

The earthquake concern

Preparedness should be all-out

WITHIN 24 hours of an earthquake that in a way shook a vast region on the shores of the Indian and the Pacific oceans followed by a Tsunami alert, another quake of lesser intensity jolted Rajshahi, Rangpur, Kurigram, Lalmonirhat and Sylhet districts. The redeeming feature is that no damage to life or property occurred.

The sources of the two quakes, however, were around a thousand kilometres apart. The worrying aspect of Bangladesh's position vis-à-vis the quake-prone flashpoints in the region is that it is close to four active and powerful sources of tremors in the Bay of Bengal.

Therefore, Bangladesh's vulnerability to stronger earthquakes is a reality that can be only ignored to our peril.

Lest we become complacent, experts have warned that earthquakes, albeit moderate in their intensities, coming one after another in a regular fashion, may be a precursor of yet bigger quakes with devastating consequences.

With some 90 such tremors of moderate intensity jolting the country between January 2006 and May 2009, according to Buet observatory -- Bangladesh should have meanwhile mounted elaborate preparedness measures against any future earthquake of still higher intensity. But as far as our knowledge goes, nothing of consequence in this respect has happened so far, except that the high court recently issued a directive asking the government to procure necessary equipment to conduct rescue operations during any possible destructive quake in the future.

Hopefully, in response to the high court order, the government machinery has in the meantime swung into action as far as post-quake rescue preparedness goes.

It is time we should get over the mindset of being voluble about earthquake only when there is an incidence. Instead, we ought to have a clear-cut action plan to face up to the challenge of quakes.

The most important part of the task is to create people's readiness in the face of such a calamity. There should be regular awareness campaigns in the print and the electronic media. Periodic civil defence and fire-fighting demonstrations should be organised at different educational institutions and office buildings as well as at community levels. Volunteer corps should be on the alert to take part in rescue operations. Simultaneously, the government needs to strictly ensure that the buildings of the major cities are constructed with built-in quake-resistant measures following, of course, necessary building codes. According to experts, 70, 000 buildings of the capital city remain extremely vulnerable to earthquake-induced collapse, even if it is of 6.5 intensity.

Given the experience of so many tremors scraping through us in recent times, now it is not a question of if, but when, any stronger quake jolts us. So, our preparedness cannot wait. This should be now and, of course, an all-out one.

The perverse and the vile

Perpetrators should be severely dealt with

THE report that a 14-year old school girl was not only physically violated by two men in a village in Faridpur district, but the whole savage act was recorded on mobile phone and the video footage uploaded on the Internet, is mind boggling, to say the least.

Such beastly acts put society at large to shame. The very fact that the perpetrators not only committed a heinous crime but had also the audacity of publicising it is an indicator of the sense of insecurity and humiliation that young girls are subjected to by social desperados. The police reportedly did not register the case and the victim's family had to take recourse to Women and Children Repression Court. If the allegation is true, then one might really begin to comprehend another dimension to the extent of helplessness of young girls. It seems the seminars and meetings to uphold the rights of women are not having the desired effect on all concerned. They are burnt with acid or raped but nobody comes to their rescue.

The trauma associated with such attacks is often too great to be absorbed by a young girl. However, we do not yet have the specialised treatment facilities needed to help such victims overcome the shock and awe.

The poor parents of the rape victim are doing as much as they can to seek justice. They have threatened, out of sheer desperation, to commit suicide if the culprits go unpunished. One should not fail to understand what they have been through and it is the duty of the law enforcers to catch the culprits, whoever they may be, and bring them to justice.

The court has, for understandable reasons, clamped a ban on sale of the CD and ordered arrest of the culprits. But a whole chain of people are involved in it and they must all be brought to justice. This is an aspect of such cases which needs to be dealt with to have a deterrent effect on the rogues.

Bestiality becomes all the more repulsive when it is condoned in any society. The point is relevant in our context as ghoulis crimes against women are often committed with impunity. The Faridpur rapists must be brought to justice and punished according to the law.

