

PLEASURE IS ALL MINE

# Can Obama buck the trend?



SHAH HUSAIN IMAM

THE news for Obama is bad but that of the trend is not. The US Senate has scrapped Obama's jobs bill. Two of his own Democrats joined Republicans to vote against it. There are 53 Democrat Senators to 49 Republican. It was skating through the thin ice anyway. The 60-vote supermajority mark required for the bill to advance in the chamber was a steep call.

A procedural opportunity exists though, for the Senate majority leader Harry Reid to bring back the bill in the Senate. Obama says: "It's not the end of the fight." It surely is not, because he has a whole war before him and hopefully, the ammunition, to fight it.

The Republicans' unabashed priority is to ensure single-term presidency for Barack Obama. That's why the \$447 billion job creation proposal to benefit 14 million unemployed in the US doesn't find favour with the GOP. After all, why would they be an accessory to giving Obama a reelection on the platter? If that is the foremost Republican agenda, clearly they are drawing the battlelines not so much on principles as on an ulterior single-minded objective which is to see the back of him.

To be the devil's advocate, this fits into the "smear and fear campaign against Obama calling him a Muslim, foreigner, terrorist, woman hater, anti-American, anti-Semitic, racist and all other hate-based nonsense," expletives of the extremist fringe. Mainstream America is not with them.

Some of those issues or their variants had stalked the Obama campaign for presidency in 2008 but couldn't stop him walking into

the White House. Three factors made a difference for him the last time over: one, his superb oratorical skills and confident intellectual jabs; two, his world vision for repairing the neo-con-wreaked damages on the global stage; and third, a certain melting pot idealism streaking through the US consciousness, with prejudice to colour overcome. Would he be second time lucky given the odds stacked against him?

The Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement is a counterpoise to the pro-right anti-taxation, anti-spending Tea Party movement that carried favour with Conservatives, i.e. the Republicans. The OWS' catch word of 99% raw deal recipients as against 1% beneficiary elitist millionaires and billionaires is taking hold of American imagination. President Obama was quick to dub it as voicing the "broad frustrations." This rhymes in with his "look at underdog me." The OWS and perhaps its variant Occupy Congress (OC) is waging a war



AFP

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against the power of the corporate finance or political lobby. The Tea Party, even formal Republican detractors -- Alaska Governor Sarah Palin seen more as an 'entertainer' and less as a serious presidential contender withdrawing from the race -- have called the OWS as a class war. But the movement has already attracted a measure of both political and celebrity support.

President Obama says: "We can either keep

the focus on what has been left undone than what he has done: "Healthcare reform, repeal of the 'don't ask, don't tell' or the killing of Osama bin Laden." His efforts to revitalise the economy or his American Job Act are being glossed over, too.

Public interest being the pole star here, both Republicans and Democrats should be guided by the sole consideration of

taxes exactly as they are for millionaires and billionaires, with loopholes that lead them to have lower taxes, in some cases, than for plumbers and teachers, or we can put teachers and construction workers and veterans back on the job."

His opponents argue: "If he really wants to put people back to work he should declare a Reduced or Limited Tax and Regulation Holiday for the next five years or so. That would start a hiring boom in the private sector for sustainable job growth."

This is what the US Chamber of Commerce would like to see happen. President Obama laments

beneficial bipartisanship that serves the people more than combative non-cooperation, especially in the face of a stupendous global economic crisis. The challenge takes into its cusp the traditionally bigger economies more than the rest.

President Obama's approval rating among the Liberals at 67%, according to most recent Gallup poll, remains higher than among any other group. This is the potential electorate terrain he and his team should be cultivating to connect with the rest of the voting public.

Mitt Romney, viewed as the inevitable presidential hopeful from the Republicans at this stage, faces considerable obstacles to his nomination such as winning over social conservatives and Tea Party activists who have been ill-at-ease with the healthcare overhaul he championed as Governor of Massachusetts. His shifting positions on abortion and same sex marriage also evoke a controversy. Texas Governor Rick Perry, his rival, is considered an authentic Conservative which can cut ice to gain him Republican nomination.

