

Bangladesh in the UN Human Rights Council

The mandate puts the council member states in direct human rights radar screen of the UN vis-a-vis their pledges and commitments.

MOZAMMEL H. KHAN writes from Toronto

ON Tuesday, May 9, Bangladesh was elected to the newly formed Human Rights Council (HRC) of the United Nations.

Council elections signifies strong international endorsement for the government's commitment to upholding and promoting human rights in Bangladesh.

In the words of the former Canadian Supreme Court Justice Ms. Louise Arbour, the current High Commissioner of the Commission on Human Rights (CHR), 'the elections were more on the pledges than performances.'

around the world." The similar views were echoed by Secretary General Kofi Annan when he said, 'now the real work begins.'

As voluntary pledges, Bangladesh (here the government's commitments came into play) would, in addition to other things, (i) establish the National Human Rights Commission as soon as possible;

1. Bangladesh's deep commitment to the promotion and protection of human rights of all of its

citizens emanates from its constitutional obligation.

2. At the national level, Bangladesh, a democratic and pluralistic polity, is fully committed to the principles of good governance, democracy, rule of law and promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedom of all her citizens.

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As an achievement, the document highlighted the government's commitment to fight against corruption and the formation of an Independent Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), albeit the real independence of which and any blip of success are yet to be felt by the people.

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tactics of the government in separating the judiciary from the executive branch of the government. However, if the NHRC is at all formed during the rest of the tenure of the government, its 'neutrality' may not be any better than that of current Election Commission and its activities may not be any more pronounced than the ACC.

The question is how far the current government has been successful to live up to the universal aspirations of the people as outlined above. Is the government of the day adhering to its constitutional obligations? Is the law-enforcing agency upholding the rule of law? Day after day, the government is telling the same fictitious story of killing innocent (According to UDHR Article 11.(1) 'everyone charged with a penal offence has the right to be presumed innocent until proved guilty according to law in a public trial at which he has had all the guarantees necessary for his defence') people in the name of so-called 'crossfire' knowing very well that the people of the country do not believe it.

As regards the 'fundamental freedom of her citizens', the brutal crimes of the members of law

enforcing agency committed to the people of Kansat reflected the atrocities of a barbaric society and only on the other day, there would have been a repetition of the same barbarism if the law enforcing personnel would only comply with the order of the local lawmaker of the ruling alliance in Shanir Akhra. Obviously, no legal action has been initiated against the said lawmaker although the story of his unauthorised order to shoot people was published in all the major news dailies of the country.

Many of the members of the current government, including the PM, have the perpetual obsession of inventing conspiracy in every action of the citizens that are critical of the government's misdeeds, which very well and in most cases, include the denial of the fundamental constitutional rights of the citizens. It was, as usual, reflected in the comments of the foreign minister while expressing his satisfaction over the election of Bangladesh to HRC, undermining the fact that, in this electronic age, the brutal acts at Kansat or the police atrocities at Chittagong were beamed from Cape Town to Canada within minutes. The government leaders ignore the fact that the universal aspirations of the citizens of the Republic as reflected in the constitution (and as highlighted in her campaign for an HRC seat) is a national commitment and that makes it obligatory for every citizen

concerned to raise concerns in any forums, national or international, to mitigate the situation. It would be a good avenue to reassure our current government leaders that when they would be out of the helm and if their political adversaries inflict on them the similar torture and harassment as they themselves have been subjected to over the last four and a half years, these 'conspirators' would be in the fore front to raise their voices to alleviate their sufferings, exactly the way they are doing today.

In fact, Bangladesh's election to HRC is nothing new since Bangladesh has been an uninterrupted member of CHR from 1983 to 2000, Vice-Chair of the Bureau of Human Rights Commission in 1998 and is a current member (2006-2008) of CHR as well. The new dimensions come from the rejuvenated mandate of HRC that would replace CHR on June 19, 2006 and that includes the resolves such as, 'members of the Council will undergo the Council's new universal review mechanism during their term of membership. The General Assembly would have the right to suspend the rights and privileges of any Council Member that it decides has persistently committed gross and systematic violations of human rights during its term of membership.'

This resoluteness was reverberated by the words of the

General Assembly President Jan Eliasson, while declaring the election results, 'I find it very important that all Member States have made pledges and commitments to human rights which they are expected to live up to, and also that they have accepted, by their membership in the Human Rights Council, to be reviewed, that their human rights record is to be reviewed.'

Dr. Mozammel H. Khan is the Convener of the Canadian Committee for Human Rights and Democracy in Bangladesh.

