

Tipaimukh: Disaster or opportunity?

In conclusion, I would like to reiterate that we should not hesitate to say "no to Tipaimukh" if it conflicts with our overall national interest. That is a national consensus. However, before saying so, let us examine and explore whether the Tipaimukh Project is really a disaster or an opportunity.

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A lot is being said about Tipaimukh and its impact on Bangladesh; so much so that people really feel threatened and are worried by the extent to which the highest-degree-adjectives and expressions are being used by many (including "water-experts," opinion leaders, and political leaders) about its disastrous impacts.

The situation has been worsened by the style in which India has decided to start construction of a dam on a trans-boundary river (Barak-Surma) without taking Bangladesh into confidence and without signing any agreement with Bangladesh on sharing the water of Barak-Surma River.

I do express my concerns with the feelings of the people, but have strong reason to doubt the sweeping remarks and frightening statements being made by many, as those are not supported by data and information.

In this respect, I refer to two reports: (1) Northeast Regional Water Management Plan (NRWMP) (September 1993) and (2) Northeast Regional Model (NREM) (Final Report, March 1995), which were prepared under the Flood Action Plan (FAP-6).

In connection with preparation of the NRWMP, the Tipaimukh Project (dam and barrage) was also studied, which was supported by running a mathematical model. The findings of the mathematical model and the reports are contrary to what many people are writing and saying.

While some people say that there will be a catastrophic disaster (*moha biporjaya*) if the Tipaimukh Project is implemented; and that the dam will have a devastating impact on Bangladesh, both in the dry and the wet seasons, findings of the simulation study by mathematical model suggest the following:

During an average flow year

Dry season flows will be increased substantially: Increase in dry season water levels would also occur on the Kushiyara and Surma rivers (for example, water levels during March should increase by 1.5 m at Sherpur). These increased dry season flows will provide benefits for navigation, irrigation, and fisheries, but could also reduce drainage from some areas.

Flood flows on the Barak river will be moderated: The corresponding water levels at Amalshid (on the Indian side) would be reduced by about 1.6 m. Similar changes would be expected along the Kushiyara and upper Surma rivers. This should reduce the frequency of spills from the Kushiyara and upper Surma rivers, reduce the extent of inundation in the Sylhet basin and reduce channel erosion and sediment transport rates along the two rivers. (ibid, p.91)

Effect of dam failure by earthquake

The Tipaimukh dam is located in a sensitive earthquake zone. (ibid, p.46) Assuming a flooded area of 100 km by 100 km and a released volume of 10 km³, the average depth of flooding is estimated to be 1.0 m above the ambient flood level. (ibid, p.48, 49)

The flood peak at Amalshid will occur approximately two to three days after the dam fails, and flooding will continue for 10 days or more. The flood wave will require approximately 24 hours to reach Amalshid. (ibid, p.48)

The probability of dam break failure is low based on the history of observed failures and the type of fill material, but some allowance must be made for earthquakes and the possibility of operational errors. (ibid, p.47) Dr. Zahiruddin Ahmed, Professor of BUET, in a recent interview, also said

that it was possible.

There are references to the Tipaimukh Project in several places in the reports, but none of those conflicts with what has been cited above. I don't like to over-emphasise the findings of the model study as the report suggests: "Assessment of the impacts is preliminary as it is based on sketchy information regarding the design and operation of the project (NREM, Final Report, p.75)." Nevertheless, referring to the model study is more logical and convincing than making notional statements.

Effect on the eco-system

Many "experts" have stated that the impact of the project will be catastrophic for the eco-system of haor areas and the north-eastern region; but there is no mention about the impact of the Tipaimukh Project on the eco-system in the NRWMP, 1993. I cannot imagine that the study would have missed addressing the impact of the project on the eco-system, had it been so disastrous. I also cannot imagine that there was no capable environmentalist in the consultancy team or in the panel of experts to point out this very important aspect.

Here, I want to make a general remark. Some people mentioned that the US has stopped building dams. It's true -- the US and big donors are against building dams; but it has reasons other than the interest of developing countries or protecting nature.

