

Caught in a quake

MONZURUL HUQ

It could have been the worst day if I had been inside a building instead of the middle of the road. I was halfway between National Press Club building and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, when all of a sudden I felt as if the ground beneath me had started shaking. It took time for me to realise that I was about to experience a powerful earthquake in an open space.

My reaction was slow because I had encountered earthquakes in this country at regular intervals, so much so that even as someone completely unfamiliar with what earthquakes meant before setting foot in this country more than one and a half decades ago I eventually got used to them to the extent that they even failed to wake me up from sleep when they occurred deep in the night.

However, I soon realised that what I was witnessing around me was completely different from what I had seen before. It did not take long for people to rush out of those huge buildings and look around nervously, as if not realising what they were supposed to do once they were safe from the possibility of getting trapped inside a collapsed building. Their frightened faces made me nervous and I too started staring around.

What my eyes caught at that moment was more frightening indeed, as I saw all those towering buildings shaking from the massive blows they were getting from down below. The telephone antenna on top of one of those buildings was simply trembling, as if seeking the

mercy from somewhere to get strength so that it could withstand the shock.

It was at that moment that I realised I was standing next to a huge electric pole. The pole was also shaking in the quake, reminding me that I should move as far away from it as possible. As soon the first wave of big shocks slowed down I started walking. After reaching my destination I saw that the elevators were all turned off as a safety measure and had to climb the stairs to the seventh floor.

There too, as we started talking, I suddenly realised that the whole building was shaking, and for the first time I felt panic. The official with whom I had the appointment probably noticed my nervousness and took me to the next room where other officials were working. The presence of other people was reassuring, and after the second shock subsided we went back to the designated guest room to continue our discussion. There were more aftershocks later, but we were able to complete the discussion in time.

When I came out, I realised that all the subway and commuter trains had stopped running, so I walked to the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Japan through Hibiya Park. It was by then full of people who had come out of surrounding office buildings.

Another climb to the higher floors of tall buildings was waiting for me as I arrived at the Club. Here too the elevators were turned off, and since our Club is located on the twentieth floor I had no other option but to use my legs. The Club



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was the safest place where I could stay the night if the transport link was not restored in time. I'm still at the Club as I write this report.

I must consider myself lucky as I was outside in the open air when the first big shock struck. One of my colleagues at the Club later told me of his horrifying experience of getting trapped in the subway. According to him, the carriages of the train all of a sudden became

like small boats and started moving violently. He just prayed, and on reaching the next station rushed outside, took a taxi and, like me, eventually took shelter at the Press Club.

As I compile this report, more than 40 people have been reported dead and numerous others injured and missing. The death figure is sure to rise when the picture becomes clearer in the morning.

The quake, with a magnitude of 8.8, is the strongest ever recorded in Japan, surpassing the 7.9 registered by the 1923 Great Kanto earthquake that hit Tokyo and its vicinity, killing more than 100,000 people.

The first shock of the quake was felt at 2:45 pm, and it was followed by a number of strong aftershocks in the next few hours. The epicenter was at a depth of 10 kilometers

off the coast of Ojika Peninsula in Sendai City, which is 130 kilometers east-southeast in the Pacific. Up to 10-meter high tsunami waves followed the quake, one of which hit Sendai port, washing away small boats and containers. A wide, muddy stream carrying trees and rubble was seen moving rapidly across a residential area in Miyagi.

The earthquake also caused explosions in at least two factories and forced numerous manufacturers to suspend production. The quake also brought about disruption in mobile phone communication and forced railway and subway companies to stop trains in large parts of eastern and northeastern Japan, resulting in thousands of commuters getting trapped in the city. 4.4 million houses in six quake-hit prefectures were affected by power failure that followed the quake.

Prime Minister Naoto Kan held an emergency meeting of the cabinet following the quake. He said that the government would devote all its energy to face the crisis and urged citizens to stay calm and act promptly when needed.

The government has declared a state of emergency around nuclear power plants after the quake, saying that no radiation had been detected at or near any nuclear power plants as of Friday evening. Japan's industry ministry announced that four nuclear power plants located closest to the quake hit areas had been safely shut down.

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Sent from Tokyo.

Will sanctions bring Gaddafi down?

M.SHAFIULLAH

LIBYANS burst into an unprecedented popular revolt from February 15 against the ruthless rule of Gaddafi. The oil-rich country has been under one man rule since he seized power by overthrowing old and ailing King Idris in a bloodless coup in 1969. Col. Gaddafi nationalised foreign oil companies and spent huge oil revenue in building basic infrastructure in otherwise impoverished Libya. His popularity was sky-high. But the demi-god gradually sank into adventurism at a terrible cost to his country.

Gaddafi proclaimed himself as the "Messenger of Revolution." He started a personality cult by embracing a Bedouin life style. He has enormous oil revenue at his disposal, which he distributes at will to keep the tribal loyalty. His network of popular committees in every locality keeps watch on any potential dissidents against his "revolution." This cadre is armed both with weapons and authority to dispose of any suspect. A pervasive security system keeps the populace in constant fear and tension. Libya is an enormously rich country but the people have to line up daily for bread.

Protest in Libya is on pain of death, and was therefore unthinkable and unbelievable until the contagious waves of people's power swept away two authoritarian rulers on the right and on the left of Libya. After overcoming the shock of his life that Libyans had challenged him on the street, Gaddafi started suppressing the popular will against him with tank, artillery and air strikes in the "liberated zones," while his cadre and paramilitary security forces "cleansed every house" of the protesters.

