

## Coping with Aila devastation

In exceptional times, exceptional solutions have to be found. The real test of nations, governments and peoples is how they react to crises. If the availability of fresh water is endangered due to natural disasters, the government should employ the desalination process followed in the Gulf States and Saudi Arabia.

Md. ASADULLAH KHAN

BA NGLADESH, during the last few decades, has been identified as a disaster prone area. It has been barely 16 months since the killer Sidr struck the coastline of Bangladesh and took a toll of 3,500 lives, according to official count, with huge loss of property and livestock.

Cyclone Aila, that hit the south western coast of Bangladesh on May 25, left a trail of devastation, killing at least 175 people, with several hundreds missing and several thousands injured, according to official count. The tidal surge that accompanied the cyclone caused widespread damage, affecting the lives and livelihood of about 33 lakh people, as revealed by an official handout of the Disaster Management Bureau.

The damage caused in Shyamnagore and Assasuni upazila under Satkhira district is extensive. People in these places don't have any houses, water or sanitation facilities. In the words of Anwara Begum of Dumuria village under Gabura union: "This is a living hell." The air there is heavy with the stench of decomposed livestock washed away by the surging water from the rivers linked to the sea. The direst need in these places is drinking water.

Officials cannot get food and medicines

across to the needy. Relief experts have an adage: "For the survivors of the natural disaster, a second man-made disaster may be looming." Given Bangladesh's dismal record in calamity management, it usually holds good. But with the government tackling the situation, this can be a different story.

With committed officials and a host of well meaning individuals and institutions, there can be a change in the lives of the shattered people. Unhappily, even seven days after the calamity, relief is meagre, food is scarce and government officials are conspicuous by their absence on the plea that disaster-hit areas are inaccessible.

Paradoxically true, most tragedies have no end, just a beginning. Equally true, most tragedies expose the bureaucratic bungling and political callousness that heighten the crisis. Octogenarian Golman Bibi of Bir Laxmi village and housewife Farida Khatun of Uttar Atulia, taking shelter on raised land, lament in desperation not for food but for a bottle of drinking water and a packet of Orsaline to save Farida's diarrhea affected daughter. For the people of Shyamnagore, it's a double-whammy. They not only faced the brunt of nature's fury, but have to suffer government apathy as well.

The government's task after the calamity is enormous. Confronted by an army of

NGOs all offering to help, the problem before the government is efficient utilisation. The reports of the sufferings of the battered people, heightened by the scarcity of drinking water, coming in everyday seem almost too horrific to be true. But they are.

As reported by WDB officials, about 1430 sq km of embankments have been breached and, in Bhetkhali, Gabura, Jogindranagore and Protapnagore bordering the rivers linked with the sea, about 109 sq km of embankments have been totally washed away by the tidal surge, allowing intrusion of salt water over vast areas that will remain submerged unless the embankments are either built afresh or repaired.

Because of the submergence of land and ponds in salty water that continues to inundate the land bordering these rivers, drinking water will be hard to find.

It seems impossible for the government machinery to continue long-term relief, rescue and rehabilitation efforts. Even seven days after the tidal surge inundated Satkhira and Khulna, thousands are still without food, water, shelter or hope.

The key to combating a disaster of such proportions is speed, commitment and will, so that damage can be minimised and rescue, relief and rehabilitation is swift and effective. The government needs to appoint a disaster management coordinator from the civil administration or from the army to supervise the entire rehabilitation program.

A coordination centre must be set up, and placed in charge of the coordinator who will monitor all activities related to the repairing and building of embankments breached or washed away. One thing is certain. Proper utilisation of the money allocated for construction of the embankments is most important to avert



Waiting for water.

future catastrophe.

One reason for the collapse of the embankments is the weak foundation of the embankments, caused by the plastic pipe pushed through the bed of the embankment for bringing in saline water from the river on the other side for the shrimp farms.

During my visit to Shyamnagore and Assasuni after the last Sidr disaster, I saw hundreds of such pipes. This must be stopped. The shrimp farm owners must be forced to pipe in saline water only through the sluice gates. Sure enough, the damage these areas suffered that time was trivial compared to what has happened this time.

If the administration or WDB fails to put the embankments in place at the earliest, no solution will work and there will be

hundreds and thousands of Aila refugees who will have no other option but to migrate to high lands, preferably the district town Satkhira, for food and living.