Withdrawal of the security forces from CHT

A dispassionate look is in order since, while some may be trying to overplay the security issue, it would be advisable not to overlook the apprehensions altogether. At the same time, delay in the implementation of the accord might provide the excuse to certain groups in the hills to create unrest in the area.

SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN

THE current army withdrawal is perhaps a tangible manifestation of implementation of certain aspects of the 1997 Accord, although the suddenness of the announcement has surprised many. As per the accord, the government is required to pull out such camps as were deployed during the security force's anti-insurgency campaign, after the surrender of the insurgents along with their arms and weapons.

When the government is asserting that the "withdrawal" is in conformity with the terms of the accord, why is opinion divided regarding the prudence of the move? While some feel that the move would adversely impact the security situation in the hills, the government is confident that no such thing is likely, and that it is quite capable of addressing the situation as is obtaining there at the moment or that is likely to in the future.

One would like to take comfort from the assurance of the government; it is for the state to ensure the security of its citizens; and one would hope that it has alternatives in place to address any emerging situation. However, going by the reactions of the non-tribal population in some parts of the CHT, one would not be wrong in suggesting that there are serious misgivings in their minds about the likely outcome of the army withdrawal.

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delay in the implementation of the accord might provide the excuse to certain groups in the hills to create unrest in the area.

But let us first clear some misperceptions regarding certain aspects of the issue.

First, it would be wrong to consider law and order and security matters as synonymous. It has to be stressed, at the risk of sounding pedantic, that the issue of security has a wider scope and has both trans-frontier and cis-frontier connotations; and while law and order can be a relatively more straightforward matter to handle, the security issue is not.

Secondly, one gets to hear that the withdrawal will help end "army rule" and "military occupation" of the region. The fact is that the law enforcing agencies were inducted, not as a political solution but as a holding force, to reduce the insurgents' capacity to launch destructive operations; and although, to handle the security situation, certain regulations were introduced to help tide over the prevailing circumstances, it was the civil writ that ran.

Thirdly, there can be nothing more ridiculous than to suggest that the area was, or is, under "occupation." While one can dismiss such remarks emanating from the uninformed, those words coming from none other than sitting members of the parliament is distressing. One fails to understand how one's own territory can be under "occupation" of one's own army. Are we to understand that the protagonists of such ideas think that the army is not in its own sovereign territory?

And what is the ramification of "with-



drawal?" I suggest that there are certain ground realities that must be kept in mind, and which, one would like to think, the government has kept in view before deciding on the move.

The situation in the CHT is not like what it was pre-December 2, 1997. With the termination of military operations and end of active insurgency it had become easier for gunrunners and drug peddlers to use this area with impunity. Given the nature of the terrain and absence of area domination, it was being used by them as a safe conduit for movement of illegal weapons and drugs.

Physical withdrawal from certain sensitive areas, more so after the current flux in the BDR, may be of help to these elements. And, as with movement of weapons, the various insurgent elements in our neighbouring countries would find it easier to seek sanctuary in our territory when under pressure in their own. And one cannot discount the possibility of their security forces extending the pursuit into our territory unbeknownst to us. Add to this the fact that a

segment of the insurgents in the CHT has not conceded to the accord, and continues to remain armed as before.

As for the CHT Accord, we are into the twelfth year of its signing, and in the more than three years of the AL rule, and the five years of the BNP's, except for some cosmetic actions, very little worth the mention has been done in this regard. What begs the question is why has the compact been not fully implemented?

We all have a stake in permanent peace in the CHT. The BNP and the JP led by Ershad had made attempts in this regard during their tenures. If there be provisos in the accord that need a rethink, in particular those that deal with the devolution of power which seems to have hit a snag, then all concerned must sit together and devise ways to circumvent those and determine the means to implement the accord without either violating the constitution or the spirit of the deal itself.

The author is Editor Defence & Strategic Affairs, The Daily Star.

Some reflections on adivasis

We think the time is ripe for taking initiatives to implementation the peace treaty. We feel a wind of change is blowing over the hills. Let us hope for peaceful co-existence between the tribes and the non-tribal immigrants.

