

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

Flood-hit farmers need proper support Govt must ensure swift response based on their needs

As floodwaters begin to recede in the Mymensingh, Netrokona and Sherpur region, the scale of the destruction caused by the recent flash floods is gradually becoming apparent. Current estimates suggest that Aman crops over 83,000 hectares of land have been totally or partially ruined, impacting around 322,000 farmers. Moreover, a large number of fish farms have been washed away. In Sherpur alone, floods have washed away the fish from 7,366 ponds, affecting around 4,500 farmers. While a comprehensive assessment of the damage done to agriculture, fish farms, livestock and properties can only be made after the water fully recedes, it is already clear that recovery will be an immense challenge for this agriculturally crucial region.

Farmers whose crops have been destroyed have an uncertain future awaiting them. The damage to this season's Aman paddy is beyond repair, as the window for new cultivation has already passed. How will these farmers survive? Or, consider the case of fish farmers like Mohammad Ali, who had taken the lease of an acre of land to set up a fish farm and invested nearly Tk 7 lakh by taking a bank loan. He and others like him have not only lost their livelihoods but are now saddled with a crushing debt.

While the flood situation in these districts has improved to some extent over the last few days, many villages in low-lying areas still remain inundated. According to the local administration, about 13,000 families are still trapped by water. These people, too, face an uncertain future, not knowing what awaits them when the waters finally recede.

Under the circumstances, the government must urgently come up with a robust post-flood recovery plan for all the affected areas, while continuing its relief efforts by providing food, medicine and other essential supplies to the victims. Understandably, livelihood rehabilitation, particularly for farmers, will be one of the government's biggest challenges as they need to be given an alternative choice of crops or vegetables to cultivate since the Aman season is already over. To this end, the Department of Agricultural Extension should swiftly assess the conditions on the ground and identify suitable crops and vegetables for the affected areas. Immediate distribution of crop sapplings, vegetable seeds, fertilisers, and other necessary inputs is also essential.

Those who cannot go back to their previous livelihoods must be given alternative means of earning a living. This is a huge task requiring strong coordination among all the relevant government agencies. We hope that the government will rise to the challenge, supported by NGOs and philanthropic organisations, to meet the post-flood needs of the affected communities.

Save Hatirjheel from overdevelopment

Why continue an initiative that will worsen waterlogging?

Waterlogging has been a perennial problem for Dhaka city, and we all know the reason behind it. Rampant encroachment of water bodies has resulted in water remaining stagnant in many areas as there is nowhere for it to go. Canals, ponds, and parts of rivers have been filled up to satisfy the greed of encroachers who often enjoyed political patronage. Hatirjheel is one of the latest casualties of this unplanned development that threatens to further worsen Dhaka's waterlogging problem.

According to a report, over the past 17 months, more than 10 acres of Hatirjheel Lake have been filled with sand as part of the Dhaka Elevated Expressway project. Authorities claim that the move was necessary to build 41 pillars for the project, despite warnings that it would severely disrupt the lake's natural water flow and reduce its capacity to retain excess rainwater. As a result, there would be increased waterlogging particularly in Dilu Road, Karwan Bazar, Banglamotor, Moghbazar and Tejgaon areas. Hatirjheel's biodiversity would also be affected, damaging habitats of aquatic life and destroying bird nesting areas. It is unthinkable that despite such dire risks, the authorities would allow this move to continue. Reportedly, the approval for the filling initiative came directly from the former Prime Minister's Office. And despite this violating Dhaka's Detailed Area Plan (2022) as well as the Environment Conservation (Amendment) Act 2010, both Rajuk and the Department of Environment remained silent.

But now that the former regime has been ousted, we expect things to be different. Given the environment adviser's track record for fighting against encroachment of rivers and waterbodies, we hope this dangerous initiative would be scrapped soon. While the elevated expressway has made life easier for many city dwellers in terms of mobility, it cannot be at the expense of the integrity of Hatirjheel or citizens' safety from environmental impacts. The government must stop the expansion immediately and develop a plan to undo the damage already caused and protect the lake in the future.

This year's floods in various parts of the country proved to be more severe precisely because floodwaters stagnated for days on end as most water bodies have been filled up or blocked by unplanned infrastructure development. The interim government should identify all at-risk water bodies in Dhaka and other cities that have been filled up or encroached upon, and take urgent steps to free them.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY



Italy declares war on Nazi Germany

On this day in 1943, the Kingdom of Italy officially joined the Allied Powers and declared war on its former Axis partner Germany.

India's hubris

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

Brig Gen Shahedul Anam Khan, ndc, psc (ret'd) is a former associate editor of The Daily Star.



BRIG GEN SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN
NDC, PSC (RET'D)

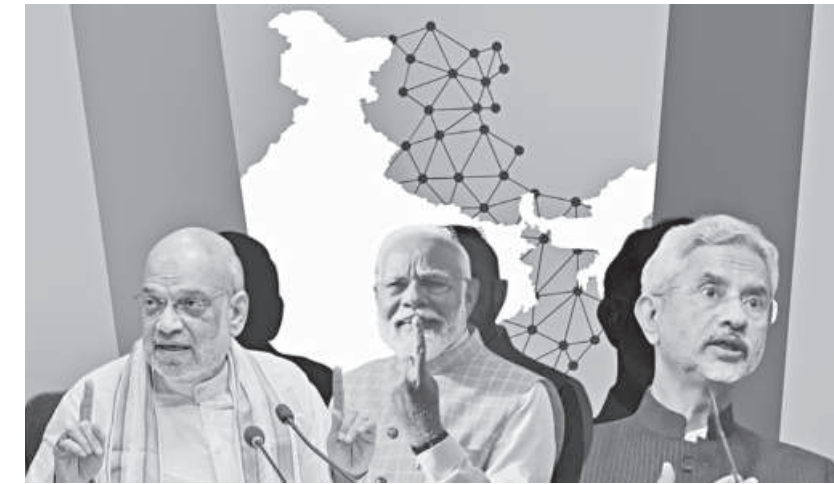
"We make our friends; we make our enemies; but God makes our next-door neighbours." - Gilbert K Chesterton

Isn't it time for India to come to terms with the reality about its neighbours, particularly about its most strategically located neighbour, Bangladesh? One wonders whether India realises that until the successful Monsoon Revolution in Bangladesh, the only government in the region that was close to it was that of Sheikh Hasina, whose regime, elected through questionable processes, India had consistently helped to sustain for 15 long years. And with every passing year, as the Hasina regime became more and more autocratic, India was seen as increasingly complicit in the travails and woes caused by the destruction of democracy and abridgement of the basic rights of Bangladeshis. Most saw the prolonged agony that Bangladesh went through as being the result of India's unflinching support for the Awami League (AL) to further its own geostrategic interests.

The degree of commitment of the Indian administration to AL is evident from the fact that some of the top leaders of the ousted regime have been given sanctuary in that country. Skeletons hidden in their closet for so long have only just started to emerge.

Before Bangladesh, it was for the Maldives to show that it had had enough of India. The gumption shown by the then newly elected president, Mohamed Muizzu, to say openly that his country would not be bullied by its big neighbour might have irked India, but that view is fairly representative of the views of citizens in India's many other South Asian neighbours. A new president in Sri Lanka from a party formed on nationalistic platforms must have added to India's worries.

India doesn't like being shown the door, and it showed after Muizzu ordered Indians to leave. And as is the tradition with the Indian establishment and media, it was the Maldives that was



VISUAL: ALIZA RAHMAN

painted as the villain. No one bothered to analyse why Muizzu took the stand that he did.

The South Block and the Indian media must delve deep into why public opinion in Bangladesh had turned so vehemently against India over the years. It was guilt by association. Hasina served Indian economic and strategic interests—much at the expense of Bangladesh, we must add—and so India did everything to see that AL continued their hold on power. Anyone reading or watching only the Indian print and electronic media, particularly in the days following the July-August mass revolution, would be led to believe that a most benevolent servant of the people of Bangladesh, elected by overwhelming popular mandate, was illegally pushed out of power and made to flee to India!

The Indian media's lamentation about the death of democracy and collapse of Bangladesh's economy post-Hasina is in stark contrast to its deafening silence on Awami League's 15 years of misrule and wanton looting of national wealth by Hasina, her family, and party members, aided and abetted by a partisan bureaucracy. Largesse was also distributed among state institutions to make them pliant

to her plunder and pillage. Nothing of the kind was published in the Indian media. Needless to say, the Indian media's lamentation in unison represents the opinion and position of the South Block.

