

A lifetime of dedication to his people and country

Remembering Syed Muazzem Ali

IHTISHAM KABIR

TODAY is the first death anniversary of Ambassador Syed Muazzem Ali. He was born in Sylhet in 1944 to an enlightened and accomplished family. His father Syed Mustafa Ali was a well-known writer and his elder brother SM Ali was the founding editor of this newspaper. Eminent writer Syed Mujtaba Ali was his *Chhoto Chacha*. Syed Muazzem Ali obtained his Masters degree from Dhaka University in 1966 and was placed in the First Class. He appeared in the Pakistan Central Superior Services Exam and joined the Pakistan Foreign Service in 1968. He was serving in the Pakistan Embassy in Washington DC when the Bangladesh Liberation War broke out. Dissociating himself from the Pakistan government, along with 12 other Bengali diplomats and officials of the Embassy, and the youngest diplomat to do so, Ali was a founding member of the Bangladesh Mission in DC. Ali became active in efforts to support Bangladesh during the war, raising public awareness of the genocide in Bangladesh, raising funds to support activities for Bangladesh, and liaising with the Congress and State Department. Following the war, Ali served a long and distinguished tenure in the Bangladesh Foreign Service. He was Ambassador of Bangladesh to Bhutan, Iran, Turkmenistan, France, Lebanon, Syria and Portugal. While Ambassador to France, he was also Permanent Representative of Bangladesh to UNESCO. It was in that capacity that Ambassador Muazzem Ali tabled the draft resolution, on behalf of Bangladesh,



PHOTO: COURTESY

for the proclamation of February 21 (Bengali Language Martyr's Day) as International Mother Language Day. He spearheaded the diplomatic efforts leading to its unanimous adoption by the UNESCO General Assembly in 1999. Syed Muazzem Ali was Foreign Secretary in the Bangladesh government in 2001 and

retired from active government service at the end of 2001. In 2014, he was called back from retirement to serve at the High Commissioner of Bangladesh to India, a position he served with great distinction and diplomatic acumen until December 2019. Syed Muazzem Ali was dedicated not only to Bangladesh as a whole, but really to the poorest Bangladeshis, the farmers and villagers. He believed he worked for them. Diplomacy was a way for him to bring nations closer and to make Bangladesh better understood by the world at large. To him, professionalism, diplomatic etiquette and protocol, and love for one's country, were important tools to reach that goal. While he is well-known as a diplomat, he was also my maternal uncle. In the 1990s when my grandmother (*Nanu*), along with her sister, both in their eighties, went to perform the Hajj, it was Khokon *Mama* who took extraordinary pains to ease the hardship of the pilgrimage. I got to know *Mama* and his family better when they came to live in California where we lived. They were living in Alameda, a town across the San Francisco Bay, about 50 miles from us, and we met several times. His sudden, unexpected death last year deprived us of a talented diplomat. He left behind his wife, two sons, two daughters-in-law and three grandchildren. Most of all, he gave us that rare gift: a lifetime of dedication to his people and country. Ihtisham Kabir writes the weekly Tangents column every Saturday in this newspaper.

Memories of SYED MUAZZEM ALI

SHAMIM SINNAR

AT the first death anniversary of Syed Muazzem Ali, former Foreign Secretary of Bangladesh, on December 30, many of his colleagues remember him as the highly accomplished and charismatic diplomat who helped to turn International Mother Language Day into a reality, and who tirelessly advanced Bangladeshi priorities on the world stage. They remember his warmth, humour and charm. I too remember his warmth, humour and charm—not as a diplomat, but as Abbu, my father-in-law. Whenever I think about him, I think of mangoes. Abbu loved mangoes, and would always insist on buying and cutting them for his daughters-in-law and then later, for his grandchildren. Every time he visited, he, without fail, made a trip to the *deshi* grocery store in search of the best mangoes for us. Indeed, though we all loved mangoes, somehow we would only eat them when he cut them specially for us. Every time I now cut mangoes myself, I feel his presence. He also loved music, and would often break out in Hindi or Bangla songs while relaxing with a newspaper on our recliner. He arranged the musical portion of my *Mehendi* (wedding event), and surprised me with secretly requesting the musicians to play “*Tujhe dehka to ye jana sanam*,” my

