

## FOCUS

## Building a Society for All Ages

by Dr Khalilur Rahman

If we genuinely want to mean active old age for all, we have to think of an old rickshaw puller, an old farmer or an old worker and even an old retired clerk. We need to seriously consider their old age well-being. These people have not even tasted their lives during their youth; their potentials have not been utilised fully because of paucity of opportunities.

THE United Nations is marking this year as the International Year of Older Persons with the theme "Towards a society for all ages". In 1991, the UN General Assembly agreed on a set of principles which state, among other things, that older people should have access to adequate food, water, shelter, clothing, social and legal services and health-care, through the provision of income, family and community support and self-help; that people of all ages are encouraged to take steps to ensure greater health and well-being in the later years for themselves and for their communities.

Nine years prior to the UN General Assembly agreed on these principles, the World Assembly on Ageing adopted the Vienna International Plan of Action on Ageing. This plan outlined the challenges and opportunities for development posed by increasing numbers and opportunities of older people. It recommended measures that can address issues that affect older people. These are health and nutrition, social participation, economic security, housing, environment, consumer protection, research and education.

## WHO and Ageing

UN Bodies and voluntary organisations are undertaking expert group meetings and public events to promote age-integration and counter social exclusion in light of the UN International Year for Older Persons. As a UN Specialised Agency, WHO is also taking step in promoting active ageing. To mark this international year, WHO Ageing and Health Programme is initiating the Global Movement for Active Ageing. This is a network for all those who are interested in moving policies and practices towards active ageing. The Global Movement will be inaugurated by a global walk event — the Global Embrace, on 2 October this year following celebration of the UN designated International Day of Older Persons on 1 October. This is an around the clock around the world event to which all countries are invited. It is designed to inspire, to inform, to promote health and to provide enjoyment and good company. It will link local projects to a global community of similar concerns and to people all over the world.

The theme of the World Health Day (7th April) this year "Active ageing makes the difference", recognises WHO's commitment to this important issue and is the reflection of its commitment to promoting active ageing. To add the Fifty-second World Health Assembly held in May this year noted with appreciation the successful 1999 World Health Day campaign which focussed global attention on the benefits of healthy lifestyles throughout the life span in order to remain healthy and active for as long as possible in later life. It called upon the WHO Member States to



Active ageing makes the difference. Picture: Courtesy—WHO

show greater concern and to take appropriate steps that ensure the highest attainable standard of health and well-being for the growing numbers of their older citizens.

## Our Side of the Story

Ageing is not a disease but a normal process and dynamic process of life. It is in fact the inevitable alternative to premature death. Yet, one can prevent or delay many of the disabling conditions that often accompany ageing through regular, moderate physical activity.

In opposition, a sedentary lifestyle certainly puts one at risk for reduced functional capacity. The concept of active ageing also goes beyond the physical domain.

The unfortunate part is that whenever we talk of older persons in our country, we tend to mean only those older persons who had always been better off throughout their lives. We talk about their well-being during their retirement age, we advocate to engage them in different spheres of life, including in the policy-making level of the Government and in nation building. Nowadays most of these people are rather far better off than what they have been during their so-called active age before retirement. Most of them get lucrative salary from the international organisations, NGOs etc. Doubtless, there is no harm in it. For the greater interest of the country, we need to benefit from their life-long experiences and knowledge.

The reason for my mentioning this is that while we talk about this group of older persons, we very often forget millions of older persons who had, even during their youth, to struggle for their livelihood. This group of millions older people most of them suffer from minimum basic needs for their survival. Our enlightened society do not think considerably of them, they think only of those who are already better off, who have their own capabilities to engage themselves even without patronising from any quarter.

I saw a number of write-ups in a number of our national dailies on the occasion of this year's World Health Day (7th April) wherein most of the writers spoke for only this privileged group of older persons to

ageing makes the difference". When a country severely suffers from necessary resources to be devoted to the youth, it is not easy at all to do some thing better for her older generation. That is why it is also our duty to remind the donor community of their responsibility and commitment towards poor countries. In all international fora, we need to keep this issue alive and up.

