

Earthquake threat and preparedness

The government should take immediate steps for setting up a seismological observatory network equipped with modern and sensitive earthquake monitoring facilities for continuous monitoring and prediction.

A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

THE two earthquakes of moderate magnitude that rattled a vast area of Bangladesh within a span of 24 hours in the past week have once again brought forth the earthquake concern as well as awakened the nation to the need of preparedness for facing the spectre.

One of the most powerful earthquakes that hit southern Asia on December 26, 2004, unleashing a tsunami, also shook Bangladesh with water rising by several feet at different places. The earthquake, measuring 7.36 on the Richter scale, shook buildings and other structures and caused cracks in a number of structures in the port city.

In the recent past, four notable earthquakes occurred in Bangladesh. A quake of magnitude 5.6 occurred on May 8, 1997, in Sylhet, damaging some buildings. On November 21 in the same year a quake of 5.9 magnitude hit Chittagong and brought down a five-storyed under-construction building, claiming 23 lives.

North Bengal and Dhaka city were rocked by a moderate earthquake in December 2001, and some buildings in

Dhaka city developed cracks. A magnitude 6 quake hit Chittagong and Khagrachhari on November 7, 2007 and caused many cracks in the hills.

Bangladesh is an earthquake prone country as it lies along the border of the Eurasian and Indo-Australian plates, where earthquakes of comparatively uniform intensity are generated at regular intervals. In this region, earthquakes may occur in a cyclic order of hundred years and, according to the experts, the Great Indian Earthquake of 1897 is likely to be repeated every hundred years.

The meteorological department detected at least 90 earthquakes that occurred in the country between May 2007 and July 2008, nine of which measured above 5 on the Richter scale, and the epicenters of 95% of the quakes were within a 600 km radius of Dhaka city. Buet observatory recorded 86 quakes between January 2006 and May 2009, of which four were above magnitude 5.

The threat of earthquake is a matter of great concern to Bangladesh, and repeated tremors in different areas may be warnings for a severe one, as per opinion of the experts in this field. But the worrying aspect is that the people's

preparedness and awareness to face a fatal earthquake seem to be almost zero. What has so far been done is preparation of a map dividing the country into three seismic zones.

Natural calamities like cyclone, flood, tornado, tidal bore, drought and downpour are more or less known to the people of our country. But an earthquake is quite different from other natural calamities because any kind of forecasting or prediction is impossible.

So it is urgently necessary to prepare the people of our country adequately to face a catastrophe like an earthquake. The government has taken up a five-year project, titled "Comprehensive Disaster Management Project," to reduce the risks of natural calamities, with special focus on creating awareness about earthquakes. But nothing noteworthy has happened so far.

Dhaka is the riskiest city amongst the top 20 cities of the world according to the Earthquake Disaster Risk Index (EDRI). A catastrophic earthquake may cause heavy casualties and destruction of properties in our densely populated capital city because of lack of awareness and necessary preparations.

The meteorological department established a seismic observatory at Chittagong in 1954, which is now obsolete and not adequate for a country located in the seismic zone.

The High Court, in a commendable move, recently issued a rule on the government to procure necessary equip-



Dhaka: Earthquake prone, but totally unprepared.

ment for conducting rescue operations in case a stronger quake hits any part of the country in future.

The government should take immediate steps for setting up a seismological observatory network equipped with modern and sensitive earthquake monitoring facilities for continuous monitor-

ing and prediction.

The most important part of the task is to enhance the level of awareness among the people to face earthquakes. The print and electronic media can play a vital role in preparing the people to face such a calamity.

As far as the post-quake rescue opera-

tion is concerned, the government should organise rescue operation campaigns and civil defense exercises all over the country under its Comprehensive Disaster Management Project, which is financed by the donor agencies.

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Will Musharraf face trial?

Demands have started pouring in for the trial of the former president. The Supreme Court bench, headed by Chief Justice Iftekhar Mohammad Chowdhury, who himself was among the judges dismissed two years ago, called the declaration of the emergency and sacking of the judges as "unconstitutional."

ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

APakistan court, acting on a petition regarding the house arrest of Supreme Court judges, has directed the police to lodge a case against former president General (retd) Pervez Musharraf. The ruling has come as the latest legal woe for the former ruler, who is now abroad.