The two reports mentioned above are not confidential. Unfortunately, they are rotting in darkness when the issue is being discussed with all seriousness. Even Dr. Ainur Nishat, who was a member of the panel of experts for the FAP studies, and Mr. Tauhidul Anwar Khan, former member of the Indo-Bangladesh Joint Rivers Commission, did not refer to those reports when they spoke on the Tipaimukh Project. Somebody may argue that that study is 15 years old, but this does not justify the sweeping remarks and the frightening statements. About the data and information, the report mentions that "information obtained through the Joint Rivers Commission provides a minimally adequate description of the project which has been used to make

preliminary assessments of impacts on the region (NRWMP, p.91)."

Now the question is: How should the Tipaimukh Project issue be handled?

Firstly, a brief look at history may be useful. After formation of the Indo-Bangladesh Joint River Commission, the first meeting was held in the backdrop of a heavy flood in the Assam and Sylhet region. The two countries agreed to form a Study Group "to assess immediately the flood situation in the Sylhet area of Bangladesh, in Cachar district and other adjoining areas in India in order to formulate short-term and long-term measures for reducing the flood damage in the region. In this connection, the commission noted that a project for the construction of a storage reservoir on the Barak river had been investigated. The commission felt that this was a useful project and formulation of this project should be expedited, taking into consideration conditions in Bangladesh (first meeting of the Indo-Bangladesh Joint Rivers Commission, New Delhi, June 25-26, 1972)."

Some preparatory work for the joint study was also started. Later, things did not proceed as they should have.

In 1978, the Tipaimukh Project came to Bangladesh's knowledge. It transpires from various articles that India went ahead without involving Bangladesh. That was not what India should have done from a good neighbour's point of view. It also transpires that the Bangladesh governments and the "knowledgeable quarters" did not do enough on the issue. Now, India is reported to be ready to take-off.

Secondly, Bangladesh had been working for river-basin development, co-operation among the co-riparian countries, and construction of reservoirs (dams) upstream for flood regulation and irrigation. Over the last decade, strong forums have emerged to try to push the water issues -- although it is not an easy task. The water forums are strongly promoting the issues that Bangladesh has been pursuing for long.

The Ministerial Declaration of the World Water Forum in Istanbul (March



Let us have a reasoned discussion, based on the facts.

16-23) states:

"We will take, as appropriate, concrete and tangible steps to improve and promote co-operation on sustainable use and protection of trans-boundary water resources through coordinated action of riparian states, in conformity with existing agreements and/or other relevant arrangements, taking into account the interests of all riparian states concerned. We will work to strengthen existing institutions and develop new ones, as appropriate and if needed, and implement instruments for improved management of trans-boundary rivers (para 16)."

"We resolve to develop, implement and further strengthen transnational, national and/or sub-national plans and programs to anticipate and address the possible impacts of global change. Investment efforts to establish necessary infrastructure, to increase storage need to be scaled up, taking into account water efficiency (para 9)."

On the above premise even at this stage, having no malice toward India for its unilaterally going-ahead attitude, I think most people will agree with me that we should consider the Tipaimukh Project from our national interest. If it does not conflict with our national interest why should we oppose it, and if there is any opportunity why should we not try to reap benefit from it? Anyway, it depends on co-operation, frank discussion and negotiation between the two coun-

tries. For that matter, we need to analyse, study and evaluate all aspects of the project.

There is no better way than that India gives us the necessary reports, data and information for our evaluation; otherwise, we have to do it with whatever data and information we have and can generate. We need to ensure that both the countries benefit, and that there is a win-win situation. This approach is supported by the initiative taken in 1972 and the 1993 Northeast Regional Water Management Plan, which suggests in its Development Strategy:

"In particular, in some cases, it would be in Bangladesh's interest to invest in upstream catchment projects (outside Bangladesh) in return for some control over water flows from catchment areas outside Bangladesh. Because of the region's location, such actions would have a particularly high incidence if impact in regional development (p.103, 104)."

In conclusion, I would like to reiterate, that we should not hesitate to say "no to Tipaimukh" if it conflicts with our overall national interest. That is a national consensus. However, before saying so, let us examine and explore whether the Tipaimukh Project is really a disaster or an opportunity. I think there can be a consensus on this also.