favourite Bollywood tune. I still remember Abbu and myself smiling and singing that song to each other along with the musicians. Abbu was an immaculate dresser with an impeccable sense of fashion. I was not a fan of clothes shopping, and would spend a long time finding one or two outfits that I liked. Abbu would take those to Dhaka and have his tailor make five or six replicas for me in beautiful patterns. He chose the materials himself—I trusted his sense of taste wholeheartedly. One of Abbu's most precious loves were his grandchildren. Some of my favourite memories are of him holding my daughters or nephew on his shoulders or taking them for walks. Indeed, his love for his grandchildren was the strongest force leading him to retire and return to the United States. He requested the Prime Minister to release him because, as he told us, “The Prime Minister will be able to find another diplomat for my position. But my grandchildren will not be able to find another grandfather.” It is our collective sorrow that he passed away before he was able to see us again, to retire and spend the rest of his life with those grandchildren whom he so adored. Shamim Sinnar, MD, PhD, is an Assistant Professor of Medicine at Pennsylvania State University.

Who had the best and worst year in Asia?

CURTIS S CHIN and JOSE B COLLAZO

FOR all of South Asia, 2020 has been a year that cannot be over fast enough. This has true for Bangladesh too, even as the International Monetary Fund's latest Economic Outlook reported that the nation has overtaken India in GDP per capita. By year-end though, Bangladesh had also reported some 511,000 Covid-19 cases, with reported deaths of about 7,500. Elsewhere, the ongoing economic and health catastrophe has encompassed more than 1.7 million dead globally—including more than 343,000 deaths in the United States, more than 191,000 in Brazil and more than 148,000 in India. Year-to-date deaths from Covid-19 surpassed 9,990 in Pakistan. Yet, less than 12 months since the novel coronavirus SARS-Cov2, first identified in China, spread with deadly effect to the world, there lies hope for a better year ahead amidst unprecedented progress on vaccines and treatments. So,

of the coronavirus' economic impact has ranged from seafood workers from Myanmar in Thailand's seafood industry, to medical glove factory workers from Nepal and Bangladesh in Malaysia. The World Bank reports that Asia's most vulnerable have borne the brunt of a “triple shock”—the pandemic itself, the economic fallout from the containment measures, and the ensuing global recession. Amidst collapsing tourism and weakened exports, hunger grows, and access to jobs, technology and education shrinks. The Asian Development Bank now projects that the coronavirus could push 160 million more into poverty across Asia. The region's poverty rate will increase for the first time in 20 years, adds the World Bank. And so sadly, it is Asia's rapidly growing class of the “new Covid poor” who receive the depressing distinction of having the worst year in Asia. **Bad year: WHO and Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus** It should have been a year for the World Health Organization (WHO) to shine. Instead, the specialised UN health agency and its beleaguered director general, Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus of Ethiopia, found themselves in a no-win situation, facing accusations of not holding China accountable for its less than transparent handling of the coronavirus. Hidebound by the rules of bureaucracy and diplomacy, the WHO could say little as China delayed release of information, allowed millions to travel from Wuhan during the Chinese New Year period, and cracked down on citizen journalists and whistleblowers. In February, Chinese doctor Li Wenliang himself died from Covid-19 after seeking to warn others of a mysterious SARS-like virus early on. President Trump said the US—the WHO's largest donor—would leave the organisation, alleging that Ghebreyesus and the WHO were beholden to China. A turnaround could be at hand with a new US administration, but it's been a decidedly bad year for WHO and Ghebreyesus.



New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern (left) and Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen.



PHOTOS: AFP, REUTERS

Mixed-year: Xi Jinping and the Belt and Road Initiative China President Xi Jinping's successes at home so far in crushing Covid-19 and dissent in Hong Kong were tempered by growing pushback abroad in 2020 against his much touted Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This grand “One Belt One Road” infrastructure scheme—launched in 2013 to connect some 70 countries, including Bangladesh, with a “new Silk Road” of Chinese-financed ports, railways and highways, and other projects—ran into growing pushback amidst Covid-19 slowdowns and worries about debt owed to China. This was underscored at year-end as Australia approved new laws that would give Prime Minister Scott Morrison powers to veto or scrap agreements that state governments reach with foreign countries, including a BRI project in the state of Victoria. A 2020 Pew Research survey fielded in 14 countries including Australia, the US and several Asian and European nations revealed that attitudes toward Xi and China have now reached

new lows. Seventy-eight percent of respondents stated that they had little or no confidence Xi would do the right thing in global affairs, up from 61 percent in 2019. The year 2020 was a decidedly mixed year for Xi despite, or perhaps because of, the reality of China's engagement abroad—from conflict on the Himalayan border with India to trade tensions and disputes over the Mekong River and the South China Sea. **Good year: Asia's e-commerce giants** The United States might have Amazon and eBay. And Bangladesh's consumers know Alibaba platforms, but a diversity of Asia's e-commerce giants also found 2020 to be an emphatically good year. E-commerce in Asia was already on the rise well before Covid-19. Golek of Indonesia and Grab of Singapore have long had well established digital payment platforms. And with the pandemic, the pace of adoption has quickened as lockdowns drove more consumers online. Statista, a Germany-based provider of market and consumer data, projected e-commerce revenues to reach two billion dollars this year in