Pakistan's former strongman appears to be in the hot water. A recent verdict by the country's apex court has invalidated his declaration of emergency and sacking of 12 supreme court judges in 2007. Demands have started pouring in for the trial of the former president.

The Supreme Court bench, headed by Chief Justice Iftekhar Mohammad Chowdhury, who himself was among the judges dismissed two years ago, called the declaration of the emergency and sacking of the judges as "unconstitutional."

The Court summoned Musharraf before the verdict was pronounced, but he neither responded nor was represented by a lawyer. Now his critics are demanding his trial for trampling the constitution for, what they allege, accomplishing his designs.

Will Musharraf return to the country and face the likely trial, which the attorney general says is possible by the simple-majority resolution of the parliament? Or he will choose to stay abroad, ignoring the developments centering him? Will any country friendly to him, like Saudi Arabia, officially extend hospi-

tality in the form of exile?

Finally, it is also possible that he may go scot-free even after the verdict of the supreme court and the demand for trial because his influence in the country may not be fully exhausted, even though he seems to be a spent force.

All these issues are revolving around the former ruler as the focus of the Pakistan politics is now definitely on the persons whose recent comments have generated intense interest, even though not without controversy, and an element of disbelief.

Musharraf took over power on October 12, 1998 through a bloodless military coup in a dramatic fashion after he was sacked by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif while he was away on an official visit to Colombo. Even the PIA plane carrying him was instructed not to land at Karachi airport. But things had gone entirely in his way as troops and officers loyal to him made no mistake in ensuring his safety. He was whisked away from the Karachi airport and was soon at the helm in Islamabad.

However, Musharraf did not impose martial law although the armed forces called the shots and the elected government of Nawaz Sharif was toppled. The development was nothing new in the topsy-turvy history of the country, given the record of intermittent army intervention in the rule of the nation. The Supreme Court validated his taking over of power, but asked him to national elections within three years, which he did.

An elected parliament came in and civilian prime ministers -- first Zafarullah Khan Jamali and later Shaukat Aziz -- gave a semblance of democratic rule. Musharraf had by then become the president with the political support of a faction of Pakistan Muslim League (Quaid-e-Azam). He said the cup

of democracy is Pakistan was 99% full, but the hollowness of such a claim was obvious since the real power lay with him, and he was still in uniform in addition to holding the presidency.

He was free from trouble for most part of his rule as both the main politicians were abroad: Benazir Bhutto in

self-exile while Nawaz Sharif was sent to Saudi Arabia. The US and Saudi Arabia brokered Sharif's release. Finally, when the next national elections neared, President Musharraf felt increasingly worried since any balloting would have been meaningless without the two main political leaders -- both former premiers.

He probably reached some broad understanding with Benazir's PPP, but kept Nawaz at arms length even though both had returned to Pakistan. Clearly, Nawaz was more hostile to Musharraf as it was his elected government that was toppled by the army chief.

In the polls, the PPP won largely by riding on the popularity and sympathy caused by the tragic assassination of Benazir Bhutto. Musharraf had to relinquish the presidency, paving the way for Benazir's widower Asif Ali Zardari, who is now the head of state.

Both PPP and Nawaz's Muslim League were against Musharraf's undemocratic rule, but Nawaz was anti-Musharraf for understandable reasons. As opposition leader he kept on demanding actions against Musharraf for various acts, including sacking of the judges, a demand to which Zardari paid scant heed.

Dismissed Chief Justice Iftekhar Mohammad Chowdhury got back his job as the government was forced to reinstate him and several other judges because of the agitation launched by Sharif and independent minded lawyers.

Once Chowdhury was back to his earlier position, it was a more or less foregone conclusion that Musharraf would be in the dock through the court if it was asked to deal with him. That is what has exactly happened.

Musharraf is largely seen as a dictator, barring the last few months of his presidency. But it must also be said that he has some popular support because he had brought Pakistan back from

miserable economic conditions and also steered the country well in the difficult situation caused by the Afghan war.

