

# In need of international support

Leaders of some powerful nations were criticised by their people and the media for either not acting immediately, or acting inadequately, for the calamity hit countries. School children, top celebrities of the cine and music world, sports figures and heads of governments of some countries spared no efforts to stand by the suffering humanity.

ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

THE United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) session has just begun, and the highlight of the gathering this time has been the deliberation by world leaders on the alarming climate changes across the world. President Barack Obama emphasised the issue in a significant speech at the session.

The gathering of the world leaders during the UN session this year bears a special significance and, in a way, is critically important for many countries for whom climatic changes pose threats and problems that are far larger than one can imagine. The situation is particularly dangerous for South Asia and South-East Asia since countries of these regions often have to face disasters that essentially stem from the effects of climate changes.

In South Asia, Bangladesh and several other countries are extremely vulnerable to these problems that are causing manifold effects and in all probability will bring disasters of unimaginable proportions. For instance, the tiny Indian Ocean island state of Maldives even fears that the whole country may go under water at one stage because of the rise in the sea-level, and President Mohammad Nasheed said that the entire population of his country may have to be shifted to a safer zone.

Not long ago, catastrophic cyclone Nargis narrowly spared Bangladesh but battered neighbouring Myanmar, where many lost their lives and many more were affected. This catastrophe could have struck Bangladesh or any other country in

the South Asian region. Earlier, cyclone Sidr wreaked colossal devastation in Bangladesh, and the country is still reeling under effects while sparing no efforts to bring back normality in the affected areas. Unfortunately, natural disasters have become regular visitors in this part of the world, and we all are largely hapless before the whims of nature.

South Asia is often in the grip of severe floods, causing havoc. Mainly three regional countries -- India, Bangladesh and Nepal -- are struck, leaving millions badly affected. Last time, three years ago, the catastrophe was seen as worst in several decades in the region, and international community, including the chief executive of the United Nations, had expressed grave concern and anxiety at the situation.

Natural disasters are not a new phenomenon as countries are victims to the fury of nature. Despite tremendous technological and other advancement, the world is still helpless in the face of natural onslaughts and cannot offer much resistance. People now, at best, can know in advance about the impending disaster and take some precautionary measures; and this preparedness help them contain to some extent, or minimise, the consequences of the dangers. In some cases significant progress has been made in combating natural disasters as far as possible, but by and large people still remain only spectators before nature that can cause devastating losses.

South Asia and South East Asia are a disaster-prone areas. Catastrophic floods, storms, hurricanes, droughts, earthquakes and other colossal problems

caused by the whims of nature are a regular phenomenon in this part of the world, while many other regions are also vulnerable to various disasters.

Early warning systems, adequate pre-calamity preparedness, and speedy post-disaster management systems are some of the measures that can definitely reduce the chances and more importantly lessen the scale of devastation. It is not that these possibilities are not being thought of or efforts are not being made in this line to save the calamity-prone nations as far as possible. But what is urgently needed is a more serious bid in that direction on the basis of utmost priority, and placement of resources, even if there is constraint on part of the countries, desperately needs protection from natural disasters. It appears that such a drive is somewhat lacking even though there is no dearth of anxiety and concern, as well as talks of probable steps to mitigate the causes and consequences.

Several years ago, the tsunami tragedy brought to the fore the need for anti-disaster measures on a regional plane, and this has received particular attention since the occurrence of unimaginable magnitude took the lives of more than a quarter million hapless people in South and South East Asia.

Bangladesh is vulnerable to natural disasters, which were highlighted by the catastrophes of 1970, 1988, 1998 and other occasions. The world conference on disaster management in Kobe, Japan, five years ago, focused especially on the hardships caused by nature to such nations.

Saarc, in its summits including in the last one in Colombo, had taken up disasters and climatic change as one of the priority issues for South Asia's eight countries, stressing on combating disasters as far as possible with preventive measures. It goes without saying that a venture like disaster prevention in South Asia needs collective endeavour, and larger international support and assistance are also required for the purpose.

It can be concluded that international help will not be absent, as evidenced by



Facing the disaster alone.

the fact that the sympathy demonstrated in the aftermath of Asia's tsunami was more appealing in the people of the Western nations whose hearts went out in consolation with the dead and affected in the South and South East Asia.