An interesting sidelight: Obama and Perry are to star in the new comic books of the famous Blue Water Production. The number of prints in each case when decided would be an indicator of their respective charismas. However, between Barack Obama and Michelle Obama, 35,000 copies of comic books about the former have been sold out since 2008 to 75,000 about the latter. Michelle is by Obama's side anyway.

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## INTERNATIONAL DISASTER REDUCTION DAY

# Disaster risks loom large

RIFAT MUNIM

IT is impossible to preclude nature's fury when it strikes in the form of cyclone, hurricane, tidal surge, flood and earthquake. In recent years, imminence of deadly disasters has been aggravated either by natural factors such as geological, hydrometeorological and biological changes or by social factors such as unplanned urbanisation and indiscriminate manipulation of natural resources, not to mention the excesses of the industrial revolution in the West precipitating climate change.

It is, however, possible to significantly reduce the loss of life and damage of property and infrastructure by adopting certain measures to promote the resilience of nations and communities to disasters. With this vision in mind the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR) is observing the International Day for Disaster Reduction today to further strengthen the institutional as well as infrastructural basis of the disaster-prone countries for reducing disaster risks. Such an occasion aptly puts the status of Bangladesh in matters of tackling disaster risks into its proper perspective.

Bangladesh, as was manifest over the last two decades, ranks high at risk mostly for tropical cyclones and flood, and also for nor'westers and tornadoes, earthquakes, riverbank erosion, salinity erosion, drought, arsenic contamination and landslides. According to data available from the Centre for Research on Epidemiology of Disasters, from 1979 to 2008 over 191,415 people were killed and about 229 million directly affected by natural hazards in Bangladesh while the estimated economic loss was about \$5.6 billion.

According to a World Resources Report titled Bangladesh's Comprehensive Approach to Disaster Management, climate change will increase the frequency and severity of many natural hazards especially cyclones and floods. It is against this backdrop that Bangladesh's preparedness for and resilience to disasters have to be measured.

However, in view of the initiatives taken so far, Bangladesh seems to lag far behind other disaster-prone countries, in terms of policymaking and sustainable programmes to strengthen preparedness and promote resilience of the affected people. The establishment of Disaster Management Bureau in 1993 and the subsequent issuing of the Standing Orders on Disaster in 1997 defining duties of different government bodies have

ensured a strong institutional basis both on national and local levels and provided a seemingly all-inclusive guideline for disaster risk reduction and emergency management activities. However, these policies utterly fall short of protecting massive infrastructure and private and public properties from being damaged, especially when it comes to the vulnerability of the 12 districts in the coastal areas. The cyclone Sidr killed 3,363 humans and 4,62,815 cattle; destroyed approximately 5,64,967 houses and partly damaged 9,57,110; permanently damaged 7,43,321 acres of crop areas and partly 17,30,316 acres.

In the span of less than two years, Aila, which struck with a tidal surge of up to 22

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feet, killed 190 humans and 100,000 cattle; permanently damaged 350,000 acres of crop land; and crippled infrastructure irrevocably by breaking the embankments in such way that large areas still remain flooded. So while loss of lives has significantly scaled down, damage of property and infrastructure has increased, which has resulted in large-scale migration to cities causing in its turn an unexpected rise in unemployment and crimes in urban areas. A well-thought-out approach to disaster risk reduction is thus an overriding issue, without addressing which the goal of sustainable development cannot be fulfilled.

That is not to say, there has not been any progress. In fact, the ministry of food and disaster management has shown substantial progress in the construction of cyclone and flood shelters not only at the district levels but also at Upazila, Union Parishad and village levels -- a success which accounts for the significant reduction in loss of lives during the last two cyclones. Still, the present number of the shelters is inadequate to address the need of 30 million people and is also marked by some basic flaws with regard

to gender sensitivity, lack of health support and provision for cattle, poultry and household assets. Even so, the ministry along with the DMB has successfully established an institutional basis comprising eight national bodies and five sub-national bodies ensuring authorised local governing bodies to implement disaster management and act promptly in times of emergency.