Whether the demand for his trial following the verdict of the Supreme Court will see the light of day remains doubtful. Whether Pakistan's powerful army led by Gen. Ashfaq Kayani, who was appointed to the position by Musharraf, will agree that their former boss goes on trial is also uncertain.

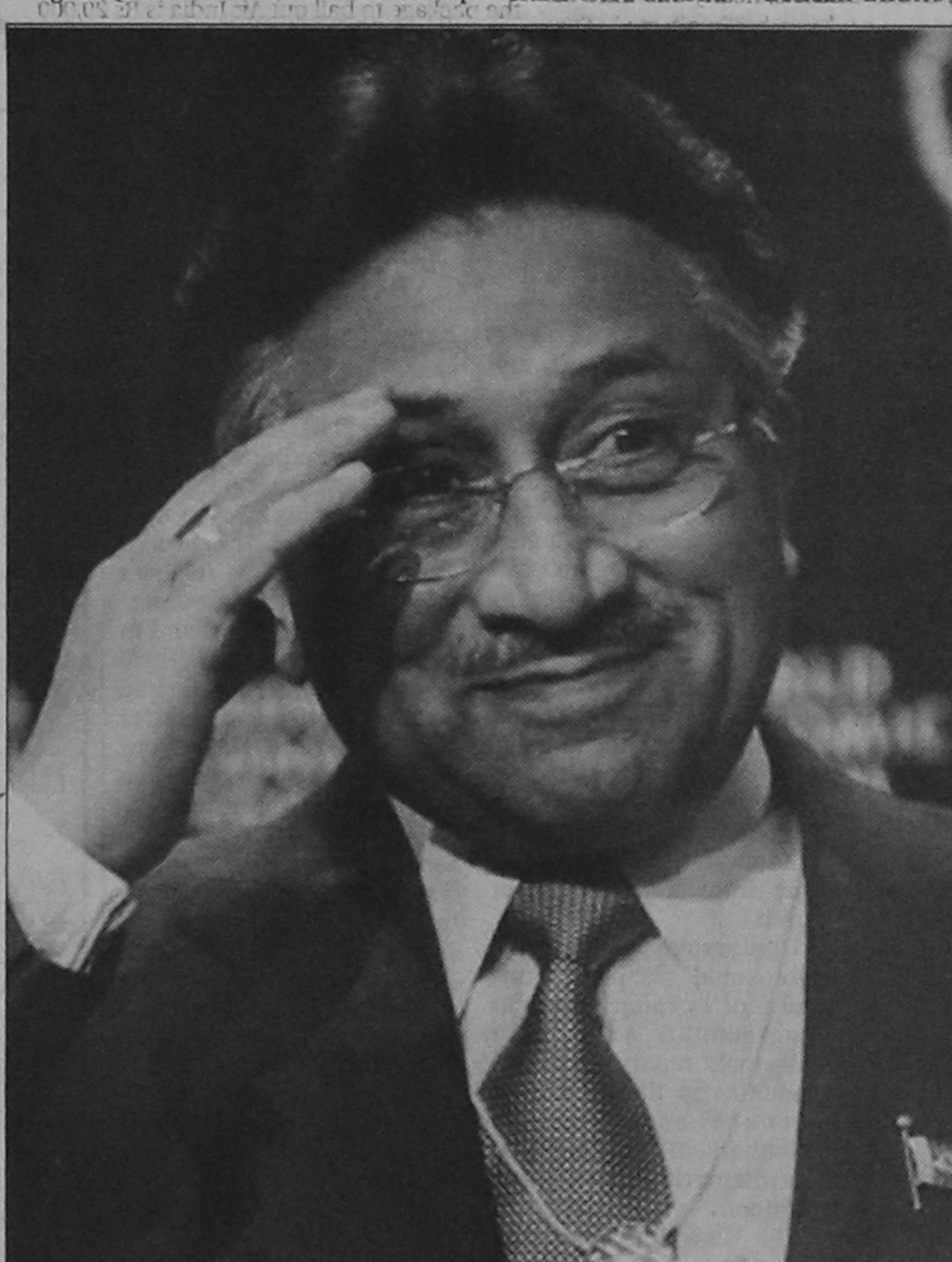
Besides, the ruling PPP and the main opposition Nawaz's Muslim League may not fully see eye to eye on the issue, although both President Zardari and Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gilani said that trial was possible if the parliament wanted.

