

## KALEIDOSCOPE

# Japan tsunami: Lessons for us



SYED FATTAHUL ALAM

JAPAN is not a stranger to tsunamis and earthquakes as it has a highly advanced network of early warning system and matching infrastructure both against quakes and

tsunamis. But still, Friday's tsunami triggered by an earthquake at the Pacific Ocean's floor more than 24 kilometres below the surface (hypo-centre) wreaked havoc on the north-east coast of the country. The quake, with its epicentre located 130 kilometres off the east coast of Oshika Peninsula, Tohoku, measured between 8.9 to 9.1 on the Richter scale, which was the largest one to hit Japan and within the boundaries of North American and Pacific tectonic plates in the last 1,200 years.

We express our deep sympathy for the tsunami victims of Japan and feel as one with the people of that great nation at this time of adversity.

So far the death toll, according to Japan's news media estimates, is between 1,300 and 1,700, while thousands have been dislocated. At the moment, the Japan government is engaged in evacuating hundreds of thousands of victims from quake and flood damaged villages in the north-eastern coast.

While the country is still reeling from the devastation caused by the earthquake and tsunami, the plight of the people has been compounded further by the threat of radiation exposure from the damaged reactors at the Fukushima Daichi Nuclear power station of Fukushima Prefecture, 170 miles north of Tokyo. It is feared that cores of two reactors of the plant are undergo-

ing meltdown as their cooling systems are not working. Worse still, cooling systems have already failed in three reactors at another nearby nuclear complex.

So, at the moment Japan is in double jeopardy. But is not Japan, its government and the people, more experienced and wiser so far as bracing themselves for calamities and their consequences? No doubt the country has elaborate preparations to face and overcome such disasters. The highly developed infrastructures have buildings that can stand strong quakes. Around a thousand early tsunami warning sensors operating across the Pacific coast of the country alerted the people

logically most advanced group of nations, provides a classic example of how helpless humans still are in the face of the fury of Nature. And if this is the situation of such a highly advanced nation that has grown to survive amid such calamities, what would happen to a backward, poor and very densely populated country like Bangladesh in the event of an emergency of Japan's scale?

Are we at all in a safer zone given our not-yet-dimmed-memory of 2004's Indian Ocean earthquake at a scale between 9.1 and 9.3 on the Richter scale (its epicentre was situated off the coast of Sumatra in Indonesia), and which was followed by a ferocious

And considering the frequency of the tremors of different magnitudes jolting us from time to time, we have good reasons to have our own early warning system for tsunamis. Alongside that we should also develop infrastructures including strongly built tsunami shelters, especially for the section of the population living in the coastal areas.

It has to be kept in mind that the colossal mass of water that a tsunami brings with it causes a huge flood. In Japan's case, for example, flood that the tsunami has caused killed most of the victims by drowning. That, in other words, means, there should be adequate facilities to evacuate the population from the tsunami-prone zones within virtually a few moment's notice. In Japan, they can mobilise their evacuation operation within 15 minutes after the tsunami alert is issued.

The Japanese were really well-prepared to face Friday's temblor and the tsunami it caused. But they were cheated by the catastrophe that finally struck. That is because the warnings they had been receiving so far gave the indication that the quake would originate in the southwest off the Japanese coast. Unfortunately, it finally came from the northeast. In fact, notwithstanding the early warning system and its forecasting, the element of surprise is always there.

Even then, there should be adequate facilities in place and the ability to mobilise those at the moment of need. Which is why compared to the Indonesian and other Indian Ocean nation's experience in 2004, the number of death has been rather small in Japan's case.

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*If this is the situation of a nation that has grown to survive amid such calamities, what would happen to a country like Bangladesh in the event of such an emergency?*

about the impending disaster well ahead of the moment when the tsunami with 10-metre high watery mass crashed against the coast of Japan.

The level of awareness of the Japanese against such disasters, too, is one of the highest in the world. Then why is it that the Japan government appears to be so helpless in the face of the Friday's seaborne calamities so much so that it has appealed for external help in the rescue operation? It speaks volumes for the scale of devastation caused by the megathrust temblor and the tsunami.

The situation that Japan, which also belongs to the wealthiest and techno-

tsunami carrying a 30-metre-high mountain of water that claimed some 230,000 lives in some fourteen countries along the coasts of the Indian Ocean. The worst-hit among them, however, was the Aceh region of Sumatra in Indonesia, while the long trail of its devastation stretched up to Sri Lanka and India.

That is a stark reminder of the fact that Bangladesh is also not immune from quakes and tsunamis of the worst kind.

In the light of the seaborne calamities of the scale that has just hit Japan or the one of 2004's Indian Ocean variety, what would be our preparations?

## Stopping border fatalities

*BSF should go by its commitment*

IT is a welcome piece of news that the Border Security Force (BSF) of India will not use lethal weapons in order to bring down killing of Bangladeshis that has been on the rise at the borders. We would much rather they had no use for weapons at all. For we want a full stop to killings rather than bringing down the number of firing incidents.

