

Thinking Small on Power

The Power Development Board may have set some sort of a record in lethargy and inefficiency, but it is still throbbing with life when it comes to floating ideas. The latest big idea to come from the PDB is all about the greatness of things small. The chairman of the Board was quoted in yesterday's papers as saying that smaller plants should be the "order of the future power scenario", rather than large generation units. The reason: Large plants put too much pressure on the dilapidated transmission lines of the national grid, thereby causing enormous systems losses and frequent power failures. Thus, smaller plants based regionally and supplying electricity to limited areas would be more efficient, prevent pressure on the grid and save cost. This is a fine piece of thinking, come as it has while review of the 1995 Power System Master Plan is in full swing.

However, it is all rather surprising. If the national grid is so dilapidated that it cannot take any more load without rupturing the whole system, then why did the PDB not draw up a "master plan" to overhaul the transmission lines in the past? If small is better, then why was it not adequately reflected in the Plan currently under review? Indeed, if decentralisation of power generation is such a wonderful thing, then why did the PDB continue to build, commission and centrally manage large plants in the past? The chairman's current thoughts are not new, only incomplete.

There is no denying that the country needs smaller plants to serve a limited radius of area, from a region to districts to individual industrial zones. This would certainly reduce pressure on the national grid. But the key question is who would own and manage these smaller things? Certainly not the PDB, which has made a mockery of the word "management" in the past. Blaming the run-down of the grid for the high systems loss is simply not tenable, because that only tries, in vain, to gloss over the corruption rampant in the PDB. The idea of decentralisation is sound, but only if that is coupled with restructuring of the entire sector through privatisation of both power generation and transmission. The real issue that has to be addressed is privatisation, because only that would make decentralisation work.

BJP Flat on the Nose

BJP's political fortunes are manifestly on a sharp decline. The fall looks as steep as meteoric had been the party's rise to power through the last two general elections in India. By one fell stroke of electoral reverses suffered in the hands of Congress at the state polls in Rajasthan, Delhi and Madhya Pradesh BJP has been reduced to a shadow of its resurgent self. So much of an electoral rout has it been for the BJP that while anti-incumbency factor worked against it in the BJP-held states of Delhi and Rajasthan the Congress is spared the same fate in Madhya Pradesh where it has actually returned to power.

The swing away from the BJP has been entirely a positive vote for the Congress. But it is too early to say whether Indian voters have grown apathetic towards coalition governments moving back to a two-party scenario in India's power politics. Obviously, the regional tendencies are still very strong determinants of power equations at the centre. The conjecture is, therefore, left to the next general elections for confirmation or otherwise.

Meanwhile, we feel sure-footed about two telling lessons pronounced by the electoral verdict. First, the playing on religious sentiments has stoked up antipathies in a society that has been accustomed to secularism since the Nehruvian day. Indian voters deserve thanks sending a timely warning to fundamentalist parties in the South Asia region. Secondly, religious sentiments or the nuclear pedigree cannot be substitutes for good governance. The high consumer prices and the run-away inflation gripping India brought to the fore the BJP-led coalition's underperformance at the basic civic level. A government has to govern and deliver—rhetorics cannot hide its failure to do both.

The 18-party coalition government in India has become a still weaker medley and India seems in for a mid-term poll, sooner perhaps than later.

Great Event

The celebrations of the 50th anniversary of Dhaka's Institute of Arts and Crafts, still popular as Art College, opened on Thursday. Fittingly the celebrations are planned to be a most colourful national event. A nostalgic fervour overtook the programme from day one with the honouring of the nation's eleven most eminent painters starting from the founding father Zainul Abedin and ending with first batch gems Bijon Choudhury and Aminul Islam. The memory lane is being well-visited by aging painters and their supportive friends, begun so poignantly by Bijon, now a leading painter of India but wholly a product of the Dhaka Art College. The founding of this college in 1948 has had a catalytic effect on the social and cultural denouement of the Bengalees of the then East Pakistan almost as powerful as the Language Movement that began the same year. That the Bengalee people, in a span of only 23 years repudiated Pakistan, which was their own exclusive making, owes it in no small measure to the influence of the Art College and its teachers and students, especially the latter.

