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Floods have left farmers with nothing

They need immediate financial and food relief

THE continuous floods this year have been particularly devastating to farmers who were already facing hardships in growing crops because of the pandemic, which left them with an acute shortage of farm hands and difficulties in selling their crops. Now, thousands of hectares have been destroyed in northern Bangladesh as the water continued to rise, drowning the paddy fields, vegetable farms as well as seedbeds. It is estimated that 40 lakh people in 147 upazilas in 30 districts have been affected by the floods. Thousands of farmers have had their dreams shattered and all their hard labour has been washed away with the floods.

Our correspondents from various districts have reported a colossal loss of arable land and crops in Lalmonirhat, Kurigram, Tangail, Thakurgaon, Gaibandha, Nilphamari, Sirajganj, Bogura, Manikganj, Sunamganj and Sylhet, among others. It is not just paddy that has been destroyed but also huge amounts of maize, green chillies and other vegetables. In some areas, farmers were preparing to harvest jute, but those crops have become submerged as well. Seedbeds for Aman cultivation, which usually takes place in the monsoon season, have also been destroyed.

The hardships and utter despair that thousands of farmers are going through are not hard to imagine. It is reassuring that the government's department of agriculture has said that they will help the farmers by providing them with seeds and fertilizer free of cost, and that farmers will be rehabilitated. But we cannot help but wonder whether this will be enough to make up for the losses, especially in the income they would have generated had their crops not been lost.

The government is therefore faced with a huge challenge in addition to the task of trying to keep farmers afloat during the pandemic. Now, the government should provide financial assistance to the farmers and their families, who have no crops or money to survive.

There are other concerns that will arise from the loss of so many crops. It will definitely adversely impact food security, which must be addressed immediately. With the scarcity that will inevitably follow the shortage of rice and vegetables, prices may spiral upwards, placing a greater burden on people already facing economic hardship. The possibilities of growing hunger, malnutrition and disease are quite high and the government must urgently strategise to address this new crisis. This includes making sure we have food security, not only for now, but also the near future. But first, the farmers must be rescued.

Worsening woes of waterlogging

City corporations should be given sole responsibility of drainage system

FOLLOWING the recent incessant downpour last week, much of the capital remained submerged and people had to walk in waist-deep water in many areas. In a recent report published in this daily, Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) pointed out that the lack of coordination among the responsible government organisations—Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC), Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC) and Dhaka Water Supply and Sewerage Authority (Wasa)—their unhealthy competition and the practice of blaming each other, are the main factors behind the lack of any headway in solving the city's waterlogging problem. It has been suggested that the government hand over the drainage management system to the two city corporations because according to the law, Wasa is responsible for the construction and maintenance of major drainage systems while the city corporations are to look after the connecting lines.

We are concerned as experts fear that this year's flood is going to be one of the worst the country has experienced in recent memory and might last for quite a long time. In Dhaka, Wasa looks after 385 kilometres of drainage system along with 26 canals, a total of 74 kilometres in length, and 10 kilometres of box culverts; whereas the city corporations are responsible for 2,500 kilometres of the drainage system. Due to the legal complexities that exist, the concerned bodies tend to evade their responsibilities when the situation escalates. Earlier, Wasa failed to solve waterlogging problems and also claimed to have cleaned 20 out of the 26 canals under its maintenance. When in reality, TIB's research found that the canals were not cleared but clogged with heavy solid waste instead. It is Wasa's responsibility to inspect drains and canals at least twice a month. If this had been done, how could the canals be clogged?

Therefore, we too agree that it is necessary to amend the Act and hand over the responsibility of the drainage management to a particular body—the city corporations, as they represent the public. Despite the annual spending of thousands of crores of Taka of taxpayers' money in projects to improve the drainage system in Dhaka, the problems that cause waterlogging have not been solved. In fact, the situation seems to be worsening with time, making it nearly impossible for the people to move around in their city. A thorough and integrated approach needs to be undertaken immediately to address the severity of waterlogging so that it can ease the suffering of the people.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Save SMEs

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are considered a vital component of economic development in Bangladesh because it helps in creating jobs, reducing poverty and driving a resilient economy. Unfortunately, due to Covid-19, most of these enterprises have been stagnant and are struggling to pay rent, provide salaries and repay loans and interests. The government should extend long- and short-term support, as well as financial aid, to save these businesses from collapsing. It can provide new loan rescheduling facilities, reduce VAT and disburse stimulus packages. Extensive plans and policies for this sector are crucial, and only with the authorities help will the sector be able to survive.

Md Siamul Haque, Dhaka

Waterlogging in Dhaka: Why is there no respite in sight?

MOHAMMAD ABDUR RAZZAK

A couple of days of rain in July reminded us, once again, that the decades old waterlogging problem is far from over. There has not been any dearth in development projects undertaken to solve this problem. Such development activities have been continuing in perpetuity without yielding much benefit during the monsoon season.