Bangladesh, and three billion dollars by 2023. And a report from Google, Temasek Holdings and Bain and Company projects e-commerce in Southeast Asia to exceed USD 100 billion by 2025, up from USD 38 billion in 2019. All this is good news across Asia for e-commerce platforms such as Lazada, Taobao, Shopee, Shopify, Bukalapak and Sendo. Importantly, 2020 might also herald many a good year ahead as consumers build on new digital habits, from fintech to telemedicine. **Great year: Tsai Ing-wen and Jacinda Ardern** Both women won landslide reelections this year, but that's not all that Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen and New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern have in common. These two leaders led charges against Covid-19, instituting strict lockdown measures that prevented community transmission in their countries while also avoiding the draconian practices adopted by China. In late-December, Taiwan with a population of about 24 million had reported just 780 cases and seven deaths. New Zealand with a population of about five million had recorded about 2,125 cases and 25 deaths. Ardern has also remained unruffled during a live telecast in the midst of an earthquake, and continues to lead her nation forward amidst enduring climate change and terrorism worries. And when it comes to economic numbers, Tsai and the people and businesses of Taiwan may well be a role model for all. By mid-December, Taiwan's 2020 economic growth looked to outpace much of Asia's, including that of mainland China—the world's second largest economy—for the first time in decades. So, in this most difficult of years, the “Best Year in Asia” goes to a dynamic duo of decisive female leaders who are showing the way to a better year ahead.

Curtis S Chin, a former US ambassador to the Asian Development Bank, is managing director of advisory firm RiverPeak Group, LLC. Jose B Collazo is a Southeast Asia analyst and project consultant at RiverPeak Group. Their Twitter handles are @curtisschin and @josebcollazo.

The diversity of victims of the coronavirus' economic impact has ranged from seafood workers from Myanmar in Thailand's seafood industry, to medical glove factory workers from Nepal and Bangladesh in Malaysia. The World Bank reports that Asia's most vulnerable have borne the brunt of a “triple shock”—the pandemic itself, the economic fallout from the containment measures, and the ensuing global recession.

who was up and who was down in Asia in 2020? Here's our annual assessment. **Worst year: Asia's poorest** As in too many places, it is the poorest and most vulnerable in Asia who have been hit hardest by Covid-19. Across the Indo-Pacific, migrant workers in particular have suffered the consequences of economic lockdowns. The diversity of victims

ELIE WIESEL
(1928-2016)
American author.

There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Annual visitor

6 Christmas song

11 Seething

12 Sun Valley's state

13 Christmas treat

15 Capitol Bldg. figure

16 Had a banquet

17 — Angeles

18 Winter wrap

20 Winter quaff

23 “The Lion King” hero

27 Actor Rickman

28 Christmas song

29 Army doc

31 Defy authority

32 One of Santa's reindeer

34 Stunned wonder

37 Keyboard key

38 Old hand

41 Christmas treat

44 North Pole crew

45 Chicago airport

46 With cunning

47 Carrots for snowmen, maybe

DOWN

1 Easy targets

2 Skilled

3 Person, place or thing

4 “A Christmas Carol” lad

5 Llama's cousin

6 Apple drinks

7 Find a sum

8 Track part

9 Cry of distress

10 Fireplace stack

14 Hagen of acting

18 Boom type

19 Penalized

20 Motor part

21 Bullring cry

22 Scoundrel

24 Unruly group

25 Garden visitor

26 Maximum amount

30 Excessively

31 Gift-wrapping stuff

33 Golf goal

34 Gets older

35 Heir list

36 Jealousy's kin

38 Casserole bits

39 Quite uncommon

40 Keats works

42 Salon stuff

43 Pi follower

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

P	B	I	A	S	R	O	A	D	
P	E	N	N	E	A	L	T	A	R
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BEETLE BAILEY

BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES

BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT