

Aila Shock for the Left

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In what can be called the greatest natural catastrophe in West Bengal after the near-total deluge in the entire South Bengal at the end of September, 1978, the *Cyclone Aila*—a category 2 cyclone, set off gale-force winds along with torrential rainfall while crossing West Bengal coast on 25 May around 2-30 pm and killed over 80 persons in Purba Medinipur, South 24 Parganas, North 24 Parganas and Howrah districts in south Bengal and Malda, South & North Dinajpur, Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri districts of North Bengal. Darjeeling Hill region was conspicuously affected with several land slides at Haridashatta, Tashi Doma and Rishika near Ghoom killing over 20 people including two women and a toddler were killed. Landslides damaged houses at Jawahar Busty and Frymal Village in Darjeeling town. Affected in varying densities were entire North Dinajpur district and parts of Malda, South Dinajpur, Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri districts. The Buxa Reserve Forest, home of One-Horn Rhino was partially inundated and devastated. Many birds were killed.

The media, local authorities and rumour-mongers seem to have worked in tandem about the density and sweep of *Cyclone Aila* which belongs to the group of cyclones like Nargis, Bijli, Nisha and Rashmi. A few newspapers wrote that it hit Haldia Port at a speed of 120 km and 190 km at Sagar. In fact, the category 2 Cyclone cannot exceed 100 km.

Dr Debashis Lohar, reader, atmospheric physics, Jadavpur University, who did significant research on south-west monsoon and tropical disturbances, told IPA, "We should be guided by satellite images and data, provided by the India Meteorological Department. If the windspeed goes up to 200 kmph, there will be fire all around. Had it been 170 kmph, it could not be managed. As far as I have studied the cyclonic path, it was much less than 90 kmph and in Kolkata it was around 70 kmph. You see, a nor'wester has a higher speed, but stays for two three minutes. There lies the difference".

Dr Lohar attended a daylong meeting at IMD's Kolkata regional headquarters, Alipore. His observations are not only important but provide leads to important revelations. Were there normal preparations in districts? Are the dykes and embankments built in a perfunctory manner? The warning from IMD came two days in advance. There was no semblance of pre-emptive rescue operations.

Over 400,000 people remained marooned in the Sundarban delta region out of whom about 100,000 reportedly fled their homes. With frantic SOS from the Railway minister Mamata Banerjee and Union finance minister Pranab Mukherjee to the defence minister A K Antony, the eastern command of Indian Army sent four columns of Army's Black Cat Division to clear road blockage and remove uprooted trees. Army and Air Force helicopters have also been pressed into service for supplying essential commodities and rescuing the marooned. The home ministry assured the state government that it would ensure all assistance that may be required.

The Centre's National Disaster Response Force monitored the relief and evacuation work. They put away the broken power lines to avoid electrocution of human being and livestock. That apart, medical assistance with medical personnel and ambulances rushed to crucial spots. Food, drinking water and

medicines were rushed to the populace in the worst affected areas, according to Wing Commander M Upasani, in-charge of communications, Eastern Command.

Crossing over to southern parts of Bangladesh thereafter, Aila became more devastating as it picked up a higher wind speed reaching 100 kmph. Severely affected places include Bhola, Khulna, Patuakhali, Noakhali, Laxmipur, Barguna, Barisal and Pirojpur areas in the main. About 200 people were killed there along with another 100 missing.

Mamata Banerjee personally oversaw the relief operations from her home where a makeshift control room has been opened. The railway service in both Sealdah (North and South) and Howrah (South-Eastern) were affected with five express trains, cancelled, although three were rescheduled next day.

In contrast, the state government's initiative was pathetically naïve. Until 24 May three ministers, directed by the West Bengal chief minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee—Kanti Ganguly, minister for Sunderban Development, Land Reform minister Abdur Rezzak Molla, MLA from Canning, South 24 Parganas (both CPI(M) state committee members) and Subhas Naskar, minister of irrigation and RSP state committee member to plunge into rescue and relief operations, could not reach near the severely affected spots, namely two 24 Parganas and Purba Medinipur districts.

Worst of all, it was the Pranab Mukherjee who phoned up the CM first and not Buddhadeb Bhatta-charjee. Significantly, both the CM and railway minister said that party workers should work together with local populace crossing party lines. But it appeared to be lip service on the part of LF.

The IMD in its website stated a day before the hit of Aila, “the would-be cyclone to move in a near northerly direction and cross the West Bengal-Bangladesh coast by Monday evening. International models estimate that it would have attained Category-2 strength prior to landfall”. It predicted heavy to very heavy rainfall with isolated extremely heavy falls (above 25 cm) over Gangetic West Bengal and north coastal Orissa for two days. There was no pre-emptive evacuation operations despite 36 hours' notice. Otherwise, casualties could be drastically reduced, livestock loss could also be considerably averted.

At least seven people succumbed to the tempest in Kolkata. Several thoroughfares and roads remained blocked and a large number of pockets witnessed prolonged power cuts. Numerous trees uprooted in the southern fringes of Kolkata, but the initiative from the Kolkata Municipal Corporation, run by the CPI(M)-led Left Front was too inadequate to address the gravity of the problem. The Mayor of Kolkata, Bikash Bhattacharjee, whose performance and casual attitude was severely criticized at recent meetings of the Kolkata district committee secretariat of CPI(M), resorted to untimely polemics with environmentalists. “The fact that some 1200 trees were uprooted proves that the so-called environmentalists are wrong that there are few trees in the city”. Well-known environmental activist Subhas Dutta, instrumental in enforcement of ecological standards at the Kolkata Maidan, cleaning the Victoria Memorial, compound shot back at Mayor, “It's in bad taste”. Bhattacharjee claimed that but for a newly-set-up disaster management cell, over 400 uprooted trees were cleared from roads. But local TV channels gave a different picture. “The figure is overstated. KMC has no management in reality”, said a borough chairman of Tollygunge-New Alipore area and a Trinamool Congress councilor and MLA Arup Biswas.

There were road blockades by people in many parts of southern part of city such as Tollygunge, Jadavpur and Behala. Power lines were snapped throughout the city, even in northern parts. People's rage was directed at the private sector power generation and distribution major, CESC, flagship of RPG group as Telephones at CESC control room were buzzing but receivers were not lifted for answering calls. However CESC spokesperson said telephone lines were in dysfunction and "it's difficult to cope with the complaints, although they are genuine". It must be admitted that despite snapping-off of hundreds of electric lines, CESC contract workers plunged into the task to take on catastrophic situation on war footing, very much unlike the KMC. □□□