

Cyclone Aila, a year on A scandalous rehabilitation failure

IT is deeply embarrassing to speak of Cyclone Aila a year after it claimed lives and left homes destroyed in the southwest of Bangladesh. A full year after the disaster, there are yet tens of thousands of people who remain homeless and still live on the embankments or raised ground in the area. It is here that a sense of outrage comes up. It was only to be expected that with a disaster of such magnitude, all out efforts would be made to rehabilitate those affected in the quickest possible time through making such rehabilitation a priority on the part of the government. Natural disasters anywhere arouse a high degree of attention on the part of the authorities, to a point where the machinery of administration is swiftly deployed to roll back the damage caused. Unfortunately, in the case of Aila, that sense of importance has clearly not been there.

The time is now here for some hard and harsh truths to be told about all the efforts that have been made or not made about helping Aila victims get back to a normal life. What surely exercises the mind and is certainly inexcusable is the fact that tenders related to the repair of damaged embankments were not called before November last year, a good six months after the disaster had struck. When as many as 213 kilometres of embankments were fully damaged and 1,128 kilometres were partially damaged, one quite does not fathom why such an inordinate delay came into the repair process. Indeed, as many have suggested (and it is something we cannot disagree with), the task of rehabilitation and repair should have been done on an emergency basis. That is the standard rule everywhere in case of such all-encompassing tragedy. Why our authorities did not consider Aila serious enough to warrant placing the affected areas under emergency is a question no one has answered, much to our shame. The consequences have naturally been predictable: a number of major points along the embankments remain unrepaired. And with the monsoon approaching once again, we can all expect a worsening of the miseries of those who are yet without roofs over their heads. And, of course, there are too the sad tales of many victims who have simply moved out of the area in search of shelter, a condition that cannot quite be described as congenial.

Questions of emergency handling of the situation aside, there are some very serious worries about the way in which the Water Development Board and the contractors employed to repair the embankments have gone about their work. In July last year the WDB announced a plan of repair, which plan was then shelved aside in September. It was then said that a new plan would lead to a repair of the embankments by December. Nothing happened. In November the WDB invited tenders.

The long-drawn indifference to the need for a quick reconstruction of the embankments now imperils the entire region once more. Such a cavalier attitude will not do. Those responsible must be held to account as the repair of the breaches in embankments is completed before the monsoon gets into full flow with the residual vulnerable people relocated elsewhere.

RAB and police operational disconnect

Another dent in their credibility

THERE are very good reasons for the IG police to have felt inclined to pull up the Rapid Action Battalion and the Metropolitan Police, two key elements of his organisation. It has been compelled by, what we feel, quite unprofessional behavior of the two agencies. And one cannot but take serious note of this.

We agree with the police chief that a serious dent to the image of the police has been caused due to the confusion created by clumsy handling of the case related to the killing of a sub-inspector of police.

It is quite an incomprehensible situation to have two organs of the same agency in a state of feud over a murder case. We detect an attitude of one-upmanship, of one trying to outdo the other in carrying out an assignment. This is what has come to pass with the police and RAB coming up with two quite different outcomes of investigation into the killing of SI Gautam. It seems rather ludicrous that the two investigations would give out two different sets of accused but with the same names.

The impression that we have formed from this is one of deplorable lack of coordination between different law enforcement agencies, of two arms working in a watertight compartment, and both suffering from a serious problem of self-righteousness. This is nothing new, but the level it has gone to has taken the credibility of the police to a new low.

We are constrained to say that this has done more than merely create confusion in public mind; it has created misgivings about the intention of the parties concerned, about a veiled attempt to smokescreen facts. And nothing can be more damaging to the merit of the case than this. And in addition to causing severe dent to the image of the police, such happenings are bound to sap public confidence in state agencies even more.

We fully endorse the view that the propensity to come to the media with confusing messages should be curtailed. And insofar as the issue of coordination is concerned, it remains the function of the head of the police, the IG himself in this case, to ensure that the DMP and the RAB do not work at cross purposes, and a well defined rules of business, to guide their functioning, is established.



The tribalisation of our politics

In all this barrage of innuendo and mutual recrimination, it is respect which becomes the casualty. Politics comes best when political players from across the spectrum agree to disagree, and at the same time agree to respect the other person's point of view.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

QUAMRUL Islam now thinks Ziaur Rahman was indeed a brave freedom fighter. That is most reassuring. But then, why did the minister of state for law outrage us earlier with his bid to denigrate Zia's role in the War of Liberation?

