

Post-flood recovery will be challenging

Flood leaves victims with a whole new set of problems

As floodwaters slowly begin to recede, a grim reality is emerging across the 73 upazilas of 11 districts that have been affected over the last 10 days or so. The flood has left behind a trail of destruction—broken homes, crumbling roads, collapsed bridges, toppled electric poles, public facilities lying in ruins. The scars of the disaster are evident everywhere. Many have returned to their homes, or what's left of them, while others, whose villages are still under water, remain in the shelters. An uncertain future awaits them all. The thought of rebuilding their lives from the ground up can be daunting, yet this is what they must prepare for.

According to an estimate, at least 52 people have died in the flood. The human toll, tragic as it is, is just one component of the widespread devastation caused by it as survivors now must focus on the painful process of recovery, rehabilitation and reconstruction, with little help guaranteed. Many have lost their homes, livestock, and other belongings, and will need financial and institutional support to get back on their feet. A big part of the recovery also involves regaining livelihoods, especially for farmers, fishers, and other small earners. The government and private donors must ensure steady provision of not just food and clothes but also cash support, at least until some recovery is achieved. Another focus area is their health needs. Many in flood-affected areas are suffering from waterborne diseases including diarrhoea, skin infections, cold- fever, etc. So, ensuring adequate medical care is vital.

Unfortunately, this is proving to be difficult because of the flooding of many health facilities, including the 250-bed Feni General Hospital, that left them severely compromised. The Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief has reportedly deployed 619 medical teams across 11 districts. But ensuring the full resumption of local health complexes is crucial for uninterrupted care. There are many other areas of rebuilding and reconstruction that the government also needs to focus on urgently. While we are yet to know the full extent of the damage caused by the flood, initial estimates are quite alarming: 6,542 kilometres of roads damaged, and 1,066 bridges and culverts ruined. Highways in affected regions are in no better shape. Many utility structures have been destroyed. There has been widespread littering, with piles of garbage seen in many areas.

All these things will require prompt and proper interventions. We are told that rescue and relief activities have been hampered because of coordination problems, exacerbated by the ongoing administrative chaos caused by transfer and other issues. The absence of upazila chairmen and other public representatives is also causing problems and will likely continue to do so for some more time. This is all the more reason why the government must double down on ongoing efforts, ensuring full cooperation of all relevant state agencies and officials, so that flood-affected communities have an easier go of it going forward. It must repair and resume all public facilities without delay, and must help the affected in every way it can.

Councillor crisis needs to be resolved

Residents must not be denied essential services any longer

Service disruptions across various wards of Dhaka North City and Dhaka South City—primarily due to the absence of their councillors—are causing immense suffering for the residents. According to a report by *Prothom Alo*, 66 out of 75 ward councillors in Dhaka South are not attending their offices, while 11 out of 54 councillors in Dhaka North are similarly absent. This has led to a breakdown of services and many attendant complications. The uncertainty surrounding absent or absconding councillors will continue unless the authorities take decisive actions.

The ward councillor offices in Dhaka provide 14 types of services. Key among them are birth and death registration as well as issuance of various certificates such as citizenship, character, inheritance (warish), income, marriage or family membership, eligibility for elderly and disability allowances, etc. A councillor's office also handles attestations and no-objection certificates (where applicable), and signs off as a verifier for national identity cards and voter lists. Additionally, the councillor is responsible for overseeing mosquito control and sanitation works and the distribution of TCB products. The fact that these vital services are being hampered at this critical time for the nation is extremely disconcerting.

Some of the councillor offices came under attack around the time of the fall of the Awami League government, which not only damaged these offices and their equipment but also destroyed important documents, many likely belonging to citizens. The complexities this may cause for people seeking services in the future remain unclear. Many people are already showing up at the ward offices daily for various services, only to return home dejected. Unless this issue is immediately addressed, people will continue to be denied essential services, leading to a huge backlog of pending paperwork and potentially more problems in the future.

Under the circumstances, the authorities need to urgently determine why the councillors are absent and ensure resumption of services. As local government experts have suggested, councillors can be given a week's time to return: those who do can be assigned multiple wards at once, while those who do not can be subjected to legal consequences. Additionally, alternative arrangements can be made, such as having the office of the regional executive officer provide some of the services. However, none of these solutions are permanent. Therefore, the government should consider a process for replacing absent ward councillors.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

US troops withdrew from Afghanistan

On this day in 2021, the last US troops left Afghanistan, some seven years after the war in that country had officially ended.

The interim government must not fail

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KAS MURSHID

We now have another opportunity to get things right and the challenge is to manage aspirations and expectations. We want everything—safe roads, cheap and quality health services, good schools, inexpensive electricity, low inflation, zero corruption, professional police services, an accountable administration and judiciary, rule of law, social justice, jobs, etc. The list is endless. And we want all this right away! Our impulse for instant gratification runs strong as we righteously scream for the resignation, arrest, incarceration, or even “*phashi*” of anyone and for anything, expecting the government to immediately deliver.

Unfortunately, there are no quick fixes. The challenges facing us are complex and will require time and effort. Time, however, is not unlimited. For one thing, the current mood of victory and jubilation will soon give way to recrimination, infighting, and impatience. As these intensify, our poor advisers will find themselves beleaguered, and only the toughest will keep going while others will decide to leave. It would be naive to think that all the major stakeholders will keep their peace and hold their tongues for very long. The chaos has not subsided yet; we are ruled by emotion, instinct, and plain disregard for rules, norms, and values—these have been the worst casualty of a long period of abject disregard for the rule of law. In the meantime, vultures are circling the skies and have begun to sweep down upon media houses, banks, and vantage positions from which economic rents can be extracted.

Same old wine?

Initial signs show that the playbook of governance has not shifted very much. Just as top BNP leaders were once

to prevent failures. If we can fix one institution, we can scale up quickly. The most difficult sector nor the least difficult one should be chosen. An “average” sort of sector will do fine. The set of priority reforms must reflect and inform our overarching goal: to bring in a vibrant democracy with all the necessary components required for its success.

friendly rules in the banking and financial sectors could be changed. In addition, the autonomy of various institutions in the public sector including the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies could be re-established and returned to its status quo ante. Subtle benefits given to crony capitalists in the guise of tax forgiveness, subsidies, and duty



VISUAL: ALIZA RAHMAN

we establish a maximal set of goals or a minimal set of critical goals? Or perhaps strike a note somewhere between the two?

The second, and far more important question is, how do we implement reforms, especially institutional ones? We have almost zero experience here, and so must rediscover the wheel. We could learn from the experience of other countries, such as Singapore, that made the transition. Their experience is more recent. They too were a British colony like us and have inherited similar systems of governance, and more importantly, they have been able to modify and build upon those systems to create superb outcomes. However, following another South Asian country in this regard is not advisable.

For instance, a free, credible, and independent media is crucial to fight the war against unscrupulous social media, fake news, and false narratives while a powerful and independent election commission is needed for credible elections. The key question is whether some form of interim arrangement will need to continue. If so, how will such an arrangement be

waivers should be weeded out too. Our duties and taxes must be realigned to promote diversified exports and employment.

Conspiracy

The student-led uprising was undoubtedly native. However, various analysts including Jeffrey D Sachs have spoken of possible US involvement and infiltration of the movement.

Just as top BNP leaders were once accused of setting buses on fire, so now we see top AL leaders being accused of killings occurring even in the remotest of districts. The horrific scenes we see at our court premises are no different, even though we have a neutral, non-political government in place.



PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

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accused of setting buses on fire, so now we see top AL leaders being accused of killings occurring even in the remotest of districts. The horrific scenes we see at our court premises are no different, even though we have a neutral, non-political government in place. Nobody is talking about judiciary reforms before calling for the annulment of constitutional amendments. This is a problem for a new Bangladesh.

