

United Nations and Bangladesh

by Harun ur Rashid

What Bangladesh lacks in economic or military strength could be recouped through creative and imaginative footwork in multi-lateral diplomacy. Bangladesh should continue to be projected as a credible nation to enable it to play a key role in the UN. Stable democratic institutions is a vital ingredient in the make-up of this credibility. How we achieve this will present a challenge to Bangladesh.

BANGLADESH celebrates this month the 25th anniversary of its formal entry to the United Nations (UN). In fact on 10th June 1974, the Security Council deliberated on the issue of admission of Bangladesh and unanimously recommended to the General Assembly for the admission without voting pursuant to Article 4 of the Charter. Bangladesh first applied for the membership of the UN in 1972 but the issue was postponed by the Council because of the resolution of the Council of December 1971 on Indo-Pakistan war was not implemented fully by India and Pakistan.

During the initial phase of our foreign policy in 1972-1974, it was focused principally to obtain formal recognition from as many countries as possible so as to consolidate our independence by entering into bilateral relationship with other countries. With the admission in the UN, Bangladesh became fully integrated into the family of nations and it was a proud moment for the people of Bangladesh. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman addressed the General Assembly of the UN in Bengali which was translated into official UN languages for the audience.

The United Nations was set up on 24 October 1945 by the victors of the Second World War at its inception only 51 members and they are known as 'original members of the UN'. Now it can boast of having 188 member-states. (Three states were admitted at this session of the UN). One can argue that the increase in membership itself is a testimony to the usefulness of the organisation if the UN was not in existence it had to be invented because many of the contemporary issues are global in character and requires global response, such as, environment, communicable diseases, drug trafficking, money-laundering and terrorism.

The obligations of the member-states under the Charter are paramount. That means that if there is a conflict between the obligations under the Charter and those under other international agreement, the Charter will prevail (Article 103 of the Charter). The obligations under the Charter for maintenance of international peace and security are so weighty and pervasive that they are applicable even to the non-members of the UN (Article 2.6 of the Charter).

Assessment of the UN's Activities: Successes and Failures

The Charter is quite broad, has a comprehensive mandate and encompasses a span of activities that ranges from the normative to the operational. Its presence is global, regional and country-based. It seeks co-operation from its member-nations in every possible sphere of activity and performs a central role in harmonising the actions of nations in the attainment of the common goals envisaged in the Charter.

The UN was established immediately after the Second World War. There was a cry all over the world that war must be abandoned and peace must be maintained. The founders believed that there must be a mechanism at the global level of establishing peace and security. This sentiment has been reflected in the Charter whose principal aim is directed to take effective 'collective measures' for the prevention and removal of threats to international peace and security.

The consensus among the victors of the Second World War which underpinned the

functions of the UN received a battering during the Cold War and as a result serious differences arose among the five permanent members of the Council (US, Russia, Britain, France and China) who possess veto-power. Although the US and Europe were in peace, there were innumerable conflicts or civil wars in other continents and it was the lack of political will among the members of the Security Council that prevented the UN machinery to work to contain the regional conflicts.

Generally speaking, it is the deliberations of the UN in political conflicts in New York which receive attention in the media and often these political conflicts are intractable because of the disagreement among the five permanent members. For example, the sanctions on Iraq imposed in 1990 cannot be lifted due to the differences of opinions among 'the big five'.

The UN failed badly in Somalia, Rwanda, Angola, and to some extent in Bosnia. It did not involve itself in Sierra Leone and Congo. It seemed to ignore Sudanese civil war and Eritrea-Ethiopia conflict. When I say the UN, I mean the member-states who decide what it may do - first and foremost, the five permanent members of the Security Council of the UN. Secretary General Boutros-Ghali had to go because of the disagreement on how to handle the regional conflict between the UN and the US.

The power and functions of the Security Council have been paralysed because of the disagreement among the veto-holding permanent five members. In recent months the UN faced a crucial challenge in Kosovo but it failed to act because of the threatened veto from two of its permanent members. As a result, the NATO led by the US, arrogated to itself the role of the UN with the decision to go to war with Yugoslavia in Kosovo. This is not a good omen for the future of the UN.

However, the functions of the UN have undergone a huge shift during the last 54 years of its existence. We may not lose sight of the highly successful activities of the UN in international economic and social cooperation that affect the common people in the member-states. The exemplary work of the UN and its agencies in Vienna, Rome and Geneva and in other cities are hardly noticed. Let me give an example: at any point of time thousands of planes belonging to various airlines are flying over the air space of other countries in the world and they are flying smoothly because of the rules and regulations of International Civil Aviation Organisation in Montreal (Canada) which comes under the umbrella of the UN since 1947.

It is interesting to note that the socio-economic co-operation among the member-states was spelt out only in two chapters out of the total nineteen chapters of the Charter. These activities which grew out of proportion from its original shell projected a good and kinder image of the UN to the average people in the developing world.

Organisations, such as UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), UN Human Rights Commission, United Nations High Commission for Refugees

(UNHCR) and the specialised agencies such as Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), World Health Organisation (WHO) and International Labour Organisation (ILO) have become familiar in the developing world as they have initiated global partnership to alleviate the sufferings of their people.

Another activity that has been carved out for the UN is related to the request for electoral assistance from the UN in their democratisation process. The presence of the UN observers seeks to enhance the legitimacy of an election through a dialogue with the government, political parties and the civil society. It is reported that till 1997, no fewer than 80 requests were received by the UN. This function of the UN was unthinkable in view of the stipulation in the Charter that the UN will not intervene in matters which are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any state (Article 2.7 of the Charter), which was zealously guarded by the member-nations.

Another function of the UN often witness is the stationing of peace-keeping forces in the conflict zone. The peace-operations are a form of law enforcement favouring the weak and the defenceless. Interestingly, the Charter does not mention specifically the much-valued role of the UN in stationing its peace-keeping forces in a territory of a member-state. Had the founders foreseen this role of the UN, they would have contemplated a UN standing force to intervene to prevent or contain threat to peace.

At present in a conflict or threatened conflict, the UN, on each occasion, has to rely on the willingness of the member-states to contribute its armed or police force or civilian personnel to the UN for its peace-keeping role. It creates delay in the deployment of peace-keeping forces and hurts the victims of the conflict, principally the civilian population, mostly women and children. The availability of troops for its rapid deployment by the UN needs to be worked out by the major powers.

What we have seen is the commendable but silent work conducted by the UN and its agencies in economic, humanitarian and social fields. The UN has been hugely successful but often it is ignored in the media. It appears that the success of the UN is judged by its role in the conflict-situations and since it is being paralysed by the veto-holding members of the Council, UN has to wear a negative image.

UN's Future

The question must be asked: just what would be the role of the UN at the 21st century? The answer begins with another question: would the major powers agree to undertake reforms of the UN to meet the challenges of the next century? Every nation has a range of opinion on such questions. The wall of words goes up among the major powers and the rest of the member-states may just have been sidelined in the crucial and informal debates within the four walls of the UN premises. I would assert that

all member-states, big or small, weak or strong have the right to engage with what is going on with the debates on the reforms of the UN. Every member nation has to make balanced assessments about the competing interests, opportunities, remedies and risks within the structure of the UN.

It is seen that there is a change in the UN's role in maintenance of threat to peace and security. The UN now authorises the regional organisations or countries to handle such crisis, such as East Timor, Sierra Leone and Congo. This practice appears to be consistent with the UN Charter so long the regional organisations or countries have the backing of the UN. The US administration supports this regional policing role as it cannot have its troops everywhere.

It is argued that the UN Charter has three core objectives: security, development and human rights. These three are equally important for the promotion of human dignity.



24 Sept 1974: Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman addressing the UN General Assembly in Bengali.

Growth and development is not possible unless there exists peace and security. Development eradicates poverty and promotes literacy which in turn advances the cause of human rights.

What do we see today in the Third World? The gap between the rich and the poor countries is larger at the end of this century than it was in the beginning. The rich nations are getting richer as poor nations struggle on fringes of the global village. In 1960, the richest fifth of the world's people had 30 times as much income as the poorest fifth. By 1997, that proportion had more than doubled to 74 to 1.

The UNDP said in its annual review this year that global inequalities in income and living standards have reached 'grotesque proportions'. The richest countries have 20 per cent of the world's people but 86 per cent of its income and the poorest one-fifth of nations get 1 per cent of world's income. 3 richest people have more assets than the total assets of the

poorest 600 million of 48 Least Developed Countries.

The inequality has become so wide that 200 richest people doubled their income in past 4 years to \$100 billion while 1.3 billion people live on less than \$1.00 a day. The same computer that costs a month's wages for the average American takes eight years' income from the average resident of Bangladesh. A US medical library subscribes to around 5000 journals while Nairobi University Medical School in Kenya gets 20.

These are not only the grim statistics but a grim reality affecting the people in the power nations. The UN cannot be a silent spectator to this bizarre inequality which creates social tensions and endangers the stability and security in the developing world. The UN must grapple with the situation through initiating a meaningful dialogue among the rich and the poor nations.

