

Of water, environment and flood control

The planet is not actually running out of water, but its people are having an increasingly difficult time managing the water that exists. In some areas, the hydrological cycle may be taking longer time to complete as humans use water faster than nature can renew it.

MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

THE greenhouse effect leading to global warming, first identified by the Swedish chemist Arrhenius in 1896, indicates that human activities like driving cars, burning coal, cutting trees and raising cattle have significantly increased the concentration of key greenhouse gases namely carbon dioxide, methane and nitrous oxide. This increase in greenhouse gases is thought to have enhanced the greenhouse effect that leads to global warming and consequent climate change.

Estimates drawn from reports by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) project increase in average global temperatures ranging from 1.4 degrees to 5.8 degrees C by 2100. These numbers may seem small, but because average global temperatures are stable over long periods, this range represents a very significant rise in the earth's temperature over a very short period of time.

There has been an appreciable decrease in snow cover in the Northern Hemisphere and floating ice in the Arctic Ocean. Global sea levels have risen about 0.5m and precipitation over landfill has increased 0.1%. Experts say that the atmosphere has seen a 65% increase in carbon dioxide over the past few centuries. The seas around India have shown a 2.5mm rise per year over the past few decades. When ocean waters become warmer, they tend to expand. Add to this ice melts, and you have oceans rising.

Seas rising by millimeters and lands warming by fractions of degrees might not sound like much, but it is enough to change life forever. A half-metre sea rise, for instance, is enough to wipe out India and Bangladesh's coastal areas.

The impacts of such human induced climate change are wide and varied. The predictions of the scientists about many untoward happenings that were ruled out

earlier have come to be true. Polar ice caps have started melting, causing sea levels to rise and swamping coastal communities. At the same time retreating glaciers in the Himalayas indicate that global warming has become a reality.

Increased incidence of storms accompanied by tidal surge due to higher rates of evaporation continues to devastate Bangladesh. This increased evaporation could also cause widespread drought and famine.

Impact on water and environment

Higher temperatures could harm the water quality of the rivers and lakes. In areas where river flows decrease, pollution concentration will rise. In order to keep pollution concentrations from increasing, sewage treatment plants and other water pollution controls will have to be upgraded.

The situation in cities like Dhaka, Narayanganj and Chittagong in respect of water hazards is appalling. Factories in these cities, as well as city dwellers, discharge harmful chemicals and toxic wastes into the Buriganga, Shitalakhya and Karnaphuli, while the farmers use agrochemicals and pesticides that not only pollute the river water but also wreak havoc on the eco-system.

Rivers in developed countries have become much cleaner over the last two decades. On the other hand, rivers in the poorest developing countries, like Bangladesh, by contrast have shown marked falls in levels of dissolved oxygen -- a key indicator of increased pollution by sewage. To make things worse, supplies of fresh water that might dilute the sewage are dwindling in many areas because of drought, deforestation, and topsoil loss.

Water pollution is causing indisputable harms in poor countries. Because populations in poor countries are growing so fast that improvements in water supply have



and unplanned erection of dams, especially in the south western part of the country, water areas got polluted and water became unfit for human consumption. In ways direct or indirect playing God with water has had a tendency to bite us back.

As a solution to the water problem, "we must rethink water management" says Peter Gleick, one of the world's renowned experts on fresh water resources. We no longer live in a world in which rivers can be endlessly 'dammed, aquifers relentlessly pumped, ecosystems degraded and impoverished. At the same time, proposals that are coming to the fore include reducing waste in irrigation, desalinating, recycling, making appropriate local choices of crops, employing low cost chlorination, and solar disinfectant techniques, increasing water harvesting from rain water sources for agricultural use and transportation of potable water to dry areas.

The planet is not actually running out of water, but its people are having an increasingly difficult time managing, allocating, and protecting the water that exists. In some areas, the hydrological cycle -- by which the fresh water of rain and snow eventually evaporates, condenses in clouds and falls again -- may be taking longer time to complete as humans use water faster than nature can renew it.

Moreover, as much as the world becomes urbanised, its water crisis will deepen. Climate change causing freakish weather has only magnified the problem by polluting surface water sources through flooding and water logging. Salt-water invasion of the huge coastal areas wreaking havoc on the lives of 40 million people in the coastal areas of Bangladesh has cost the economy of the country dearly.