Comprehensive Disaster Management Programme (CDMP), being conducted in two phases in association with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and other international aid agencies seems to constitute the most productive project. Its first phase was completed in 2009. Besides policymaking and research, CDMP provides technical and logistic support to almost all concerned government bodies and it is precisely with this support that the government has advanced a lot in matters of cyclone, storm and flood forecasting.

However, in spite of so many activities of so many national and local governing bodies, repair and renovation of the embankments which fall under the purview of the Water Development Board have not seen any progress yet. This failure raises serious questions about the capacity of recovering, leave alone promoting, resilience.

Despite some progress in reducing disaster risks, a substantial lack in putting up necessary infrastructure on the part of the government is too conspicuous to be overlooked. Bizarrely alarming is the fact that even massive disasters leaving hundreds of people dead in their wake cannot propel the government into action. Take for example the Nimtoli blaze which occurred as a result of illegal storing of chemical explosives in one of the most crowded areas of the city, and the recent tremors, the last originating in Sikkim on September 18 being the most menacing.

Both the disasters, one manmade and the other naturally triggered, have to do directly with violation of the Bangladesh National Building Code (BNBC), which clearly mandates that all residential areas be devoid of storage of toxic or explosive chemicals and all buildings be constructed in line with the code so as to scale down the devastation caused by a quake and its after-effects. Considering Bangladesh's vulnerability to so many hazards, the government must review its policies and take immediate actions to put up necessary infrastructure and enforce the BNBC.

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# Water vs flood

MARUFA HAQUE

WE know that excess of anything is dangerous. Let us take the example of water. Water is life and excess water is flood. Because we live in a climatically vulnerable country like Bangladesh, we do not need to be told about the ferocity of floods. People of Bangladesh know very well how disastrous the consequences of monsoons, flash floods, torrential downpours, and weeks of downpour can be. We have been suffering badly due to floods for many years and the future looks overcast.

75% of Bangladesh is less than 10 metres above sea level and 80% is flood plain, which makes Bangladesh a nation very much at risk of further widespread damage. Every year, about 26,000 km<sup>2</sup> (around 18%) of the country is flooded, killing over 5,000 people and destroying 7 million homes. During severe floods the affected area may exceed 75% of the country, as was seen in 1998. This volume is 95% of the total annual inflow.

I had the opportunity to talk with some of the extreme poor families living in Shatkhira, Tala upazila, who faced floods in August 2011. All their belongings were lost in the water. While fighting with the flood, people could not even have a glass of water. (Not to mention the trouble they faced when trying to find a glass of clean drinking water!)

Around 963,538 people from approximately 241,763 households were affected. Of them, 22,919 households were able to take refuge in 282 temporary shelters. 25,314 homes were damaged, leaving around 68,315 people homeless. They are now living on roadsides and embankments, passing sleepless nights under the open sky in squally weather. 80% of latrines were washed away. Victims, especially children, are suffering from diarrhoea and other water-borne diseases. Women and girls are suffering the most.

There are some interventions from international and national organisations. WFP provided food support to 11,000 flood affected families of southwest region of Bangladesh. A local NGO distributed 120 sanitary latrines, plastic sheets, dry food and medicines in the most affected villages. Another NGO provided food package support to 950 families. Still another distributed plastic sheets to 8,500 families, and installed 80 tube wells and 200 latrines with its own funds.

An NGO with long-standing development work in the affected areas mobilised its disaster volunteers and primary organisation group leaders to support disaster affected families to move to shelters. Staff and group leaders were engaged in shelter management. Senior staff and a forum of civil society working on water management in southwest coastal region of Bangladesh participated in a meeting to assess the situation and make plans to respond to the humanitarian needs of the affected people.

The participants shared their experience of flood situations.

What about sustainability? Bangladesh is one of the most climate vulnerable countries in the world and will become even more so as a result of climate change. Floods are a common natural disaster in Bangladesh because of our geographic location. They used to be a blessing for us but due to unsustainable ways of controlling floods and climate change, they have become a major problem for the growing population living in flood-prone areas.

Does the government have a plan? Do NGOs and donor organisations have a plan? Does the private sector have a plan? Who will assure us about sustainable flood controlling systems? Who will take the responsibility of affected people in next phase? Next time the floods may be more ferocious. Please do not let tears be part of the water overflow anymore!

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