

Tidal sufferings

Preparedness loopholes exposed

ALTHOUGH the heavy rain has tapered off, and the surge and the consequent tidal bore has receded, it has left in its wake severely damaged 50000 acres of cropland and fisheries and affected a large number of families in the coastal areas of the country. While a mix of climatic phenomena is the cause of the heavy downpour, the effect of the low pressure was exacerbated by the high tide that compounded the effect of the sea surge. Reportedly, as many as fifteen south and south-eastern districts, were lashed by rains that lasted for almost three days with varying intensity.

The recent rain and tidal surge only expose the fact that the people in the coastal belt are constantly under threat of submersion with the slightest bit of sea swell. It also reinforces the need for the relevant authorities to be constantly ready for such unforeseen eventualities. But most of all, it underscores the need for permanent measures to protect the coastal belt from the consequences of tidal bore.

What has compounded the situation is the fact that most of the affected areas and people are those that had been hit by cyclones Aila and Sidr. These people, still struggling to find their feet, not having received adequate funds for rehabilitation, and having neither a permanent roof over them, have to make do with makeshift arrangements on flood embankments, and have little by way of farmland to generate income.

There is no doubt that the matter has been worsened by the fact that the repair and rehab work in the aftermath of Aila in particular has not been up to scratch. And as reported in this newspaper in April this year, several major breaches were yet to be repaired till then as well as the fact that more than 8,000 households were living on the embankment in Khulna, Satkhira and Bagerhat at that time.

What we must emphasize here is not only that the repair works are taken up immediately, those must be strictly supervised so that the embankments are strong enough to withstand the onslaught of tidal surge, which as per our reports is not so in all cases.

Deepening uncertainty in ME

Arab Spring headed for autumn?

FORCES loyal to Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad have been shelling a small town near the border with Turkey, forcing its residents to flee to safety on the other side. The operation demonstrates, four months into the unrest in Syria, the brutality of the regime in trying to suppress the popular movement for political change. In Libya, despite all the NATO bombing to force Muammar Gaddafi from power, the regime, despite its weakened nature, remains in place. NATO bombing has just resulted in more civilians dying, which raises the critical question of whether all this international pressure on Gaddafi is yielding the results the West had earlier thought it would. Meanwhile, in Morocco, King Muhammad's offer of reforms has left no one impressed. His detractors' argument that earlier reforms in the country's 400-year history have been superficial cannot be dismissed out of hand. Yemen's Ali Abdullah Saleh has fled to Saudi Arabia.

Much as the world is enthused by the Arab Spring, the fact remains that the changes one would have liked to see in the Middle East have come only half way. So far, the tide of change has yielded results in Tunisia and Egypt, though in the latter case the future remains uncertain. The military authorities, seemingly believing in their own approach to the future, have so far failed to take broad public opinion and the political classes into confidence. But if post-Mubarak Egypt is yet finding its way around, conditions in Syria and Libya are definitely horrendous. Libyans are now caught in a civil war, with neither the regime nor the rebels able to claim victory. NATO keeps pounding away, with no idea as to when these raids will end. It is innocent Libyans who die. Those who live confront an apocalyptic future. In Syria, the West is yet to make up its mind beyond sounding out warnings at intervals.

The Arab Spring is in danger of drawing itself out into a long, bitter autumn. Conscience is in short supply in Damascus and Tripoli. NATO's killing of Libyan civilians demonstrates an absence of moral dimensions in internationalism.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

June 20

1214

The University of Oxford receives its charter.

1652

Tarhoncu Ahmet Pa'a appointed grand vezir of the Ottoman Empire, served until 21 March 1653.

1837

Queen Victoria succeeds to the British throne.

1944

World War II: The Battle of the Philippine Sea concludes with a decisive U.S. naval victory.

1960

Independence of Mali and Senegal.

1963

The so-called "red telephone" is established between the Soviet Union and the United States following the Cuban Missile Crisis.

1982

The Argentine base (Corbeta Uruguay) on Southern Thule surrenders to Royal Marine commandos.

KALEIDOSCOPE

Major parties must reach out to each other



SYED FATTAHUL ALAM

TO all appearances, the caretaker government issue is going to determine which way the country's next political storm might start to blow. The last that we know of on the issue is that both the ruling Awami League (AL) and the main opposition, Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), have drawn their battle lines over the issue of caretaker government.

