

The Daily Star WEEKEND MAGAZINE

Conversation

World Facing Greater Challenges on Human Rights

THE DAILY STAR: As far as we know your visit to Bangladesh concerned three major issues — the Rohingya refugees from Myanmar, the Chittagong Hill Tracts, and the stranded Pakistanis in Bangladesh...

LORD DAVID ENNALS: These were really some issues which I had a mind to look into. But particularly I came here for my interest in flood protection and cyclone, the other issues came because of long standing interests.

I came here on behalf of the Campaign for Disaster Prevention which was established in the United Kingdom by Bangladesh people who are anxious to be of assistance to people in Bangladesh and supported by some people myself were very interested in. So the starting point has been, looking at all sorts of things like flood control and cyclone protection shelters and variety of things that concerns disaster prevention in this country.

DS: Would you kindly tell us how meaningful has your visit proved to be. Are you happy about your visit? Have you drawn some conclusion over your visit here? If so, what kind of conclusions?

LDE: Well, for me personally, it has been a special joy, because it has been for the first time in many years that I have been here under a democratically elected government. I have had the privilege to meet the ministers of that government and the Speaker of the elected House and the leader of the Opposition. I am a democrat and I feel happy visiting a country which is pursuing democratic policies.

Secondly, I haven't been to Bangladesh for a long time and certainly think Dhaka is looking a much better place, streets are better and cleaner and the buildings are more impressive than they were a few years back. So there obviously appears to be progress in this city and progress in this country.

DS: Have you any thoughts you can share with us regarding the situation in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and the Rohingya problem?

LDE: Well, let me start with the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Now, obviously, it is an internal affair of Bangladesh. Secondly it is a problem that goes back deep into your history. Thirdly, the problem has very special interest this time, not just because of the massacre (in Logang) or allegations of massacres, but because the world is more aware than ever before about the importance of protecting indigenous people.

One other thing that I am much concerned about is that, indigenous people in all parts of the world, be it Brazilian-Indian or Tibetans or Chakmas ought to have their rights — the freedom of culture, be allowed to take pride in their history and language and above all their need of a special protection. I'll be attending a special conference in Rio, before the Earth Summit, on the rights of indigenous people.

So I obviously had taken an interest in what had been going on in Chittagong Hill Tracts partly for the reason I have already mentioned in my discussion and secondly, of course, there was a massacre on April 10, and the allegation vary from one another on the total number of casualties there. They say one thousand whereas, the government verifies that 13 died in the incident. That was the official figure I received from the General Officer Commanding in Chittagong.

Now when there was so much differences in each of the figures, quite clearly it demanded a thorough inquiry. So when I came to Bangladesh I made myself clear saying that it demanded a judicial inquiry. Therefore I have been able to welcome the fact that an independent judicial inquiry under Justice Sultan has been announced. This information was given to me by the Foreign Minister and I was really glad about this.

If I can get a little further, it is obviously an internal problem, but one of interest because of the rights of indigenous people. It is like so many other problems in the world affected by things from outside. There is no doubt in my mind that the evidence, that people have in large numbers been murdered by the

LORD DAVID ENNALS is a familiar name around these parts of the world. Chairman of the Asia Committee of the British Refugee Council, Lord Ennals has a long-held interest in human rights in general, and the rights of indigenous or aboriginal peoples in particular. Although his latest visit to Bangladesh, from May 7 to May 13, was sponsored by the UK-based Campaign for Disaster Prevention in Bangladesh (CDPB), this highly-energetic member of the British House of Lords covered a whole range of issues during his short stay.

He is actively involved in the move to repatriate some 237,000 Pakistanis still stranded in Bangladesh; he visited the Chittagong Hill Tracts and met senior civilian and military officials to discuss the problems facing the region and the indigenous, tribal people of the area; and last but not least, the continuing exodus of the Rohingyas from Myanmar into Bangladesh came in for some sharp scrutiny and comment from the veteran British politician, who served as a Foreign Office minister in Harold Wilson's government between 1974 and '76, and as the minister of health in James Callaghan's cabinet between '76 and '79. Last week, Lord Ennals talked to a Daily Star team led by the Editor, **S M ALI**, covering a wide range of issues affecting human rights in this region, as well as outside the region. S M Ali was assisted during the conversation by Assistant Editor **SABIR MUSTAFA** and Staff Reporter **TOUFIQUE IMROSE KHALIDI**.