Leaders of some powerful nations were criticised by their people and the media for either not acting immediately, or acting inadequately, for the calamity hit countries. School children, top celebrities of the cine and music world, sports figures and heads of governments of some countries spared no efforts to stand by the suffering humanity. The tsunami and Nargis narrowly spared Bangladesh. Had they hit Bangladesh, the destruction could have been unthinkable. Later, the Kashmir region in Pakistan and India was terribly damaged by severe earthquakes followed by flooding in three countries -- Bangladesh, India and Nepal.

As the South Asian nations under the

banner of the Saarc are sparing no efforts to improve their economic and social condition through collective endeavour, despite occasional strain on the Saarc and sluggish progress made by the forum, all avenues are being explored for multifaceted cooperation in various fields. As regards climate change, disaster-prone South Asia must take up the issue of cooperation in this field on a greater priority.

It is just not that disasters bring human tragedies of enormous proportions, but also badly damage and even at times wipe out assiduously built developmental infrastructure. And this destruction undoubtedly covers agriculture, road and other communications as well as some other vital sectors which are critically important for the welfare and well-being of the people.

Such catastrophes negate the progress made in different fields, and it is imperative that anti-disaster plans and progress

are taken up with all seriousness for socio-economic uplift. The terrible Sidr experience in Bangladesh and the Nargis havoc must serve as a wake-up call for them -- albeit the fact that all member states are aware of this issue of great concern.

The effects of climate change are inextricably linked with natural disasters and the whole issue needs to be seen in a broader perspective. The deliberations in the UNGA session by the world leaders are a very timely exercise, particularly ahead of the important word conference on the issue in Copenhagen later this year. South Asians nations must seize every opportunity at international level for mitigation of the effects of climate change along with the issue of natural disasters.

Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury is Senior Special Correspondent of BSS.

# Cattle class debate and austerity

Travelling in economy class should in no way be considered as cattle class journey for servants of the republic nor for the leaders, who claim to work for the welfare of people and socio-economic upliftment.

DHIRAJ KUMAR NATH

CATTLE class" appears to be a new term used to humiliate the economy class passengers travelling by air. Indian Minister of State for External Affairs, Mr. Shashi Tharoor used this term sarcastically in response to a query about his journey in economy class that he would travel "cattle class out of solidarity with all our holy cows."

This derogatory remark has generated a strong debate since most of the economy class passengers raised serious objections for calling them cows and goats. Besides, the finance ministry recently issued directives that all ministers should travel in economy class within the country. This unguarded remark of Mr. Tharoor has apparently undermined his party's stand to adopt austerity measures and thus drew a sharp reaction from the Congress as well.