We like to see the BSF use non-lethal weapons in all circumstances since the nature of our borders is permeable and by no means hostile. We should be especially mindful to avoid any unsavoury incident. On top of everything these borders are between two friendly and not inimical countries. That is why a delicate balance would have to be struck in our border guarding approaches. Therefore, we are all for special cautionary measures to be taken in the management of the borders.

Building of structure within 150 yards of each others border subject to mutual consent and allowing 24-hour access to Tin Bigha corridor which connects Dahagram and Angorpota enclaves in India with the mainland, are other important decisions that will have to be implemented with a great degree of sensitivity and attention to detail. However, for the present we like to concentrate on border killings which tend to affect neighbourly relations between Bangladesh and India.

In case of illegal border crossing or intrusion, instead of taking recourse to shooting, the Border Security Force only need to follow the procedure laid down in the rules of engagement. Under the rules it can arrest any trespasser or anybody involved in criminal activity and hand him /her over to the Bangladesh authority. Taking a path of understanding and negotiation through border meetings is the best option for resolving any differences on the ground, if any.

This time we are hopeful that the decisions taken and commitments made at the DG level conferences will permeate down the lowest rung and a changed outlook will be reflected by the BSF men at the borders. Furthermore, the friendship and cordiality that the governments of Bangladesh and India exude in their relationship will be squarely reflected via the existence of a border of peace between the two countries.

## Felicitations to The Financial Express

*Helped advance business journalism*

THE observance of the seventeenth founding anniversary of The Financial Express last week is testimony to the positive role the newspaper has played in Bangladesh's business journalism all these years. When it first hit the stands, it stood out not only for its look, which was at variance with the image presented by other newspapers, but also for the theme on which it meant to work. Fundamentally, it was --- and remains --- a publication geared to a presentation of news and comments on business, particularly in the national arena. In the years since it was founded, The Financial Express has worked quietly but passionately and in so doing has carved a niche for itself among Bangladesh's newspaper-reading public.

As we have consistently made it a point, the appearance of a new newspaper and its smooth functioning are a cause for happiness because of a couple of important reasons. The first is that it demonstrates the growing number of people inclined to reading newspapers, in this case English language newspapers, and by extension offers readers a new outlet for the dissemination of news and comments. The second is that it brings forth a new approach to the issues of the day and in so doing injects a certain intellectual dimension into the on-going issues being discussed in the public domain. The Financial Express, we are happy to say, has been carrying out these responsibilities to the satisfaction of its readers and others across the country. Its core readership has been well-served by the substantive nature of the points of view it has always presented to them. In a socio-political climate where journalism, particularly where it concerns the publication and sales of newspapers, is a difficult proposition, The Financial Express has indeed done well for itself.

We offer our heartiest felicitations to The Financial Express as it embarks on its eighteenth year of publication.

ENAM A. CHAUDHURY

THE concept of Commonwealth as a free association and the fact that the newly independent countries coming out of the clutches of the British Imperial yoke would like to stay on in the Commonwealth, facilitated transfer of power from the British Crown in the mid-forties.

Sir Winston Churchill and the hardcore Tories were reluctant to witness the dissolution of the British India empire. But the prospect that the newly independent countries would choose to remain in the Commonwealth, maintain mutual links, including major connections, with the mother country Britain drove out the elements of resistance and reservations that they otherwise would have nourished.

The idea of Commonwealth lit up the light of hope that, however diverse the members may be and whatever differences they may mutually have, it was still possible to remain linked up, and not only cement the highest common factors (HCF) among them but also to benefit from such linkage.

In spite of immense diversities they still would have common values and ideals.

The "new Commonwealth" was born in May 1949, and ever since then its adaptability, sustainability, flexibility and resilience have carried it through all vicissitudes. Her Majesty the Queen of UK, continued to be the Queen of her realms, official Head of State of countries of the old commonwealth like Australia and Canada, but just the head of the Commonwealth for other Republics -- Commonwealth being a free association of independent nations. The appeal of the concept caught on and has been used subsequently in the case of the Commonwealth of Independent States in central Asia after the break up of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

The Commonwealth, in its chequered history, faced many crises and challenges and managed to overcome those. As we look towards the future assessing the probable relevance of Commonwealth in the years to come, it is advisable to look back and see how Commonwealth passed through those critical situations.

Britain's entry to the European Union and its general political and economic integration has definitely been a serious blow to the institutions, but history tells us that member countries taking different political and economic courses can still continue to vigorously and fruitfully remain within the Commonwealth fold.

Immediately after the London Declaration of 1949, which marked the

beginning of the modern Commonwealth, in September that year, with its post-war economy in shambles, Britain was forced to devalue the pound. Within 24 hours, India correspondingly devalued its rupee. Those who had unsuccessfully opposed the Commonwealth link, seized the opportunity to proclaim that "this was the first bitter fruit" of the membership of the Commonwealth.

India's Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru retorted: "To say that this is a consequence of our being in the Commonwealth is an absurdity. Pakistan, in spite of being in the Commonwealth, has not devalued her currency." Other countries, including India, followed different monetary courses subsequently to meet their varying compulsion of events.

