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FOUNDER EDITOR
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Landslides cause havoc

Address the causes of such calamities

WE are deeply saddened by the aftermath of the catastrophic landslides in Bangladesh. Chittagong, Bandarban and Cox's Bazar that have left at least 141 people—including four army personnel on rescue duty—dead following the daylong continuous downpour on Monday. The death toll this time has already surpassed that of the 2007 landslides in Chittagong when at least 128 people were killed.

It is a well-established fact that the hilly regions of Bangladesh are extremely vulnerable to landslides and we have witnessed time and again the disastrous consequences from previous experiences. People controlled deforestation, hill-cutting for construction, establishment of settlements in foothills, etc., continue to make these areas much more prone to rain-triggered landslides. The demographic pressure over the last few decades due to indiscriminate settlements has taken a toll on the delicate ecological balance of the region making it even more vulnerable to such calamities. What's particularly appalling is that there seems to be no end in sight to such activities—most of them illegal—that the administration seems to have turned a blind eye to.

Every time, we seem to spring into action only after a natural disaster strikes. In the aftermath of the squalid of fearfulness and total disregard for human lives and security on the part of local authorities. It also brings into question the issue of city governance which is mainly to blame for failing to curb the environmental degradation of the hilly districts.

The number one priority for the government should be to see to it that affected families are resettled and that adequate relief and medical supplies and manpower are made available to deal with this largely man-made chaos.

Poor condition of transport system

Repetitive problems, repetitive inaction

EVERY year authorities promise the people that roads and highways will be repaired well in advance of Eid but nothing much changes unfortunately. The terrible gridlocks that occur on major highways are due to the poor condition of the roads. The traffic is reduced to a snail's pace and this happens prior to every major holiday like Eid on Dhaka-Chittagong, Dhaka-Tangail, Gazipur-Tangail and Dhaka-Sylhet highways. With some eight million people leaving the capital city for their home districts during Eid, it is not surprising why repair work cannot be commenced a few months prior to the predictable rush that occurs every year!

For many people the only way home is over waterways and here too we see a lack of oversight by authorities. Launch owners merely apply a fresh paint on dilapidated metal vessels and then cram three or sometimes even four times their capacity full of passengers, which inevitably lead to accidents and loss of life. We find this situation on railway not too too either. According to a survey by a passenger welfare group, more than two-thirds of the engines and nearly half the coaches of the railways are past their shelf life which opens up the prospect of frequent breakdowns or accidents.

All in all, a dismal picture for those who must make the journey home to spend hours on the road, water and rail which is fraught with danger and we see thousands perish every year. This utter disregard for life of passengers has become a mainstay because authorities fail to monitor and mitigate. It is time legal measures to restrain errant transport workers.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Preventing deaths from landslides

More than 140 people have been killed in the past two days in the CHF due to the incessant rainfall, including four army personnel. Several others are injured.

The vulnerable people of these areas build makeshift houses without taking any permission from authorities. But the government also lacks proper plans and policies regarding the building of houses or makeshifts in the hill tracts. Tragedies such as these occur because there aren't enough rehabilitation facilities. Strong punishments for building houses in forbidden areas aren't in place and the government does not follow up on the repercussions of natural disasters until casualty figures rise to alarming levels.

The deaths of these innocent people will be the subject of much discussion in talk shows and media reports over the next few days. We extend our condolences to family members of the deceased.

We doubt whether it will lead to any sustainable solution for the problem. Will proper landslide prevention facilities be put in place now, to protect the lives of those who live in the hill tracts?

Md Abdur Rashid
Agartawa

All the best to our cricket team!

Bangladesh is going to play against India in the semifinal of the ICC Champions Trophy today. Indian cricket captain Virat Kohli has said that "everybody" wants to see India and England in the final. Be it the sixteen crore people of Bangladesh, and the well wishers of Bangladesh from all over the world hope and pray to see our cricket team playing in the final.