India continues to play the Hindu card, exaggerating the stray incidents in Bangladesh, quite happily forgetting the unabated persecution

of the foreign policy posture of Bangladesh since 1971. If one's foreign policy revolves around mainly three concentric circles—immediate neighbours, the region, and the international ambit—Bangladesh's first two circles have been dominated by India only, reminding one of the rueful remarks of a Mexican president, "So far from God, so near to the United States."

Indian leaders had not flinched from betraying their intention to be an "elder brother", if not a "big brother", and one of the foreign ministers is on record saying as much and in as many words. But while the main text has been followed to the letter and spirit, the subtext that it will care for its "younger brother" has been purged from the Indian leaders' mind.

A caring neighbour does not resort to shooting of harmless people on the border, nor does it renege on its commitment to observe the international norms and conventions related to the sharing of common resources. Nor would it take for a caring neighbour 41 long years to ratify an agreement. An administration that believes in dealings on the basis of sovereign equality with neighbours would try to remove the disparaging and irresponsible comments that have been coming out of the mouths of very senior Indian leaders, including ministers.

Indian scholars keep on harping on one single issue: anti-Indian activities conducted from inside Bangladesh. The same narrative has again been regurgitated by an Indian scholar in a recent interview with a leading Bangladeshi newspaper. What our interviewers failed to ask the Indian scholar was to say when such activities were last recorded.

It is not for India to ask for Bangladesh's assurance. All of India's security concerns have been met fully, and more. Rather, it is for Bangladesh to ask whether India would fulfil its commitments as a responsible neighbour.

We would like to remind our neighbour by repeating what we had said in the past: that there is a thin line between being a big country and being a great one. And that line is often inflated into a chasm by the petty-minded upholders of so called enlightened self-interest.

It is also a good thought to conclude that Bangladesh would like to see India as neither a big nor an elder brother, but a gracious neighbour.

of the minorities—particularly of the Muslims—in the last 10 years under the Modi regime.

The contrasting role of the media in the two countries has been very stark and noticeable. The media in Bangladesh has been virtually mum about the plight of the Muslims in India, fearing the oppressive laws that lay down stringent punishment for anyone expressing an opinion that might "harm bilateral relations" with our neighbours. Our mainstream media was scared even to publish the facts. Notice the contrasting role of the Indian media. Not only have exaggerations been resorted to but stories have also been fabricated to run a propaganda campaign about the so-called persecution of Hindus in Bangladesh.

India's diplomatic and intelligence failure in Bangladesh was hard to swallow for its leadership. Hence the venomous invective spewing from their mouth, which, thankfully, has been dismissed as guttural utterances by most world leaders. Such utterances do little to engender good neighbourly feelings, and good feelings are a precondition to a good mutual relationship.

Inevitably, India has predominated

Can Biman have a fresh beginning?



CAPTAIN A M MAQSOOD AHMED

Captain A M Maqsood Ahmed is captain of Boeing 777 with Bangladesh Biman and a former member of the fleet planning committee, that did the groundwork for the purchase of 10 new generation Boeing aircraft.

Following the July-August mass uprising, almost all service organisations, corporations, administrative bodies, and government offices in the country are experiencing significant changes, reshuffling, and overhauls. Previously stifled voices are now being heard, and we expect a new Bangladesh to emerge from the wreckage left behind by the Awami League government. The extent of embezzlement is staggering. Any honest person who envisions what could have happened if this money had been invested into the economy can't help but feel enraged by the fallen regime.

Towards the end of the regime, Salman F Rahman, the former adviser to the former prime minister on private industry and investment, spearheaded an attempt to purchase 10 new aircraft from Airbus. The intent was brazenly clear: to embezzle funds. That chapter is now closed. It's time to look forward and build a new Biman founded on professionalism, efficiency, transparency, and accountability.

The aviation industry experienced an unprecedented lull during the Covid pandemic, followed by a tremendous boom. Despite this, Biman has underperformed, especially considering it has a relatively young fleet.