To inform the country, for no rhyme or reason, that Ziaur Rahman was a Pakistani spy in 1971 was not only unseemly but also a patent questioning of the late military ruler's patriotism. And questioning one's patriotism is something that decent men, good citizens will not and must not permit to go unchallenged.

What General Zia did in his years in power between 1975 and 1981 will of course remain a blemish on his reputation. His systematic rehabilitation of the collaborators of the Pakistan occupation army and his careful liquidation of many of the leading heroes of our struggle for liberation are in a very big way responsible for the political tribalism which Bengalis have been going through for decades.

That Zia undermined the constitution through tampering with the four fundamental principles of the state (ignore those who suggest that he restored multi-party democ-

racy in Bangladesh, for it was anything but) is a reality we have been pelted with day after day.

So all these basic facts about Zia and his regime remain beyond question. But when you suggest that he was a Pakistani spy (it really does not matter that you now retract your statement, for the damage has already been done), you are setting in motion a train of thought that others could take advantage of. To censure one who has been part of a heroic generation is simply to put truth to the torch.

Those who have for years remained uncomfortable with the pre-eminence of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in history have regularly peddled the notion of his "surrender" to the Pakistan army on March 25, 1971. And these retail suppliers of falsehood have never for a moment told themselves that they are being untrue to their souls, to their conscience.

As if that were not enough, there is another body of people whose discomfort with 1971 often pushes them into casting aspersions on Tajuddin Ahmed, truly the one man whose battlefield role in the creation of Bangladesh was certainly more inspirational than anyone else's. He was, say these men of sinister intent, a pro-Indian

politician in this country.

There is another group which carefully tried to destroy his reputation in the early 1970s. And they were the Young Turks in the Awami League, who made it a point to let Bangabandhu know how Tajuddin had "usurped" the leadership of the Mujibnagar government in 1971. Tajuddin fell because of what these elements of darkness did to him.

It is a sad commentary on our collective history that at nearly every stage of it some men have with diligence and questionable motives attempted to run down some of the bravest and most enlightened souls in Bangladesh.

Those who have cheered the so-called sepyo-janata revolution of November 1975 have felt no shame at all in castigating the honourable man that was Khaled Musharraf through describing him as an Indian agent. Another hero of the Liberation War, Major M.A. Jalil, was once called a collaborator. He who made that snide remark surely had a poor understanding of history.

When Syeda Sajeda Chowdhury sees Pakistan's hand behind the Bangladesh Nationalist Party's call for hartal, one wonders if she has the evidence to prove her claim. In similar fashion, when Begum Zia and her cohorts question Sheikh Hasina's patriotism over the deal she recently reached with the Indian leadership on Dhaka-Delhi cooperation, they conveniently forget the difference between demagoguery and informed politics.

In all this barrage of innuendo and mutual recrimination, it is respect which becomes the casualty. Politics comes best when political players from across the spectrum agree to disagree, and at the same time agree to

respect the other person's point of view.

Where the matter is one of Bangladesh's struggle for freedom, there is no question that everyone who took part in it and everyone who supported it in diverse ways is an individual held in the greatest honour in our history.

Those who remain outside these parameters of respect are that clutch of collaborators who saw nothing wrong in abetting the crimes committed by the Pakistan occupation army, in committing similar crimes themselves.

Bangladesh ought not to be segmented into a fractured country where tribes reign in all their viciousness. And yet when you observe the manner in which the political classes have conducted themselves across the years, you ask yourself if there really are not shades of the Hutu-Tutsi divide in Bangladesh today, those which have hobbled nations such as Rwanda and Burundi.

There really was no reason for Minister Quamrul Islam to humiliate the war hero that was Ziaur Rahman. There was absolutely no cause for Sheikh Hasina to ask the rhetorical question of whether it was Zia's mortal remains buried beside Crescent Lake. And those who keep fanning the lie that Bangabandhu gave himself up to the Pakistanis in 1971 are only inflicting wounds on themselves as free citizens of a free Bangladesh.

There is always an incontrovertibility about history. History remains immutable, constant as the stars in the heavens. And mocking the stars is a preoccupation for sinners.

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Migration can end worldwide poverty

According to many specialists, the weight of the evidence provides support that the movement of population can be a significant factor in the alleviation of worldwide poverty.

HARUN UR RASHID

MIGRATION is often caused by poverty. Similarly, poverty can be alleviated by migration. In developing countries, migration is seen simply as a flight from poverty since there are no opportunities available locally.

Historically, migration has been taking place since the dawn of human civilisation. At present, migration takes place because of the integration of global labour markets and workforces, and easy transportation.

The World Bank estimates that in 2008 remittances from migrants amounted to approximately \$444 billion, out of which \$338 billion went to poorer countries.

In these days of globalisation, capital, goods and services move easily from country to country, but movement of people is restricted by strict immigration laws.

Intending migrants, therefore, find it very difficult to move from one country to another, although there is a huge demand for workers in industrialised countries.

Even in the supposed enlightenment of the 21st century, most people prefer people of their own type and find different cultures strange or unacceptable. I would not call it racism but a miserable mindset towards another human being.

In 2004, James Wolfensohn, former president of the World Bank, accused rich countries of spending \$900 billion on defence, \$300 billion on subsidies for their farmers

and just \$50 billion to \$60 billion on aid, of which just half is in cash rather than loans. "That is the fundamental imbalance that one needs to deal with, and it is just so clear," he says.

He recognised that some rich countries spend money on war against terrorism but do not come up with more money for improving the social and economic conditions of poor young people who are unemployed and deprived of the basic necessities of life.

Sending aid to poor countries has merit but it cannot end worldwide poverty. Poverty breeds unrest and conflict, and eventually leads to an unstable world. Instability in one region affects other regions.

Year after year, almost all rich nations, except a few Scandinavian nations, have constantly failed to reach their agreed obligations of the 0.7 percent GNI target on official development aid set by the UN in 1970.

Recent increases in foreign aid do not tell the whole truth about rich countries' generosity, or the lack of it. Moreover, official development assistance (ODA) is often of dubious quality. Analysts say that in many cases:

- Aid is primarily designed to serve the strategic and economic interests of the donor countries.
- Aid is primarily designed to benefit powerful domestic interest groups.

- Aid systems are based on the interests of donors instead of the needs of recipient-countries.
- Too little aid reaches countries that most desperately need it.
- Agriculture's share of total ODA dropped to less than 5 percent compared with 18 percent in 1980.
- All too often, aid is wasted on overpriced goods and services from donor countries.

Given the above context, the best way to ameliorate worldwide poverty is to increase migration to rich countries, where the population is getting smaller.

In 2009, the amount of money sent by the migrants was \$10.72 billion, constituting about 12 percent of GDP of Bangladesh. It is estimated that almost the same amount comes through unofficial channels every year. Remittance is the second biggest source of foreign exchange for the country.

According to a report, in the next 30 years the labour force in Germany will shrink from 41 million to 21 million, and from 23 million to 11 million in Italy. Japan will require about 90,000 a year, falling to a longer-term figure of about 700,000 a year.

Left to their own devices, intending migrant workers from poorer countries would gravitate to richer countries, leading to a rough equilibrium between the world's resources and its population.

Migration faces restrictive immigration policies and currently it seems that richer countries are moving to an age of "anti-migration." National security is commonly used to justify a tight migration policy. While each country has a legitimate right to security, richer countries allow entry of tourists from middle income and rich countries -- but not of migrants.

Some argue that entry of migrants would

lead to cultural dilution. However, a multi-cultural society can be seen in a positive light as cultural enrichment.

The general finding of most studies of migration in non-disaster situations is that it is not the poorest who can move but those with access to some resources, no matter how meagre these might appear.

Migration always involves costs of transportation and the abandonment of many of the few possessions the poor might have. A recent study by IOM in Bangladesh has shown that 59.5 percent of the cost is spent on agents and brokers, that the poorest of the poor cannot afford to migrate, and that the majority starves in situ.

According to many specialists, the weight of the evidence provides support that the movement of population can be a significant factor in the alleviation of worldwide poverty.

The words of John Kenneth Galbraith appear to capture the essence of the whole relationship: "Migration is the oldest action against poverty." It selects those who most want help. It is good for the country to which they go; it helps to break the equilibrium of poverty in the country from which they come. What is the perversity in the human soul that causes people to resist so obvious a good?"

Is the unfettered migration going to happen in future? The answer is in the negative because narrow mindset and prejudice are such powerful forces that they are likely to reverse the "fortress" policy of rich countries. Let there a debate on this issue under the auspices of the UN because, in the globalised world, all countries are dependent on each other.

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