

## Returning to normalcy

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**C**YCLONE Aila hit the southwestern coast on May 25, just one and a half years after Cyclone Sidr hit Bangladesh. The most severely affected areas are Shyamnagar upazila of Satkhira district and Koyra and Dacope upazilas of Khulna district, the areas adjacent to the Sundarbans extending from Sharankhola in the east to South 24 Pargana in West Bengal in the west. According to the 2001 Population Census, these three upazilas had 90,000 households with a population of 0.66 million.

The Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB) constructed an earthen embankment in the 1960's to protect the area from salinity intrusion caused by tidal fluctuations and bring the land under cultivation. The system of enclosing agricultural lands and homestead areas with embankments is called poldering. BWDB also constructed a number of sluice gates to drain out excess rainwater within the polder to prevent inundation during the monsoon season.

With the protection of areas from tidal waves and opportunities for livelihoods through farming of saline free land, human habitation has spread and the area has become densely settled. From early 1980s the highly profitable brackish water shrimp farming has spread widely.

This, together with poor maintenance, has weakened the embankments. The embankment in many places could not withstand the huge tidal surge caused by Cyclone Aila. It is reported that more than 1,700 km of the embankment were washed away, which caused inundation of agricultural lands and

homesteads.

When Aila hit the coast, salty tidal water entered the polder through the breached embankment. The entire area is now exposed to tidal fluctuations twice a day and has become unfit for human habitation.

There are some areas where tidal influence does not reach and water stagnation is worsened by rotten grass, fallen leaves and dead plants. Aila was not as strong as Sidr and its effect was localised, but the damage is much more devastating and will be long-lasting.

The livelihood of the Aila affected people centres around crop farming, pond aquaculture (mostly shrimp farming), fishing, and collection of forest products from the Sundarbans. The farmers used to grow a single crop of *aman* rice in the rainy season. Some of them depend on shrimp cultivation as part of their livelihoods. Cyclone Aila and the accompanying tidal surge demolished the shrimp *ghers* and destroyed the *aus* crop and vegetables, thus washing away their livelihoods.

The people along the coast live in mud houses, which collapsed when they came in contact with water. They are now living on the roadside and embankments in makeshift huts. The people are also facing acute shortage of drinking water, as the ponds have been completely submerged by saline water. Women and girls sitting on the roadside with pitchers and cans, waiting for the relief trucks carrying fresh water to arrive, is a very common sight.

At present, many people are living on the roads/embankments in temporary huts. Most of them are dependent on relief items. It is reported that about 25%



How will they rebuild their lives?

of the affected people, most of whom belong to the landless households, left the area and migrated to safer places. The middle class, small and marginal landowners and tenants are the worst sufferers among the community. At present, they are dependent on their fixed assets (e.g. cow, goat, and ornaments) and personal savings.

Although many organisations and individuals provided emergency relief, it was not sufficient to meet the minimum basic needs of the distressed people. Their most earnest appeal is for immediate reconstruction of the breached embankments so that they can return to their normal livelihoods.

Until the embankments are repaired, the saline water cannot be drained, and the land will continue to be exposed to daily tidal fluctuations. Prolonged inun-

dation of the agricultural lands will make it impossible to restart normal economic activities and rehabilitate their livelihoods.

Some people, on their own initiative, have started repairing the damaged embankments, and the water has started receding from these areas. We have noted this situation in unions adjacent to Shyamnagar. However, the people are scared that the patchily repaired embankments may not be able to withstand high tides and strong waves that occur in late August and early September.

The Water Development Board needs to give immediate attention to repairing the embankments. Even if the water is drained within a month or so, the area will be unsuitable for growing *aman* paddy with the locally available seeds

(BR 10) because of the salt in the land. For these areas, distribution of seeds of salt-tolerant rice varieties is urgently needed.

Rice farming is not possible in areas where water stagnation will last till the next dry season, and innovative economic activities that can be undertaken with brackish water must be started. To get an idea of possible aquaculture activities, we visited the station of the Bangladesh Fisheries Research Institute located in Paikgachha. This station has been experimenting with rice/fish farming system for the coastal areas.

Scientists suggest that people could undertake low-cost fish culture by constructing cages or pens on their land. If the water salinity remains around 10 to 15 ppt. or below, tilapia and shrimps (*bagda chingri*) could be grown in the cages.