According to a report in this daily from July 22, "The two city corporations in the capital have "spent" several thousand crores of taka in the last few years for the "development" of Dhaka's road infrastructure and drainage system... In the last four years, Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC) spent over Tk 2,000 crore for the "development" of road infrastructure and drainage but there has been no visible sign of improvement when it comes to waterlogging". Waterlogging seems to have been inching towards becoming worse, year by year, due to greater difficulties in dealing with heavy downpours.

Dhaka city's drainage systems comprise of primary, secondary and tertiary drain networks. The primary drainage system includes the drains under the control of city corporations and Dhaka Water Supply and Sewerage Authority (WASA). Drains are immediate reservoirs of rain and grey water from households and businesses, and it ultimately guides waters into the secondary drainage system, which are canals under the ownership and operational control of Dhaka WASA. Canals are connected to rivers, the third tier in the city's drainage system.

There are persistent problems in both the primary and secondary drainage networks which seem to have been added to by service providers and city dwellers—the beneficiaries of the system. People's contribution has been through the abuse of the available drainage system. Drains should carry only water. Unfortunately, people push everything they can into drains and canals, choking the drainage system. Service providers' contributions have been identified to be inadequate maintenance and cleaning of different types of existing drains, not having a well-designed and well-set out perspective plan and not strictly enforcing laws against abusers of drains.

The dual control of primary drains by city corporations and Dhaka WASA is a barrier in improving the drainage system.

They do not have any coordination in the operation, maintenance or construction of the primary drainage system. Drains are generally built to satisfy immediate needs of the people in the wards or as a matter of troubleshooting, without taking the long term perspective into consideration. As far as I could gather, city corporations do not have city wide maps of drain networks that have been constructed over the decades either.

Dhaka WASA has the sole responsibility of the secondary drainage network. As per the organogram, there is supposedly a dedicated Drainage Operation and Maintenance Division (with 87 staffers) and a Drainage Research and Development (R&D)

hawkers have set up illegal shops on long stretches of drains. They discharge waste, including plastic wrappers originating in their shops, into the drains. Drains in such places cannot be cleaned due to the permanent presence of hawkers. We have the bad habit of not only spitting but also littering on the streets and footpaths. Trash is regularly thrown onto the street and into the drains. Materials like sand, brick chips, cement and soil from construction sites is a grave cause of drain choking, and individuals, as well as private and public organisations, are responsible for this. Random samples of drain sludge tested in laboratories in 2018 revealed that 87 percent of the sludge contained sand and soil.



Old Dhaka's Doyaganj area was completely submerged after a heavy downpour on July 21.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

Circle with 34 members. It is not known how far the Drainage R&D Circle has contributed in solving the waterlogging problem. Maintenance of canals have not been visible by performance. Looking at the severity of waterlogging in the Mirpur area and the bizarre state of canals, the Mayor of DNCC in 2019 came forward to excavate canals to lessen public suffering. The excavation exposed negligence in maintaining canals and the dire abuse of canals by the people living on either banks and in the surrounding area.

Recurring capuse of available drains by the people and public and private organisations is another cause of waterlogging. In many parts of the city, Construction sites, whether private or public, do not employ appropriate "environment management measures" to prevent drain choking and air pollution.

City corporations' engineering departments construct drains, and the waste management departments have the responsibility of cleaning them. Waste management departments have to shoulder the management of 150,000 to 200,000 tons of municipal solid waste every month and sweep a couple of hundred kilometre tracts every day. It has limited capuse to clean surface drains, and lacks organisational strength and technology. It cannot chalk out year long drain cleaning programmes as there is

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

India's China strategy is changing

AWAKENING INDIA

SHASHI THAROOR

AFTER last month's clash in the Ladakh region's Galwan Valley killed 20 Indian soldiers and an unknown number of Chinese troops, the two countries are settling in for a prolonged standoff on their disputed Himalayan frontier, even amid reports of a disengagement at the site of their recent clash. More importantly, the recent skirmish may have highlighted a broader shift in Asian geopolitics.

At first glance, this suggestion may seem exaggerated. After all, China and India had been making a decent fist of living with each other. Although they haven't reached a durable settlement of their disputed 3,500 kilometre (2,200 mile) border, not a shot had been fired across the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in 45 years. Meanwhile, bilateral trade has climbed to USD 92.5 billion in 2019 from just USD 200 million in 1990.

Of course, bilateral tensions also reflect long-term disagreements that go beyond territorial disputes, such as China's "all-weather" alliance with Pakistan, and India's hospitality toward the Dalai Lama, to whom it granted refuge when he fled Tibet in 1959. But neither country has been swept up by these issues. When China declared that the border dispute could be left to "future generations" to resolve, India was happy to go along. India also endorsed the "One China" policy, and shunned United States-led efforts to "contain" its northern neighbour.

But the latter policy, in particular, has played into Chinese hands. The People's Liberation Army has taken advantage of the seemingly benign situation to undertake repeated military incursions.