In the aviation business, the margin for error is extremely narrow. A single poor decision can lead to total chaos for any airline. An accident can damage an airline's brand image so severely that it may take months to regain passenger confidence. Building a brand is a slow and painstaking process, but it can ensure a return on investment. For effective branding of Biman, key areas require attention.

A major complaint against Biman

is its poor "on-time performance". In the recent past, the importance of punctuality has been largely ignored. The airline's vision and mission do not appear to be clearly communicated to its employees and departments. A concerted effort is essential to ensure flights are dispatched on time.

Aircraft serviceability is one of the most important areas for profit maximisation. Aircrafts must be serviceable and in good condition, including in-flight entertainment systems. An aircraft that sits idle is useless unless the airline's operations

managers. Certain problematic individuals must be removed from sensitive positions immediately.

Modern aircraft have the unique ability to communicate their health status to engineers, even mid-flight. However, we often fail to take advantage of this technology due to inadequate spare parts provisioning. Delaying repairs because of cost-cutting can be disastrous. Aircraft should not be left idle for days due to a lack of necessary parts. The prospect of providing maintenance to more foreign carriers may be explored to expand the spares pool.

Many of our international flights include short segments, such as Dhaka-Sylhet or Dhaka-Chattogram, before proceeding to the ultimate destination, which highly increases operating expenses. These short flights waste valuable engine, landing gear and auxiliary power unit (APU) cycles. A better strategy would be to operate point-to-point international

crew numbers do not allow crew to take time off to attend to personal matters. Aspiring young pilots should be given the opportunity to join Biman, and current pilots who meet the requirements should be promoted in due time.

Biman is a relatively small airline with few airplanes. So, it is very important to take advantage of any opportunity to optimise operations that come our way. For instance, the decision to procure Boeing 787s, despite their delayed delivery, was influenced by the ability of pilots to fly both Boeing 787s and 777s simultaneously. However, when the 787s arrived, the crew for both aircraft types were segregated, causing problems in planning issues and crew dissatisfaction. There are also issues with aircraft allocation in different routes that should be revisited.

Biman must immediately focus on future fleet planning based on pragmatic business solutions and operational needs. Failing to plan ahead will lead to major operational problems. We are already in a stage where aircraft shortage is inevitable.

Another area is communicating delays. We often see passengers getting agitated at the holding area because of a lack of information regarding delays. Passengers readily accept a delay of less than 30 minutes or even more if they are updated about it along with the reasons. Biman traffic personnel needs training on providing updated delay messages to passengers without exception. Any delay of more than 15 minutes must be communicated to the passengers.

Lastly, sufficient executive power must be granted to the managing director and chief executive officer to hold them accountable for decisions. In recent years, the board and its subcommittees made almost all decisions, leaving central management unaccountable. This led to unnecessary delays, and in some cases, decisions were rendered ineffective by the time they were made.

Proper brainstorming will bring forth many more steps that can be taken for the advancement of Biman and improve its brand image.

Towards the end of the regime, Salman F Rahman, the former adviser to the former prime minister on private industry and investment, spearheaded an attempt to purchase 10 new aircraft from Airbus. The intent was brazenly clear: to embezzle funds. That chapter is now closed.

are so inefficient that it is cheaper to keep aircrafts grounded.

Another issue that needs focus is efficiency, which is essential in every aspect of the airline, from marketing and sales to dispatch, engineering, maintenance, pilots, and cabin crew. Investment in efficient human resources and systems is never wasted and is crucial to achieving efficiency. As such, it is essential to emphasise proper recruitment and training, especially of managers.

A positive work environment is critical. Disengaged employees can cause significant losses. Responsibility and ownership are key contributors to an airline's brand image and efficiency. We need empathetic, knowledgeable

routes, like Dhaka to Dubai, Dubai to Chattogram, then Chattogram to Jeddah and so on. This would not only avoid unproductive short sectors but also save on engine, landing gear, and APU cycles. The short-sector flights are choking off domestic operators. The national carrier should not monopolise the market at the expense of underperformance.

Crew shortages should not hinder expansion or planning. Recruitment should be regular and recruitment numbers should be manageable within a set timeframe. Currently, because of crew shortage, and the reluctance of crew to stay over in Sylhet and Chattogram, direct flights from these cities cannot be operated. Inadequate