

Pakistan floods renew heated debate on dam project

AP, Islamabad

This summer's floods in Pakistan have reopened a quarter-century-old debate on whether to build a large hydroelectric dam on the River Indus, a dispute that has split the nation along regional lines. Supporters say the water reservoir could have prevented much of the floods' devastation and boosted agricultural production along the river. Opponents say just the opposite.

The debate over the Kalabagh Dam shows how the worst natural disaster in Pakistan's history, affecting some 20 million people, has unearthed deep fissures in its society. There is a chronic mistrust among Pakistan's four provinces and the central government, and critics accuse wealthy landowners of naked self-interest in wanting to ensure the Indus keeps irrigating their crops.

Kalabagh is in eastern Punjab province, the country's most populous and prosperous region, where the glacier-fed River Indus moves from northwestern mountains to plains and nourishes millions of acres (hectares) of wheat, cotton and sugar cane crops. The dam was first proposed in 1984, but political sensitivities mean it has never passed the planning stage.

In the northwest, politicians and farmers fear the dam could mean more flooding and not less. They say if the dam's reservoir was full, surplus water would be diverted into some districts in the region. South of Punjab, where the Indus runs into the Arabian Sea, they fear the dam would mean drought and poor crops. Both regions ultimately think that it would give Punjab even more economic and political clout.

The governor of Punjab dismisses the arguments as "nonsense."

"It is an emotional issue that they play up and say the Punjabis are stealing your water," said Salman Taseer, a vocal proponent of the dam. "It is a storage dam, it is not diverting any water. The studies have been done. It is cheap to build, near the national grid and the studies have been done. Kalabagh is ideal in every way."

This year's floods began six weeks ago in the northwest after exceptionally heavy monsoon rains. The deluge slowly worked its way down the Indus and its tributaries, washing over at least 3 million hectares (7.4 million acres) of farm land, and destroying or damaging more than 1.8 million homes.

Shams-ul-Mulk, a former chairman of Pakistan's Water and Power Development Authority and a strong supporter of the dam, said even a "common man" could see that having the dam in place would have mitigated the floods.

The Indus already has two large dams on it. He said one of them, the Tarbela Dam, was able to control water flows of 238,000 cubic feet per second just days before the July 29 floods. The proposed Kalabagh Dam, which would lie further south, could handle another 300,000 cubic feet per second of water that would be gradually released down the country.

Meteorological official Riaz Khan said that at their peak, the floodwaters in southern Pakistan flowed at 1.15 million cubic feet per second.

"The floods wouldn't have been a monster" with the dam, said Mulk, who is himself from the northwest.

No one disputes the electricity that would be supplied from the dam would benefit the whole country. Pakistan has for years struggled with electricity shortages, leading to outages for up to 16 hours a day in some areas and damaging industrial growth. The suffering is worst in summer, when the temperatures soar but power cuts mean fans and air conditioners won't work.

Studies show the dam would generate some 3,400 megawatts of electricity and could be built in under five years.

Still, few outside Punjab support it. Leaders in the northwestern province of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa say the dam will destroy farmlands in the Peshawar valley -- the main

source of agriculture in the region -- as water from its reservoir would seep into surrounding land, raising the water table.

They also fear the dam would force incoming floodwaters to spread to areas beyond the already vulnerable district of Nowshera, which is susceptible because of its geography and was badly hit in this summer's deluge.

"We will never let it happen," said Bashir Bilour, a senior minister in the north-west province.

Mulk disagreed, saying the proposed Kalabagh dam's site is too far south of Nowshera district to worsen any flooding in the northwest.

Aurangzeb Khan, 57, who owns a farm on the outskirts of Peshawar city, opposes it. He said before the construction of the two dams in the province decades ago, his land used to yield fruits such as grapes and oranges.

"It's been years since I can recall them growing. More dams mean lesser or no crops at all" because the land is too soaked with water, he said.

In southern Sindh province, there are fears Punjab will use the Kalabagh dam to hog water, meaning even less will reach their farmlands. That could also lead to greater salination. Waters from the Indus help hold back salt water flowing in from the Arabian Sea that inundates increasing amounts of the delta region.

"The dam means our lands will turn into deserts," said Khaliq Junejo, vice chairman of a Sindh nationalist party.

Punjab's governor alleged the resistance in Sindh was being led by wealthy feudal landowners whose sole interest was personal profit.