'Assets will be confiscated'

Though there was much rejoicing in La Paz, the jubilation may be short-lived. For most of this decade, this benighted Andean nation, where 70 percent of the people live below the poverty line, has been stuck on a wheel of political and economic turmoil.

MAC MARGOLIS

WHEN the tough-talking labor leader Evo Morales took office as president of Bolivia early this year, many people in Latin America and beyond held their breath.

to power and suddenly embrace international lenders and business in hopes of stirring Latin America's poorest nation from its centuries' old economic slumber?

Barely five months later, the verdict is in. On May 1 -- fittingly, International Labor Day -- Morales abruptly nationalized the country's vast oil and natural gas reserves and infrastructure.

Meanwhile, companies like Brazil's Petrobras -- which has ploughed some \$1.5 billion into Bolivia -- and Britain's BG Group, Total of France, and the Spanish-

Argentine conglomerate Repsol, will have to pony up a whopping 82 percent of their earnings to the La Paz government.

The fine print has still to be worked out, but one thing is already crystal clear: from here on, doing business in Bolivia depends not on the fortunes of the free market but on the vagaries of the mood in La Paz. "Companies that do not accept [our conditions]," announced Hydrocarbons Minister Andrés Solís Rada, "their assets will be confiscated."

In one way Morales's move was hardly unexpected: all last year he had campaigned on the promise to return Bolivian natural resources to the Bolivians, vowing to become "Washington's nightmare."

Still, the Labor Day decree and

the theater surrounding it -- Morales donned a petroleum worker's hardhat and dispatched army troops to seize foreign-owned wells and refineries -- caught many outsiders by surprise.

For all his brazen rhetoric, after all, Morales had taken care to court the favor of his giant neighbor, which is Bolivia's largest foreign investor. He even referred to himself deferentially as Lula's "little brother."

Such two-fisted politics are not new to Latin America. They hark back to a seemingly distant, almost quaint era when most of the region's economies were run by populists, military men and charismatic caudillos who ignited the imaginations of the poor and neglected with promises of plenty and broadsides against the enemy without.

In country after country, those policies flattered as investment dried up and capital-starved economies

succumbed to inflation, debt and uncompetitive industries. There was no more glaring example than Bolivia itself, where the gas and oil industry had all but collapsed under the dead weight of hapless government bureaucrats.

Yet while many of the reforms prescribed by the much vilified Washington Consensus took root across the continent -- lowering trade barriers and inflation, and boosting fiscal discipline -- growth has still been elusive. Instead of a call for deepening those reforms, spiking joblessness and the brooding frustration over fleeting prosperity fueled a backlash against the austerity of the free market and its gringo sponsors.

But with national elections scheduled in half a dozen countries, from Mexico to Peru, over the next seven months, the clamor for what Harvard Latin American expert Kenneth Maxwell calls "the populist temptation" seems to be finding sympathetic ears again. In March, Argentina's Nestor Kirchner, facing rising inflation, browbeat private

companies with a price freeze. Hugo Chavez last year ratcheted up state controls over the oil and gas industry, crowding out private investment. In Peru, socialist-leaning Ollanta Humala, leading the field for the Peruvian presidency, is threatening the same.

No one knows just how far Bolivia will go to impose its newfound "sovereignty," but the abrupt change of direction and the belligerent trappings that surrounded it have already sent distress signals across the region. (Bear Stearns, a New York based bank, warns that Morales's nationalization of foreign firms could spark a wider flight of investments throughout the emerging markets.) Not least because Bolivia is sitting on some 1.6 trillion cubic meters of natural gas, the largest reserve in Latin America after Venezuela's, and enough to fuel the needs of an energy-hungry continent for the next century or more.

Although Bolivia's energy decree affects some 20 energy multinationals in Europe and Latin America, no one has more at stake in the short run than Brazil, which built a huge pipeline to pump Bolivian gas thousands of miles

across the South American jungle and savanna and sunk \$1 billion into wells and refineries.

Nearly half of the natural gas Brazil burns today -- in industry, homes and car engines -- comes from Bolivian wells. Though there's no apparent danger of shortfalls in the short term, future development is a question mark for dozens of industries that had converted to gas-burning machinery on the promise of bountiful supplies from the Andes. Finally, on May 3, Petrobras announced it was suspending further investments in Bolivia.

Though there was much rejoicing in La Paz, the jubilation may be short-lived. For most of this decade, this benighted Andean nation, where 70 percent of the people live below the poverty line, has been stuck on a wheel of political and economic turmoil.