One man embodied in him the Bengalee Muslims' struggle to break loose from the cultural straitjacket they were put into by pseudo-religious taboos. Zainul's strivings and his art were eclectic while some of his comrades and followers have tended to be esoteric and elitist. Art is still largely inaccessible to the general run of our educated middle class. The heroic role of the Art College and its constituents in the political and cultural movements of our nation has partly been robbed of its power to change the people from inside because of the pictures' unarrested distancing from the people. On the occasion of this great anniversary celebration we wish art and people to come closer.

The Rocky Road to Final Status Agreement

As the hope for an independent Palestine state was rekindled after Oslo, the hardline Palestinians are unwilling to accept even an Israeli return to its pre-1967 borders whereas even the concept of a Palestinian state is still an anathema with the Israeli leaders. The idea of Palestine as a sovereign state requires some prior agreement on boundaries that also does not exist.

FIVE years before when Oslo Agreement was signed ending long years of bitter hostility between the Palestinians and Israelis, the optimism ran high on both sides. The Israelis found it to be a tool to establish their bonafide in somebody else's territory once for all and the Palestinians saw in it the dream way to their statehood at long last. But as the Oslo process unfolded, its inadequacies came in sharp focus against the backdrop of evolving realities. The open-ended and transitional nature of agreement bred ambiguity, conditionality and reversibility. Although Oslo Agreement sought to transform Israeli-Palestinian political and psychological environments and build mutual confidence during the interim phase to let the sides eventually tackle the thornier issues of final status by 1999, in reality the approach let each side raise its own expectations fraught with disillusionments. So long the expectations remained unfulfilled the disillusionments further rose impeding the progress of the peace process and at times, raising doubts about its feasibility.

Moreover, deferring the most crucial issues until the final-status talks gave the detractors both within Israel and occupied area one last chance to use violence which, time and again, rocked the process bringing it almost to a breaking point. Also the disparities in power between two sides let the strong — the Israelis — dictate both pace and scope of the agreement's implementation and the weak — the Palestinians — to look for alternatives including violence to peace negotiations. However, neither has been willing to completely abandon its negotiating assets like territory, jurisdiction and more grimly the ability to inflict violence and suffering.

These being the basic lacunae in the Oslo Agreement, the impending problems of final-status talk the deadline for the start of which has already elapsed are enormous. These problems have been multiplied with numerous shifts from the original stipulations of the Agreement and a constantly disturbed time-table for its execution. So long the Oslo process

was moving, it enjoyed some support for it in spite of reservation about the process' outcome. But as Oslo stalled during 1996-98, a significant number of Palestinians came to simultaneously back both violence and peace process. The frustration over the peace process and its likely results obviously created a constituency for terror. The suicide bombings by the members of Hamas and Islamic Jihad significantly increased since 1996 when Netanyahu government came to office. Israel's response to violence including a policy of closing off West Bank and Gaza to Israel proper, threats of cantonisation and the infliction of collective pain and suffering led to the rise of violence after a period of its steady decline. During the period till Wye Summit the overwhelming majority of West Bankers and Gazans believed that the armed resistance was the only realistic option for them. The reversal of situation hampered the growth of congenially desperately necessary for taking up final status issues.

Then there are the problems of leadership which can finally deliver the dividend of the peace process. While the country's democratic traditions did ensure a leadership capable of handling the Oslo Agreement to its last on Israeli side the peace brokers had been in a fix to find a similar leadership which would make the agreement work on behalf of the Palestinians. They however ended up negotiating with the weakest of all parties among politically active Palestinians: Arafat's Tunis-based PLO.

After two years of negotiations with West Bank political elite they chose Arafat as Palestinian people's leader at exactly the point when he was failing to be that leader. By then, the Hamas and Intifada generation started to represent the maximalist but popular aspirations of the Palestinians. In contrast to the weak and discredited PLO, Islamic radicalism and Intifada already created a powerful Palestinian-

Arab movement which alone was visible Palestinian resistance on ground. From the Intifada radicals and Hamas an aggressive movement fueled by small but fanatical militant cells and violently opposed to Oslo had emerged to challenge a fading Arafat and his PLO.