The fish will grow to marketable size within four months. Another possibility is crab fattening in cages. The crabs grow very fast and the people can start earning income after two months of initiating this activity. A marketing chain for exporting crabs is already well established in the Satkhira region.

Since most of the farmers have lost their assets, soft loan or interest free loan would be useful for them. Transportation of bamboos and making of bamboo fixtures can help generate employment for some people in the area.

The landless may be rehabilitated with diverse self-employed and/or wage employed economic activities. They can be provided with boats and fishing nets, and hired to re-construct the embankment under cash for work or food for work programs. They may also be provided with some grants for starting small businesses.

Once the water is drained and people return to their homesteads, reconstruction of houses will be a major economic activity. The low-income households will need outside help with grants and/or soft loans for housing reconstruction. The ponds needs to be drained of saline water so that accumulated rainwater could be used for drinking purposes.

Repair and reconstruction of the embankment is urgently needed to rehabilitate the Aila victims. Once it is fixed, the people can help themselves to restore their pre-Aila livelihoods.

The government, NGOs and the civil society organisations must come forward with livelihood rehabilitation programs that must contain grants for the supply of boats and fishing nets for the landless, collection and distribution of seeds of salt-tolerant rice varieties, demonstration of cage culture fisheries, and supply of fingerlings of tilapia and shrimp. The supply of fresh drinking water from outside must continue till heavy monsoon arrives.

The writers are Brac staff members.

## Why steal shine off the sun?

Why steal shine off the sun? The nation must be reclaimed out of the perilous division it has been afflicted with after BNP's propping up of Major Zia as the proclaimer (?) of independence, a position that President Ziaur Rahman himself had never laid claim to.

MD ALI AKBAR

**W**E are unfortunately divided by an unnecessary debate about who proclaimed independence of Bangladesh. It is unnecessary because it is about a self-evident, historical truth that admits of no debating or twisting. "Proclamation of independence," as embodied in our constitution, is a settled matter.

The all-important "Proclamation of independence" unambiguously mentions Bangabandhu as having proclaimed independence of Bangladesh right after "all hell broke loose," i.e. the Pakistan army's crackdown on March 25, 1971.

The undisputed founder-proclaimer of independence, Bangabandhu, was ensconced at the helm of the new state until his tragic assassination in 1975. Never had we heard any quarter dispute his proclamation of independence. Even later, neither Zia himself nor anybody on his behalf had ever challenged

Bangabandhu's epic proclamation.

Strangely, the post-Zia BNP enthusiasts -- possibly to muster undue political capital -- resorted to claiming that Ziaur Rahman proclaimed independence. Now, with the June 21 landmark HC ruling that it was Bangabandhu who proclaimed independence on March 26, 1971, the BNP leaders are expected to renounce their bizarre claim that they know, no less than others, is fictitious. They cannot assign to Zia what is deservedly due to Bangabandhu.

Still, they hold on to the disproved claim in TV talk shows and elsewhere, leaving us wondering whether or not such conduct constitutes "contempt of the court," which the HC may or may not take into cognisance. But we ought to let the post-'71 generation know the truth that has long been shadowed.

Millions of people who participated in the liberation war, or witnessed how the nation jumped into the war and at whose clarion call, are still alive to attest to the truth of Bangabandhu's proclamation

in the early hours of March 26, 1971, before he was taken captive by the Pakistani military junta.

Rightly, discussants as well as the media affirm that the HC has just upheld the self-evident historical truth of Bangabandhu's proclamation. They adduce various records -- the terming of Bangabandhu as a traitor for proclaiming an independent Bangladesh in General Yahya's March 26, 1971 radio address, and the US Consul General's message on the day to Washington about Bangabandhu's proclamation being prominent among them -- as evidence.

I, then an intermediate candidate at Chittagong, saw what had happened, and how the war had ensued. The message of Bangabandhu's proclamation on the morning of March 26, 1971 spread far and wide like a wild fire. The printed message was "Pakistani military has cracked down on the unarmed Bengalis... From now Bangladesh is independent. Fight to the last drop of your blood. Drive the last enemy soldier out of the motherland."

We heard over radio the then Chittagong AL General Secretary M.A. Hannan read out Bangabandhu's historic message of proclamation of independence at frequent intervals throughout the day. The message electrified the freedom loving Bengalis, who instantly jumped into a do-or-die battle with

whatever means they had.