Addressing ageing problem is certainly a big and much talked about issue now in the developed countries. In this group of countries, older people are often viewed as a homogeneous group who no longer contribute to their families and societies and may even be a burden. The scenario is not too different in developing countries. Certainly, these people are burden for their families since society hardly takes care of them. In developed countries, these people have, however, their social security — guarantee for food, house and health. In developing countries only a very few older people have these minimum basic facilities.

The most important for us to reflect on what we are doing or are able to do even for our active work force before they get older. Due to inadequate opportunities and basic care, they are already like older people even at their young age. Poverty is still rampant, people are yet to afford very minimum basics. What we need to make our development partners understand is that we need more assistance for our poverty eradication, for ensuring basic amenities and for overall economic development. If we can do this, we would be able to do something meaningful for all groups of our older population.

Likewise, it is not the time only to look back. We equally need to reflect on the present and to the future. We should not make ourselves isolated from the ongoing efforts of the international community for the older people. We need to associate ourselves with the UN and other organisations' programmes designed for the older people. In keeping with the international programmes for older persons, Dhaka city authority may also consider celebrating the Global Embrace in co-operation with the Dhaka UNDP and WHO Offices in a befitting manner. Ministries of Health and Family Welfare and Social Affairs can also be involved in successfully organising this event. As we know, local communities are an important factor to promote any social event. This walk even is no exception to promoting healthy ageing. It can provide a useful occasion for health care workers, concerned activists and policy makers to initiate dialogue with the general population on healthy ageing.

The writer is Counsellor in the Bangladesh Permanent Mission, Geneva. Views expressed in this article are writer's own.

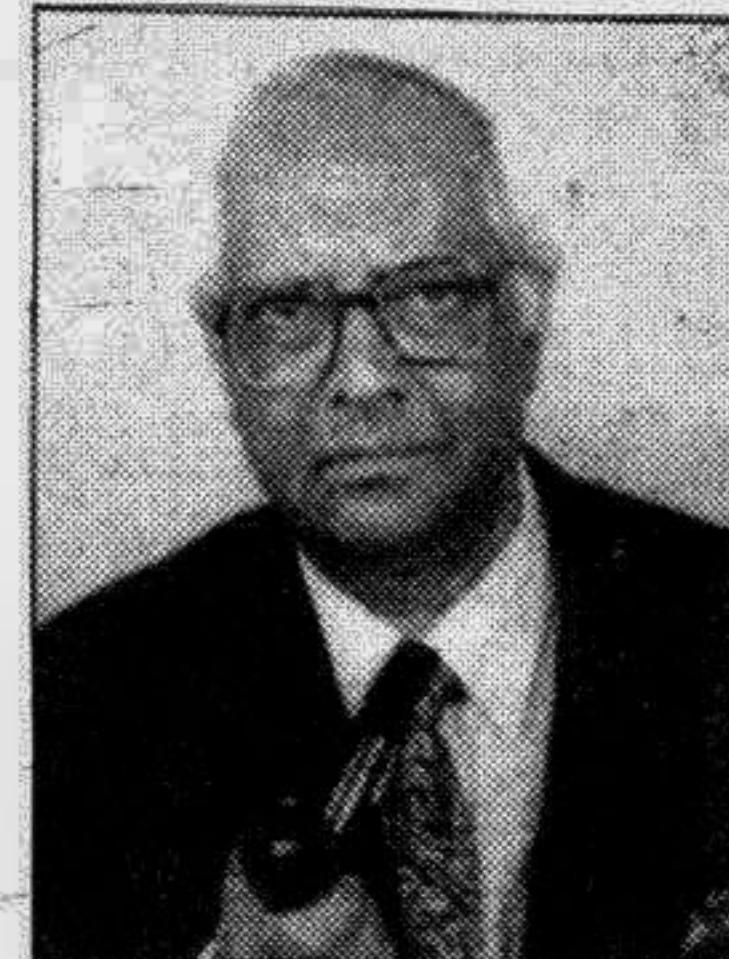
## Liberation and Beyond

by J N Dixit

The Daily Star is serialising extracts from the book through exclusive contract with University Press Limited (UPL), publisher of its Bangladesh edition.