The drinking water problem will haunt the cyclone victims for a long time. With advanced communication and warning systems available these days, Bangladesh can't fail miserably in its response to such events.

We might recall that after the tsunami in 2004 in the coast of Tamil Nadu, its drinking water sources were polluted with excessive salt-water intrusion because of tidal surge. Responding to a call from the Tamil Nadu administration, Tata Projects Limited installed a desalination mobile van that could produce 3,500 litres of potable water per hour. The plant

is still in operation now. The disaster management bureau should install such "kits" in coastal zones, operated by diesel engine.

In exceptional times, exceptional solutions have to be found. The real test of nations, governments and peoples is how they react to crises. If the availability of fresh water is endangered due to natural disasters, the government should employ the desalination process followed in the Gulf States and Saudi Arabia.

In the distillation-based desalination plants in the Gulf states, salty water is heated to produce vapour, which is then condensed to produce fresh potable water. But this could be a costly venture for Bangladesh because it uses a huge amount of electricity.

The second way is the reverse osmosis process -- which is more flexible than distillation and often cheaper. Engineers at the California Metropolitan Water District (MWD), in collaboration with others, have come out with an economic breakthrough by designing a plant that uses aluminum instead of titanium and concrete instead of steel to keep construction costs down. These plants turn out water for less than 50 cents a cubic metre, with production capacity of 75m<sup>3</sup>/d.

With the region extending from Satkhira to Teknaf coming under the grip of salty water because of the frequency of natural hazards like cyclone and hurricane accompanied by tidal surge, the government is left with no other option but to go for desalination plants in these places to meet the cataclysmic situation resulting from such recurrent nightmares that seem to haunt the coastal population these days.

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## Homing in on the golden goose

Allowing the proposed incentive to attract the diverted earnings will be beneficial -- giving with one hand and receiving with the other. There is no gestation time, no costly opening of bank branches, and no fund allocation. All that is needed is an administrative order.

ABDUL ALIM

HUNDI is the diversion and selling of the foreign currency earned by expatriates, and is thought to be a major vehicle for financing of terrorism. In Bangladesh, *hundi* is practiced not for profits or for servicing terrorism, but because of the absence of a workable system for managing remittance.

At the behest of the donors, the government adopted the Anti-Money Laundering Act, which is a replication of an act that the US designed to curb transfer of sale proceeds of drugs to Latin American countries by routing it through banks in Caribbean countries. Such routing tactics conceals the source of the money. In other words, it launders (washes) the illegal sale proceeds (black money) from drugs.

The scenario is not the same in Bangladesh. Rather, it is the other way round. White money, earned by our migrants, is being diverted (blackened?) to enter the country in an informal way (*hundi*) because systemic inadequacies like lack of short loans, difference in exchange rates, undocumented visa status of senders, etc. Not surprisingly, the American model of Anti-Money Laundering Act proved largely ineffectual.

The depth and reach of *hundi* is amazing. 8 out every 10 interviewed expatriate workers confirmed that they send money through *hundi*. Though no data is available, it will not be a surprise if such unofficial remittance is twice the official figure.

About 70% of the official remittance comes from our workers in Middle East countries. Unlike the diaspora in developed countries, the Middle-East based

low-end migrant workers send home almost all their earnings every month, be it through *hundi* or through banks.

The principal *hundi* dealers in major cities collect money through a network of sub-agents in remote towns. He sells the collected foreign currency to various users, like recruiting agents who have to pay for visa purchases, to smugglers, to patients seeking treatment abroad, to politicians and bureaucrats who need to stash away ill-gotten money abroad, to importers who under-invoice the imported items, to arms and drug peddlers, to anybody who otherwise finds it difficult to obtain foreign currency. He is an invaluable man! More invaluable he will be the more we veer towards an opaque economic system and the corruption. He is not concerned about the use of the currency he sells to the clients.

There are compelling reasons why many of our expatriates choose *hundi* for sending their money. The *hundi* dealer pays the remitter a higher rate than the official exchange rate, as they can charge higher rate from their clients and retain a nominal commission. High volume of transaction justifies the marginal profit.