Dhaka has to rely largely on ground water, but aquifers take decades to recharge while the population growth in the city is exponential. As urban demands for water increase, supply of the developing world's already water starved areas will be further affected, creating an insurmountable food security crisis.

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

Expatriate welfare bank

The government also moved to form expatriate workers' welfare associations in 10 countries where Bangladesh has got missions. But no progress is seen in forming such an association for serving the interests of our expatriate workers, who are deprived in many ways while working abroad.

A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

THE government's move to establish an expatriate welfare bank with expatriate workers as its shareholders and investors, in a bid to help those seeking jobs abroad and using remittance for productive purposes, is unrealistic.

The government high-ups, including the prime minister, have already agreed on the move. The expatriate welfare minister is moving fast, holding meetings with the finance ministry and the Bangladesh Bank (BB) to set up the bank in the next fiscal year (2009-10) after completing all necessary formalities including formulation of a legal framework.

Observing the expatriate welfare ministry's move for setting up the bank as a scheduled bank, BB has suggested that it should be set up as a specialised bank instead. The government has

formed an Expatriate Welfare Fund (EWF) with a view to using remittances for productive investment. The Anti-corruption Commission unveiled a good number of alleged irregularities a few months back in the use of EWF, worth over Tk 820 million, in the name of two projects.

The fund, which was collected as service charge from the expatriate Bangladeshi workers by the Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET), was used in such a way that it had virtually no relevance to the real welfare of the expatriate workers.

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Work is underway for setting up the

expatriate welfare bank with an initial capital of about Tk 250 crore. It will lend money to the people seeking jobs abroad at a low rate of interest. The expatriates' welfare ministry expects that people will no longer need to raise funds to go abroad by selling their lands or other valuables, once the bank is established. But experts in the banking sector have termed the move unnecessary.

Expatriate workers will be allowed to take loans from the expatriate welfare bank for business or industrial ventures, and use the bank for sending their earnings from abroad. The bank will not have any branch at district and upazila level, but will provide mobile phone banking services to the expatriates and their family members.

Some banks, including Agrani, Pubali and Mercantile, have loan facilities to help people seeking jobs abroad. Pubali Bank, having 371 branches all over the country, has lent to only 100 job seekers in 2008. Agrani Bank, with its country-wide network of more than 1,000 branches, could not get the expected response for loan from the job seekers.

It is indeed a utopian idea to provide banking services to the huge number of expatriate workers and their family members through mobile phone, having only a few branches in divisional headquarters. Such a bank may only serve the

interest of a few fortunate people living abroad, allowing them to take loan for business out of the funds worth around Tk 350 crore collected from the poor workers.

Every worker who has gone abroad was compelled to deposit Tk 1,300 to the fund, with which the government has moved to set up the bank. But setting up an expatriate welfare bank is not the right step for taking care of the interest and welfare of the expatriate Bangladeshi workers who are deprived in many ways both at home and abroad.

There are 48 scheduled banks, including four state-owned banks, in operation in the country at present. These banks, with their countrywide network of branches, can easily help those seeking jobs abroad with low-interest loans. They can also help our expatriate workers and members of their families with various banking services, including quick delivery of their remittances.

BB should make it mandatory for all the scheduled banks operating in Bangladesh to open a separate section in their existing premises for providing prompt and efficient banking services to the overseas job seekers.

In a commendable move, BB has set up a Tk 200 crore revolving fund for banks to give loans at a low interest in the solar energy, biogas and effluent treat-



ment sectors to help the country face the crisis in the energy and environmental sectors. BB should also take a similar step by providing funds to banks so that they can give loans on soft terms to those seeking jobs abroad.

The expatriate welfare ministry should straighten things up for proper management of the expatriate welfare

fund, constituting a competent management board with public and private sector representatives for taking up well thought-out projects and programs that have relevance to the real welfare of our expatriate workers, without moving to set up a bank having no feasibility.

A. N. M. Nurul Haque is a columnist of The Daily Star.

Less murky than before

I can understand the reason for dropping the two most loyal ministers to the dynasty, Arjun Singh and H.R. Bhardwaj. They had outlived their utility. But why to drop a sensitive minister like Saifuddin Soz?

KULDIP NAYAR

INDIA'S political scene looks far less murky than before. This was reflected in the first session of Parliament after the general election. There was shouting, boycott or walkout. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh also assured a bipartisanship approach in the first speech at the Lok Sabha.

