

Aila: Helping the helpers

Post-disaster rehabilitation is like fighting a war. Let us all appreciate the difficulties and complications which are faced by the people-on-the-job, and let us all help and inspire them, not demoralise them when they are at war.



M.A. QUASSEM

I have just returned from Aila-affected polder 32 in Dakope Upazilla and polder 15 (Gabura) -- an island on the fringe of the Sundarbans. I have seen people dying, houses demolished, crops destroyed, but never such a horrible destruction of the landscape. In this respect, Aila is unprecedented. As a hydraulic engineer, I can comprehend the breaches on the embankments, but the damage it caused to the terrain -- opening up new canals and widening small channels to rivers -- is beyond comprehension.

There has been a lot of criticism against the officers in the field -- particularly the Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB) -- regarding the failure to repair the embankments and reluctance of the people to return to their habitat. I want to highlight (a) the arduous tasks which confront the BWDB field officials; (b) the multidimensional problems being faced in rehabilitation work; and (c) the lessons for the future; and in no way to make excuses for any real failure.

Aila affected, according to BWDB sources, 47 polders (areas confined by embankment for protection against saline water intrusion due

to tidal rise and to facilitate drainage). BWDB identified the destruction of and damage to embankments and water resources infrastructures, and estimated the cost of emergency repair work. The government allotted wheat and money for the emergency repair work.

By July-August 2009, with the GOB's own resources, BWDB closed 303 breaches totaling 85.9 km, 122 closures out of 152, repaired 32 sluice gates and other water structures, and made 41 out of 47 polders flood-free. The rest of the work was taken up in December 2009. In my opinion, some time might have been gained between August and December.

Post-disaster rehabilitation is not easy. The rehabilitation work in polder-32, which was constructed in 1966, may be illuminating. The embankments weathered the fury of the coastal waves without the necessary maintenance, and were worn out. Added to this is the uncountable number of unlawful pipes -- put in the embankments by shrimp cultivators -- are destructive and make the embankment extremely vulnerable. BWDB's cry for action against these irresponsible shrimp cultivators goes unheard. BWDB never gets the required money for repair and maintenance.

By July-August 2009, BWDB had closed 6

breaches on the embankment, constructed 6 closures out of 13 planned, and made one-third of the polder flood-free. Seven closures remained, which were tendered in November 2009. The work sites were difficult, earth for embankment was scarce, labour was not available, and financial support was uncertain. Works for only 2 closures started but, unfortunately, one was washed out after construction by the high tidal flow on February 24, which was only one foot less than the Aila height. Five closures could not be started at the right time.

Pushed by circumstances, BWDB modified the plan and design of the works and took a lot of risk on their shoulders to persuade the contractors to participate in the bidding. Finally, the work of the 5 tenders started around the first week of February, which was quite late. Anyway, now works are going on all the crucial places and all but one are expected to be closed.

The one which may not be completed is the construction of the Nalian river closure (140 m wide) with 2.70 km of connecting approach embankment, estimated at Tk.303.46 lakh. This closure was tendered five times. Those who know about construction of closures will consider the bid price as normal (even less) for a closure, because of the risks and hazards involved. However, the Public Procurement Rules (PPR) of the Government prohibits award at rate higher than 5 percent.

The situation was further complicated by conflicting vested interests. Firstly, the poor residents of the polder feel safe on the embankment and are happy with the relief they have been receiving. Their problem is lack of drinking water. Secondly, there is a quarter that thinks that if the polder is not closed, land price inside the polder will come down to the advantage of the rich ones, particularly the shrimp farmers. Thirdly, there is conflict between the outside and the local labourers. Fourthly, there is strong demand to sub-divide the polder in two.

So the quarter did not want the Nalian river closure as proposed in the tender and considered this an opportunity to have the polder divided, which finally boiled down to what they call the 2nd strategy -- a closure 10.5 km inside with embankments (ring bunds) on both sides of the Nalian river. Ironically, this alignment traverses over 4 km of marshy land with bad sub-soil condition, where normal construction methods cannot be used.

The departure from the original concept of the Nalian closure may prove costly both in terms of money and success. A group of design engineers and BWDB high-ups are working to devise a strategy and design for closing it. The executive engineer hopes to succeed provided army is deployed within 2-3 days (I visited the

polder on March 12). The Bangladesh Navy was deployed on March 16 to assist BWDB.

In many places, the repair work could not yet be completed, and need immediate strengthening before a severe high tide or similar event occurs.

BWDB has to work under extreme constraints. Not to speak of an emergency, even the staff under normal set-up is also not there. None of the 6 work assistants and surveyors were posted there. One sub-divisional engineer (SDE) and one section officer (SO) are not enough for emergency jobs. The logistic support is even worse -- no office, no water transport, no accommodation is available. A hired engine trawler, which takes more than 4 hours to go to the furthest work site, is used; the SO lives in a hired country boat where he cooks, eats and operates the office. There is no contingency plan(s) to face an emergency.

The BWDB field office has to work in spite of these constraints. They are thankful to the ADG and chief engineer of BWDB, who stay in the Aila area almost full-time, and also to the DG BWDB and the Secretary, MoWR, who have visited the places several times to give them support. They have expressed gratitude to their colleagues of other departments also.

