

## Chief lesson from Cyclone Aila

*There is no alternative to building strong embankments*

THE most important lesson which can be drawn from Cyclone Aila, which last week hit south-western Bangladesh, is that a comprehensive programme regarding the construction and maintenance of embankments needs to be put in place. It is an issue about which the inhabitants of cyclone-prone areas are acutely aware, for they themselves have been demanding that more than anything else it is strong embankments they need. In effect, what they have been saying is that if they have embankments to protect themselves, they can take care of everything else.

That is certainly a forceful argument. Cyclone Aila has patently demonstrated the afflictions that can result from weak embankments. In this past week, survivors of the disaster have suffered badly from the salinity which has not only stopped their sources of clean drinking water but has also damaged crops, cattle and homesteads. They would have been spared such an ordeal if purposefully built embankments had been there. As it is, following Sidr in November 2007, not much of repair work was done on the embankments and indeed hardly any new ones were built as a precaution against subsequent natural disasters. Besides, the embankments that were there (most of them have been damaged or washed away by Aila) were fragile because the materials used to construct them were not expected to withstand shocks. It is regrettable but true that embankments in Bangladesh have by and large been built of mud. Small wonder then that they will collapse in the face of a strong assault by the forces of nature. Again, in many instances the heights of the embankments did not conform to accepted standards or standards that reflected the realities in Bangladesh.

In light of the collapse of the embankments caused by Cyclone Aila, it becomes important that serious, meaningful steps be taken to repair the damage caused last week, raise the existing height of the embankments and where necessary build new ones. A special task force may be set up to study the present condition of the embankments, to take stock of them as it were, and follow it up by taking measures to construct more lasting embankments to deal with future calamities. As an additional measure towards securing the embankments, an overall, well-thought out plan for a green belt along the coastline ought to be put in place. The bottom line is simple: the future, when it comes to dealing with natural calamities, should not be a repeat of the past.

## Extortionists having a field day

*Intimidated businessmen ask for protection*

THE congenial environment for the growth of trade and commerce is being denied by armed gangs of extortionists, who have seemingly become hyperactive. A good number of the victims were fatally shot in recent months when they failed or refused to come up with the money demanded. We are troubled by the reported revelation that around 1200 extortionists clustered into 300 gangs might be operating in the metropolis, thereby contributing to the spiralling of crime in the city. Reports of industrialists and business personalities receiving phone calls from these criminals with demands for huge sums of money are pouring in to the print and electronic media. According to Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) Cell as many as 250 extortion related complaints were lodged since its formation on April 28. And needless to mention that many incidents go unreported as victims opt to remain unidentified for fear of reprisals.

Besides traders and industrialists, people involved in real estate business have also expressed their anxiety at the growing incidence of extortion targeting this sector. The Home Minister has reiterated government's pledge to end such crimes, but victims wait for actions to be made visible. They want to see results from the Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) and Detective Branch (DB) special cell that was created to curb extortion.

With the help of modern communication technology, extortionists are now allegedly finding it rather easy to operate from their hideouts, from inside jails and even from outside the country. As such, with godfathers staying behind curtains, it is their younger cohorts who do field level operations, including murders, and melt into the outskirts of the city.

We feel the idea to track down callers using most modern technology would go a long way in apprehending the criminals wherever they are. Also investigators should seek help from the foreign ministry and Interpol in catching ring leaders sitting at some safe haven abroad. Whatever it takes, extortionists must be stopped in their track, otherwise investment, trade and commerce will suffer a severe setback.

## In quest of a credible political leadership

For years we blamed -- and rightly -- the authoritarianism to be at the root of all evil. We have done away with it by installing democratically elected governments.

M. ABDUL HAFIZ

THE emergence of Bangladesh was both preceded and followed by a series of extraordinary circumstances -- protracted civil unrest, the worst cyclone in history, the first-ever general elections, non-cooperation, a genocide, war, victory, famine and finally the violent overthrow of the first elected government culminating in the assassination of the nation's founding father -- all of which dearly cost this already impoverished country in more than one way, perhaps, one of the most serious casualties of some of these traumatic events had been the near-total decimation of the country's credible political leadership.

Prior to independence, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the last of the vanishing breed of national liberation leaders, successfully led his people to their cherished goal of freedom -- but both his towering personality and the prevailing political flux did not allow the rise of an alternative leadership. It was manifest from the events that followed. In the wake of

AL's phenomenal popularity after 1969 mass upsurge when it occupied the country's entire political space, the most of the party's new entrants simply rode the bandwagons without much conviction. So when during 1971 they were put through the litmus test of their loyalty to the party's cause and its ideology, they miserably failed.

The remaining lot including the party veterans gave a poor account of themselves in the aftermath of 1975 putsch. The leadership crisis deepened when four front-ranking AL leaders were killed in detention in November 1975, although few believed that anyone of them could really put on the mantle of their mentor. Nevertheless, 1975 was the end of an era -- a watershed for the evolution of political leadership in this country.

Now came a different brand of political leaders who strutted on the centre stage of our politics for the next two decades. After the political process of the country was brought under the official control by the succeeding regimes, an entirely different

political culture evolved in the country. Politics was told by a ruler, would henceforth be made difficult. But for a new brand of politicians, it was rather simplified while the political veterans found it outright impossible to survive in the emerging political ethos.

It wasn't surprising that the culture rapidly flourished over the years. The political space was almost instantaneously crowded by the people that included obscure activists from the far left and extreme right as well as firebrand revolutionaries to octogenarian obscurants and shrewd opportunists. Notwithstanding the diversities of their backgrounds they had one striking similarity with all of their eyes fixed on ever-shrinking national cake and greedy fingers stuck in its creamy layer. The nation's liability soared as the number of the greedy lot swelled -- particularly during Ershad's regime.

Our people pinned great hope in the return of AL to power once again that the party with its credentials of principled politics in the past would bring back order in highly distorted political practices. It is distressing to see that in addition to being oddly archaic in outlook the ruling style of a new breed of 'Awamis' is hardly dissimilar from that of the BNP or JP thus obliterating AL's ideological distance, if any, from its opponents. So far the AL has not done any-

thing to outshine or out-perform any of its predecessors. It's more of the same, enjoying no edge over others. The AL also, in practice, failed to project an articulate enlightened political leadership as expected. Where do we go from here?

The last thirty-eight years witnessed many changes both at global level as well as in the domestic scene. For years we blamed -- and rightly -- the authoritarianism to be at the root of all evil. We have done away with it by installing democratically elected governments. We also thought of the parliamentary system of government to be more conducive to participatory democracy. We now have that too. We held centrally controlled economy responsible for our economic stagnation. We have now opened up to the market forces. Amid all these changes what has not changed is, however, the fate of our people. The changes in system are important, but much more important are the people who make the changed system work. Where do we get those people from?

An intellectual decay, notwithstanding, this country it is told has been endowed with outstanding economists, jurists of international fame, the scholars who teach abroad and innovative bankers. Bangladeshi builders produced architectural marvels outside the country. There are brave entrepreneurs when the working ambience is free of sleaze. The professionals used to have some presence in our public life. They have gradually been pushed out of the political arena with its growing criminalisation after the independence.

An emerging generation wedded to technology, vibrant with ideas and exposed to the revealing world of Cyberspace earnestly look for a role in the nation building. The counting can also count blessings of innocent millions, content only with two square meals, but ready to give everything when it comes to the question of the country. A measure of conviction still prevails among the cross section of the political activists. But they hardly find a space in the country's politics dominated by the perditions theme of 'All in the family'.

Given the will and determination, a potential leader can build on these assets. After all, why can't the honesty be combined with quality, populism with knowledge enthusiasm with initiative and conviction with capability? The political leadership has a great deal to do with the context of time and it must be responsive to its challenges.

The demagoguery, gimmickry or slogan mongering are now motor way to nowhere. On the contrary it is the managerial skill, dynamism and X-ray vision with the ability to seeing through the fog of lime would enable a leader to guide his nation through the turbulence of globalised politics.

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Can the PM bring credibility back to politics?

## A political safari

Dr. Manmohan Singh is showing every sign of being a sensible victor. Being sensible means taking decisions in silence, instead of churning out a statement a day to keep television channels in play.

M.J. AKBAR

VICTORY and defeat in an election are a judgment call between options, not an epic choice between good and evil. It takes a couple of days for the celebrations to peter out and the tantrums to ease; then it is back to the difficult business of delivering governance against the background of raised expectations.