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Tier game of US State Department

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THE US State Department downgraded Bangladesh to Tier 2 Watch List from Tier 2 in their Trafficking in Persons Report 2009, through a system that ranks countries whose governments do not fully comply with the Trafficking Victims Protection Act's minimum standards, but are making significant efforts to comply with those standards.

This Tier 2 Watch List is just one step short of the most heinous one -- Tier 3 -- that automatically makes a country vulnerable to different sanctions imposed by the US. As a labour-sending country we are in the same branded category as India, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and 47 other countries.

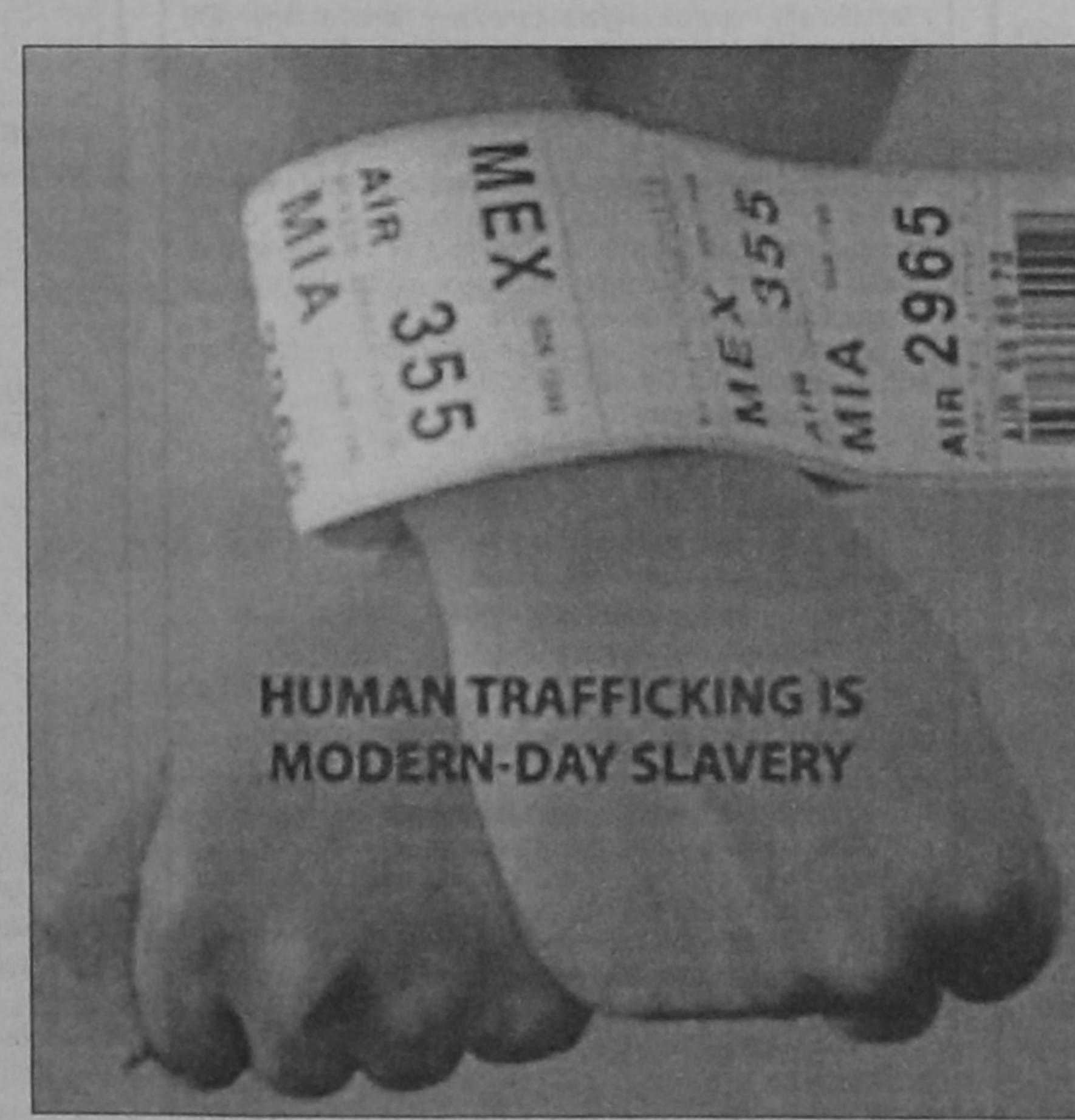
In the diagnosis part of the report, it says that a significant number of trafficking victims are people going abroad on "fraudulent employment offers" and landing up with "forced labour or debt bondage." It says that boys and girls are trafficked within a country for sexual exploitation, bonded labour and forced labour.