MD. SHAIRUL MASHREQUE

THERE are about 30 lakh indigenous people in Bangladesh distributed among 45 ethnic groups. The Tribal Welfare Association (TWA) has demanded constitutional recognition of the indigenous communities. This association also demanded "establishment of a separate adivasi ministry to protect the ethno-diversity and rights of the indigenous people."

Tribes living both in the hills and the plain areas are treated as ethnic minorities and are "pushed to the periphery" with the "denial of equal status with Bengalis." They are deprived of "land, education and social rights."

We deeply feel that the adivasi people should get equal status and opportunities for shaping their destinies in a free and congenial environment. We cannot do anything to undermine their identity or give them the status of second-class citizens. The human rights issue covers adivasis -- their rightful share in the mainstreams of politics and administration and their socio-economic empowerment.

Internecine conflict of ethno-cultural nature constitutes one of the problems in nation build-

ing in the face of abject poverty, illiteracy and social backwardness. Globally, ethnic conflict haunts post-colonial states "like a tenacious spectre." The post-colonial states are not "nations in being but only in hopes" (Rupert Emerson).

In a multi-racial state like India the simmering ethnic violence in pluralistic societies and periodic eruption of violence continue to be the very basis of democratic norms and values. The Indian government, so far, has reacted violently with state terrorism and peacefully with democratic dialogue.

Sri Lanka faced this problem even with its advanced political system. National integration was threatened by the rising militancy of a secessionist movement launched by Tamil tigers. The state adopted violent tactics to tame ethnic violence.

Bangladesh is a homogenous state but it has still inherited tribal problems, including dissidence of other minorities, from the past. The crisis began in the early sixties, when the Kaptai dam dispossessed innumerable hill tribes in Rangamati. It was a colossal dislocation.

The crisis was intensified in the late seventies when thousands of Bangalees were allowed to

settle in the hill districts. As a sequel to this encroachment the sense of alienation increased, giving rise to a force to challenge Bengali settlers. The lingering crisis became a flashpoint where perpetual confrontation with the army turned out to be a threat to national integration.

Although the famous peace treaty signed between the government and PCJSS in 1997 quenched the ferocity of the tribals in CTG Hill Tracts, the alleged procrastination in the implementation of the treaty bred frustration among the hill tribes.

Santu Lama, the Chairman of PCJSS, expressed grave concerns over greater uncertainties hobbling development in tribal areas. Tribes-non-tribe antagonism became fierce, with a perpetual state of lawlessness in three hill districts.

This tends to impair homeostatic balance of power in tribal communities. Some political groups and front organisations tried to whip up antipathy among the Bengali settlers, while the groups sympathetic to the rights of the indigenous hill people criticise the anti-tribe sentiment of the Bengali settlers.

In this situation, PCJSS organised rallies, blockade and strikes. An annual report of the state department (2003) mentioned that these tribes were facing trouble in defending their entitlement to landed property.

The sentiments of the tribes had been smouldering since the advent of the outsiders. With the march of modernisation, coupled with educational advancement, the aboriginals have by now become acquainted with the techniques

of asserting their rights. They are coming in contact with many human rights groups upholding their rich cultures and spearheading a social movement against violence that continues to jeopardise their rights.

Even then, they are living in a state of intimidation, facing structural and non-structural violence. We lament their lingering predicaments and deplorable conditions. The human rights organisations have pointed at the notorious land grabbing in the hill tracts.

Recently, the news of withdrawal of army camps in the hill districts created news headlines. It is a laudable move by the present government, of course, but is opposed by the opposition forces that are critical of the peace treaty of 1997. The decision to "dismantle 35 temporary security camps in hill districts by September" was taken on July 29.

In addition, the law minister said that CHT land survey would be carried out by the end of the year "to recover land of the indigenous people occupied over the years." The minister was speaking at the meeting organised by the Bangladesh Adivasi Forum (BAF).