Dr. Manmohan Singh is showing every sign of being a sensible victor. Being sensible means taking decisions in silence, instead of churning out a statement a day to keep television channels in play. The wisest victor cherry-picks the best programs in an opponent's manifesto, takes note of any criticism that may have stung without being a fatal bite, and absorbs it without any fuss into the agenda of government.

The smart thing to do is to make this so much a part of your commitment that the voter forgets the past when it comes to making a choice yet again. The evidence for this assumption lies in the decision to give Kamal Nath road transport and highways.

It is possible to argue that Kamal Nath, now the oldest sitting member (in number of elected terms) of the Lok Sabha, turned commerce into a glamorous ministry by the force of his personality. By the measure of any political yardstick, he has had every right to feel that he is both senior to and at least as competent as P. Chidambaram, who has had the better portfolios.

However, politics is less about justice and more about being in the right place at the right time.

The most suitable metaphor for power in Delhi comes from the safari park, with variations to extend the nomenclature beyond the cat family. At the top are the big five. The prime minister is the lion, though hopefully with the diligence of the lioness rather than the feed-me indolence of the male cat.

The finance minister would be legitimately the tiger.

Defence and external affairs would be elephants, controlling their patch with hauteur, but essentially vegetarian by nature. Elephants might trumpet and trample, but they don't bite.

I suppose the human resources minister could lay claim to being the leopard. That

gives the job status in the eyes of the jungle, but over the last decade the claws of this leopard have been manicured to non-existence.

Both the BJP-led NDA and the Congress-led UPA allotted human resources to seniors in order to minimise the damage he could do to the big boss.

Dr. Murli Manohar Joshi and Arjun Singh considered themselves worthy of the prime minister's job, and were convinced that it was only a matter of time before summons arrived from destiny. It may sound a bit cruel, but the fact is that P.V. Narasimha Rao, Atal Behari Vajpayee, and Manmohan Singh converted the HRD office from a waiting room for promotion into the ante-room of oblivion.

Dr. Joshi left office with a faintly malodorous air, and Arjun Singh left in tears. His relevance in the Congress Party is more or less over. Kamal Nath's name was bandied about as the HRD minister of this government, because he was considered too senior to take a lesser job. But being a sharp man, he decided to avoid the trap of a first class waiting room with second class prospects.

The prime minister has sent a signal, picked up early and clearly by Kamal Nath, that the quality of infrastructure development in the next five years will be a vital key to public perception of the success or failure of this government. This was one area in which the BJP's charge that the Vajpayee initiative had tapered off was received well by the voter.

Dr. Singh fought hard and successfully to keep the DMK out of infrastructure, because he knew that this perception had some truth in it. These nodal ministries are much in demand because of the massive spending involved.

Spending is a gilt-edged invitation to corruption. Road transport and highways is a responsibility that extends equally to every part of the country. It is the most visible measure of change.

The manner in which Praful Patel transformed civil aviation into a dynamic development office is an indication of what a good minister can do with opportunity. A quiz question will perhaps clarify what I mean a bit more. What was the name of the last highways minister? The fact that you would probably

have to be the last minister's close relative to recall his name is evidence of the decline it suffered in the last five years. Trust me, you will not forget that Kamal Nath is in charge this time. Neither will the contractors.

Every government will have its share of file-shufflers. That is a demand of the cabinet system we operate, in which political considerations have to take some precedence over competence. If Vilasrao Deshmukh was a disaster as Maharashtra Chief Minister, there is no earthly reason to expect that he will be a paragon of Harvard Business School now that he has been put in charge of heavy industries. He is being, as they say, "accommodated."

I presume the prime minister believes that all the heavy industrialists in the state sector have competent managers and the best thing

that the minister could do is limit his intervention in their lives. The case of chemicals and fertilisers must be similar. The only really in-demand ministry that he has given the DMK is communications, and he has put two Congress ministers of state as guardian angels -- to guard Congress interests.

There is no confusion this time about the pecking order at the top. Pranab Mukherjee is the clear second-in-command, while A.K. Antony comes next. The highest table has no fourth place. There is a high table after that, shared by the external affairs minister, finance minister, the law minister and the road transport minister. The rest contribute to the attractions of the political safari, but they don't sell tickets.

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Back with a bang!