Ironically, Bolivia's fortunes began to turn in the late 1990s, when President Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada opened the doors to foreign investment. The rush of foreign capital threw many Bolivians in dead-end jobs out of work, but it also revived the nearly bankrupt natural-gas industry.

Lozada and his successor were

forced out of power when Morales

rode a tide of nationalist rebels,

Marxist intellectuals, coca farmers,

unemployed miners and

impoverished indigenous people

into power, blaming outsiders for

their plight.

Morales's move to expropriate

foreign assets was tailored to

please this seething coalition. If he

is unable to attract capital to convert

the treasures buried under ground

into wealth and jobs, the same

constituency could turn on him, too.

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How inflation takes your money

If we had deposited Tk 100 on January 1, 2005, we would have received Tk 5.9 as interest on our money by the end of the year. However, by the end of 2005 we would need Tk 106.7 to buy the same goods that we could buy for Tk 100 in the beginning of 2005.

DR. NOUSHI RAHMAN

INFLATION in Bangladesh has been on the rise in the past four years. From 3.1% in 2002, inflation has risen to 5.6% in 2003, 6.0% in 2004, and roughly 6.7% in 2005.

How does inflation affect us? Inflation reduces the purchasing power of our money. Let us take the 6.7% inflation of 2005 as an example. A 6.7% inflation in 2005 means that what we could have bought for Tk 100 on January 1, 2005 would require Tk 106.7 on December 31, 2005.

Now let us see what happens to our money when we make deposits to our savings accounts. The Bangladesh Bank lists the interest rate of deposit accounts in 48 scheduled banks. The average interest rate of savings accounts in these 48 banks is approximately 5.9%. Assume that this average interest rate remained fairly stable in 2005.

Then, if we had deposited Tk 100 on January 1, 2005, we would have received Tk 5.9 as interest on our money by the end of the year. However, recall from the previous paragraph that by the end of 2005 we would need Tk 106.7 to buy the same goods that we could buy for Tk 100 in the beginning of 2005.

Thus, the interest that we thought we earned would not even suffice to keep up with the inflation.

With Tk 105.9 in December 2005, we are actually poorer than we were with Tk 100 in January 2005!

Saving steadily is not steady enough. Most of us endure hardship to save money. The idea behind depositing money in savings accounts is two folds: (1) to have a safe place for the money and (2) to allow the money to grow through interest (at the very least, keeping par with inflation). But what good is it if the money fails to outgrow inflation? Our money still has a safe place in our savings accounts, but the money fails to grow at all.

We need to find a way to use our money in a manner so that the money not only remains safe, but also increases in value. Various kinds of investments are available, but most are highly risky. Almost all of us know of that relative or friend who has lost a fortune in the stock market.

Considering the rapid increase of gold price, it would have been a great idea to buy gold bars as investment. However, in our culture, gold jewelry has much more value than gold bars or coins. The problem with gold jewelry is that its resale value is significantly diminished, neutralizing any possible gains from the value appreciation of the gold (even after inflation adjustments). Buying gold bars or coins would have been a good idea, but perhaps not a very timely and realistic one any longer.

A third option to utilize our money is by buying apartments and renting them out. This is an old form of business. Here, we observe fixed rents for a period of time, till the landlord all of a sudden decides (almost out of whim) that rent must be increased. Quite clearly, rent is

the income generated from owning the apartment. Whether the income translates to a satisfactory yield after inflation adjustment ought to be assessed carefully before jumping into this kind of an investment.

Indeed, the financial picture is rather grim for passive investors. These investors are passive because they want their investments to generate income automatically. People who want to invest their money must realize the problems of passive investment. In order for our money to generate value rapidly, we must get actively involved in the money-making process.

For those who are more comfortable with savings deposit-type investments, paying close attention to short-window opportunities of high-interest bearing bonds is a good strategy. For those who are interested in the gold market, buying gold and converting them to attractive jewelry may be a way to generate value.

Acquiring gold-plating technology can give rise to ample opportunities to add value to myriad existing products. Finally, for those who are interested in real estate, buying properties and performing renovations can substantially increase the value of the investment.

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EAST WEST CENTRE ALUMNI CHAPTERS

The 'Aloha' spirit

ARCHITECT KHALEDA EKRAM

THE East-West Centre (EWC) was established through an act of the United States Congress in 1960 to 'promote better relations and understanding between the United States and the nations of Asia and the Pacific through cooperative study, training and research'.