Musharraf recently caused a stir by saying in an interview that he had good understanding with late Benazir and, had she been alive today, she would have been the prime minister and Musharraf the president. This means he had close rapport with the PPP.

Nawaz Sharif is more vociferous in demanding trial of Gen. Musharraf, who is now in Europe. His trampling of the constitution merits his trial but, because of the complex political scenario of Pakistan and a role from behind the curtain by the armed forces, such a trial may remain ever elusive. If the army considers him a "liability" then Musharraf may have to face difficult times.

However, much depends on how far the PPP government is willing to go with the issue. Besides, Musharraf's anti-militancy and anti-fundamentalist role has earned him at least some friends in the West, which may also help him bail out from this situation. In any case, much depends on the developments centering him in the coming days.

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Tough times ahead?

Remembering William Carey as an environmentalist

MARTIN ADHIKARY

WILLIAM Carey (1761-1834), who arrived in Bengal on November 11, 1793 from England as a missionary, was born on August 17. Side by side with his missionary work he did great work in social reformation and renaissance, literature, translation and the print media, and many other fields. His great contribution to the preservation of environment is one such area.

Ecology is a great concern all over the world today, and it will be fitting to remember Carey's contribution in this field. This short writing is a modest way to remember the many areas in the life and work of the versatile genius of William Carey, who lived and tirelessly

worked in the then Bengal for transforming the lives of the people.

Carey had a deep love for nature. He had internalised right from his youth the truth that though the purpose of nature was to serve man, man also had the responsibility to be the faithful steward of God's creation. Due to poverty his parents could not afford to give him formal education. He had to work in agricultural fields with his uncle from his boyhood days.

His resolute character and love for God, nature and mankind helped him to learn from everything around him. He learnt from nature, its beauty, intricacy and sanctity. The trees, plants, flowers, fruits, butterflies, birds and all other creations appealed to his whole being. In the 41 years he spent in the then Bengal,

Carey served man with a deep regard for God's creation backed by a deep devotion to God.

He wrote in "On the Study of Nature": "The great Author of nature has filled the world with so great a variety of objects that something presents itself, at every step, to the view of the most inquisitive observer, either from its utility or its beauty. Its singularity or some other obvious property brings itself to his notice. Where, however, a superficial observer sees only the most prominent beauties or singularities of an object, or only recognises it from the virtues popularly attributed to it. The philosopher examines it with greater minuteness, reduces it to its proper class, and assigns it a place in the general arrangement of organised bodies."

He had books on plants, birds, beasts, fish, reptiles and various other creatures. Carey taught Natural Science and Agronomy to his classes with great earnestness at the Serampore College, of which he was the founder. He and his colleagues used to publish new findings in the newspapers of that time so that the public could also learn about developments in agriculture. Carey's contribution to agriculture can be understood from his essay "State of Agriculture in the district of Dinajpur," published in the Asiatic Researches in 1811.

Carey's contribution to the development of agronomy and botany can hardly be overemphasised. It was primarily because of his insistence that the government formed the Plantation Committee with the mandate of protect-

ing the receding forests in India. Carey was its first secretary. He put great emphasis on the promotion of agriculture and horticulture.

He founded the Agri-horticultural Society of India in 1820, 30 years before the foundation of the Royal Agricultural Society in his homeland England! This was a great step towards the development of agriculture in all of India. He received cooperation from Governor General Hastings and Lady Hastings. The Society had great seminal effect, manifested in the formation of local societies in different parts of India -- including one in Dhaka. He reminded people that man was a part of nature and without love and protection of nature man could not live.

From nature we get food, drink, medi-

cine, shelter, oxygen, and what not. He founded the Botanical Garden in Serampore on 15 bighas of land. It had as many as 427 species, many of which were of rare varieties. Carey worked for a considerable amount of time in Madnabati in western Dinajpur, where he did a lot of work in agricultural farming. He used to cultivate various vegetables, bringing their seeds from England, and also used to send seeds of different kinds of vegetables and fruits from Madnabati to England. He did what he could do in his time. Let us remember him for his great work and be encouraged by his love for nature and all its blessings for our good.

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