Cropping up of vested quarters of profiteers, who trade on the sufferings of the distressed people after a disaster, is a usual phenomenon which needs to be handled severely.

Post-disaster management, particularly the rehabilitation of infrastructures destroyed/damaged by any disaster, should be handled on an emergency basis under special emergency rules and procedures.

Special emergency rules and procedures should include special powers for relevant executing agencies on technical and financial sanctions, and procurement rules to facilitate emergency execution of works.

Each service-oriented government agency should have a general contingency plan to handle natural disasters, including formation of special task forces to assist the normal institutional arrangement and mechanism, to take immediate decision and be equipped with minimum logistic support.

Placement of pipes on the embankments and violation of rules on use of embankments and sluices must be severely dealt with by punitive actions.

Post-disaster rehabilitation is like fighting a war. Let us all appreciate the difficulties and complications which are faced by the people-on-the-job, and let us all help and inspire them, not demoralise them when they are at war.

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The world's funniest disease

A man woke up from a coma last week. Tom Paterson had spent his whole life in a UK town called Largs and had a rural English accent. After six weeks in hospital, he woke up.

"Are you feeling better?" the nurse asked him. "Ya!" he said in a strange, East European accent. "I vanting drink."

After he left hospital, everyone he spoke to asked: "Where are you from?"

He said: "All my life I've been Tom from Largs and now people think I'm Tomasz from Poland."

Yes, he had Foreign Accent Syndrome (FAS), almost definitely the world's funniest disease.

Comedians pray nightly to catch this ailment, and some of us even hit ourselves over the head at regular intervals in a desperate bid to get an advantage. No luck, yet for me.

FAS was first identified by a doctor in 1907. But the number of cases appears to be accelerating. (I am not making any of this up).

I once listened to a tape of a victim named George Reynolds, who came from Essex, near London, but woke up with an Italian accent.

A BBC interviewer asked him: "When you grew up you spoke in an ordinary Essex voice?"

George replied: "Oh, I was as Essex as they come, like-a-da cockney." I'm telling you, it sounded so Italian you could smell organo.

I've also heard tapes of Cindy Lou Romberg of Washington. In 2008, she had a normal American accent until her chiropractor performed a neck adjustment. Click! Suddenly she had a Russian accent and even made the grammatical errors Russians make when speaking English.

Imagine spending your whole life saying things like: "Yo, dude, wanna coffee?"

Then one day you open your mouth and out comes: "Don't thanking me, nyet, nyet, I wish give you gift from Moskva, please to haff my shoes." Cindy then drifted into something more European.

BJP's nowhere new team

The new team compares extremely poorly with the BJP's standard-bearers during its heyday, with top leaders Messrs Vajpayee and Advani, supported by second-generation leaders like Messrs K N Govindacharya, Pramod Mahajan, Arun Jaitley and the pre-2002 Modi.

PRAFUL BIDWAI

Is the Bharatiya Janata Party obsessed with proving that it is the sectarian, confrontationalist oddball of Indian politics? Recent developments suggest so.

Take Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi's behaviour. A Special Investigation Team (SIT) appointed by the Supreme Court to probe the 2002 Gujarat pogrom summoned him to question his role in the killings. Many questions had been raised about his role by former Director General of Police RB Sreekumar, victims' evidence, independent inquiries, and sting-operation disclosures by Tehelka magazine.

Mr. Modi questioned the SIT's legality on unconvincing grounds before agreeing to appear before it, gracelessly. Such disdain for constitutional values mirrors Mr. Modi's past conduct. In 2002, he accused Mr. J.M. Lyngdoh -- chief of the Election Commission, another statutory body -- of nursing an anti-Hindu animus because he was a Christian from Meghalaya.

Mr. Modi was instrumental in creating the myth that the Godhra train fire was planned by Muslims, and in using the state apparatus to unleash mass-scale violence on them "in retaliation."

As if to further underscore Gujarat's abnormality, the BJP felicitated its newly appointed state president Ranchhodhai C. Faldu by weighing him against blood collected from volunteers. This solidarity among "blood brothers" expresses a militarism typical of extreme Right-wing groups who define their politics through hatred and "holy war" (whether dharmayuddha or jihad).

These episodes testify to the BJP's rightward evolution after its two consecutive routs in national elections, and major leadership changes including Mr. Advani's resignation as the leader of the opposition.

The direction was confirmed by last week's organisational reshuffle by new party President Nitin Gadkari. Mr. Gadkari, a Maharashtrian Brahmin with no experience outside the state, was nominated to that post

by RSS sarasanghchalak Mohan Bhagwat, also a Maharashtrian Brahmin.

Mr. Gadkari has repeatedly sworn his loyalty to Hindutva. The RSS is pleased as punch about the pro-RSS nature of the BJP's generational transition after the Vajpayee-Advani duo's eclipse. It has tightened its control over the party.

When Mr. Gadkari became party president three months ago, he emphasised the importance of managerial-style efficiency in returning the BJP to an upward trajectory. Cadres would be judged entirely on their performance and merit. But the composition of his new team, with a 121-strong national executive, belies that pledge.

