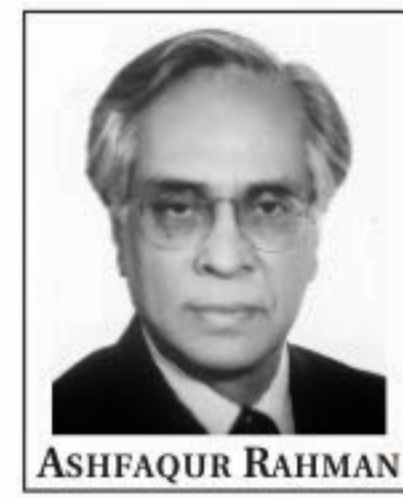


SUNDAY POUCH

Annus horribilis for Japan



ASHFAQUR RAHMAN

LAST week a massive earthquake hit the north-east coast of Japan's main island of Honshu. It triggered a tsunami of up to 30 feet high.

This killed thousands, destroyed towns and caused big power outages. To date about 6,000 people have died and 10,000 are missing.

The Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear power plant located in the vicinity of the quake and tsunami was also disabled. The electric lines supplying power to the plant were damaged and the back-up generators and the batteries also went out of order. This resulted in disruption in supply of water to cool the reactors of the various units.

But atomic fusion reaction within the units continued without cooling water. This accumulated heat and steam in the various units of the reactor. Some of the steam gushed out while the excess heat set fire to the units in the plant. The casings around the buildings housing the nuclear cores, but which were separately protected, were partially blown off. According to reports, atomic radiation in small quantities bled out and spread with the wind in a large radius around the plant.

Thus, within a week, Japan was faced with crises of epic proportions. The situation was complicated with bad weather conditions in the area. Freezing temperature and snow disrupted and slowed relief efforts.

Thus the country which was already in the midst of an economic depression and political uncertainties for the past several years walked into a particularly horrible year (annus horribilis).

Japanese people are used to earthquakes. They are therefore quite well versed about what to do when a big earthquake strikes. They know that they are not to panic but work like professionals to help each other out.

But the tsunami that followed the earthquake was not in their calculation. The sea walls that were built to protect the inland cities were too

small to contain the powerful onrush of water that swept away houses, cars, bridges and humans.

The nuclear power plant in Fukushima was built in the seventies of the last century. Its design is out of date. The Japanese nuclear scientists who built the plant and ran it never thought that power supply and the standby battery could both become inoperative simultaneously. They were not prepared for a situation where there would be no electricity to pump water and cool the reactors.

So the operators of the nuclear plant have to bring in helicopters to unload buckets of water on to the

about accepting foreign assistance. They are, therefore, overwhelmed by offers of aid from 120 countries and 30 international organisations from around the world. They do not know exactly how they should handle this.

But what has in some ways disappointed the Japanese is that many countries are also withdrawing their citizens from Japan in view of possible spread of nuclear radiation.

The order of US government to its navy ships to go far into the deep sea away from the Japanese shores to avoid possible radiation contamination is a psychological set-back for them. The fact that the US is also not

seems unable to cope efficiently with the triple crisis. The Japanese are looking for new ways to address the challenges.

Prime Minister Naoto Kan is a weak leader but it seems that he is slowly taking charge. The venerable Emperor of Japan has addressed his people. The politicians are likely to take the front seats again.

But the big question that remains is how the tragedy will play out on its economy. Japan is the most heavily indebted country in the world. It is more indebted than the US. Its public debt is 228% of the GDP. The cost of reconstruction of the destroyed infrastructure will further aggravate its debt. The question is whether the disaster will push Japan over the edge.

In January, the respected international rating agency, Standard and Poor, cut Japan's long term sovereign debt rating.

Already, the value of the Japanese yen has risen because of the fear that much more of this currency would be in demand for reconstruction. This would mean that Japanese exports of machineries and cars would cost more and they would be losing their demand in the international market. A vise-like economic situation could grip Japan. But the G7 countries have decided to chip in to support the yen as they do not want any disturbance in the currency market. This reflects how much the world is sympathetic to Japan.

For us in Bangladesh, we could see much less Japanese commitment of aid in future. Japan is likely to be looking at herself more than towards developing countries like us. Our imports from Japan could be reduced due to higher costs of purchase, perhaps because of higher value of the yen. This means paying more for importing Japanese cars and machineries to Bangladesh.

Japan is likely to watch closely who have extended a sincere helping hand during their crisis. Have we taken any step yet to stand beside this long-standing and trusted friend?

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reactor. It is like trying to put out a forest fire with small buckets of water. However, all hope is not lost. It is expected that an alternative power source will be connected soon to provide electricity to run water pumps to cool the nuclear plant.