Some children are even sold by their parents, while others succumb to fraud and physical coercion.

They categorically branded BAIRA, trade-body of over 700 recruiting agencies, for trafficking of people through legal channels to Middle East countries and Malaysia at placement cost of \$1,235 -- sometimes more. They get as low a salary as \$100-150 per month, which, as per ILO report, compels them to bonded labour or forced labour. It also mentions some NGOs' reports on recruitment fraud and false contracts leading to labour trafficking.

The US State Department suggested integration of objectives in anti-trafficking policies and programs, and increased criminal prosecution and punishment for all forms of trafficking, including fraudulent overseas recruitment, etc.

Interestingly, nowhere did US itself figure in the Tier list. They branded 173 countries, including even their close ally UK, at Tier 1, but not themselves. In the briefing ceremony on June 16, Ambassador Luis CdeBaca, a director of the State Department, simply mentioned that US's trafficking scenario had been placed in their



Congress.

This double standard, separating US from the rest of the world, caused retorts from leaders across the globe. Kuwaiti National Assembly Speaker Jassem Al-Khorafi made a statement on June 18 harshly criticising the United States for placing Kuwait in Tier 3. "I have repeatedly said that Kuwait is not a country of angels, but what hurts me is that the United States thinks it to be a country of angels," al-Khorafi told reporters.

He went on to say that the report

sending suspects for torture to Syria (whom they now place in Tier-3), secret detention camps in Europe, etc., are but few examples of abuse of humanity by US. This self-proclaimed guardianship and unsolicited sermons are not looked at with love and affection.

No country in the world, be it democratic or totalitarian, supports human trafficking, and countries like ours are striving hard to uphold human dignity even with all our limitations. The tone and tenor of Trafficking in Persons Report of the US State Department seems to convey that Bangladesh, especially its recruiting agencies, is primarily engaged in human trafficking and that the 6.5 million expatriates sent by the agents are trafficked. That trafficking in the guise of legal migration is the order of the day is being actively propagated by our NGOs.

That people from Bangladesh are going on jobs abroad under an accountable legal regime, that our embassies in destination countries, equipped with legal retainers, are primarily mandated to look after expatriates, that the country has enough legal instruments and capabilities to address genuine cases of trafficking, that recruiting agents are operating and accountable under Emigration Ordinance 1982, that the Bureau of Manpower Employment & Training (BMET) is scrutinising each and every migrant and giving pre-departure briefing, did not, surprisingly, have any effect on the report.

The branding game is not without

reason. With the motivated feedbacks from cohorts in NGOs, they need to belittle countries trying to break out from poverty and deprivation, to keep them on tenterhooks so that the US can rule the world by proxy. A resounding answer is always given by China (placed in Tier 2 Watch List). With their thousands of years of wisdom, they simply give a damn to the branding ploy of Uncle Sam.

It is high time for the government to take a new look at our rights-based NGOs. Knowingly and unknowingly, they blow up minor issues out of proportion, instigate garments and expatriate workers, feed half-truths to branding agencies like the US State Department, Human Rights Commission, etc.

In their urge to win projects and funds, they hardly keep the interest of the country in mind. We have witnessed how they financed and organised sit-in demonstrations of returned migrant workers in the lounge of the airport, even after the government's and BAIRA's assurances of compensation.

The growth of NGOs in Bangladesh was stupendous and, at present, for every 19,000 people there is one NGO. Unless something is done to contain NGOs, Bangladesh will very soon say goodbye to two sectors -- garments and manpower -- where we are competitive in the global market. Moreover, we will continue to face branding irritations from guardian angels.