"They are all occupying huge areas, that is one reason that they don't want the Kalabagh Dam," Taseer said.

Tahir Qureshi, an adviser with the International Union for Conservation of Nature, said Pakistan could build multiple dams, but it first has to introduce an efficient water management scheme and upgrade its canal system, otherwise it risks drying out Sindh.

While the fierce debate over the dam is likely to rage on, its politics are so perilous it looks unlikely to be built soon. Two of Pakistan's military rulers who backed the project, Pervez Musharraf and Zia ul-Haq, were unable to push it through during their tenures.

The current civilian administration has avoided taking a clear stand. The ruling Pakistan People's Party would risk alienating its main support base in Sindh and coalition allies both there and Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa if it pushed for the dam.

For now, President Asif Ali Zardari favors pursuing smaller, less controversial projects instead.

"Until there is national consensus on it, we should not insist on it and seek to build small and medium dams for which sites have already been identified at various locations in all provinces," his spokesman Farhatullah Babar said.

Safety lapse

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have been accidentally activated by a worker who was removing them for the day's work.

He spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak to the media.

The dynamite, used to blast rock, was stored in the police compound for security reasons.

Two Chinese citizens and 16 police were among the dead. Fifty-two others were wounded in the blast.

The site of the blast, Karadiyanaru, a small town in eastern Sri Lanka, was a one-time stronghold of Tamil Tiger rebels responsible for hundreds of bomb blasts targeting the military and civilians during their quarter-century rebellion for an ethnic homeland.

The government has initiated a major construction drive there to build roads, reservoirs and other infrastructure following the defeat of the Tamil insurgency last year.

Flooding

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Around 6,000 hectares of farmlands in Sadar, Kazipur, Belkuchi, Shahjadpur and Chowhali upazilas have been inundated.

A report from our Kurigram correspondent says: Flood waters were receding as the Jamuna started falling.

Sources at the district relief and rehabilitation office said 550 tonnes of rice as gratuitous relief (GR) and Tk 9 lakh have been allocated for the flood-hit.

Upazila Nirbahi Officer of Rajibpur Md Abdul Kader told this correspondent that about 13 thousand people of 2,600 families have been affected in his area. They have received two tonnes of GR rice, he said. He hoped more relief will be forthcoming.

Our staff correspondent in Sylhet reports: Fresh areas of Jhikaganj upazila have been flooded. Farmlands with Aman paddy in the areas have been submerged.

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family in a flat in the building. Touhid started making friendship with drug addicts and became addicted to drugs, his family members said. He even skipped college for the last one year.

Nobody saw when Touhid jumped off the building, said the family members.

Mostak Jamal, Touhid's elder brother, said, "We heard a thud and on coming out we saw Touhid lying on the ground".

Monirul Islam, operation officer of Mohammadpur Police Station, said Touhid had a fight with his brother and other family members over his drug addiction Friday night. He was forcing them to give him money for drugs.

In another incident, cantonment police yesterday morning recovered Sumi's body from her Purba Manikdi residence.

On information, the police went to the house and found her body hanging from the ceiling, police sources said. They picked up her husband Mohammad Sumon in connection with the incident.

Sub-Inspector Masud Karim of the police station told The Daily Star that Sumi and Sumon married two years back. None of the couple had any source of income, and they were having a troubled relationship ever since their marriage.

Sumon's father used to pay for their house rent while Sumi's father for their family expenses, he added.

Two unnatural death cases were filed with cantonment and Mohammadpur police stations in connection with the incidents.

Meanwhile, police recovered the body of a young woman of around 17 years from a water body (jheel) at Alinagar of Pallabi in the capital. She could not be identified.

BNP slates

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Mahbubuddin Khokon MP on going abroad.

He said the government issued alert at different places including airports and land ports by sending the list of BNP leaders of different levels to debar them to go abroad. He wondered what a country and what type of rule under which people of Bangladesh are living.

Delwar referred to the murder of Jubo League activist Ibrahim and was highly critical of the city police commissioner for his reported statement. Many doubt that the police statement is heavily biased to the ruling party lawmaker who is also accused of the killing of Ibrahim, a potential political contender of the MP.

The statement has proved that no government institutions, including the police, are allowed to function independently, he added.

Delwar cautioned the government that the consequences of setting free the killers and implicating the innocent might be dangerous. The same is applicable in case of harassing the political opponents by implicating them in fabricated cases.