AL's General Secretary Syed Ashraful Islam, at a press conference said, his party will wait until the last moment for a dialogue with the BNP on the caretaker government issue. And in case the BNP fails to respond to their call, they will have no other option, but to go by the High Court (HC)'s verdict on the issue and bring amendments to the Constitution in the Jatiya Sangsad (JS) as suggested by the special parliamentary committee constituted by the government for the purpose.

And if ever there is at all any dialogue between the two parties on that score, that too, must show the highest regard to the HC verdict, Syed Ashraf added. But Syed Ashraf did not further elaborate on how the implied dialogue partner, the BNP in this case, would show the respect as settled by AL unilaterally! And are not the very words "showing the highest respect to the HC verdict on the caretaker government issue" as spelt out by the Awami League general secretary a veritable source of controversy

supplying the opposition BNP with adequate arsenal against its joining the dialogue in the first place?

That is so because the BNP, too, has declared its clear stand on the Awami League's call for the dialogue saying that "there is no question of any compromise with the Awami League on the caretaker issue." Or in other words, BNP considers the subject of the caretaker government a resolved issue. That is, to them, the caretaker government issue is inviolable and as such the next parliamentary elections must be held under caretaker governments. The 13th Amendment to the Constitution says it all. And so if any dialogue is to be held with the Awami League that should centre on, for instance, who would be the head of the next caretaker government and not on if the provision of caretaker government should at all exist, or not.

After enforcing two *hartals* within the span of a week, the BNP is threatening the government with more *hartals* of non-stop type, if the government goes ahead with its current position of having the recommendations on the constitutional amendments as brought by the parliamentary special committee passed in the

Jatiya Sangsad (JS) or Parliament, taking advantage of the brute majority it enjoys in the House.

On the face of it, the very public posture that the ruling Awami League has taken by opening the door to dialogue with the main opposition BNP may seem unassailable. For can any sane person deny the importance of dialogue in settling any political issues? Should not then the BNP take hold of this opportunity in earnest? And if it fails to do so, will

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it not commit a political suicide, for which none other than the party at fault (the BNP in this case) will have to bear the sole responsibility for any unforeseen consequence? And in that event will not the ruling party be justified in going it alone without the opposition BNP?

Now the big question is, would the society at large be truly convinced of the argument as, for instance, the ruling party would like to put it? Or why should anyone blame the BNP, if it decides to go ahead with its non-stop *hartal* programmes on the ground that the ruling Awami League did not care to take heed of its point of view about the dialogue, if any?

Both the parties might be right from their own points of view. And

WORLD REFUGEE DAY

60 years and still counting

CRAIG SANDERS

COMMEMORATING World Refugee Day on June 20 is a good time to reflect upon the plight of refugees around the world. With a number of landmark anniversaries this year, 2011 also highlights just how the refugee experience has been intertwined with the history and humanitarian tradition of Bangladesh.

Today some 43.7 million people around the world have been forced to flee their homes due to persecution and violence. This number includes over 10.5 million refugees and 14.7 million internally displaced persons who receive protection and assistance from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees or UNHCR. Another 12 million people are stateless and cannot enjoy the basic rights which come with citizenship or nationality.

Last year alone, some 845,800 people around the world sought asylum as refugees -- one in three was a child and more than 15,500 were unaccompanied or separated from their families. Not surprisingly, women and girls make up almost half of all refugees worldwide while an equal percentage are children under 18. Developing countries also shoulder a disproportionate responsibility by hosting four-fifths of the world's refugee population, including most of the 7.2 million refugees whose lives are caught in dismal, protracted situations where there is often no apparent solution in sight.

These statistics present a sobering reality as we consider that 2011 is also the 60th anniversary of the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 50th anniversary of the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness. While international laws alone are not a universal remedy to their plight, these conventions have long provided a solid foundation for the protection of refugees and stateless persons around the world and today serve as a

practical guide for states, the UN and civil society to pursue durable solutions for these same people.

Of course, 2011 is also important as we commemorate 40 years of independence of Bangladesh. Many Bangladeshis hold vivid and sometimes traumatic recollections of the events of 1971 when some 10 million Bangladeshis sought safety in neighbouring India. This remains the largest and most rapid forced displacement in human history. In the midst of these tumultuous events, UNHCR

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was tasked to serve as the UN's focal point to coordinate the inter-agency humanitarian response.