Nur Jahan
Chittagong

FARID HASAN AHMED

AT least 141 people (at the time of writing), including children and four army personnel, were killed in separate series of landslides triggered by heavy rains in Rangamati, Bandarban, and Chittagong on June 13, 2017. The losses have been monumental, and officials fear that the death toll may rise even further in the worst landslide since 2007, when a landslide resulted in the death of around 130 people and affected 1.5 million people in the region.

Landslide has always been a geological hazard in Bangladesh, especially in the southeastern part of the country. Southwest monsoon flows over the Bay of Bengal, heading towards northeast India and Bangladesh, picking up more moisture from the Bay from June through September. The winds arrive at the Eastern Himalayas with large amounts of rain. Bangladesh and certain regions of India face heavy monsoons heavy rain during this season, and most landslides occur after heavy rainfall. In recent times, landslides have increased both in frequency and intensity, causing widespread loss and damage to life, infrastructure, assets and property, and posing serious challenges to the existing development process. This increase has been prompted by a blend of several elements (morphometric, climatic and anthropogenic) that cause slope instability, most of which is human-induced.

In 2015, heavy floods and landslides during the last week of June inundated the districts of Chittagong, Bandarban and Cox's Bazar. A second series of heavy rain from July 22-27 caused new floods, landslides and further displacements. The side-effects, so to speak, of Cyclone Komen, were again heavy rainfall, causing additional landslides and flooding which extended to all the coastal regions.

It is disheartening that despite the occurrence of such disasters in the past, we have learnt little from our experiences. Thus, thanks to mismanagement and lack of preparedness, landslides of such magnitude continue to strike our hills.

The Chittagong region is especially vulnerable due to various aspects, ranging from physical, social, political and environmental factors. It goes without saying that comprehensive, well-coordinated steps by the government are needed for sustainable landslide hazard management.

How, one might ask, can we prevent a natural disaster of such scale? Actually, there are several ways. First of all, by controlling the grabbing of state-owned land, such occurrence can be limited. Moreover, understanding the rainfall pattern and its exact relationship with landslide in the region could also help us be prepared. Detailed land use planning of the vulnerable areas, a landslide

database, landslide mapping and geophysical analysis of the region are essential to minimise landslides and their impacts in the region.

For locals living in the hills, it is imperative that they are taught how to secure themselves against landslides. They could also be taught how to control landslides through proper drainage, protection, soil conservation, and watershed management.

Early warning systems need to be strengthened, with active participation of community leaders. Proper communication amidst the Bangladesh Meteorological Department, community based organisations, the civil defence wing and local government authorities is needed to receive regular data relevant to the area as soon as the monsoons set. Volunteers or representatives of the vulnerable communities could also be involved to assist in the alertness and



preparedness process. Moreover, existing cross departmental coordination and cooperation on landslide management should be reviewed and strengthened with necessary resources.

In order to ensure sustainable landslide management, contingency planning at different levels for emergency response should be developed and updated at least once a year. The focus of these plans should be on landslide prone areas and their vulnerability status, and the availability of resources and capacity, apart from other requisite elements that feature in such a plan.

Capacity building courses on landslide hazard management is needed along the proper gap analysis. Moreover, the constant planning process should include volunteers, managers, workers, government officials, local government representatives, relevant military authorities and media of

the vulnerable districts. Half of the participants in the process should be women, as they should also be trained on how to protect their homes, families and communities against such natural disasters.

Landslide mitigation refers to lessening the aftereffects of landslides by taking various projects at vulnerable slopes. Appropriate feasibility studies, along with assessments of risk, uncertainty, possible consequences, construction, environmental impacts and cost benefit analysis by independent authorities are needed for any mitigation measure. A public hearing and consultation is important in this regard.

Many of those living in the vulnerable areas might not even be aware of the legal provisions that are already in place to tackle such natural disasters. And so, laws such as the Disaster Management Act, and Standing Orders on Disaster (SOD) of the Government of Bangladesh should be



understood and exercised by all concerned with appropriate resources, planning and monitoring and accountability mechanism.