The forum brought out colourful procession on the occasion of Adivasi Day. We think the time is ripe for taking initiatives to implementation the peace treaty. We feel a wind of change is blowing over the hills. Let us hope for peaceful co-existence between the tribes and the non-tribal immigrants.

Dr. Md. Shairul Mashreque is a Professor of Public Administration, Chittagong University.

Verdict of Aung San Suu Kyi trial

Some may question why Burma warrants so much attention. There are other countries where human rights are ignored or people live in poverty. But the Burmese regime stands virtually alone in the scale of its misrule and the sheer indifference to the daily suffering of its 50 million people.

GORDON BROWN

THE appalling but inevitable outcome of Aung San Suu Kyi's sham trial is final proof that the military regime in Burma is determined to continue defying the world.

Depressing news that she has been sentenced to up to 1.5 years further house arrest is not only a tragedy for her and her family but also for the Burmese people who suffer daily at the hand of tyranny.

This was the moment for the generals to embrace the growing clamour for change and choose the path of reform demanded by the region and the global community.

They comprehensively shunned it. The charges were baseless, the verdict outrageous.

So the international community must respond to this latest injustice with a clear message to the junta that its tyrannical actions will no longer be tolerated.

Further sanctions to target directly the regime's economic interests have been agreed by the EU in response to the verdict and must be

implemented as quickly as possible. And determined action in the UN Security Council must follow. Nothing less than a worldwide ban on the sale of arms to the regime will do as a first step.

I also believe that we should identify and target those judges complicit in these political show trials, which are an absurd mockery of justice.

The generals should be in no doubt about the strength of international solidarity with the cause of freedom, democracy and development in Burma.

Political and humanitarian conditions in the country continue to deteriorate.

When over 140,000 were killed and millions made destitute by Cyclone Nargis last year the world's efforts to help were resisted, a peaceful uprising by monks in 2007 was violently quashed, ethnic minorities were persecuted and under armed attack.

The media is muzzled, freedom of speech and assembly are non-existent and the number of political prisoners -- jailed only for their

unwavering commitment to peace and national reconciliation -- has doubled to more than 2000.

Aung San Suu Kyi is the most high profile of them.

She has long been a symbol of hope and defiance during her 14 years as a prisoner of conscience. She is a most courageous woman. In those long years of isolation, she has barely seen her two sons, yet is resolute in her faith in democracy and the Burmese people.

Her refusal to buckle in the face of tyranny is an inspiration. The façade of her prosecution is made more monstrous, therefore, because its real objective is to sever her bond with the people for whom she is a beacon of hope and resistance.

Her treatment can only be read as the junta's reluctance to move towards freedom, democracy and rule of law with Aung San Suu Kyi a central figure in a new Burma.

So unless they immediately free her -- and all political prisoners -- and start genuine dialogue with opposition and ethnic groups elections next year will have no credibility.

In July, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon demanded such measures on a visit to Rangoon. With this verdict, the generals have publicly snubbed him.

Now comes our greatest test.

In the face of this arrogance, we cannot stand by and effectively sanction the abhorrent actions of a violent and repressive junta -- but

show them that the international community is united and coordinated in its response.

We have seen an extraordinary consensus building around the world against the Burmese regime, encompassing the UN, the EU, Asean and more than 45 heads of state. All of us must continue to push for genuine political reconciliation and change, especially those countries in the region with the greatest influence.

Burma is rich in natural and human resources and sits at the heart of a dynamic continent. Democratic reform would unleash the country's enormous potential.

And I have always made clear that the UK would respond positively to any signs of progress but attitudes must harden in the light of this verdict.

The generals are condemning the country and its people to ever deeper isolation, poverty, conflict and despair.

Some may question why Burma warrants so much attention. There are other countries where human rights are ignored or people live in poverty.

But the Burmese regime stands virtually alone in the scale of its misrule and the sheer indifference to the daily suffering of its 50 million people.

Once again my thoughts are with Aung San Suu Kyi -- the human face of Burma's tragedy. But words and thoughts are no longer enough.

RT. Hon. Gordon Brown is the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom.