle East, its most vital area of interest. Economic and political partnerships might serve as power enhancers for the Islamic Republic. Tehran is using its energy policy as a diplomatic tool not only to guarantee its integration within the international community but also to reduce its political isolation.

It is clear that Iran's proactive foreign policy is improving its position at the negotiating table by "reducing the cost of failed negotiations." It is also consistent with the desire of the Iranian theocracy of not demonstrating an early spring thaw but relying on initiatives that might create for Iran an alternative to an imposed solution.

Muhammad Zamir is a former Secretary and Ambassador and can be reached at mzamira@Dhaka.net.

Hope for better

The microcredit is showing her some light of hope. Her husband, two sons and their wives have joined hands in the family enterprise. She could give her only daughter in marriage to a good groom.

MANIK CHOWDHURY

LMOST on the Jessore-Narail highway, bordering Narail district, lies the quiet Bhangra village of Jessore Bagharpara upazila. Although it is along a highway there is little high sight or sound of development or modernism anywhere. Mostly a neglected habitat -old and poor. A narrow earthen road goes down inside from the highway. A dilapidated Durgamandap (Durgapuja shed) with old icons at the entry point hints of Hindu settlements. Then appear the golpata (large leaves), earthen tiles, hay sheds, leaning houses -- as if from eons apart. People are also eon-old. Not in age but by situation. Deprived of development facilities, trapped in the povertynet, they have been left in the middle of the past century.

But this deprivation, poverty and backwardness could not hold their will back, nor could steal all of their innocent smiles. They are working to earn a livelihood, to improve their condition. Microcredit has turned their will into entrepreneurship.

An expansive, clean compound in the middle of the dilapidated houses; here the family of Jamuna Rani Das and husband Ratan Chandro Das works with bamboo and cane. They are traditional craftsmen, meticulously manufacturing farmers' hats, baskets and winnows for centuries. These have been helpful items years. for the Bangalee peasants in the field, and in keeping and selling their produce. The Bangalee's cultural tradition is intermingled with these. But the carriers and holders of this otherwise rich tradition have turned too poor today!

dated then. Being victims of decades of deprivation their opportunities and capacities have gradually diminished. The first wave came in 1947 at the time of partition. Mass exodus from the communal riot ridden localities caused destabilisation. The impact on the countryside might not have been too sharp, but their ancestors had to bear the brunt of the 3-4 year-long unstable social condition that

The second wave came in 1971, during the war of liberation. However this wave touched all in the country not only the inhabitants of Bhangra, and more or less all took to rebuilding their habitats after independence. They also might have, but could not advance or settle like many others over these 37 post-independence

However, not all is lost in this race of time. Appreciation for their handicraft is still there in the villages. People are still used to the bamboo and cane baskets, winnows and farmer's hats in the absence of proper alternatives. The

Even 30/40 years ago they were not so family needed only some capital to be hard-core poor, and their houses and endeavouring. ASA's microcredit has settlements surely were not so dilapi- provided that new endeavour to keep the old work going.

Jamuna Rani's family is working with new enthusiasm for seven years. She took first loan of Tk 5,000, becoming a member of ASA Tolarampur branch. Then onwards, each year, the loan was repaid and a bigger loan taken, gradually increasing the volume of her work in consequence. Now she is repaying the seventh loan of Tk 12,000 in regular installments. The microcredit is showing her some light of hope. Her husband, two sons and their wives have joined hands in the family enterprise. She could give her only daughter in marriage to a good groom. She could smile away her suffer-

Two of her three grand children are already school going. The third one will follow suit in course of time. Jamuna Rani has started rearing hope for giving them secondary, even higher education. She could also undertake repairing the dwellings gradually. She is hopeful because the demand for their traditional products has not declined much. If they could increase



Eking out a future.

the quantity vis-a-vis demand, they would be able to enhance income. They know that, if necessary, the capital can be raised by enhanced microcredit from ASA, or

small entrepreneur loan in case of bigger

Manik Chowdhury is a senior journalist.