Although the eastern provinces are held by the anti-Gaddafi forces carrying the royal flag, it is apparent that the troubled mid and western townships came under constant shelling and air strikes by Gaddafi forces with innumerable casualties. Clearly, anti-autocratic forces needed outside help to sustain the movement as well as to survive Gaddafi's savagery.

Two weeks into the three sets of sanctions -- US, UN and EU-- there is no sign so far that Col. Gaddafi is relenting or will step down.

To stop Gaddafi from further slaughtering the unarmed civilians President Barack Obama asked the Libyan leader to step down as he had lost legitimacy with the people. Gaddafi laughed it away by saying that he was not a king or monarch to step down. He held no post to resign from. To help the beleaguered and embattled Libyans from wanton violation of Human Rights Barack Obama imposed US sanctions on Libya on February 25. The US unilateral sanction regime includes ban on arms sale, and travel bans on Gaddafi, his children and senior members of his caucus. It also freezes the American held portion of Libya's Sovereign Wealth Fund.

According to a New York Times report of February 25, "the government of Libya has claimed that it holds as much as \$130 billion in reserves and its Sovereign Wealth Fund reportedly holds more than \$70 billion in foreign assets." Next were the UN Security Council's multilateral sanctions covering an arms embargo, asset freeze abroad,

travel ban on Gaddafi, his family and 16 of his cronies.

The UN Security Council also put Gaddafi and his henchmen under the investigation of the International Criminal Court at The Hague on charge of gross violation of Human Rights. European countries that are close to Libya -- its oil, gas, captive market and financial hub -- also came up with their set of sanc-

tions on Gaddafi and Libya, which are complementary to the US and the UN Security Council sanctions.

But a defiant Gaddafi claimed that he maintained no foreign account, that the assets abroad belonged to the Libyan people. His people loved him and he would stay with them in his motherland. He ruled out going abroad. He wanted to placate the West by pin-pointing the source of trouble to the handiwork of Islamists, Al-Qaida and drug addicts. A confident Col. Gaddafi invited UN and European fact finding commissions to see the Human Rights situation in Libya.

Gaddafi's confidence partly emanates from the fact that he survived previous US sanctions imposed under the Regan Administration, which bombed Babul-Azizia to eliminate him. The UN Security Council's air embargo from 1993 was lifted in 1999 following handing over of two Libyan suspects in the Lockerbie bombing. There was no sanction on Libyan oil production and marketing, which is 1.55

million barrel per day. Libyan gas is supplied to European countries through an undersea pipeline. 97% of Libya's income comes from oil and gas.

Libya is a billion dollar captive market of Europe -- from every day essentials to medicare and high-tech. A scramble among the Europeans and the US to sell aircraft and arms, repair airports, and maintain oil rigs and pipelines followed close on the heels of lifting of the US and UN embargo in 2000. Tripoli was the city of pilgrimage for Tony Blair and Condoleezza Rice, and Gaddafi became a holy man in his show-case desert tent, whereas the ordinary Libyans, airlines, diplomats (including the writer), expatriates from third world countries and construction firms bore the full brunt of the embargo.

This time around, there is not even an air embargo like before, or embargo on Libyan oil and gas marketing. No consensus has been reached yet on imposing a no-fly zone over Libya to save civilians from air strikes. Gaddafi's forces are re-capturing the townships and cities held by the protesters. Gaddafi thrives on the deficiencies of the Western democratic system and the weakness of market economy.

The bulk of the Libyans who came out to the street to see the end of the forty-two year totalitarian rule of Gaddafi have been fighting a lone battle against the mechanised columns and air strikes of the brutal regime. Two weeks into the three sets of sanctions -- US, UN and EU-- there is no sign so far that Col. Gaddafi is relenting or will step down.

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READERS'

REACTIONS

The High Court has spoken

Thank you editor. You have spoken the minds of millions including an ordinary citizen as I.

Z Zossain

Thank you for your sentiment. You are right that the government could handle matter in a decent way. But that was not the intention of the government. It's main objective was to bring Dr. Yunus to disrepute and punish him for being so popular.

Anonymous, USA

Project aid utilisation

Unemployment is increasing day by day and the honorable finance minister said that shortage of manpower in the projects is a hindrance in speeding up implementation. Let us see, how long this self contradictory problem continues.

Sk. Nasir Ahmad

I do agree that implementation is a problem most particularly when agreed terms of reference signed off by the recipient are comprehensively ignored and other agendas are implemented which has been my single experience of working in your country. You will not be surprised to learn that I support greater transparency and accountability and more effective use of the overseas expertise provided to advise the delivery of project outcomes.

Dr Chris Reynolds

Pulse taking before agitation

A very nice editorial. BNP should go to the people, talk to them over the issues of the country. But they should not go to the streets for agitation. Do not agitate, start dialogue sensibly.

Anonymous, USA

BNP must attend the parliament to add to the recovery of their lost popularity and credibility among the people. The hopes and the trust that inspired the people to vote for AL in the last election have been shattered to a significant level. Joining the Parliament will help BNP come close to these people, correct some of its mistakes apparent to the people and build up a solid democratic base for the next election.

Md. Russell Talukder