The scale of this massive and complex humanitarian operation was a first for the UN Refugee Agency and was the start of what has become an intertwined history between Bangladesh and UNHCR. Lessons learnt in 1971 helped shape UNHCR into the organisation it is today.

In 1978, and again in 1991, many Bangladeshis will know of UNHCR through our work with refugees from Myanmar. Today, some 29,000 registered refugees reside in two camps in Cox's Bazar District in addition to a government-estimated 200,000-500,000 Myanmar nationals who are undocumented, but who still figure among persons of concern to UNHCR.

Over the last two decades, UNHCR has worked closely with the government of Bangladesh to protect and assist these refugees while still harbouring the hope that a durable solution for all Myanmar people might some-

day be found. To support Bangladesh in resolving what may be one of the most protracted and forgotten refugee situations in the world today, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, António Guterres, has designated this as one of his priority operations.

In an increasingly interconnected world, we are facing new and sometimes unexpected challenges. Earlier this year, the events in Libya led to a unique situation where for the first time in recent history, the number of "third country nationals" -- non-

Libyans such as Egyptians, Ghanaians, Vietnamese and of course, Bangladeshis -- vastly outnumbered the Libyan refugees who fled to neighbouring countries.

While many will correctly point out that the Bangladeshis fleeing Libya were migrant workers and not refugees, there were some obvious similarities. Many Bangladeshis in Libya, like refugees and asylum seekers, did not want to leave, but instead were forced to leave due to the insecurity they faced. Together with refugees and asylum seekers, many migrant workers from Bangladesh and other countries had to beat a dangerous and often traumatic path to safety and needed support when they arrived in Tunisia, Egypt and other neighbouring countries.

Together with the hosting countries and other international organisations and NGOs, UNHCR provided tents, food, water, and medical care like it would to any other displaced person. At the peak of the crisis, UNHCR also

the problem is in their present positions, both of them are missing a very vital point. And that is neither of them is making any allowance for what the rest of the people might be thinking about the issue. There is also no reason to indulge in the belief that the people at large are seeing what these two parties would like them to see. In fact, the people are known for their keen power of observation when it comes to politics. So to take them all for granted would be as good as living in a fool's paradise has been proved more than once, especially during all the four (or maybe five, if you take the infamous February 15, 1996 opposition-boycotted parliamentary elections held under BNP government) general elections held in the country.

All those polls unmistakably demonstrated that the people have their own logic unbiased by the pet views of the major political parties when they vote for a candidate in an election. And that neither of the major political parties has been able to see the writing on the wall has been amply demonstrated by their habit of falling in the all too familiar dialogue-centred political mire, which sometimes tempted the extra-constitutional forces to usurp political power.

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The writer is Editor, Science & Life, The Daily Star.

used its own funds to charter 17 long-haul aircraft to repatriate 5,670 Bangladeshis who were among the more than 36,000 who have so far returned home from Libya.

Quite simply, these actions were in response to a humanitarian and moral imperative -- the same sentiment that led to the creation of UNHCR and the passage of international law to protect refugees and stateless persons. It was also the same sentiment that led to the assistance provided to Bangladeshi refugees in 1971 and later for Bangladesh to host and assist refugees from Myanmar for the last 20 years.

A last landmark date to mention is the 150th birth anniversary of Rabindranath Tagore, who remarked: "Where our humanity is concerned we are weak -- because we do not consider some human beings as part of mankind." Where in many parts of the world we see xenophobia and discrimination on the rise, Tagore's words strike a familiar chord which resonates well beyond his native Bengal.

All too often, refugees are faulted for fleeing from violence and persecution and seeking safety for their loved ones and themselves. They are blamed for not returning to their homes quickly enough, even if this might result in their imprisonment, torture, rape, or death. Too often, refugees must sacrifice some of the last shreds of basic human dignity just to survive.

Tagore's counsel is an echoing reminder that we -- the world community -- must consider all displaced persons as an integral part of mankind, only then can we effectively address the ever-complex issue of forced displacement which affects refugees, the internally displaced, and so many others around the world.

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