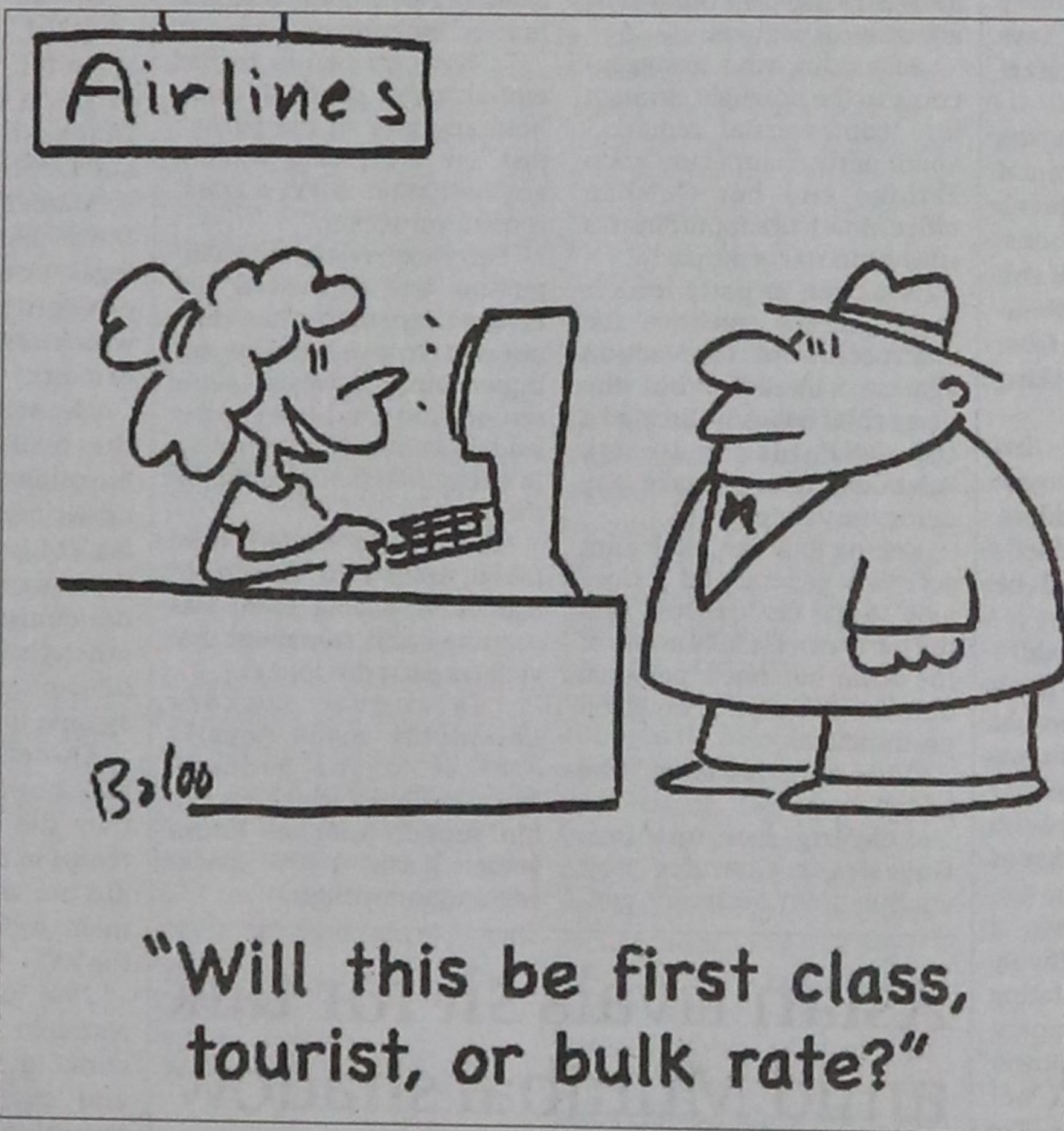
The AICC spokesperson, Jayanthi Natarajan of Congress party, observed: "It is unacceptable to every one of us and not just to the citizens travelling in economy class or even buses. The party strongly

disapproves his expression. It may be slang or jargon but we find it unacceptable." It was also observed that members of the cabinet should learn the language and the culture of this historic party. It may be mentioned Rahul Gandhi always used to travel in economy class by air and chair car by train.

Mr. Shashi Tharoor, before this assignment, was the Under Secretary General to the United Nations. He was one of the contestants for the post of Secretary General of the UN, which Mr. Ban Ki-moon won.

Such an absolutely insensitive and unacceptable statement from a person of his stature has surprised many and left a lesson for others. This has, in fact, created a strong debate about the wisdom of the council of ministers and also their affinity with the poverty stricken people, who can hardly afford to travel by a bullock cart. The poor people of the country walk hours together since they have no money to pay to the carrier.

The cattle class debate in fact has generated contentions about two issues,



firstly about the privileges and immunities of the cabinet members and, secondly, their inexperience and poor understanding of the pulse of the people and silly praise of the programs and priorities of the government.

In a democratic society, where the media monitor the movement of public representative very closely, every expression should be well guarded and well thought out. No member of the cabinet, or persons occupying high positions of the government, should create a situation for those who would willfully distort their words if they got an opportunity to do so. This is equally true for all countries, including Bangladesh.

Many observations and speeches during the BDR episode and also in controlling market prices of essential items were not so well thought, for which some confusion developed, creating embarrassment for the government. Equally, some unguarded remarks on the Tipaimukh dam debate created a national issue subsequently when the government had to respond.

The second issue is about the privileges and benefits of the members of the cabinet and other high-ups in the administration. There is no restriction on members of the cabinet, or officials having the status of very important persons, travelling in the first or business class. It is for the person to avoid excessive revenue expenditure and choose convenient economy class or route. The saving of public money is a reflection of national feeling and patriotism, not a question of audit objection alone.