Landslides are the consequence of the political and administrative incapability to manage urban expansion. Consequently, the risks facing the urban poor remain unaddressed or partially addressed by relevant agencies. Measures to reduce landslide risks need to be integrated into area planning. In this regard, actors including government and local government authorities, the private sector, NGOs and individuals, have particular roles to ensure compliance with land use and relevant policies and procedures, so that landslide risks are addressed when infrastructure is constructed on hillsides. Moreover, the poverty-stricken who live in landslide prone areas cannot even afford an alternative area to live in which could be safer for them. Therefore,

addressing poverty of the hill people should be considered as a priority for reducing landslide-related risk and vulnerability.

Politically and socially empowered people of the society in conjunction with corrupt government officials are involved with hill grazing and cutting in Bangladesh, violating the existing rules and regulations. Legal instruments should be in place and the enforcement of existing rules should be executed to manage risk-free hills.

In addition, integrating landslide risk reduction in existing development works and future initiatives of different government departments and others working in the area should be made a priority. The concerned authorities should develop a database to carry out detailed study and planning. Government organisations and NGOs also need to redesign their development programmes with the active participation of the most vulnerable communities to ensure that



they maximise hazard mitigation potential and incorporate traditional community coping practices. To guarantee the best implementation of all this, adequate resources from the central government and development partners should be ensured by authorities and policymakers.

Countries like China, Philippines, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Japan and the US have managed to control the frequency of landslide occurrence. We should learn from their experiences and seek cooperation from them to enhance our capacity in managing landslide risks. If we are to truly avoid landslides of such magnitude, we need to learn how to be prepared from the beginning instead of waiting for disaster to strike before taking any concrete step.

The writer is a disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation expert, and a development lawyer.

The longer the Gulf crisis lasts, the higher the stakes get

JAMES M DORSEY

SAUDI Arabia and the UAE appear to be contemplating a joint military intervention some drastic action in Qatar with the stakes in the Gulf crisis so high that a negotiated solution may prove difficult, if not impossible.

Neither side in the Gulf divide can afford to back down or be seen to have failed in achieving its objectives.

Caving in to Saudi and UAE demands that it break its ties to Islamists and militants and curb, if not shutter, Qatar-funded media like Al Jazeera, amounting to a total surrendering its ability to chart its own course, and, like Bahrain, becoming a Saudi vassal.

Bahrain has been walking in step with the kingdom since Saudi Arabia and the UAE with Qatar support helped its minority Sunni Muslim ruling family squash a popular uprising in 2011.

Similarly, neither Saudi Arabia nor the UAE can tolerate a repeat of 2014 when Qatar appeared to put on public display the limits of their power, refusing to bow to the two states' demands after they and Bahrain withdrew their ambassadors from Doha.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE have this time raised the stakes by not only breaking off diplomatic relations but also declaring an economic embargo. The longer they Qatar with a citizenry of only 300,000 people resists Saudi and UAE pressure, the more embarrassing it is for the two Gulf states.

Amid indications that Qatar may have the political will and economic backbone, despite the economic obstacles and commercial losses, to hold out for some time to come, Saudi Arabia and the UAE will likely look for ways to increase pressure on the recalcitrant Gulf state.

Increased economic pressure could involve the withdrawal of Gulf deposits from Qatari banks, the closure of a partly UAE-owned pipeline that pumps Qatari gas to the UAE and Oman, and pressure on other Muslim states like Malaysia, Indonesia and Pakistan to join them in taking punitive economic measures.

The majority of Muslim and non-

Muslim nations, except for the economically dependent six nations, including Bahrain, Egypt, the Maldives and Mauritania, who joined Saudi Arabia and the UAE in acting against Qatar have sought to remain on the sidelines of the dispute. States like Pakistan and Bangladesh are, however, vulnerable because they rely to a significant extent on migrant workers' remittances in the Gulf for their foreign currency reserves.

US President Donald J. Trump has come closest among outside powers to endorsing the Saudi-UAE-led effort, but even he has so far refrained from turning words into deeds that would exert real pressure on Qatar.

Turkey and Iran are helping Qatar meet its food and water needs after Saudi Arabia closed the two countries' land border, preventing one-third of the Qatar state's food and water imports from reaching it. Turkey, moreover, is sending troops to Qatar, which is home to the largest US military base in the Middle East, a possible reason why the US has not gone beyond words in its support for the Saudi-UAE campaign.