The crisis in Japan has put the Japanese system and the way of life of the people under severe strain.

A huge array of obstacles is hampering quick rescue and recovery in the affected areas. These range from bad weather to non-availability of fuel, to empty store shelves to broken infrastructure and no water supply.

The Japanese are usually reticent

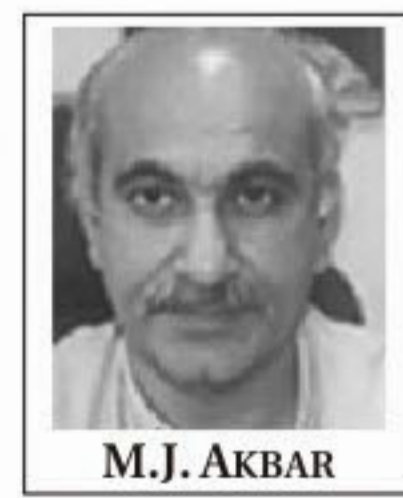
depending on Japanese data in assessing the impact of the nuclear tragedy is disturbing to them.

The Fukushima nuclear plant disaster reveals a series of missteps, bad luck and last minute improvisations by the Japanese. Another important aspect that is emerging is that the people for the first time are questioning some of its oldest values.

Take for example the fact that the Japanese always respected the competence and efficiency of their bureaucracy. They had distrusted their politicians because of the dysfunctional way they operated in the past. But this time the bureaucracy

BYLINE

The terminal patient needs a doctor



M.J. AKBAR

THE habitat of a government may have relocated from a palace to a hospital, but don't start the funeral prayers too soon. The fate

of Dr. Manmohan Singh's coalition will not be determined by the number of wounds on its body, or indeed on the body politic, nor by the toxicity of the environment, but by the circumstances of a moment which has not yet arrived.

The medical report of UPA2 would, in normal circumstances, demand emergency health bulletins. One of its legs, DMK, has gangrene. The only solution to gangrene is amputation, but the Congress has chosen to put band aid instead. The suicide of Satchik Batcha, the pauper-to-prince bagman who became conduit and beneficiary of A. Raja's stolen goods, has added a sinister and fatal dimension to the sores oozing out of DMK's bone marrow. Gangrene will spread as the system works its way through the suicide.

Congress, bathing in antiseptic to prevent that contagion, has been diagnosed with tuberculosis in its lungs by Dr. Wikileaks. All the familiar ingredients of this historic malady have been found in the reports sent by the American embassy in Delhi to the State Department in Washington, and revealed to the world through

internet.

Names become almost irrelevant when the pattern is so set: a central figure whose principal contribution to the party has been as a cash reservoir for political transactions, an all-purpose middleman who could not resist flaunting his treasure chests to US intelligence officials, and then lazy denials without even the strength of a whimper.

As if all this were not hopeless enough, an obstinate sister from Bengal has chosen just this time to do

her little bit: instead of bringing fruit and flowers to the patient, Mamata Banerjee has inserted a little knife into a vulnerable tendon. She has decided that the Grand Old Party is worth just 64 candidates out of 292 in the Bengal Assembly elections, take it or leave it. In order to swallow your pride, you must have some pride left, and Mamata Banerjee has drained the pride out of the Bengal Congress.

Her calculation is self-serving, which is the only logic that works in politics. She does not want to be dependent on the Congress to form a future government. The Congress will win between 30 to 40 seats in any case; in an alliance it might get a bit more in such an equation. There is

not much going for it. An alliance only benefits Mamata, for it places her victory beyond doubt.

I have no idea whether the prime minister believes in astrology or not, but no conjugation of planets and demons could have inflicted more misery upon him. For some months now, news has become a four-letter word for the Congress. But such is the paradoxical behaviour of the planets that the very stars which are destroying the Congress image are preserving the life of this government. Dr.

Manmohan Singh's government will survive this and even worse because there is no alternative alliance possible in this Parliament, and no MP wants a general election so soon.

Precisely because the crisis is premature, Dr. Singh has an opportunity to fight his way out of it. When you have nothing more to lose, the only serious option left is going for the gain. It is too late now to reverse the alliance with the DMK, but another crossroads will come after the Tamil Nadu Assembly elections, which the DMK is almost certain to lose. This gives the Congress a reasonable opt-out: rejection by the voter will confirm the immorality of the alliance.

Any threat by the DMK to take

revenge by bringing down the government is meaningless, since it cannot do so until a widely disparate opposition finds a common reason for doing so. Narasimha Rao, aided by a similar House, survived for three years with a minority without a jitter.

But survival must mean something more than bobbing about on a raft in the middle of a clueless sea. Dr. Singh has to use this year, and there may not be much more time than that, to fill the gap in governance that has developed, and convince India that he is not paying mere lip service to probity in public life.