On the following day -- March 27, 1971 -- we heard the then Maj. Zia say "I, Major Zia hereby declare independence of Bangladesh by the order of our great leader Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman." Therefore, we credit Major Zia with making repeat announcement on March 27, 1971 of Bangladesh's independence mentioning "by the order of our great leader Bangabandhu." That was to inspire the Bengalis at war, certainly not to negate Bangabandhu's proclamation.

Logically, Major Zia cannot be said to have proclaimed independence himself, as Hannan cannot be either, although the latter had read out Bangabandhu's independence proclamation over radio throughout March 26, 1971, i.e. a day before Major Zia did.

A huge amount of water has rolled under the bridge. It is now for the over-zealous BNP leaders to look into mirror of their inner self, and decide to shun what millions of 1971-era people call "a dirty ploy" to mislead the post-71 generation about the seminal landmark of the momentous '71 event. Misguided promoters of Zia only trivialise him by catapulting him to a position comparable to Bangabandhu's.

Given the HC ruling based on cognisable records galore, the BNP coterie had better not belittle them by pitting



The controversy is over.

Bangabandhu, the proclaimer-founder of our independence, against a government functionary -- which the then Maj. Ziaur Rahman was. It does not glorify Zia, rather it demeans him.

As the HC ruling is mandatory upon all, let nobody mislead the youngsters. Bangabandhu was undeniably like the sun in the firmament of independent Bengali nationhood. Let late President Zia shine in his light. He need not be reinvented as being what he was truly not. Misrepresentation of

Bangabandhu's March 26 proclamation of independence must be eschewed.

Why steal shine off the sun? The nation must be reclaimed out of the perilous division it has been afflicted with after BNP's propping up of Major Zia as the proclaimer (?) of independence, a position that President Ziaur Rahman himself had never laid claim to.

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## How not to organise speakers



**T**HOUSANDS of people are signing up for public speaking classes, the press reports. In East Asia, applicants want to talk their way into better jobs.

In South Asia, classes are taken by "undertrials" who want to clear their names. (Undertrial is an Asian-English word meaning "person awaiting court hearing." Indians are highly litigious and cases take generations to come to court, so everyone in India is an undertrial, including babies, fetuses, spermatozoons, ova, etc.)

Everybody's trying to be more elo-

quent these days. But in my humble opinion, people need courses in how to shut up. The other night, your humble narrator had to act as Master of Ceremonies at a function.