And what better location can there be than the Hawaiian Islands for the EWC, the 'Centre for Cultural and Technical Interchange between East and West'?

No wonder at present the East West Center Alumni (EWCA) Association has 45 Chapters existing in United States and the Asia Pacific Region of the world. I spent most of my four years stay at the EWC in Honolulu, Oahu while pursuing graduate studies at the University of Hawaii (UH) on an EWC grant. This makes me a member, yes a proud member, of EWCA Association, Bangladesh Chapter. Let us contribute to the establishment of a stable, peaceful and prosperous Asia Pacific Community; let us come together to the celebration of EWC Day on 14th May 2006.

As a way of thanking the Centre and the people of Hawaii, we the degree participants had to be involved in different community service activities in addition to academic pursuit at the University of Hawaii. The EWC taught us to know ourselves who we are as individuals and also as people and cultures. The ideas and ideals of EWC are not high brow concepts; rather they are things that emerge everyday; teaching one to see with one's mind not just with one's eyes. Perhaps this is 'the ALOHA Spirit'.

The EWC and EWCA has been hosting conferences and workshops at different places of USA and



Participants at November 2005 conference of New Delhi, India

the Asia Pacific region to maintain a close liaison with its participants and alumni. Thus there was a conference in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in July 2002. The theme of the conference was 'Impact of Globalisation on Building an Asia Pacific Community'. After the Kuala Lumpur conference there was another conference at Tokyo, Japan in 2004 where also many EWC alumni gathered and shared their views.

Looking at the world and the events taking place around us, it is evident that now more than ever we need to understand each other's cultures, way of life and religion. There are nine East West Centre Alumni (EWCA) Chapters in South Asia. The EWC Alumni, Bangladesh Chapter remained quite inactive and dormant for many years. Dan Berman, former EWCA President and presently Special Representative for South Asia, EWC President's Office, New Delhi,

and Karen Knudsen, Director, External Affairs, EWC visited Bangladesh in September 2004 to rejuvenate the Bangladesh Chapter. An ad-hoc committee was formed. So far the ad-hoc committee has been able to successfully track down 273 alumni and update information on some of them. Much more remains to be done. Dan Berman's further visit to Bangladesh on 23rd April, 2005 and again on 2nd April 2006 paved the way for further consolidation of the Chapter.

During Dan's both visits the Bangladesh Chapter hosted EWC Alumni dinners and had fruitful open discussion and question answer sessions. The EWCA Bangladesh Chapter intends to create a database of the alumni. It needs and expects the support from the alumni so that it can develop into a Chapter that excels all other Chapters of the region both in quality and content of activities. The EWCA South Asia

Chapter's Regional Conference at the Habitat Centre, New Delhi on November 16-18, 2005 was a success. The theme of the Conference was 'Building a South Asia Community in a Global Context'. Bangladesh Chapter took on the responsibility of organising panels on Gender Issues and Demographic Transition in South Asia.

In this conference a workshop of Chapter Leaders was held. At the workshop it was decided that every chapter should take up some community service projects and I consider this is a follow up of 'the Aloha Spirit'. Bangladesh Chapter has chosen 'Teaching English to Underprivileged People' as a community service project. The group in focus is the college students with potential for higher studies to upgrade their knowledge, understanding and skill in English language. The objective of the project is to improve quality of

human resources in the country and provide opportunity for higher education.

The forthcoming conference is scheduled to be held in Hanoi, Vietnam from December 7 to 10, 2006. All EWC alumni as well as others interested in the Asia Pacific region are invited and expected to participate. The East-West Centre Association, which represents 50,000 government, business, and educational professionals throughout Asia, the Pacific, and the United States, is planning a major international conference in Hanoi, Vietnam. The Theme for the Conference is Building an Asia Pacific Community for Sustainable Development. The conference will explore major issues facing the region and consider ways to assist in their resolution.

Invited speakers for the programme include Ambassador Le Van Bang, Deputy Foreign

Minister for Vietnam, Ton Nu Thi Ninh, Vice Chair for International Relations of the

Vietnam National Assembly, U. S. Ambassador Michael Marine, East-West Centre

President Charles E. Morrison, and other leaders from government, education, and business sectors.

Bangladeshi Alumni may feel encouraged to participate in large numbers at the conference and make their presence felt. For detail information they may contact Dan Berman at Danberman@hawaii.rr.com; Ekramul Ahsan at ekramul_ahsan@yahoo.com or Khaleida Ekram at khaleida@atilbd.net.

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