The next round of trade negotiations at Seattle in November under the auspices of the

heart of globalisation. The concept lacks moral dimension, a sense that there is something wrong about a system which adds risk to those able to bear it the best and which tolerates indecent disparities in wealth and well-being. The UN needs a robust policy framework for coping with the challenges of the new disorder.

The international community is being confronted with new issues. Biological weapons and man-made poisons, in other words, chemical weapons are relatively easy to make by any qualified professional personnel. With germ warfare, tiny quantities could be enough to inflict tens of thousands of casualties. Just like germ warfare attacks, computer virus could challenge the ability of any government and economy to keep functioning. Terrorism appears to be far more a free-lance operation, driven by personal fanaticism than any practical and political objective.

The digital divide (information technology) between north and south continues to increase and this will likely to impact adversely commercial interests between the rich and the poor countries. Among the social problems, human security, illiteracy, unskilled human resources, population control, empowerment of women, communicable diseases, drug trafficking and drug related problems, migration of people, sustainable environment, scarcity of fresh water and natural disasters need to be addressed at the next century.

All the above issues need global solution and the UN will have to deal with them. The UN can function well with the support of major powers, the five permanent members of the Security Council. Most importantly the UN has to elicit support of the US as after 1945 it took over the world leadership. Ten years ago eight of the 10 biggest multinationals in the world were Japanese; now they are all American. Its military might was demonstrated by its remote-controlled war in Kosovo. Some predict that 21st century would continue to be dominated by the US because of its supremacy in the information revolution.

It is not incorrect to say that with the support of the US (or at least need not to face US opposition) the UN will have the credibility and the teeth to bite. Take last year's treaty setting up an International Criminal Court. Washington did not sign it and it remains little more than a paper-document until it signs the treaty.

Review of the UN Charter

The developing countries which emerged as independent states after 1945 had no inputs to the preparation of the UN Charter. Although the Charter does not suffer from any serious shortcomings, the small membership of the Security Council, the most important organ of the UN, does not represent the contemporary power realities. The increase of membership of the Council from 11 to 15 came into effect in 1965. There is a demand that the membership should be increased to a reasonable level so

as to reflect the existing political and economic environment. Some maintain that another five (2 of which would be permanent members) from each of the continent except Europe should be included in the Council and there are many ideas proposed by various regional groups in respect of the composition of the Council.

Other priorities are to re-structure the executive configuration of the secretariat of the UN, to remove the UN's chronic funding problem by introducing a new formula or levy, to provide the Security Council powers to defuse tensions through preventive diplomacy and/or take peace or confidence-building measures to contain the situation.

There is a strong view that either the veto-power should be totally abolished or it can be exercised only in certain conditions which will exclude, in respect of peace, operations or in conflict situations. The power of the General Assembly should be enhanced and it should not be considered as the 'talking club'. The Secretary General of the UN should be empowered to take emergency action in conflicts or in situation of gross abuse of human rights under Article 99 of the Charter. At present the Secretary General is only empowered to 'bring to the attention of the Council any matter' threatening international peace and security.

This is not good enough. The review of the Charter is being discussed but because of the lack of unanimity of the major powers nothing has actually moved on. It is imperative that the Charter should be amended to carry out the reforms within the UN.

Bangladesh's Role at the UN

Bangladesh is a responsible member of the UN and has taken its obligations very seriously. It paid its dues regularly and never defaulted once. It is the eighth largest country in the world in terms of population and has been consistently making contributions to the deliberations of the UN and in the agencies. Many of its proposals were adopted by the UN and it earned commendation from other delegations.

Bangladesh was born of a war of independence in 1971 and many countries in the developing world have witnessed the courage and determination of the people of Bangladesh. In fact the role of Bangladesh freedom-fighters have inspired the people in other countries who struggled for freedom. I recall that one Eritrean diplomat told me in Geneva that Bangladesh was a great source of inspiration to them in getting rid of Ethiopia's rule.

Bangladesh has always played a role of moderation in the debates in the UN and its balanced and pragmatic approach is appreciated. Its commitment to peace is total from the very beginning. It responded always to the call of the UN in providing peace-keeping troops/police or civilian personnel which has been admired by the UN Secretary General. Bangladesh has a self-interested preference for the peaceful resolution of conflict, protection of weak against the strong.

Bangladesh is a member of the Organisation of Islamic Countries, Non-Aligned Movement (now the chairperson-designate) and the Commonwealth, besides the UN. This unique position makes Bangladesh privy to many policies and decisions, not available to many countries

and helps to interact effectively with other countries.

Bangladesh holds the chair of the least developed countries in the UN (48 in number) and in that capacity it is involved in 'niche' diplomacy which means concentrating resources in specific areas worth having, generate returns worth having, rather than covering the entire field. By being not economically powerful or militarily strong, Bangladesh is not in a position to impose its will or proposal but often is seen persuasive to have like-minded countries to see its point of view and act accordingly.

Bangladesh was elected as a member of the Security Council for two years (1979-80) within four years of its admission to the UN. During this period, there was no dearth of problems. Among the significant ones were the political crisis in Cambodia, escalating tension between Iran-Iraq in the Gulf, Afghanistan's civil war and the question of Zimbabwe's independence. Bangladesh played a constructive role which was recognised by the members of the UN.

Challenges for Bangladesh

Bangladesh has limited resources and therefore there has to be careful identification of where our interests rest. There is no prestige in pursuing ideas which are over-ambitious or for some reasons would unlikely to generate support from other countries. Resources are to be concentrated where they are likely to have the most useful impact.

Bangladesh needs to address its major focus on human security, transfer of technology, training of human resources, developmental aid, environment and market access of its goods. It needs persistence for a long period to follow an issue. Many good ideas fall by the wayside because they could not elicit support or interest from other countries.

What Bangladesh lacks in economic or military strength could be recouped through creative and imaginative footwork in multi-lateral diplomacy. Bangladesh should continue to be projected as a credible nation to enable it to play a key role in the UN. Stable democratic institutions is a vital ingredient in the make-up of this credibility. How we achieve this will present a challenge to Bangladesh.

Conclusion

The UN is not a supra-national government. It is a mechanism through which the member-states agree to act together and the primacy of the US in decisions reflect its current dominance in world affairs.

We live in an era of change and realignment. The world is rushing into greater integration, driven mostly by market profitability and economic efficiency. Human development and social protection are being ignored. Times of transformation can be challenging. The UN is a unique instrument of concerted action and it is what its member-states make of it.

The question is: how do we get from where we are to where we ought to be when those countries that have the power lack will and those that have the will lack the power? Time will only tell whether the major powers have the will and commitment to make the UN an effective organisation at the next century so that dignity and respect of all nations are preserved and promoted.

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THE Ministry of Planning has turned down a US\$ 23 million proposal for 50,000 cellular mobile phones of Bangladesh Telegraph and Telephone Board (BTB). The donors did not respond and thus the rejection. It was reported in The Daily Star on September 3. Some serious issues seem embedded in the Bangladesh Telegraph and Telephone Board's (BTB) unsuccessful bid to push through the proposal.

At present, four private companies have license to operate a nation-wide cellular phone network. Competition among the four has led to reduction of call charges, connection fees and price of handsets, and resulted in a phenomenal growth. The clientele have reaped the benefits. Naturally, the BTB was rather shaken by this unprecedented market stimulation. It stopped providing further inter-connections to the operators. This was BTB's countermeasure to execute the revenue sharing agreement with them. In fact, BTB had been pushing a 'revenue payment provision'. It mandates cellular phone operators unilaterally paying to BTB for every mobile call to a BTB number. The operators were persuading a bilateral revenue

sharing agreement. Under this plan, BTB is also supposed to pay the private operators when its subscribers call any mobile number. BTB, however, remained reluctant to share any revenue. The cellular phone companies' operators had no option other than complying with BTB's. But the situation did not improve. BTB kept refusing interconnection with the private mobile networks.

PriceWaterhouseCoopers published a telecom sector reform study in April 1999. They observed that the interconnection agreement between the mobile operators and BTB is discriminatory and 'grossly one-sided' in favour of the latter. The former told the consultant that they were 'forced' to sign the agreements, or not at all to be connected with the BTB network.

BTB's attitude also created the most unfortunate mobile users of the world - 'mobile-to-mobile only'. They are allowed to call only the mobiles, but no access to BTB numbers. These mobile 'intercom' users represent 30 per cent of roughly 80,000 cellular phone subscribers in the country. They are unable to call an ambulance, fire service or police during the most crucial moments of their life.

Such isolation is contradictory to the national telecom policy. This policy of 1998 ensures the right of universal access to all mobile phone users in Bangladesh. It means, they would be able to make and receive calls to and from any telephone at an affordable cost. Whereas, acting on behalf of Bangladesh government, BTB impinged upon their rights.

The interim regulator, Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications (MoPT), has been collecting license fees from the operators and annual royalty from each user. But MoPT never intervened to safeguard operators' business interest or users' legitimate right. Rather, it promoted BTB's proposal to Planning Commission. The national planners apparently dumped it.