Prime Minister Haider Al-Abadi of predominantly Shiite Iraq appeared to also come to Qatar's defence by countering some of the allegations that the Gulf state had funded militants. Mr. Al-Abadi, the Shiite militia, according to Al Jazeera and other Qatar-controlled media, that a ransom paid by Qatar for the release of 26 members of its ruling family, who were kidnapped in December 2015 while hunting in Iraq, remained in Iraq's central bank. News reports suggested that the ransom had been paid to Syrian militants and Iraqi security officials was one straw that broke the Saudi and UAE-backed back.

Oman, one of two Gulf states to have refrained from joining the Saudi-UAE campaign, has opened its ports to Qatari shipping that no longer can access key Saudi and UAE ports. Qatar maintains its access to international shipping lanes and can refuel its LNG vessels at alternative ports, including Singapore.

The UAE, with Qatar's ability to retain its energy exports, its main source of revenue, underlined would be damaging if itself if Gulf deposits plus a quarter of the remaining foreign funds the banks keep.

International ratings agency Standard's Poor (S&P) reported that Qatar banks were strong enough to survive a withdrawal of all Gulf deposits plus a quarter of the remaining foreign funds the banks keep.

Deposits and other funding sources from Gulf countries represent about eight percent of total liabilities of Qatari lenders or USD 20 billion, S&P said. It said that in a worst-case scenario, only two lenders of Qatar's 18 lenders would have to dip into their investment securities portfolio.

Failure to force Qatar on its knees any time soon would force Saudi Arabia and the UAE to look at other ways of forcing Qatar to comply, including regime change.

UAE State Minister for Foreign Affairs Anwar Gargash insisted last week that the Saudi-UAE campaign was "not about regime change—this is about change of policy, change of approach."

Saudi and UAE media reports nonetheless suggest that the Gulf states may be gunning for a regime change; given that unlike in the case of Bahrain and the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen in 2015, the legitimate, internationally recognised government of Qatar is unlikely to seek their military assistance.

In the latest episode of the Gulf media war, Saudi Arabia's leading broadcast Arab News, in the clearest sign yet that the kingdom and the UAE were fishing in Qatar Emir Sheikh Tamim's military backyard, this week published an interview with retired General Mahmood Mansour, an Egyptian military officer who Saudi and Egyptian media described as the father of Qatari intelligence.

General Mansour has long been on the war path against Sheikh Tamim and his father, Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, who abdicated as emir in 2013. General Mansour asserted that Sheikh Hamad and his long-standing prime minister, Sheikh

Hamad bin Jassin bin Iaber bin Mohammed bin Thani Al Thani, had attempted to foment unrest across the globe in the Gulf, the Middle East, Africa, Asia, and Russia.

Speaking separately to Al Arabiya, the Saudi TV network established to counter Al Jazeera, General Mansour accused Qatar of aiding and abetting Iranian efforts to penetrate the Arab world. "Iran needed to penetrate some Arab countries, needed an Arab force to introduce them more and more within the Arab fabric, so it addressed their intentions through the friend who lost their mind," Qatar, "General Mansour said.

UAE newspapers reported earlier that a little-known member of Qatar's ruling family, Sheikh Saud bin Nasser Al-Thani, who lives in Europe was forming an opposition party in exile.

Despite criticism of the emir, Qataris largely appear to be rallying around the government in rejection of the effort to force their country to surrender its ability to graft its own policies.

It was not clear whether General Mansour maintains close contacts within the Qatari military and intelligence community.

An effort to replace Sheikh Tamim with a member of the ruling family more amenable to Saudi policies would not be the first time the kingdom has tried to influence who rules Qatar. In a gesture to former Saudi King Abdullah, Sheikh Hamad pardoned in 2010 a group of Saudis for their involvement in an attempted coup to overthrow him in 1996.

Qatar, by holding out against Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and garnering international support for a negotiated solution to the crisis, is raising the stakes in a risky poker game. Both the kingdom and the emirates feel emboldened and believe they need to strike while the iron is hot.

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