Shantibahini, is a part of the problem that we simply cannot ignore.

I firmly believe that the Shantibahini could never have fulfilled this murderous task if they did not have any assistance from outside. So that is a problem which has international connotation. It may be that some time may come when the government of Bangladesh may seek a longer term solution. They might look to the United Nations or some other international bodies for help, who can independently come up with some advice, or some international group who can look up the matter with some authority. And for this a good relationship with India is needed.

The government of Bangladesh could not expect that Chittagong Hill Tracts should forever be governed by the Army, any more than I can wish that the situation in Northern Ireland should be always governed by the British Army.

Actually this matter has been of great concern to the voluntary and human rights organisations in Britain and they asked me, knowing that I was coming to Bangladesh, to make inquiries. Before I came here I had written to the former High Commissioner on April 30 before he left London and had written to him urging that there should be a judicial inquiry.

DS: Your Lordship, you mentioned about a conference to be held in Rio before the Earth Summit which will discuss the problems of indigenous people. Will the Chakma

long way to go, quite frankly speaking. A long way to go.

Whether we are talking of democratic government or countries which make no claim to be democratic I think in Asia in general there is some severe human rights problems. I am speaking for Asia as a whole.

I look as far as Tibet. I am deeply concerned for the rights of the people of Tibet, who are a people in their own right. They have a history of their own independence, a culture and tradition which spread over hundreds of years and yet are treated by the Chinese government as if they were some colonial territory. I think the issue — rights of indigenous people of Tibet has a very strong claim which must eventually be met and the government of China has to face external criticism for the way it has treated the people of Tibet.

Myanmar is perhaps the worst example of all. Whether we are going to see a change in policy by the government of Myanmar, we simply don't know. But there have been few good signs. The government has lifted the restriction on anyone visiting Aung San Suu Kyi and her being totally regimented. May be this is a sign that in the coming future the government intends to treat its people with some respect.

However, the fact that the majority of those who were chosen to represent the people, through a free election (in 1989) are now in prison, doesn't yet give anyone much cause for hope. Nor does the



"There must be constant international pressure on Myanmar as I believe there has to be upon Indonesia and on China and wherever there is gross violation of human rights and oppression against indigenous people."

UN system, because it's not just a question of passing a resolution but going into some kind of action?

LDE: Firstly, I would not use the term 'punitive action' rather I would prefer to think it as action seeking to influence situations.

A very good example at the moment is Libya. Quite clearly the Libyan government has been told that if it does not meet the wishes of the Security Council and release for trial two people — the ones who are alleged to be responsible for the bombing of the plane in which several hundreds of people had died — then the UN member states shall take definite action against this.

This is a very interesting example. I would like the Security Council to look at issues like Myanmar. But one thing must never happen, the power of UN should never go into the hands of a wrong power or any wrong group of powers.

I had had concerns at the time of the Gulf crisis. I could not have been more condemnatory of the behaviour of Iraq and of Saddam Hussain but at the certain moment when the UN had decided economic sanction against Iraq was the proper way to influence the situation, the affair seemed to move outside of the Security Council. As you remember that Perez de Cuellar then remarked that the actions taken against Iraq was not UN's action and he felt very deeply about that and I was much concerned about that too.

So, in giving more power to the UN, it must be power to the UN. Not to the United States or any other countries of the world which occupy global influence. The UN represents humanity and we must see that those that have power don't misuse or flout that power by seeking to use the UN.

DS: One gets the feeling that much of the activities in favour of human rights has been conducted from the West. Is there anything being done to strengthen these movements in Asia, Africa and Latin America. How do we make the Human Rights Movement gain stronger grassroot support?

LDE: It is really going to take a long time. I was at a

human rights activists in Brazil even face danger to their lives. Their government considers their activities as an attack on the government.