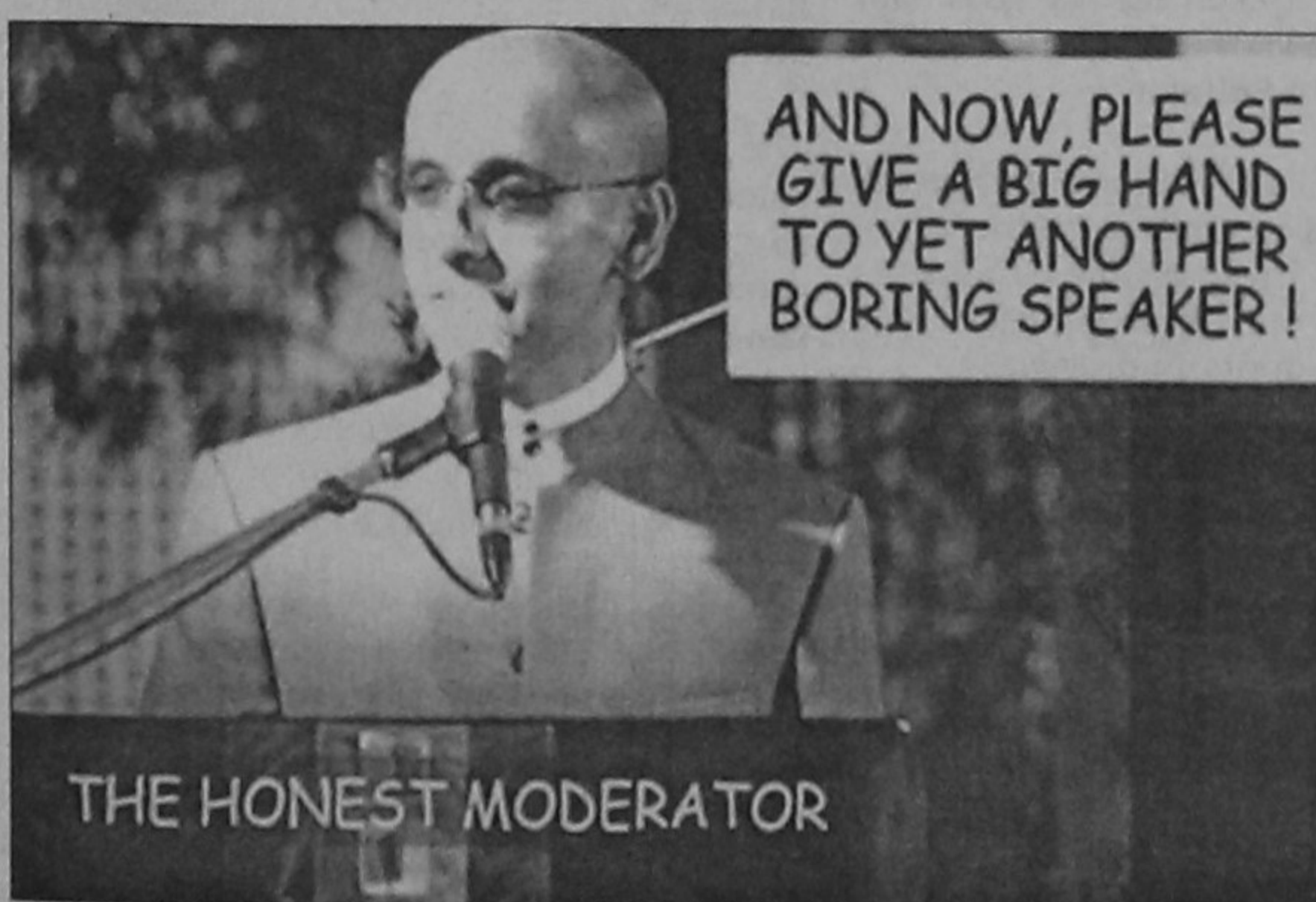
"The timing is really tight," the organiser told me, handing me a running order. "Try to keep things moving on schedule."

Looking at the schedule caused my eyebrows to rise cartoon-like over my head. The speakers had told the organiser they would just "say a few words," so she had allotted them three minutes each. No speaker in the history of the world has ever successfully kept to a three-minute time slot.

This is what actually happened.

At 8.00 pm, the ballroom doors opened. Nobody entered.

By 8.10, organisers using whips and electric cattle prods managed to get half the people away from the free drinks in



the foyer.

At 8.20, threats of violence persuaded about half of those to sit at the right tables.

At about 8.25, I introduced the first speaker. Let's call him Mr. Roy (not his real name).

First 42 seconds: Mr. Roy stands up at his table, makes a joke to the people he is sitting with, and strolls to the stage, pausing to shake hands with four other people on the way.

Next 58 seconds: Mr. Roy waits for the microphone to be adjusted to his height. Then he hits the microphone and blows into it. He turns it upside down, switches it off, switches it on, turns it the right way, hits it one more time and blows into it again. He opens his speech by deafening everyone with the words: "Is this thing on?"

The next four minutes are filled by an impromptu pre-ambles about what led up to his being there, followed by an irrelevant and inappropriate joke.

Mr Roy eventually takes out his reading glasses and reads his "three minute speech." It lasts 12.5 minutes. At the end, he spontaneously invites a fellow committee member to join him on stage and add a word or two. She

says: "I haven't prepared anything and I can't talk off the cuff." She then talks off the cuff for a further 12 minutes.

By this time, we are 52 minutes behind schedule and there are numerous other speakers who all expect to just "say a few words." It was going to be a loooooong evening. I couldn't blame the speakers. It was the organiser I wanted to throttle. But then I would end up as an "undertrial." And I, too, would be given free public speaking lessons.

Organizers: if you haven't built into the schedule a margin of three to four hours for speakers who over-run, you should give the master of ceremonies the tools he needs to keep the meeting on time. A Taser would do nicely.

To know more about how to be a good speaker, visit our columnist at [www.vittachi.com](http://www.vittachi.com)