## War and the Birth of Bangladesh

Part V



Foreign Minister Abdus Samad Azad flew back to Delhi on January 11 afternoon primarily to discuss the establishment of diplomatic relations between India and Bangladesh and also to initiate negotiations on economic and technical assistance urgently needed by his country.

There was speculation as to who would be India's first head of mission in the newly created Bangladesh. It was politically important and high profile. It was glamorous and professionally challenging. The assignment would begin at a historical time, within days of the creation of a new country. Politicians like former Education Minister Triguna Sen and even Siddhartha Shankar Ray, then Chief Minister of West Bengal, had reportedly indicated an interest in this assignment. On the advice of PN Haksar, her Principal Secretary, Mrs. Gandhi however decided that the first Indian Ambassador/High Commissioner should be somebody who would have no personal interest in the assignment. He would be detached and a senior person. He would have high professional competence. It was therefore indicated to the Bangladesh Foreign Minister that the appointment of the first ambassador would be delayed by about two months but that India would send an acting head of mission and open an embassy by the middle of January. Among the professional foreign service officers there were reports that AK Ray could be appointed as the ambassador. Other names which were making the rounds were those of RD Sathe, Joint Secretary in charge of the economic aspects of the war, and SK Singh who looked after external publicity during the war. Ultimately DP Dhar, TN Kaul and PN Haksar took the considered decision that the person to go as the first acting head of mission should not be so senior as to feel bad about not being confirmed in the post. He should also not be too junior because they wished the person to continue as the deputy chief of mission when a regular ambassador was posted. Haksar and Dhar's choice fell on me. Dhar took me to Mrs. Gandhi for a very brief meeting as far as I recall on January 12. I was hesitant about the assignment because I had only thirteen and a half years of service and had just been promoted as a counsellor. Despite the thrill I felt there was trepidation. When Mrs. Gandhi asked me how I felt about the appointment, I said I was deeply grateful and proud for the trust being shown in me. Then I said I was too junior in rank to go and function as the acting head of mission. DP Dhar turned to me and asked what rank should I be holding. I said the minimum rank should be that of a Minister. Mrs. Gandhi smiled at me sardonically said: "Dixit, you are Minister from now onwards. Go to Dhaka as instructed."

I was given the local rank of Minister and I had the appointment letter in my hand on the night of January 12. I was asked to proceed to Dhaka on January 17, 1972. I was also asked to choose a team of officers who would constitute the diplomatic and administrative staff of the embassy. I requested for SK Lambah (Now Ambassador to Russia), Ramesh Mulye (Later Ambassador to Syria and the Philippines) and Ms. Arundhati Ghosh, Deputy Secretary in the Calcutta Branch Secretariat, who went on to become India's Ambassador to South Korea, Cairo and Geneva. Most of my requests were accepted, but Foreign Secretary Kaul did not approve of Mulye's going to Dhaka for whatever reasons. I always regretted his not being posted to Dhaka.

I arrived in Dhaka on the morning of January 17 accompanied by Lambah and Ms. Ghosh. Since there were no banking facilities in the just liberated city we carried two sacks of Indian currency to meet initial expenses. The former residence of the Deputy High Commissioner in Dhaka was in a shambles because of the war. I was authorised to take up residence in the Inter-continental hotel in Dhaka, my colleagues stayed in the Circuit House. I went to the office of the former Deputy High Commissioner which was located in the slum area of "Segun Bagicha" in Dhaka city by the side of a mosquito ridden pond. The building was full of cobwebs and dirt.