The first is easier than the second, since elements within his own party and alliance are corrupt. But if he does not act against them, whatever be the price, his injured credibility will suffer beyond repair.

Governance needs a resurgence of ideas, and the will to reform that has been strangely absent from his agenda after his re-election. Why this has happened is a mystery beyond the comprehension of this columnist.

Dr. Manmohan Singh has a doctorate in economics rather than politics, but this is precisely what he needs. Politics has brought the government to hospital. Only economics can get it out of there.

The writer is Editor, The Sunday Guardian, published from Delhi, India on Sunday, published from London and Editorial Director, India Today and Headlines Today.

Repatriation hampered

Let our govt do more to help

THE appeal by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and UNHCR for international assistance in repatriating thousands of foreigners fleeing Libya is the biggest sign of what governments can yet do to help captive citizens. The situation is particularly difficult for the thousands of Bangladeshis who remain stranded on the frontier between Libya and Tunisia, a condition that looks likely to continue now that the IOM has run out of funds. While one expects the international community to come forward, and quickly with emergency funds, one also believes that governments such as Bangladesh's should be doing a whole lot more to help their own people out of the crisis.

Meanwhile, we express our gratitude to the Tunisian people who, despite their own difficulties, have come forth spontaneously to help the foreigners including Bangladeshis streaming into their country from Libya. Their noble deeds will resonate with us forever.

The unfortunate reality, though, is that while the Bangladesh government has loudly voiced its concerns and its determination to bring back all Bangladeshis home, it has simply not backed up its resolve with enough concrete measures. The proof of such indifference comes from the IOM itself. Officials of the organisation are plainly exasperated that despite reports of Biman aircraft flying in to fly out the stranded Bangladeshis, there has been no sign yet that that is truly happening. We are now constrained to ask why the Bangladesh government, which recently despatched the foreign minister and the foreign secretary as well as other officials to oversee the repatriation of Bangladeshis, has failed to meet public expectations. Our officials have reportedly not contacted the IOM or UNHCR people working on the ground. If they have not, what exactly have they been engaged in doing? It is not a pretty sight when the government of a country cannot come to the aid of its people in distress abroad. It disappoints citizens and it leaves them red-faced before the rest of the world.

Let the government get its act together and strive more energetically to orchestrate the repatriation exercise so that none of our citizens feel abandoned.

Biman's loss of customers

Avoid half-baked approach

THE state that the national carrier is in at present it can do well without any poorly planned step. This has become only too evident from the quandary Biman finds itself in due to the enhancement of fares, which, apparently, was effected without proper homework.

The result of the hike in fare on the international routes has been loss of customers, in some cases as much as 50 percent. Even reduction by 60 percent in the new rates has not been able to recoup the loss.

We find it difficult to agree with Biman Chairman that the tariff committee had taken the decision after considering all the factors. It is very obvious that the decision to raise passenger fares has not been backed up by a thorough market study, as evidenced by the quick change of decision to cut the raise.

The poor state of the national carrier has been a matter of serious concern. It is a classic example of how a prospective and promising enterprise can be wasted due to sheer mismanagement, corruption and abysmal lack of commitment by those that are entrusted to run the airline. We fail to understand how other airlines operating in and out of Bangladesh have flourished while Biman has suffered. Can we expect an explanation by the Biman authorities as to how the number of Biman passengers has dwindled while some airlines have increased the number of flights to meet the increased demand on them?

Biman needs a thorough overhaul starting with having a management that is well versed in running an aviation industry, and no political consideration must come in in this regard; and a long term plan needs to be put in place to lift it up from

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

February 20

1602

The Dutch East India Company is established. It was the first multinational corporation in the world and the first company to issue stock.

1739

Nadir Shah occupies Delhi in India and sacks the city, stealing the jewels of the Peacock Throne.

1815

After escaping from Elba, Napoleon enters Paris with a regular army of 140,000 and a volunteer force of around 200,000, beginning his "Hundred Days" rule.

1852

Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin is published.

1916

Albert Einstein publishes his general theory of relativity.

1966

Football's World Cup stolen while on exhibition in London.

1956

Tunisia gains independence from France.

2003

Invasion of Iraq: In the early hours of the morning, the United States the United Kingdom and smaller contingents from Australia and Poland begin military operations in Iraq. Also known as the so-called "Operation Iraqi Freedom."

2005

A magnitude 6.6 earthquake hits Fukuoka, Japan, its first major quake in over 100 years. One person is killed, hundreds are injured and evacuated.

Birth

1725

Sultan Abdul Hamid I, Ottoman Sultan (d. 1789)