The case is almost same in China and the other parts of Asia. So human rights in these areas has a long way to go before it is genuinely applicable. China had made it perfectly clear that its concept of human rights is totally different from that of the West and its practice is thus unwelcome.

To tell you the truth I am not too optimistic that in the very near future there will be a genuine order in human rights in these regions.

DS: You have given your view point about the violation of human rights in Tibet, East Timor and Burma? But how about those countries which claim to be democratic, for instance, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan? The laws that they practice, are they in any confrontation with the question of human rights?

LDE: You see, I don't think I am in the business of making general critical comments. Except on specific issues, I cannot make expert opinions, since I am not an expert. I must agree that many of the democracies have to face up to the fact that in many occasions they are pursuing undemocratic policies. But I don't want to discuss it by picking on or by singling out one particular government that one might say I am attacking one government and these are violations which even cannot be proved.

Let's say, the Kashmir issue. I am not on the side of India or Pakistan. I am on the side of Kashmiris. They I think should have the liberty to form their own institutions and own form of government without any domination from either of the two great powers.

People have been fighting for their rights worldwide. Such a right is the right of the Pakistanis (stranded in Bangladesh) to return to Pakistan. Even though the government of Pakistan is going a bit slow on this issue, I hope that they will come round to the commitment that they had made.

DS: When the Vietnamese boat people were sent back from Hong Kong, some observers said that they had been forced back. Is it difficult to



Rohingya refugees awaiting repatriation

issue be discussed there? Will they be represented there in any way?

LDE: It's a very good question. I hope that they go. I really don't know the answer to this question. I know that there would be some 700 representatives of indigenous people throughout the world, and I know that at one stage the Chakmas were on the list, but I don't know whether in fact they would be present in Rio.

DS: You have had a look at the whole of South Asia and also South East Asia. As a human rights activist, how do you feel about the situation of human rights in countries which are democratic, at least has a parliamentary democracy? We are thinking of Malaysia, Singapore and we are talking about India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. Are we on the right track? Are we doing it the right way?

LDE: I think you have a

plethra of the refugees who have come to Bangladesh. Obviously they had fled to Bangladesh from a land which practised oppression, torture, rape, forced labour and denial of human rights. If it was not so, there would have been no good reason for them to come here.

I visited the Myanmar refugees in their camps and had great respect for the Bangladesh government in the way it is looking after these refugees, providing shelter, food and water to the best of its abilities.

There are about quarter of a million refugees from Myanmar and I can't believe that they are going to go back voluntarily without a change of situation from which they have fled. There has been an agreement that they will return. But any return other than voluntary would be a second denial of their human rights. If by any chance at all the government of Bangladesh decided to send back any of them

who didn't want to go, that would be an abuse of their human rights.

So there must be constant international pressure on Myanmar as I believe there has to be upon Indonesia and on China and wherever there is gross violation of human rights and oppression against indigenous people.

If I may add a general comment at this stage, it is that the prospects of fulfilling the original purposes of the UN Charter is so much better than there has been for the last 40 years, we can now look forward with much hope to the tasks that the UN can perform. It always seemed to me that, though non-interference in internal affairs of states under Article 27 was an essential part of the original membership of the Charter, I think we are moving away from it bit by bit.

We are beginning to accept that the question of human rights at least, now go beyond

boundaries. For example, the UN infact was interfering in the internal affairs of South Africa (by imposing sanctions for its apartheid policies), and as we look into the situations in Libya and much more so in Iraq — the UN is beginning to say, 'here are such gross breaches of human conduct that we, the UN, must intervene on behalf of the humanity'.

This may be a very important time in our history. If so happens that this weekend I am involved in a conference in Rome sponsored by the Italian government into which they have invited all sorts of people most of whom are far more expert than I. People like

"In giving more power to the UN, it must be power to the UN. Not to the United States or any other countries of the world which occupy global influence. The UN represents humanity and we must see that those that have power don't misuse or flout that power by seeking to use UN."

Perez de Cuellar and I did not Shevarnadze and many other people who are now working within the UN system. We would be looking at the future of the UN under the new and happy circumstances of the ending of the Cold War. I think that some of the issues that we are discussing are bound to come up in that conference — can the UN fulfill the task on behalf of us, the people of the world?