There were spiders and mosquitos making miserable. Lambah and Ms. Ghosh coped with the situation with equanimity and great aplomb.

I presented my Letter of Commission as Minister in charge of the Indian Diplomatic Mission on the afternoon of January 17 to the Foreign Minister of Bangladesh. I was given an appointment to call on Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on the morning of January 18. I was received with great courtesy and warmth by these two leaders despite my comparative youth and lack of political status. The Indian diplomatic mission commenced functioning in Dhaka from the forenoon of January 18. An amusing event related to the opening of the diplomatic mission was the publication of two photographs which appeared side by side, as far as I can recall, in the newspaper, Bangladesh Observer. One photograph showed me presenting my Letter of Commission to the Bangladesh Foreign Minister, and the other was about a senior UNHCR official looking into a ravine where the bones and skulls of a large number of people killed just before the war ended, lay scattered. The caption under my photograph said: "UN official viewing skulls and bones of victims of the Liberation War," while the caption for the other photograph read: "Foreign Minister of Bangladesh receives head of the Indian Diplomatic Mission JN Dixit."

Mujibur Rahman assumed active charge of the Presidential office on January 9 itself. He retained the entire Mujibnagar Cabinet and announced that the Bangladeshi legislators elected during the 1971 elections would constitute the first Parliament of the new country. Bangladesh was formally established as an independent State and became a member of the international community. I commenced one of my most interesting and functionally challenging diplomatic assignments.

(Continued)



Freedom fighters entering Dhaka

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman stopped over in Delhi for about three hours and then flew to Dhaka accompanied by his Foreign Minister, Abdus Samad Azad, and a number of Bangladeshi officials and politicians who had flown in to Delhi to receive him. Mujibur Rahman arrived at Tejgaon airport in Dhaka around 2:30 pm and was received by acting President Nazrul Islam, Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmed and the Indian representative, AK Ray. He was taken in a procession through the city. Nearly two million delirious people welcomed his return home. He assumed office as President the same afternoon as he had remained the designated President of Bangladesh since the first day of the establishment of the Mujibnagar Government. In his public statement he affirmed that Bangladesh would make a new beginning as member of the international community and would have no rancour or prejudice. He declared that he wished to have good relations with all countries of the world and he hoped that the international community would be sympathetic towards the needs, concerns and aspirations of the new state of Bangladesh.

## Might is Right?

by A Husnain

What is wrong with Iraq for the sustained punishment by the West? The moral danger is of staggering proportion, where no arbitrators would be tolerated. Might has become right; take it or leave it. Conscience has been desensitized.

fecting the borders in the area (the problems will increase, not decrease).

The Balkans has once again been turned into an unstable condition (both the Great Wars had had its innocuous beginnings here). The human dust will never settle — it is a great diversionary occupation for the European administrations (except for what is separated by the English Channel).

Two notorious objectives have been achieved, using the terrorism of remote-controlled violence through stratospheric bombing; the ensuing business contracts for the physical reconstruction of the shattered infrastructure in Yugoslavia (plus a Yankee foothold in Europe), which will last for at least a decade; and the churning up of the human factors related to the millions of refugees af-

global conflicts are deep and wide, with no theoretical solutions or options in sight. Looking at the picture nearer home, it appears that the same powerful coterie is obsessed with a quick solution of the Kashmir dispute, to provide a seamless regional trade border for the multinationals, to control the market of one billion consumers during the 21st century.

The dispute has lasted half a century, and cannot be allowed to continue indefinitely (the interested quarters are saying indirectly). It should surprise none if conditions are created stealthily for enforcing the old UN Resolution. It might mean one day of employment of UN peacekeeping force in the affected area, to bring about a peaceful solution. The situation is such that no option can be ruled out. Once the superpower is interested or obsessed with something, the situation goes out of local control.

Another potential hot spot is closed in Myanmar, where the eagle is circling. Further developments will not take long to emerge. Till then, the fingers can be kept crossed.



TOM &amp; JERRY



By Hanna-Barbera



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