In the meantime an opposition to Arafat's authority was steadily mounting even from his own Fatah ranks. An ageing and ailing Arafat was fast losing his grip on the Palestinians who were no more impressed by his leadership — especially the domestic sphere. Given the present standing of charismatic and once-legendary Arafat, can he bargain final status issues from a position of strength?

rekindled after Oslo, the hardline Palestinians are unwilling to accept even an Israeli return to its pre-1967 borders whereas even the concept of a Palestinian state is still an anathema with the Israeli leaders. The idea of Palestine as a sovereign state requires some prior agreement on boundaries that also does not exist.

On the contrary, Israel is still bent upon building Jewish settlements which will also obviously dictate the nature of dispensation. So it is still not clear what the territories vacated by Israel under Oslo stipulation will ultimately become. In Israeli perception, they can just become an autonomous region of Israel. Netanyahu,

der Yitzhak Rabin and Simon Peres discreetly avoided settlements and instead advocated moderation and territorial compromise. And at a point of time they toyed with the idea of creating major settlement bloc, one around Jerusalem and another near the highway between Tel Aviv and Haifa. This would concentrate the settlers from the centre of the West Bank to within the 1967 Green Line. But the Likud under Begin and Shamir pursued a hardline agenda urging settlements and eventual annexation of occupied territories.

Netanyahu dreams of 'Greater Land of Israel', advocates settlements and wants the expansion of Israel's border. The Israeli settlement expansion is going apace even during the peace process and Netanyahu shows no sign of compromise on this count. The Israeli government's latest — and extremely provocative — decision is to consolidate the settlers' presence at Tel Rumeida, a Jewish enclave in the divided city of Hebron. The Israeli moves will certainly constitute a major road block on way to final agreement. Especially disturbing is the news of new settlements which has risen by 12.4 per cent in last 18 months.

Under the present circumstances if the Palestinian state or an autonomous region for the Palestinians comes into existence it will just be a collection of disconnected patches of Palestinian ghettos obviously without any clearly defined boundary. It remains to be seen how the Palestinians will accept it. But there are indications from a draft peace settlement negotiated in 1995 between the PLO and Israel's Labour party that the Palestinians may accept Israeli annexation of about 5 per cent of West Bank to ease the problems of Jewish Settlements that have already taken place even if it tapers with the conventional notion of interstate borders. Some corridors may be considered for the purpose. But in final-status talks they will most certainly consti-

quire some bones of contention getting a difficult exercise of 'give and take' for their resolution.

The creation of a Palestinian homeland — if at all that will be a reality — caters only for the people living within the occupied territories. But what's about 700,000 Arab Palestinians who were evicted from Israel proper after its creation and during the fighting that followed? In the early 1960s, Golda Meir, then Israel's fourth Prime Minister, claimed that the repatriation of Palestinian refugees would mean the placing of a time bomb inside Israel. The laws were enacted and promulgated to prevent their return. Wouldn't they be entitled to return to their homeland if one is created as the consequence of Oslo process? No answer to it has as yet been formulated. How can the time bomb of the refugees be defused either by the Israelis or the Palestinians? The question will be, in all likelihood, looming over the final-status talks.

The last but not the least is the question of Jerusalem which evokes powerful emotion on either side of the divide. The hardline Palestinians as well as their ruthless terrorist wings continue to speak of Jerusalem as their capital and pamphleteer on the ouster of the Jews from the historic city. In the same vein even the moderate Israelis refer to Jerusalem as their 'eternal capital'. That they mince no word is clear from the steps they have taken with regard to Jerusalem. The Israeli position has stiffened with the coming of right-wing government to office. Palestinians are worried by Israeli moves to cut Jerusalem off from the West Bank. Last year Israel began building a ring road around the city which will connect Jewish settlements in southern Jerusalem with those in the North. There are also reports of a series of bypass roads near Bethlehem which, if built, would seal the southern entrance to Jerusalem. Israel plans to turn the checkpoint at Bethlehem into a formal border crossing thus denying the city to be the part of West Bank. Given this background it is doubtful if the final-status talk will be able even to cross its threshold.

Mid East Peace Process



PERSPECTIVES

by Brig (Rtd) M Abdul Hafiz

Notwithstanding his provocative rumblings on final-status issues he is prone to compromise because he is left with no alternative to peace process.