What is the interim government to do? It must be pragmatic and realistic. It must carefully assess what reforms it can deliver and what must await a democratically elected government. It should, however, lay out a concrete plan of action indicating its priority areas. We have discussed reforms for many years, even decades so an action plan ought not to pose any serious challenges.

At the very outset, the new government should send out strong powerful signals that indicate its broad commitment to democratic practice, judicial reforms, rule of law, and intolerance to corruption. Perhaps the most important signal it should send out is our belief in an inclusive and just socio-economic system under an overall liberal democratic-secular framework. These signals remain weak.

Priorities

The first question is how do we prioritise our interim goals? Should

We should simply use our common sense and be ready to make mistakes, learn from mistakes, and then move forward. This will require setting up a task force for each department or institution to draw up plans after careful study and discussion. Consultants from, say the Singapore government and international agencies, can aid the task forces, which will operate within a specific time frame. We need to restructure, get rid of obsolete positions, put in place new positions, clearly identify qualifications and experience for recruitment and promotion, have a proper system for staff evaluation, re-examine the system of salaries and incentives, and place special emphasis on building a strong HR department, a strong and reliable system of financial accounts, and a dependable audit mechanism. Third-party monitoring of HR and finance would be crucial. While some of these mechanisms exist, they should be reformatted and revamped. Anyone who has worked in government will know how intractable these quite basic governance prerequisites are likely to be.

We need to start the reform journey by initially picking one sector to pilot out ideas and approaches and throw sufficient resources at the project

constituted?

We all understand that fundamental reforms must be carried out in public administration, the judiciary, the police, NBR, state-owned banks and industries, and within political parties. The interim government may not have sufficient time to see all these through. They may want to set out a road map, begin the process earnestly, and ensure that all political parties commit themselves to the reforms publicly and through their manifestoes. They can start by implementing the appropriate legal frameworks after due changes, modifications, and refinements.

For democracy to work, a sector that should be addressed head-on is the reform of political parties and the need to abide by a code of conduct. All of us have ideas about what such a code might involve, and the current government should be well-positioned to come up with one, obviously after discussion with stakeholders.

Some policy reforms as opposed to

Such a serious allegation will require a thorough investigation.

We should not have any qualms about forging a better relationship with the West. This relationship, however, would only be meaningful if it goes well beyond the usual Western rhetoric urging democracy, good governance, labour rights, and so on designed to expand its own empire. We have had enough of that sort of advice. We have strong developmental aspirations to follow in the footsteps of the Asian Tigers. We need access to Western markets, transfer of technology, and assistance in capacity building in science, engineering, technology, and AI. We should have at least one world-class institute of technology within the next five years as well as massive investments in infrastructure. Help us with these and you will have our friendship and access to a potentially huge market of 170 million people.

End note

This is our last chance to usher democracy into Bangladesh. Too many lives have been lost in its pursuit since 1947 when we became free from colonial rule. It was thwarted time and again by hostile forces within and without. We cannot afford to waste this chance again. We do not want to witness another mass upheaval, another bout of violence to settle scores or another political crisis—all because of the greed and arrogance of our rulers and their cronies, and their desire to rule forever. Nor do we want to witness the beginning of another set of authoritarian rulers and despots.

We are lucky to have Professor Yunus to lead the charge. I think he is the only person in the country who can unite us and find a way for us to resolve our differences so that we can emerge as a strong democratic country with a vibrant economy. Let us show the world that we can be a Muslim-majority state with a strong democracy, continue our great economic journey inclusively and develop our own model of a just society. Professor Yunus enjoys tremendous international goodwill, which Bangladesh needs at this critical juncture.

Our enemies are waiting for us to fail. We cannot afford to oblige them. My sombre warning to all is: failure now would leave the door open to foreign intervention and subsequent loss of sovereignty and independence.

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institutional reforms are significant low-hanging fruits, which only require a few signatures to change. The separation of the executive from the judiciary should be top on the list. Reforms to the Bangladesh Bank charter to ensure its autonomy should also be relatively easy. Various crony-