They allow minor credit to grassroots level remitters. It is very convenient and informal as a *hundi* dealer's agent is always

available next door even in remote corners. Such convenience, that no financial institution can beat, and personal relationship play a major motivational role for a remitter to opt for this mode of transfer.

Our government's efforts at fast-tracking remittance have only made a scratch in the whole system. High bank charges for small remitters have a dampening effect. Except in emergencies, delivery within hours is not the main attraction for usual remitters, as they get fast service from *hundi* dealers also.

The pragmatic solution lies in transforming the vast and intricate network of *hundi* to our advantage. The government's policy of cracking down on *hundi* operators in the country is creating more social evils than benefits to the exchequer. Curbing of inter-bank transactions has forced physical cash movements across the country, especially to Sylhet and Chittagong, the major destinations of *hundi* money.

The carrying of large amounts of cash has attracted hijackers, who prowl around to locate the carriers. There are innumerable instances of hijacking of *hundi* money in transit that are not reported to police simply because the victims cannot explain how they got so

much money. Nobody wants to jump from the frying pan into the fire!

Hijackers are engaging all their talents in hunting down carriers of *hundi* money. It's a "wolf and the hare" game going on. Think of the irreparable social damage such "noose tightening" is creating. Instead of stopping *hundi* operations, it is depriving banks from earnings and fanning social anarchy.

We must address this problem with an open mind. If we can bring the sprawling network of *hundi* operators under discipline, it can do wonders. How much does a *hundi* dealer earn in this extremely risky business? Maybe 1.5% to 2% of the total transfer. What happens if the government allows them, or for that matter whoever remits funds (in cash, TT or draft) beyond a certain minimum level, one to two percent cash incentive across the bank counter without asking any questions?

To keep regular remitters beyond the net, a benchmark of a minimum amount, say \$1,00,000, may be fixed per transfer to qualify for cash incentive. A risk-free one or two percent commission can be attractive to the *hundi* dealer. He will enjoy economics of scale and his clients will be comfortable too as their privileges will remain unhampered. The catch is not to ask about the source of such funds.

In pre-budget discussions, wise men are talking of welcoming black-money, of allowing Tk. 6,000 crore cash dole outs to industrialist now in case they face problems "in future," and this reform can empower the government's maneuverability immensely at very little subsidy.

Unfortunately, policy makers do not perceive the services sector as an export item. They forget that GATT was dissolved in 1995 to create WTO only to incorporate the services sector, which commands about 65% of global GDP. To qualify as an export item, it is not necessary that it must be solid, occupy space, and be visible.

Allowing the proposed incentive to attract the diverted earnings will be beneficial -- giving with one hand and receiving with the other. There is no gestation time, no costly opening of bank branches, and no fund allocation. All that is needed is an administrative order.

The whole issue needs closer scrutiny and open discussion among the policy makers. The history of *hundi*, which grew out of a basic need, goes back a long time. At least, our policy makers can try the above suggestion for, say, one year. If it works, we can say goodbye to a lot of irritation and dependence.

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## Perception or pressure?

The manner in which Pakistan has gone about pursuing the Mumbai attack and the strong words that Gillani has used on Kashmir only shows lack of governance. Those who are at the helm of affairs appear inept in handling the situation.

KULDIP NAYAR

WHEN the Lahore High Court asked Pakistan's attorney general why the UN resolution on the detention of Hafiz Sayeed, a terrorist involved in the Mumbai attack, should be honoured when New Delhi had not implemented the UN resolutions on Kashmir, it was apparent how the mind of the judges was ticking. I do not know what the attorney general's reply was. But I think the comparison by the court was not in order. One related to an international issue and the other to an individual who was running away from justice.

Yet, this was not the only reason why the case against Sayeed was thrown out. The court said that there was not "enough evidence" against him. For this, Pakistan, which was pursuing the case, was most to blame. Even if it found that the proof provided by New Delhi was inadequate, Islamabad should have done some homework to plug the loopholes.

The court was quite candid in telling the attorney general that it had seen the details of the investigation by India but wanted to know what Pakistan had done. Apparently, it had done very little. What was shown to the judges, even in camera,

was not convincing enough. True, the government is reportedly going in appeal to the Supreme Court. But if the same material is going to be produced before it, the verdict is not likely to be different.