The Oslo's endgame is final-status talk which addresses the most fundamental issues of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and touches upon some of the deep emotional issues of both sides. With the Oslo process coming back on track after Wye Agreement the final agreement due in May 1999 as per Oslo stipulation has assumed a relevance and new importance. It will be pertinent to put the issues of final-status talks in perspectives at this stage. First is, of course, the question of Palestinian statehood because it is with which all other issues like boundaries, settlements, refugees and security are closely interlinked. It was a Palestinian hope that was rebuffed for decades. As the hope for an independent Palestine state was

whose writ is likely to prevail during final-status talk, also favours autonomy, not statehood, for the Palestinians. The Likud, his party accepts the principles of autonomy as adopted by its former stalwart, Menachem Begin in 1979.

On the part of Arafat, the Palestinian statehood is a *sine qua non*. He has repeatedly proclaimed that every inch of territory evacuated by Zionist enemy will become Palestinian state. To him, the end of the peace process would see total Palestinian sovereignty over all of the West Bank, and Gaza including East Jerusalem. This perceptual gap between the two sides by itself is enough to scuttle final-status talks.

The question of Jewish settlements which began under Menachem Begin in the late seventies, is no less tricky. At once, nearly 200,000 Jews in separate sovereign state in the same territory. The Labour un-

High Noon in Sindh

As an institution that has a reputation for fair play and justice the Armed Forces have to be very careful that justice will be dispensed in a fair and equitable manner. They cannot become party to discrimination and injustice, that would make the military courts to be no better than "kangaroo courts".

IN dismissing the petition before the Supreme Court against Governor's Rule in Sindh, Chief Justice Ajmal Mian articulated the wishes of the masses if not of all the intelligentsia in stating, "everybody wants peace in Karachi and the interest of the country and its citizens is of paramount importance instead of a particular individual or party", unquote. During the course of the hearing, the Chief Justice repeatedly observed that the Supreme Court had already upheld the government's move of proclaiming Emergency as a consequence of which the Federal Government could invoke any clause of provision of the Constitution under which the Emergency had been imposed.

For the past 10 years Karachi has gone steadily downhill in all senses of the word. Living under the shadow of the gun of different mafias with varying vested interest, one could excuse the MQM's initial need for a militant wing. Gaining power by the ballot was impossible without having the cover of weapons to get to the ballot box. The gun soon became an addiction, an aphrodisiac as well as a means of enforcing one's will for what is politely known as "Bhatta", collecting "protection money". On joining government, the first split within the Party was natural, the broad mass separating from the hard-core militants, most of whom went and made the "Haqiqi" faction, nurtured and funded by the ISI, starting an internecine war that has outlasted two Benazir regimes and is well into the second Mian Nawaz Sharif regime. When Ms Benazir as PM, wanted the Army to come in under Article 147 of the Constitution and deal with her allies now-turned foes, the MQM, the lack of adequate powers led to the then COAS, Gen Aslam Beg, to

decline politely since he did not want the Army to be engaged in "chasing shadows".

During his first tenure Mian Nawaz Sharif also fell out with his MQM allies and "Operation Clean Up" was launched in 1992 on a massive scale but again without the powers requested by the then COAS, Gen Asif Nawaz. While a lot of terrorists were caught, almost all walked free because prosecution witnesses were intimidated and the Courts lacked the will to convict them. Operation Clean-up, which promised much was left in confusion and frustration with Field Intelligence Teams (FITs) running amok and giving a bad name to the Army. Affected by paralysing strikes and complete shutdown of economic and social activity, the second Benazir regime handed matters over in 1995 to Gen Babar the then Federal Interior Minister.

Gen Babar oversaw one of the finest counter-urban guerrilla campaigns in history. Without as much as a single staff officer or the paraphernalia of an armed escort, carrying a swagger stick rather than a pistol, Gen Babar used the Rangers and Police effectively to literally exterminate the hard core of terrorists in Karachi. Sadly, in the restoration of peace to the city of Karachi a fair amount of extra-judicial killings took place but because of the repression let loose by the militants on Karachi there was little or no protest about Gen Babar's methods, a case of the result justifying the means. The then PM Ms Benazir failed to follow through with a basket of socio-

economic initiatives, in the absence of the carrot all the hard work carried out with great efficiency by the LEAs, at great risk of life and limb to themselves, came to naught.

Having persecuted the MQM as terrorists in 1992 PML(N)'s political expediency in taking the MQM again as allies post-election 1997 was very opportunistic, meant to keep PPP from power in its home base in Sindh. While in the short term, it was an astute act, politically, there was an Hobson's Choice for PML(N) candidates for CM between Ghaus Ali Shah and

Governor's Rule has been long overdue but by itself it is no solution. The first priority is to restore peace to the Province in general, the city of Karachi in particular. It is quite noticeable that there was hardly any protest to Governor's Rule, while the citizens could hardly celebrate, the sense of relief was tinged with scepticism at the eventual outcome. The Governor must be his own boss, he cannot afford a perception of being a puppet on a string, remote-controlled from Islamabad. He has to select his own team of advisors

Karachi. In a swift turnaround these "bleeding hearts" have now become the champions of democracy. During Gen Babar's 1995 campaign, extra-judicial killings took place because the civil courts were powerless to act in the face of intimidation as well as that of witnesses. Murderers many times over walked away free, thumbing their noses at cowed justice. The terrorists could be hunted down and caught, and then what? What Mian Nawaz Sharif failed to do in 1992, he has finally done six years later in 1998, given powers under Article 245 to the only institution in the country capable of carrying out the cleansing act required. There can be no doubt that the military courts will render justice, their integrity is above question and benefit of doubt is always with the accused. It is a well-known and acknowledged fact in the Armed Forces that to avoid an "adverse verdict", those in authority have been known to try and summarily dispose off cases without giving individuals the benefit of trial.

The burden of evidence in a court martial is such that unless it is cast-iron it would invariably free the individual. The concept of military justice may be simple and harsh, it is fair as long as the judicial process is not circumvented. With the existence of the Appellate Courts there is also recourse to appeal, a far better option than that of extra-judicial killings. In the face of anarchy, many developed countries have rendered summary justice far more brutal than extra-judicial killings. One feels though that recourse of appeal could be be-

fore a specially constituted Bench of the High Court. The Chief Justice of the Supreme Court must remain the final arbiter of justice in the country.

Corrupt elements within the Administration and the LEAs may use the draconian measures for their own purposes, for extortion and even vendetta. Chief Secretary Sindh Salik Nazir is busy pressurising the Provincial Home Department to take action against his perceived "enemies", some in the print media. Putting the guns on the Army's shoulder by the civil bureaucracy for personal vendettas may undercut the integrity of the whole concept of swift and sure justice. There is a necessity here for at least two more Special Military Courts that will try those who falsely frame others directly or instigate others to do so. Such a Sword of Damocles will keep a check on personal agendas.

It required courage on the part of the PM to go the "military court" route in opting for Article 245, even though the mass perception may be of surrendering civilian authority. It took far greater courage on the part of the COAS to take on this responsibility. The stakes are very high, not only is the reputation of the Army (and his) at stake but the integrity of the country, should the Army fail in this acid test of duty. As an institution that has a reputation for fair play and justice the Armed Forces have to be very careful that justice will be dispensed in a fair and equitable manner. They cannot become party to discrimination and injustice, that would make the military courts to be no better than "kangaroo courts". Not only for Karachi but for Pakistan, it is now "High Noon" and as usual this country has fallen back to the only institution that retains its integrity and credibility, the Army.

AS I SEE IT

Ikram Sehgal writes from Karachi

Liaquat Ali Jatoi. Totally dependent upon the MQM for support, chosen CM Liaquat Jatoi allowed corruption on a major scale to become the order of the day. Hardened terrorists were let loose from jail at the behest of PML(N)'s coalition partners, the LEAs became demoralised, in the case of the Police even disorganised. In a "wild west" atmosphere, militants had a field day as "protection money" racket, kidnappings, bank robberies, car-snatchings, etc became the main business of the city, affecting almost everybody in every walk of life as the rule of law disappeared. Rampant lawlessness ruled again in rural Sindh, the gains against dacoits were wiped out

and officials and then ensure that political leeches are kept away so as not to destroy the sense of neutrality that is the essence of good governance, vital for the support of citizens of the Province. Except for one notable very senior exception, large-scale transfers have been affected but more important has been the announcement that military courts are being set up to try terrorists. Criticism in the media does not reflect the opinion of the common man in the street.

Particularly sickening has been the reaction of those shouting themselves hoarse about the government not doing anything for democracy and letting anarchy take over in

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

A patriotic sound

Sir, Mr. Mahfuz Anam's 'Topic of the week' (The Daily Star, November 27, 1998) was an outstanding writing against our mean and vicious political atmosphere. It has been revealed precisely that we are poor not only economically but also politically that led us to a tenebrous situation. We, the well-wisher of our homeland are at a loss to see that there's no commitment from any party to elevate our economy to the world's poorest one. Mr. Anam also unveiled the mask of such politicians by satirical words: "Election is fair if I win it, haral is good if I call it."

Though strong disapproval by the general people, haral had been and still being practised as a political weapon to destabilise the country especially the economy. Well, it is

the time to acclaim PM's unilateral decision not to call haral even when in opposition.

Ratan Kumar Banik
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A slopy work

Sir, At the invitation of the Asiatic Society, Calcutta, I delivered the Indira Gandhi Memorial Lecture for 1991 on Cultural Pluralism in 1993. The lecture was published by the sponsors the same year and was reprinted in 1994. I was indeed very flattered to find that this was being serialised in the Star Literature page of your esteemed daily. The good sense of the edi-

tor of the page, however, appears to have prevailed upon him when he discontinued it after the third instalment.

I want you to know that no one had the courtesy to consult me before giving it a place in your paper and I want the readers to know that no one had the fairness to indicate that the text as published was incomplete.

Anisuzzaman
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DS: We apologize for this incident.

Superpower, short of options

Sir, The aggressive US foreign policy options based on military threats are dwindling. It appears unlikely that it is willing to launch any military action anywhere, considering the delicate state of both the US presidency and the Wall Street. Might is not always right, when other supports are light.

It is not surprising that Iraq has once again picked up a quarrel with the UN inspection team, knowing fully well the consequences. Once a military

front is opened in Iraq, there are other countries who might dare the US to open other fronts, just to keep her involved. Kosovo could not be contained, and NATO was relieved not to go into action. North Korea might take a gamble. Iran do some military exercises, and might feel tempted.

The question is how long and on how many fronts the US could sustain military action and come out healthier economically and otherwise (the international image is not enviable), regardless of the vast concentration of military showmanship in minimum of time. The global economy is none too good, and Wall Street is feeling the pressure of visions of another recession of the 1929 type, according to increasing number of analysts. Japan, EU including UK, and other allies are either incapable or unwilling to get bogged down in military solutions. How effective

was the UN military intervention in Bosnia, to encourage further adventurism? Afghanistan is defying a diplomatic solution — and Iran can keep up the pressure (the international oil/gas pipeline option). Economically weak Pakistan might be tempted to pro-

voked politically weaker New Delhi the coming spring, when the snow melts at the high passes, remembering that G7 is fed up with the never-ending Kashmir problem, stalling smooth entry into the lucrative South Asian markets by the global traders.

There is no more time for the waiting game, nor for the war games. The world's only superpower seems to have few options left. Keep an eye on the moves on the chess board.

Abul M Ahmed
Dhaka

Tobacco-free campus

Sir, According to a finding recently released from the world's largest study on tobacco deaths, one-third of all men in China will die from tobacco-related illnesses if the current smoking patterns persist.

The study Emerging Tobacco Hazards in China was a collective effort of the Chinese Academy of Preventive Medicine (CAPM), the Chinese Academy of Medical Sciences (CAMS), Oxford University in UK and Cornell University in the USA.

Mentionable that China is the world's top tobacco producer and home to 300 million smokers who puff some 1.8 trillion cigarettes a year or one-third of the global total.

The report revealed that most of the Chinese people are ignorant about the diseases including cancer caused by smoking.

Meanwhile it is encouraging to learn through a recent despatch by Reuters from Beijing that China has launched campaign to stamp out smoking. The WHO DG Gro Harlem Brundtland while addressing the students at the prestigious Qinghua University praised China's efforts to contain smoking and lauded Qinghua for declaring its campus a no-smoking zone. A tobacco-free campus at this university will send a powerful signal across China and beyond." Ms Brundtland said.

Let us all follow the example set by the Qinghua University and declare our respective university campuses as no-smoking zone as a step towards banishing smoking from our global society.

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