Each one was minor. China would take a few square kilometres of territory along the LAC, declare peace, and then fortify its new deployment. As a result, each mini-crisis brought a "new normal" on the LAC. And it was always China's position that improved.

By the time "future generations" settle the border dispute, China's leaders seem to hope, the reality on the ground—as well as the broader balance of economic and military strength—will heavily favour China. Any agreement will reflect that. In the meantime, border incidents keep India off balance and show the world that it is not capable of challenging China, let

alone underwriting regional security.

India has reinforced its military assets on the LAC to stave off deeper incursions, and hopes to press China to restore the *status quo ante* through diplomatic or military means. For example, it could capture land elsewhere on the LAC to use as leverage. But this is easier said than done.

Meanwhile, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has claimed that China is not in control of its country's territory. This looks suspiciously like a surrender to the new reality in the Galwan Valley and Pangong Tso Lake, where the Chinese have established positions that did not exist before May. It could embolden China to pursue additional small gains across the LAC.

India has pursued some economic retaliation, banning 59 Chinese apps on data-security grounds. It is likely soon to bar Chinese companies from other lucrative opportunities in its vast market. But given India's dependence on Chinese

2016, it concluded a logistics support agreement, and in 2018, it reached a communication security agreement and an accord on geospatial cooperation.

Moreover, India has embraced, at least rhetorically, the US concept of a "free and open Indo-Pacific," and is gradually abandoning its reluctance to participate in the US-led "Quad," an informal four-country grouping (which also includes Australia and Japan) focused on countering China's regional ambitions. The foundations have been laid for a more substantive strategic shift.

India has obvious incentives for such a shift. Beyond its belligerence on the LAC, China has increased its support for Pakistan, spending more than USD 60 billion on a highway to the Chinese-run port of Gwadar. A "peace strategy" toward these two adversaries holds no attraction for an Indian government that has stripped Jammu and Kashmir of its autonomy, in an open challenge to Pakistan.



India's Border Security Force soldiers stand guard at a checkpoint along a highway leading to Ladakh at Gagangneer in Kashmir's Ganderbal district on June 17.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Moreover, India sees China's hand in its difficulties with other neighbours, especially Sri Lanka and Nepal, whose communist government has begun questioning its own border with India. China has further rankled India by opposing its aspirations to a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council, blocking it from joining the Nuclear Suppliers Group, and making territorial claims in the northeastern Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh.

India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party is

no mapping of the city's drain network. It is feared that this lack of maintenance or irregular maintenance of underground drains might have resulted in "dead drains" under the ground.

The solutions to these problems can only come through a well-designed and well set out long term plan, combined with strong commitment and accountability in improving the drainage system. People's cooperation with utility service provider's initiatives is also important to solve these problems. But what else can be done to address these issues? The following are just food for thought, not concrete solutions, and may be adopted according to different scenarios.

There could be one single authority that has the responsibility of the city's drainage systems, such as the respective city corporations. Dhaka WASA may be relieved of the drainage responsibility and focus instead on providing pure drinking water to the public. Dhaka WASA's drainage divisions could then be merged with the city corporations.

Departments building drains should have city-wide up-to-date data to get the big picture of the drainage networks, and must not build drains on a piecemeal basis. If it is at all necessary, the data must be interfaced with the existing network. Departments building drain networks should also be given the ownership to clean and maintain them.

Regular drives should be conducted against drain abusers with punitive measures. Long term environmental education programmes for people of all occupations and professions should be in place, in order to bring about changes in negative social behaviour and stop them from abusing drains. City corporations should be the pivot of the programme where different organisations, both public and private, can contribute.

Last but not the least, safeguarding the value of taxpayers' money by ensuring accountability should be a priority. If no visible improvement in waterlogging has been noticed despite spending over Tk 2,000 crore in the last four years, the reasons behind "no visible improvement" should be looked into urgently.

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not averse to a policy shakeup. In May, two BJP MPs thumbed their noses at China by "attending" the virtual swearing-in ceremony of Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen. India has also criticised China's Belt and Road Initiative, refusing to attend BRI forums in 2017 and 2019. And it has withdrawn from the Asia-wide Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership over concerns about Chinese dominance.

But there remain significant potential barriers to a strategic re-alignment. Such an approach would mark a major departure from India's traditional obsession with protecting its "strategic autonomy"—a legacy of two centuries of colonial rule, reflected in India's role in establishing the Non-Aligned Movement during the Cold War.

Furthermore, India has no interest in putting all its strategic eggs in one basket. It remains heavily dependent on Russian military equipment and supplies (though it has recently diversified its purchases), and Donald Trump's US isn't exactly a reliable partner. But is this a worse option than capitulating to China?

Eight months ago, Modi hailed "a new era of cooperation" with China. Though it is too early to say with certainty, that era may soon be buried in the snowy heights of the Himalayas.

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