Mobile hype is not a new BTB ailment. It has been opposing every private telecom venture. Bangladesh witnessed emergence of fax in mid-1980s. Receiving and sending text and picture through a kind of copier over the conventional telephone line was a fairy-tale

Mobile Phone of BTB How Real are the Benefits?

by Abu Saeed Khan

coming true. Fax had an immediate economic impact. Apparel export skyrocketed as the industry was liberated from the snail-speed telex messaging of BTB. Transferring higher volume of information at a lower cost with a faster speed made fax the heart-throb of business community.

A customer buys a fax from a dealer, who imported that device by paying all the duties and taxes. That customer connects the fax with own phone line and pays the call charges accordingly. It increased the international call traffic and brought more revenue for BTB. But, BTB discovered that a simple gadget like fax has conquered its long possessed and profit yielding telex business. It virtually retaliated with the decree of a no objection certificate (NOC) for each fax. Additional payment of Tk. 30,000 as royalty was also imposed by BTB.

BTB also lost another lucrative monopoly, private automatic branch exchange (PABX). Customers had no choice but using BTB's analogue PABX until mid 1990s.

Private vendors introduced North American, European and Japanese digital PBX systems. Availability, price, performance and support wise, BTB's analogue PABX was far behind than its digital competitors. After sweeping the private market, private sector PBX conquered BTB's traditionally guaranteed customers - the government offices.

Fax and PBX explored a new business frontier - office automation. As fax replaced the telex, PBX eliminated another cumbersome communications tool - intercom. Fax and PBX reduced operating costs and improved productivity of trade and commerce. This twosome also germinated the local industries of UPS, voltage stabiliser, cables and other ancillaries. Above all, the Fax-PBX entrepreneurs developed in-house technical expertise to provide after-sales supports. Besides creating jobs, this office automation duo enriched the government revenue. Acknowledging these contributions, the government rewarded the PBX industry by repealing the provi-

sion of NOC and royalty, as it did for fax.

It reflects BTB's poor reflex in open market environment. During last two decades, BTB neither conceived the reality of competition nor it developed any skill to optimise its own resources. The state-owned telecom service provider has lost the spirit of 'service' from its operations. French vendor Alcatel installed 150,000 telephones in Dhaka, Chittagong, Rajshahi, Sylhet and Khulna. In order to monitor the entire network, a centralised network monitoring facility was commissioned at Sher-e-Bangla Nagar exchange in Dhaka.

This facility works like a surveillance system through closed circuit television. It enables BTB to instantly pinpoint any trouble at any point of this massive telephone network. Therefore, the possibility of telephone breakdown is almost nil. Such a strategic resource remains unused since Alcatel completed this project in early 1997. BTB may be careless about its own development but seems very careful

against any advancement in the private sector.

Internet Service Providers (ISPs) brought the cyber bounty in 1996. To develop an intelligent nation, the industry persuaded the government into waiving import tariff from computers. This landmark decision in 1998 exploded the growth of PC and Internet users. But, the ISPs have limited liberty of selecting satellite carrier for connecting respective server. Their choices are restricted among BTB specified satellite carriers. It is costing the Bangladeshi ISPs US\$6,000 per month. This amount is reportedly eight times higher than what their Indian counterparts pay. Such penalty is pertaining to BTB's unnecessary involvement as a broker. In fact, BTB retains the lion's share from the ISP's satellite payment. BTB found it not enough and itself emerged as an ISP in 1999. Unlike its private rivals, BTB enjoys a huge cost advantage as an ISP. No wonder, it bravely charges 'peanuts' and proudly claims to be competitive.

Had the independent telecom regulator been functional, the private telecom and IT sector would have been salvaged from such atrocity. The Cabinet is yet to review the draft telecom regu-

latory commission act. Then it will be forwarded to the parliament for final approval. Meanwhile, MoPT and BTB are pursuing rather a scorched earth policy for the private mobile operators.

A danger is perhaps imminent in the name of 200,000 Personal Handyphone Systems (PHS). This US\$ 2-billion yen venture is alleged to be a dumping project of the Japanese telecom wastes. The project cost is excluding the frequency charges and operating license fees, payable to MoPT. Interconnection charges with BTB and four private cellular networks are not addressed either.

Moreover, BTB will require sharing its physical infrastructure with the PHS venture. PHS investor will use BTB's buildings, underground copper cables and existing duct/sub-duct for optical fibre backbone. BTB will also expand the capacity of its local, long distance and international gateways to connect the PHS network. Some disastrous facts about PHS were discussed by the writer in an article published in The Daily Star on March 15, 1999. MoPT has directed BTB to go ahead with the PHS project. But will it be a forward journey?

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