What have really brought about the change are the demoralisation of the opposition and the confidence of the ruling Congress. The latter depended on some 12 parties to run the government after the election five years ago. This time it needed only 66 members to form the government at the Centre.

This was provided by its pre-poll allies, ambitious Sharad Pawar in Maharashtra,

fiery Mamata Banerjee in West Bengal and pro-LITE Karunanidhi in Tamilnadu.

On the other hand, the voters have cut the regional *netas* to size. The Communists who made the Congress government possible last time are too downhearted to criticize it even when their main agenda -- the opposition to the sale of public undertakings -- has been treated with contempt.

The Prime Minister has announced their privatization. The BJP, even with 130 odd members, feels too humiliated to challenge Manmohan Singh who was described by BJP leader L.K. Advani as *nikamma* Prime Minister during last election campaign. The Congress, it seems, can dictate terms if it so decides. For example, the party can get the bill on reservations for women in Parliament. But it is not pushing it because the party wants

consensus, which is on 20% reservation instead of 33%, which the Congress has promised in its poll campaigns.

Yet the party had its own Lok Sabha Speaker. Meira Kumar who has been unanimously elected is competent, soft-spoken. But she is a member of Congress President Sonia Gandhi's team of loyal members. The office demanded a person of stature.

Jawaharlal Nehru once said that the Speaker represented the House, which in turn represented India. When Sonia Gandhi made up her mind to have a Dalit woman as the Speaker, the rest followed. In the process, the position of the Speaker has been devalued. She made the office of India's President a non-office. Now she has done the same thing in the case of the Speaker.

It would have been always difficult to find a successor to Somnath Chatterjee who annoyed even the communists, once his comrades, by adopting an impartial posture and giving independent rulings. But Meira Kumar's feet are far too small to fit into his big shoes. But then the institutions have always bothered the Nehru

dynasty. Indira Gandhi demolished practically all the institutions that her father, Nehru, had built. Sonia Gandhi has completed her mother-in-law's unfinished work.

If even after 62 years of independence, the party that won 206 seats could not choose people on the basis of merit and integrity, it should realize its helplessness against the demon of caste it has created. True, the caste has stalled communalism. But both represent the forces, which taint the idea of secular India.

I also cannot understand the time -- 11 days -- taken to constitute the council of ministers. It may serve as a corrective to both the prime minister and the Congress president to know that Nehru submitted the list of his ministers on August 14, one day before they were sworn in. There was no draft, no deletion and no addition to the list.

Despite the claims of checking the background of members in Manmohan Singh's council of ministers, some have questionable credentials. Many are round pegs in square holes. Too much has been made about the youth. The average age of

ministers is 63. Only five are below 40 and none of them has been given a cabinet rank.

I can understand the reason for dropping the two most loyal ministers to the dynasty, Arjun Singh and H.R. Bhardwaj. They had outlived their utility. But why to drop a sensitive minister like Saifuddin Soz? He had the courage to write an honest report about the lack of rehabilitation by the Madhya Pradesh government of Narmada Dam oustees.

It looks to me as if there was no problem in selecting the first 11 cabinet ministers who were sworn in along with the Prime Minister. When it came to allotting portfolios, only six of them passed the muster. Then it was a 'Mahabharat,' to use the words of an insider. So powerful is Rahul Gandhi, son of Sonia Gandhi and the prime minister-in-waiting, he could force the entry of some of his close followers into the government. Were Rahul's nominees to become a ginger group within the party to put pressure to give clean governance their appointment would serve the purpose.

Belonging to the upper middle class, as

they are, it may be difficult for them to extend rural job guarantee scheme to the urban unemployed because the upper half would have to carry the burden of expenditure. They are already unhappy over the government's statement that the oil price in India would be at par with the international price.

At the same time, the government has announced the policy of disinvestment. The sale of government's undertakings would lower its earnings. Where is the leeway to spend on schemes to help the poor?

The *kurta* and *pajama* is a welcome sight in the Lok Sabha because it reminds me of post-independence parliament. The *kurta* and *pajama*, then in *khadi*, may represent the fashion, not the determination to uplift the people. All such persons are the Babalogs of the British days. Limited resources cannot also afford a jumbo council of 79 ministers. Nehru's first cabinet had just 14 members. It is not the expenditure that I have in view. Such large paraphernalia does not give the message of austerity, which the nation needs to follow.

Kuldip Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.