The team is inept and inexperienced. Celebrities like Ms. Hema Malini and Ms. Kiron Kher figure prominently in it. As does Mr. Navjot Singh Sidhu, known for poor Parliamentary performance and charged with manslaughter. So does Mr. Varun Gandhi, the BJP's own shoddy version of dynastic politics.

Mr. Gadkari was evidently keen to reserve

33 percent of top BJP posts for women. So five of the 11 vice-presidents are women, including relative non-entities like Ms. Karuna Shukla (Mr Vajpayee's niece). Similarly, there is greater symbolic representation for Muslims and Dalits.

But more important is the enlarged presence of RSS cadres among BJP office-bearers, such as Mr. Ram Lal (general secretary, organisation), two joint general secretaries under him, and Mr B. Muralidhar Rao (secretary of the Swadeshi Jagran Manch, an RSS front).

Mr. Gadkari's choices reflect the RSS's preference for separating the party organisation from its parliamentary wing. This would help it tighten its control over the party.

Yet, as things stand, the party's Parliamentary Board, including Messrs Advani, Murl Manohar Joshi and Venkaiah Naidu, is more powerful than Mr. Gadkari's team. Given the disproportion between effective influence furnished by parliamentary representation, and organisational posts in a party that's out of power, this will remain so.

Things aren't hunky-dory even within the new organisational set-up. Shah Nawaz Hussain and Prakash Javadekar, two of the BJP's seven spokespersons, boycotted their first meeting. Mr. Hussain wanted the party general secretary's post, and Mr. Javadekar was expecting a "bigger role." The poorly represented Thakur lobby too is unhappy.

The Southern states are only represented

amongst BJP office-bearers by four individuals. Although the BJP rules in Karnataka, and regards it as its gateway to the South, its sole notable representative from there is Mr. Ananth Kumar.

By contrast, tiny Himachal Pradesh is over-represented. Mr. Gadkari has a lame response to this: "I can't satisfy everybody. If anyone has any problem he has a right to discuss it with me."

The new team compares extremely poorly with the BJP's standard-bearers during its heyday, with top leaders Messrs Vajpayee and Advani, supported by second-generation leaders like Messrs K N Govindacharya, Pramod Mahajan, Arun Jaitley and the pre-2002 Modi.

Mr. Govindacharya's absence is especially significant. One of the ablest strategists ever produced by the sangh parivar, he was the architect of "social engineering," which created a confluence between Mandal (OBC politics) and Kamandal (Hindutva politics) and powered the party's rise to power first in Uttar Pradesh, and then nationally.

Only two of 10 BJP general secretaries -- Ms. Vasundhara Raje and Mr. Ravi Shankar Prasad -- have anything approaching a national profile. All this testifies to the dearth of talent in the BJP.

Talented apart, the BJP lacks something more fundamental -- a strategy to stem its erosion. Once well-entrenched in the Hindi heartland and about a dozen other states, its presence now is sizeable only in Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Chhattisgarh, Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand and, more shakily, in Karnataka and Bihar.

Only a combination of factors can help the BJP overcome its decade-long decline -- an ideology independent of the ultra-sectarian and communal RSS; inclusive policies and programs; and a political mobilisation strategy that can help it rebuild its base.

The BJP lacks all three. It has decisively failed to make a break with Hindutva. If it couldn't sever the umbilical cord with the RSS during its years in national power, it won't do so now. It has no imaginative policies that can attract mass support. And it has no political strategy on any issue, including the Ayodhya temple.

The future appears bleak for a party trapped between killers (like Mr. Modi), crooks (like some of its chief ministers) and clowns (like Mr. Gadkari).



THOMAS HAWK/GETTY IMAGES

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The sad thing is that few people take FAS sufferers seriously. Friends and family members first think it is a joke. When the days turn to weeks and months, they get really annoyed.

But whatever you do, don't hit the sufferer on the head. She may come out with an even weirder accent. One British FAS sufferer named Linda Walker ended up with a shifting accent that drifted into Jamaican. "Hey mon, why you hit me upside da head?"

But it's a real disease. Doctors say that FAS is caused by a disturbance in the speech centre of the brain, and cannot be faked.

Really?

Suspicious, I tried to fake it. In a coffee shop, I hit myself on the head and spoke with a Singaporean accent for as long as I could.

"This coffee damn good, muffin also very good one-leh. Make on. Demis izzit? Wa, you stylo-milo one today, dress so smut. Prakash nite-la. Why you look at me lidat?"

After three minutes, I gave up, exhausted. Also, the coffee shop people called security.

It was odd: during those few minutes, I did feel an uncontrollable urge to start suing international magazines.

Yes, FAS is funny, but it can also be dangerous. A Norwegian woman named Astrid L. was hit on the head in 1941 and from then on could only speak with a German accent: not very helpful in the middle of World War II.

Can you imagine the danger?

"Guten morgen, herr British soldier, do not me shoot. Ich bin not ein Deutschlander, honest."

Bang!

To learn more about this vehement illness and tips on how to catch it, visit our columnist at www.vittachi.com.