Pakistan may have a point that India has not given it any clinching evidence. And sending some material in Hindi, Marathi or Tamil does not say much about New Delhi's seriousness. Yet Pakistan was expected to do more. After all, those who attacked Mumbai were Pakistanis and their whole scheming was done on their soil. What was Pakistan's own investigation to add to the New Delhi's dossier is not known.

In the absence of any proof that Pakistan was equally serious and concerned, any dialogue would evoke a strong anti-government opinion in India. At the risk of repeating myself, I feel that the Pakistan government and the armed forces have not yet realised how angry the people in India are. Even if New Delhi were to come round, it would not be able to carry the public along until Islamabad is seen doing something concrete.

After Pakistan's embroilment in a war against the terrorists, there was a perceptible change in India that it should sympathise with the people across the border

in their hour of crisis. Pressure had begun mounting for resuming talks with Islamabad. Sayeed's release by the court has pushed India back to square one. Relations between India and Pakistan, already frozen, have become harder. The Asif Zardari government is not seen any different from the earlier governments. The impression that is strengthening is that Pakistan changes its tactics under pressure but not the strategy.

It may be a coincidence that the Council on Kashmir Affairs met at Islamabad on the day when the court set Sayeed free. But Prime Minister Yousuf Reza Gillani did not stray from the speech prepared by mind-set bureaucrats. Delivered after the judgment he could have said something to lessen the impact in India. Was it necessary for him to reiterate that the Pakistan government would continue to give its moral, social and diplomatic support to the people of Jammu and Kashmir in their fight for self-determination?

India's Foreign Minister S.M. Krishna was far more balanced in his reaction, as if he did not want to use any harsh word that might irritate Pakistan. Krishna said that Kashmir was part of a composite dialogue. He could have repeated that Kashmir was an integral part of India, but he did not lest he should spoil even the odd chance for conciliation.

The manner in which Pakistan has gone about pursuing the Mumbai attack and the strong words that Gillani has used on Kashmir only shows lack of governance. Those who are at the helm of affairs appear inept in handling the situa-

tion. Understandably, they are under pressure over the activities of Taliban and the mechanisations of religious parties within the country. Still, it looks as if the Zardari government has no clear-cut policy or program to take Pakistan out of the difficulties it faces.

India has reportedly appealed to America after Sayeed was exonerated. Washington may be at a loss about what to do next because Pakistan has already banned the Laskar-e-Toibba and its front organisation, Jamiat-ud-Dawa. The visit of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to Delhi assumes more importance than before.

The first thing she has to do is to disabuse India's mind that the Obama government is not taking sides. However successful Islamabad may have been in securing America's largesse, the test is the confidence the Zardari government can build among the people to feel self-reliant and secure. It also has to plan to feed, educate and ameliorate the living conditions of millions in Pakistan.

The advantage of a democratic government is that it can depend on the support of people. But if they remain unhappy they are bound to look elsewhere and even think of Islamic extremists as their saviour. In fact, this is the strength of the Taliban, not their weapons or the stamina to fight. Pakistan People's Party is known for its liberalism. The army, willy-nilly, is engaged in a do-or-die battle against the Taliban. But the party has also to work on the ground to brainwash the people who have been fed on prejudice and wrong teachings.



Sayeed: Lack of evidence?

Sayeed is going to be a problem because he combines in him the best of terrorism and the worst of bigotry. His support to the Taliban would be lethal. This can tell upon Pakistan's integrity and its democratic structure. The unity of non-Taliban and non-extremists is necessary.

Nawaz Sharif should not be kept at distance. He may be a rightist in thinking but he has proved again and again that when it comes to fighting for Pakistan's entity, he will not and cannot remain neutral. Zardari should seek his cooperation without putting prior conditions. Nawaz Sharif's hesitation is not because he wants an equal share in power but because he does not know Zardari's

manzil (destination).

Maybe, the Charter of Democracy, which Nawaz Sharif and the late Benazir Bhutto signed in London, can provide the basis for cooperation and also give Pakistan its ethos. The Charter calls upon the people of Pakistan "to join hands to save our motherland from the clutches of military dictatorship and to defend their fundamental, social, political and economic rights and for a democratic, federal, modern and progressive Pakistan as dreamt by the founder of the nation..."

If Pakistan were to realise all this, it would find India as its best friend.

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