DS: The UN Charter lacks the strength of taking any kind of punitive action against countries where violation of human rights are very obvious, gross and blatant. Is there any move at all among the human rights activists like yourself to strengthen the UN Charter or



conference last year in Nigeria, which was attended by human rights activists from different parts of Africa. Some of them, though they were human rights activists, had to be very careful that they did not get arrested by their own governments. Some African governments believe that any human right activity tantamounts to activity against their own governments. So some human rights workers are in great danger. But I think the situation is improving day by day.

But in African and some countries in Latin America, human rights has a long way to travel. But the situation is improving there also. We are beginning to see more and more democratic regimes in Latin America. But no doubt some

say how far they were volunteering...

LDE: The British Refugee Council is very much opposed to the idea of forcing people home. I myself was much involved in this. Both by visiting Vietnam and Hongkong and had some strong words to say.

So it happened that, in relation to the first group who were forced back, there were 51 people which the British government put on a plane and took back. I spoke to 40 of those 51. I spoke to them confidentially, without being heard by any representative of the Vietnamese government.

Firstly none of them had been arrested by the Vietnamese authority. They were received with maximum

acceptance and help, and they told me that infact they were very ready to go back to Vietnam. They had volunteered to go back, some of them complained that even though they were volunteering to go back, they were kept waiting.

There was a rather special group, the second group which was special in the sense that they had been from Vietnam to Hongkong twice. There had been people who had gone from Hongkong to Vietnam, and some of them voluntarily to Vietnam, and then made a second trip, because if they came twice they would get a second rehabilitation grant.

So both of these were rather special groups. I don't think either of these two could be labelled as typical. I am against and British Refugee Council is totally against people being forced back to places from which they had fled.

DS: Do you have a policy of looking into countries from which they have fled, to see what the situation is which prevails there?

LDE: Yes, we have to look at those too. I think that much of the cause of people quitting Vietnam to go to some other parts of the world, whether its Malaysia or Hongkong or anywhere, is the policies of the American government in denying the government of Vietnam and the people of Vietnam the opportunities of normal trade, and normal aid, as would apply to any other countries. The Americans have continued to insist ever since because the Vietnamese had defeated them in battle.

I am happy to realize that the British government is putting maximum pressure on to the American on this specific issue and believe that there will be time when America and Vietnam will live in better terms. The British government is now beginning to support the works of the voluntary organisations and putting increasing amount of money and there is more and more being done by the British government and it shows that it doesn't accept the American theory.

I think if there was a proper aid and trade programme in Vietnam, it would put an end to the exodus of these people. Because Vietnam is denied normal access to the markets of the world that it is lagging behind than many other poor countries of the world.

DS: Your Excellency, we have infact a very difficult situation in Northern Ireland and we receive all kinds of reports here. Being in such a position we are really not too clear, could you brief us in short about the situation in Northern Ireland from the human rights angle?

LDE: I won't be of any solution. But I will answer to the best of my abilities.

Earlier today, talking to someone else I compared the Shantibahini with the Irish Republican Army (IRA) who are committing acts of violence, murder and anarchy. They are killing people without any thought about the people they are killing. It is violence of a disgraceful kind whether its the Shantibahini or the IRA such acts of violence and thoughtless murder make a political solution all the more difficult.

But there must be a political solution. As there must be a solution for the Chakmas and majority of the people in Northern Ireland want to find a political solution. The proportionate people who are involved in violence are minute. They feel oppressed by the IRA. They would like to see, as I would like to see a political solution and an eventual withdrawal of British forces and that must be our objective.

I would like to see an eventual agreement about the whole of Ireland. The government of Ireland is anxious to find a solution. As you know that there are talks that take place regularly between the governments of the Republic and of Britain, keeping in mind a solution for Northern Ireland and eventually a solution must be found.

You with the Shantibahini, we with the IRA are left with a situation which has been difficult for a political solution by the use of deliberate actions of violence and murder. The arms are often smuggled and supplied from outside. There

Continued on Page 10