BNP leaders Salahuddin Ahmed, Ruhul Kabir Rizvi and Khalirul Kabir Khokon, Jubo Dal President Syed Moazzem Hossain Alal, Shechhasebok Dal General Secretary Sarafat Ali Sapu, JCD President Sultan Salahuddin Tuku and Mohila Dal General Secretary Shirin Sultana were present.

Boycotters pocket

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The lawmakers of BNP, Jamaat-e-Islami and Bangladesh Jatiya Party attended only one out of 80 sittings in the three sessions.

They joined the inaugural session and the fourth one, and have yet to decide whether to participate in the sixth session beginning tomorrow.

Enjoying financial benefits despite boycotting parliament began in the fifth parliament, in which the now ruling Awami League was the opposition.

Though AL and BNP differ on almost every point, they seem to have a consensus on taking allowances without attending the House.

Successive governments led by them did not question the practice.

Meanwhile, a recent amendment to the remuneration act has raised the daily residence allowance for a lawmaker to Tk 300 from Tk 200, and within-the-capital conveyance to Tk 75 from Tk 50.

It has also increased the allowance an MP gets to travel between his constituency and Dhaka. The rate is now Tk 10 per km, upped from Tk 6 a km.

Noted jurist Shahdeen Malik said extra pay or benefits can be drawn only on performance of the duties they are meant for.

"It is generally considered a gross misconduct if anyone enjoys the benefits without discharging the duties," Malik told The Daily Star yesterday.

He said parliament should enact a code of conduct for the MPs so this kind of practice is discontinued.

Senior MPs of the opposition, however, do not see anything wrong with drawing the allowances, as the law imposes no restraints on that.

"Neither the constitution nor the rules of procedure of parliament say that a lawmaker cannot take allowances if he does not attend JS sittings," former law minister and BNP lawmaker Moudud Ahmed told The Daily Star recently.

MK Anwar, another law-

maker from the party, yesterday said though drawing allowances without attending parliament proceedings is lawful, one can raise questions on moral grounds.

Suranjit Sengupta, chief of the parliamentary standing committee on the law ministry, termed the practice "immoral, apolitical and undemocratic".

Taking allowances despite boycotting the House is tantamount to exploiting the taxpayer's money and depriving the constituents, he observed.

Pointed out that his party did the same while in opposition, Suranjit said time has come to stop the "immoral practice".

"And to do so, we might even have to amend the constitution and frame new laws," he added.

PM off to NY

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Permanent Mission to the United Nations on Sept 26. She will formally inaugurate the chancery as she laid the foundation stone during the 64th UNGA.

The PM is scheduled to deliver her UNGA address on Sept 27.

On Sept 28, she will leave New York for Dhaka via Dubai and reach Dhaka the next day.

Gold shop

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Police Station, said the burglars broke open the vault after entering the shop by prying open the shutter as the locks were untouched.

"Babul is our prime suspect as he slept in front of the shop which is on the ground floor for the last three days," he said.

However, the OC said the amount of gold stolen may cost over Tk 1.5 crore and can be ascertained after examining related documents of the shop.

Banaj Kumar Majumder, deputy commissioner of Chittagong Metropolitan Police (CMP) who also visited the scene of crime yesterday afternoon said they hope to track down the culprits soon.

Poly bags rule

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against manufacturing of polythene bags.

He said the existing laws are not sufficient to dissuade such environment polluters from making polythene bags.

Polythene bags as well as nylon bags are not environment friendly, as they are non-biodegradable meaning they do not decompose through natural process, said Professor Dr Rafiqul Islam, former chairman of Department of Applied Chemistry and Chemical Engineering of Dhaka University (DU).

Rafiqul also conducted a research on "A study on control and management of polythene bags in Bangladesh" in 2001.

He said, when thrown away, polythene remains intact in the soil and disturbs the flow of nutrients and sunlight to the soil. It also destroys the beneficial bacteria of soil and its fertility and causes soil compaction in the longrun.

Medical science has shown polythene to be an agent of cancer, skin diseases, and other health problems, he said.

Rafiqul suggested making cost effective jute bags with

polythene lining for use in kitchen markets.

He said biodegradable polymer bags, used in Australia and England, are a costly but great alternative to polythene bags.

DU is working with the Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission (Baec) to come up with low-cost polymer bags for Bangladesh, Rafiqul added.

However, manufacturing small size jute bags for shopping is difficult and is not cost-effective for the high-speed mills, said Director (Marketing) of Bangladesh Jute Mills Corporation Md Shamsul Haque.

He said they are ready to supply jute cloth for making the shopping bags, if the private sector firms come forward to make the bags.

"During the campaign on banning polythene bags, 60 lakh jute bags were made and sold below their production costs, at Tk 4 to 5 each," he said.

"Yet, most of the bags remained unsold as people preferred using the free poly bags, given by shopkeepers, carrying around their own jute bags", he said.

Yield high yet

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Brac Executive Director Mahabub Hossain thinks prices of rice and flour in local markets are still not alarming, as the income of farm labourers and other sectors increased significantly over the years.

He, however, said this hike might affect the low-income textile workers.

A farm worker's daily wage is now Tk 150-200 while a textile worker earns Tk 100 compared to that, said Mahabub Hossain, apprehending that the hike might slam down the low-income people if the government fails to strengthen food stock.

Director General of Food Directorate Ahmad Hossain Khan said the country has a food stock of over 7 lakh metric tonnes and import of an equal amount of food grains is on the cards.

Besides, the government would increase rice supply for open market sales (OMS) to make rice available at Tk 24 a kg, which would contribute in

stabilising the market, he said.

According to Mahabub Hossain any price hike appears more in percentage figures but it does not reflect the exact situation. For instance, hike in rice price appears so much as the price was lower after last year's boro harvest, he added.

Hossain said with this hike not many low-income people were found complaining. Neither did they crowd at OMS centres for low-priced rice during the Ramadan, which testifies to people's increasing income.

"A food stock of 15 lakh metric tonnes is a must to have an impact on the local market," said the researcher.

Meanwhile, prices of edible oil have been hiked up by 26 percent in a year, garlic and turmeric up to 118 and 154 percent respectively while fish and meat by 90 percent.

However, prices of lentils decreased by 28 percent, potato by 55 percent while powdered milk and sugar by 15 and 16 percent respectively.

Anti-Japan protesters rally in China over boat row

AFP, Beijing

Waving banners and chanting anti-Japanese slogans, protesters staged rallies in China yesterday to voice anger over the arrest of a Chinese trawler captain which has sparked a major diplomatic row.

"Down with little Japan", "free our captain" and "remember September 18", demonstrators shouted in Beijing as sirens rang out to commemorate Saturday's highly sensitive anniversary of Japan's invasion of Manchuria in 1931.

Beijing is furious about the seizure of a Chinese fishing boat near a disputed island chain in the East China Sea and the subsequent arrest of the captain.

Tokyo says he intentionally rammed two Japanese coast-guard vessels during a high-seas chase on September 7.

The incident has sparked the worst tensions between the Asian neighbours in years, with Beijing summoning Tokyo's ambassador five times in a week and scrapping scheduled talks over joint energy exploration in the East China Sea.

The uninhabited islands -- called Senkaku in Japan and Diaoyu in China, and also claimed by Taiwan -- lie in an area with rich fishing grounds that is also believed to contain oil and gas deposits.

Tokyo had warned its citizens in China to remain vigilant to ensure their safety in the event of any backlash over the dispute.

More than 100 demonstrators rallied near Japan's embassy in Beijing and a group also stopped outside the Chinese foreign ministry, where they chanted "down with the traitors to the motherland" and urged China to "retake the Diaoyu islands".

In Shanghai, around 20 demonstrators gathered near the Japanese consulate and several were arrested, an AFP journalist witnessed. Other protesters tried unsuccessfully to block the police car taking them away.

JS Session

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Leader of the Opposition Khaleda Zia will chair the standing committee meeting at her Gulshan office at 7:30pm.

Earlier on Thursday, standing committee member Salahuddin Quader Chowdhury told reporters that his party will join the ensuing parliament session.

Opposition Chief Whip Zainul Abdin Faroque, however, at a press briefing at the media centre of the parliament on Friday placed two more conditions for joining the House proceedings.

Lawmakers of BNP-led four-party alliance have been abstaining from parliament since they joined the session on June 2 for only 25 minutes.

Anthrax

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this and the poor are the usual sufferers."

He said those who are farming on a limited scale often do not bother going to the local livestock office to vaccinate their cattle although it is very cheap. These farmers rather feed the cattle with steroid to make them flabby, which weakens their immune system and make the cattle vulnerable to anthrax.