In the political front, the biggest crisis came in 1956 when the totally unacceptable Anglo-French-Israeli aggression against Egypt was engineered in the wake of nationalisation of the Suez Canal. Britain's diabolical role angered most of the other members of

India that started the war with Pakistan. Countries, being mutually at war with each other could continue to remain and flourish in the Commonwealth.

The Anglo-American aggression of Iraq angered many, but that did not destroy the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth withstood all these setbacks, and we have reasons to firmly hold the view that in the future, it would be able to do so.

Like the British Constitution, the fundamentals of the Commonwealth were not initially codified, but the objectives of the Commonwealth were first outlined in the 1971 Singapore Declaration. This included, inter alia, promotion of democracy, human rights, good governance, rule of law, individual liberty, egalitarianism, free-trade and multilateralism.

Two decades later, at the 12th Commonwealth Heads of Governments Meeting (CHOGM), the Harare declaration of 1991 re-affirmed the principles and ideas enunciated in the Singapore Declaration and held

significant roles in safeguarding democratic practice, political freedom, and civil liberties.

The Commonwealth Foundation is an inter-governmental body, resourced by and reporting to the governments, guided and motivated by commonwealth values and priorities, which can be summed up as democracy and good governance, human rights, gender equality, sustainable and equitable development, and promotion of arts, culture, sports and professional proficiency.

Commonwealth ministers of finance, education, telecommunications, industry and trade meet at regular intervals, exchange views and try to develop mutually beneficial programmes of action. In the field of collective competitive multi-sports events, the quadrennial Commonwealth Games has emerged as an important and significant engagement.

To move forward in the future, the Commonwealth Secretariat and related Commonwealth institutions have envisioned different programmes on democracy and consensus building, functioning of Commonwealth election observer groups, strengthening of democratic and peace processes, monitoring by Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) against persistent violation of rule of law and human rights, and environment sustainable development.

Promoting trade facilitation and advocating for the reform of international institutions to give particular focus on the needs of least developed states and small island economies, promoting inclusive growth, ensuring gender equality are now the priority areas of Commonwealth initiatives. Last year, the Commonwealth theme was science, technology and society." This year it is "Women as agents of change," undoubtedly a very relevant and contemporaneous issue. The Commonwealth Day is being observed internationally today (the second Monday of March), and the Commonwealth Society of Bangladesh has organised a seminar on the subject to mark the occasion.

The Commonwealth Societies in different member countries are actively sustaining and nourishing people's interest in the concept, objectives and activities of the Commonwealth. All these are destined to ensure that the Commonwealth continues to remain a relevant and contributing agent for progress in the time to come.

The writer is President, Commonwealth Society of Bangladesh.

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the Commonwealth. In the Indian Parliament, a Congress MP tabled a resolution for immediate withdrawal from the Commonwealth. Left parties, left leaning Congressmen, and even conservative congress leader like Chakravarty Rajagopalacharya joined the rank of critics.

In former East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, the British Information Centre was burnt down by an angry crowd and immediate withdrawal of Pakistan from the Commonwealth was demanded. However, it was pointed out that Commonwealth membership had not inhibited the developing member countries from playing their own roles, and when the problem was over with the support of the USA, and the Anglo-French-Israeli coterie stood exposed and humiliated, it was established with support from countries like Canada that Britain had no monopoly of Commonwealth and the member countries could follow their own policy imperatives.

The same logic worked when on September 6, 1965, Harold Wilson, the British prime minister, said that it was

that the principles of international peace, global economic development, rule of law, liberty and equal rights should be applicable to all.

One important departure from the earlier declaration was the affirmation of the right to enforce its core values. This point was further clarified by the Millbank Commonwealth Action programme, which quite unambiguously mandated the Commonwealth to concern itself with its members' internal situations. I feel that this is likely to make the Commonwealth more relevant now and in the future.

Moreover, Commonwealth countries share many links outside the government, notably in sport and culture, education and law. The Association for Commonwealth Universities definitely is an important vehicle for academic connections. The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and the Commonwealth Journalists' Association play important roles in facilitating exchange of views and information, and thereby help strengthen the concerned institutions. Parliament and press play the most

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

March 14

**1915**

World War I: Cornered off the coast of Chile by the Royal Navy after fleeing the Battle of the Falkland Islands, the German light cruiser SMS Dresden is abandoned and scuttled by her crew.

**1945**

World War II: The R.A.F. first operational use of the Grand Slam bomb, Bielefeld, Germany.

**1951**

Korean War: For the second time, United Nations troops recapture Seoul.

**1967**

The body of President John F. Kennedy is moved to a permanent burial place at Arlington National Cemetery.

**1978**

The Israeli Defense Force invades and occupies southern Lebanon, in Operation Litani.

**1971**

On this day Pakistan People's Party chairman Z.A. Bhutto demands that power be transferred to his party in West Pakistan and to the Awami League in East Pakistan. He also said that if there was to be a majority government in Pakistan the Awami League would first have to drop its Six Point plan.