Institutions like the World Bank or

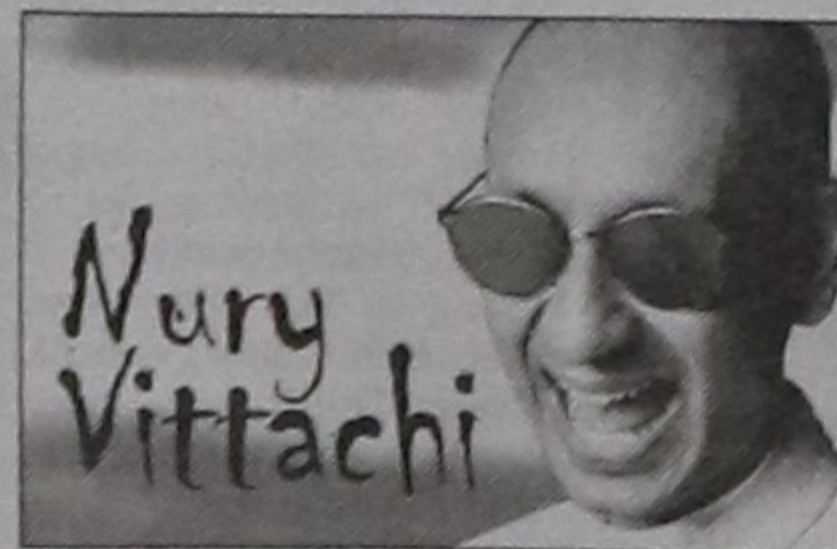
Asian Development Bank do not allow even very senior officials to travel by first class or even business class. This is also equally true for many international organisations that are paying an employee more than a million taka a month. They are ready to pay for the work, but not for the privilege, pomp and pleasure, from the exchequer. This is the canon of justice that should prevail everywhere in the government and also in non-state organisations. Some international institutions are also very careful in using the office stationery and equipment.

Our government, in these days of economic downturn, should also issue instructions to all for the economic use of all utilities, not only electric and gas, during festivals and weddings. There is a restriction on the number of guests at a function, but the public, by and large, are not aware of it due to its weak enforcement.

Travelling in economy class should in no way be considered as cattle class journey for servants of the republic nor for the leaders, who claim to work for the welfare of people and socio-economic upliftment. The saving of every coin of the exchequer should be considered as an opportunity to make provisions for the deprived and distressed poor.

Dhiraj Kumar Nath is a former Adviser to the caretaker government.

# Give your baby a pointy head



I get the weirdest jobs. I was asked to go comfort a man who was going bald.

"For some reason, he's really upset," our mutual friend told me. "Go show him that having a head like bowling ball can be a positive thing. It gives the rest of us a good laugh." (So sensitive, my friends.)

I, obediently, turned up at the address given to find a young man with a huge head of hair. Closer examination showed that he had used some sort of miniature garden fork to fluff up his thin, disappearing locks. He looked like

he had a small personal raincloud round his head.

"You don't have to worry," I lied. "Women love baldies and they fall at my feet on a daily basis."

He looked me up and down and gave me a "Yeah Right" look. He refused to be comforted and eventually revealed why he was so upset. "I have a terrible secret," he said. "My head is a really weird shape."

I examined it carefully. He was right. It stuck out at the back. "I see what you mean. Without your hair you'd look like something from Alien Versus Predator. But that's not so bad. Aliens are cool in their own way," I told him.

"Not to girls," he responded. I had to admit he had a point there. He blamed his mother for the problem.

A large number of parents in China and in south Asia spend hours every week shaping their babies' heads to make them perfectly globu-

lar. Some use molds. (Power tools are not recommended.) "My mother obviously skipped this," he lamented bitterly.

I decided to trawl for information from the smartest network of people on the planet: readers. Jason Sydnun said you can change your head shape, but only if you are an infant. "With the right manipulation, you can shape the top of the baby's head, make it rounder or pointier."

A doctor who did not want her name mentioned said babies who always sleep on the same part of their heads get a flat section. I imagine this can be useful in later life for balancing trays or leaning against walls.

Ancient writer Hippocrates said the fashion 2,400 years ago was to lengthen the heads of boys and flatten those of girls. It struck me that this would be a good tradition to revive in Singapore, where brainy-looking women scare off men.

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Not only heads are reshaped. In mainland China, parents press their babies' noses to make them flat, while in the Indian subcontinent,

they do the opposite. Reader Farah Huq from Bangladesh said: "When I was young, my mom used to pull on my nose religiously every day, so that it would become sharp and defined like my Dad's." But her nose turned out rounded and cute like her mother's.

Reader Christy Chiang asked: "Is it technically possible to shape a baby's head into a square by wrapping it in a square mold? Is that what happened to SpongeBob Squarepants?" Luckily, Christy doesn't have any children to experiment on, but I shall keep her email to warn any prospective husbands about her interest in producing children with cuboid heads. Or I may introduce her to my balding friend. If you can't have block-headed kids, Christy, how would you fancy a cute brood of aliens?

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