Polluters must

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Hazaribagh tannery units and released directly in the Buriganga, may cause genetic disorder, birth defects and cancer if it gets in the food cycle, the seminar was told.

The unplanned and half-hearted drive to clean the Buriganga bed created an additional problem, said Brig Gen Shahedul Anam Khan, editor, Defence and Strategic Affairs, The Daily Star.

Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) requires three permanent magistrates to effectively guard the 112 kilometres length of four rivers including Balu, Turag and Shitalakkhya around Dhaka, said Prof Abdullah Abu Sayeed, Bapa vice-president.

Sanjida Khanom MP and Taksim A Khan, managing director of Dhaka Wasa, among others, addressed the seminar chaired by Prof Muzaffer Ahmad.

Obama blasts Republicans for blocking campaign finance rules

AFP, Washington

US President Barack Obama yesterday accused Republicans of blocking stricter campaign finance rules he believes are necessary after a Supreme Court ruling lifting caps on corporate donations.

Obama's criticism came six weeks ahead of legislative elections that will determine how much room for political maneuver the president will have in the second half of his four-year term.

In a decision announced on January 21, the US Supreme Court said that corporate funding of independent political broadcasts in elections could not be limited under the First Amendment to the constitution.

"Now, as an election approaches, it's not just a theory," the president said. "We can see for ourselves how destructive to our democracy this can become. We see it in the flood of deceptive attack ads sponsored by special interests using front groups with misleading names."

Obama's Democratic allies in Congress have submitted a proposal that would require corporate political advertisers to reveal who was funding them. It has been adopted by the Democratic-controlled House of Representatives.

Iran invites Turkey into space program: report

REUTERS, Istanbul

Iran has invited Turkey to cooperate in work on the Islamic Republic's space program, which aims to put a man in space by 2017, the Turkish newspaper Haberturk said yesterday.

Western countries which suspect Iran is trying to build nuclear bombs are concerned the long-range ballistic technology used to propel Iranian satellites into orbit could be used to launch atomic warheads. Tehran denies such suggestions.

Pro-business Haberturk said Turkey had not responded to the proposal. Turkish officials were unavailable for comment, and there was no immediate comment from Tehran.

Iran regards its space program, which test-launched a satellite rocket earlier this year, as a matter of national pride.

The reported proposal to cooperate on the sensitive program would underscore growing trust between Turkey and Iran as the states seek to strengthen diplomatic and business ties.

Haberturk said the offer was made at a summit of business leaders and government officials earlier this week as part of a raft of business deals.

Iran, the world's fifth-largest oil exporter, insists its nuclear program is for generating electricity. Turkey, along with Brazil, signed a uranium swap deal earlier this year they hoped would stave off another round of U.N. sanctions on Iran.

The deal was unsuccessful, and the U.N. Security Council imposed a fourth round of sanctions in June over the disputed nuclear program. Despite sanctions, Turkey has said it wants to increase trade ties with the Islamic Republic.

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said last month Iran planned to bring forward its deadline for sending an astronaut into space from a previous date of 2019.

Bogra

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League, said Shuvo was ousted from the party a year ago.

Nasim's brother Alam declined to talk to newsmen. Deceased Nasim was the main suspect in a murder case filed in connection with Motor Sramik League leader Manik killing a few years ago, Sadar Police Station sources said.

In protest of the killing, Sramik League leaders and activists called for a 24-hour transport strike on Ghatoli-Shariakandi route effective from 8:00am yesterday.

The victims' bodies were sent to Shaheed Zia Medical College Hospital morgue for autopsy.

At least five leaders and activists, including Nasim and Ranju, of the ruling party's front organisations have been killed in Bogra in the last five weeks.

But the president said that Republican leaders had blocked this bill from even coming up for a vote in the Senate.

"It's politics at its worst," Obama said, arguing that there existed a collusion between Republican and special interest groups.

"Now, the special interests want to take Congress back, and return to the days when lobbyists wrote the laws," Obama noted, urging voters to reject this trend in November.

But "the power to determine the fate of this country doesn't lie in their hands," the president said. "It lies in yours. It's up to all of us to defend that most basic American principle of a government of, by, and for the people. What's at stake is not just an election. It's our democracy itself."

CID to take

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decision came as the government high-ups including the premier and the home minister felt embarrassed over a statement by the Dhaka Metropolitan Police commissioner.