

# Davos: a few words of contrition are not enough

CHAKLADER MAHBOOB-UL ALAM writes from Madrid, Spain

**D**AVOS is a small German-speaking mountain town situated more than 1500m above sea level, in eastern Switzerland. It has long been considered as one of the world's finest ski resorts. But its recent reputation is due not so much to its excellent winter sports facilities, nor to its bracing air (particularly good for the treatment of tuberculosis) but to its being the venue for the annual meetings of an institution called the World Economic Forum (the brain child of a clever impresario called Klaus Schwab). The WEF is considered as the world's biggest think tank by its supporters and as the largest gaffest by its detractors. Here, where Thomas Mann wrote *The Magic Mountain*, the rich (the barons of capitalism), the powerful (the politicians) and the agents of global capitalism (the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and the World Trade Organisation - GATT before 1995) have been meeting regularly since 1971 "to search for multilateral solutions to emerging world problems". Every year, they discuss the current issues and come up with a motto, a succinct message which forum organisers hope will influence world opinion and guide government agendas all over the world.

As usual, this year, the 31st annual meeting of the WEF was held in Davos. More than three thousand businessmen, politicians, intellectuals and the like met for six days (January 25-30) to address world issues and come up with a message. But the spirit was unusually subdued inside the conference centre and the mood sombre. Why? There were several reasons. Although there have always been some protesters in the streets against this "capitalist club", this year for the first time the Forum participants felt as though they were under siege because of the barbed wire fence around the resort and anti-globalisation protests outside. Determined not to let things go out of hand as they did in Seattle, Prague and Melbourne, the Swiss government deployed a thousand or so riot police and military to protect the Forum and to keep the protesters as far away as possible from the Conference Centre. The second reason was the much-feared end of the new economy cycle indicating a gradual cooling down of the US economy (some even talked of a recession). The third, of course, was the alternative forum (World Social Forum) meeting, which was taking place in Porto Alegre, Brazil at the same time (January 25-30). The fourth reason was the most depressing one of all for the participants which jolted them out of their self-complacent slumber. There were accusations that the Forum was intellectually incapable of setting the agenda for anything, far less

sending a message to the world because of its past failures in anticipating the events leading to the Mexican financial crisis (1995), the fall of the Asian "Tiger" economies (1997), the Russian suspension of payments (1998), the spectacular fall of Nasdaq shares (2000) etc. etc.

If the Forum's raison d'être is to search for multilateral solutions to emerging world problems, a look at the world economic situation, where the gap between the rich and the poor has widened very significantly during the last few decades, the Forum, to put it mildly, has not been very successful unless of

realise that there is something fundamentally wrong with this economic system. After thirty one years of its existence, the WEF has unfortunately become identified with capitalism in its crudest form - heartless capitalism with little social and ethical conscience.

Reading this year's WEF agenda, where items such as "Foster economic growth and reduce social inequalities", "Addressing the Challenge of Inequality in Latin America", "Globalisation and Africa: Failure to Deliver?", "Legitimacy at Risk", "The Backlash Against Globalisation", etc. were included for discussion, it is evident that the

lative financial transactions that unfair? If money can move with such ease across the national boundaries, why is there so much restriction on the movement of workers, particularly from the South to the North? Why even in times of international crises a system that allows the big oil companies to increase their profits by billions of dollars, can not provide micro-credits to thousands of entrepreneurs in developing countries just to have an opportunity to get out of their poverty? Can politics be separated from economics? How can a poor country practise pure democracy when its economic life is controlled from

and control of the municipal budget in its minutest detail. The results have been spectacular. With its well managed schools, colleges, hospitals, museums, public transport system and excellent law and order situation, Porto Alegre has become transformed into one of Latin America's best-administered cities. According to many visitors, the citizens of Porto Alegre possess a high level of civic sense and enjoy a quality of life, which can only be described as excellent. No wonder Porto Alegre was chosen as the venue for the World Social Forum by its organisers (Le Monde Diplomatique and PT Brazil's leftist Workers' Party). The objective was and still is to try to address the above-mentioned issues, which the World Economic Forum, with the connivance of the fat cats of global capitalism managed to ignore so many years. Was this objective achieved?

The answer clearly is no. But it was a good start. Whoever said that it was easy to come up with simple answers to such complex questions? But the Social Forum has at least served one purpose for the time being, i.e. to shake the leaders of global capitalism out of their self-complacent attitude. This year's programme of the World Economic Forum bears testimony to the fact that there is a sudden realisation that there is something fundamentally wrong with the current economic system, which, despite unprecedented economic growth over the last few decades, has made more people hungry and destitute. There must be an alternative. No one in his right mind will think of a communist system (which kills all individual initiatives), as an alternative and very few think that all the ills of the developing countries with their bad government and rampant corruption are due only to globalisation. A lot of people in the developing countries also acknowledge the fact that the rapid spread of new technologies in these countries is to a great extent due to globalisation. But most intellectuals (they do not necessarily have to be leftists) agree that the excessive greed and short-sightedness of global capitalism have decisively contributed to the worsening of the lot of billions of people all around the world, particularly in the South.

These are critical moments for the humanity. I call upon the WEF and the WSF to take a more positive stand and to set up mechanisms for constructive dialogue between them. I ask them to come up with a set of concrete recommendations for a fairer distribution of wealth. Why not organise another world conference (preferably under the auspices of the United Nations) similar to that of the Bretton Woods Conference? The objective should be to rewrite the rules of the game with a view to achieving a better balance between market economy and social justice. Pious hopes and a few words of contrition in a mountain resort are not enough.

## A personal tribute

# Tawfiq Bhai: a rainbow in the sky

FAYZA HAQ

**W**HEN I visited Tawfiq Bhai's house the day he passed away, I heard that he had been a great boon to the poor and the needy in his neighbourhood. I may not fall into that category but for the past ten years that I knew him, he was always ready to wipe my tears and give me courage to plough on in the battle of existence.

I was much junior to him and held no executive post. But he treated me as an equal and gave advice and consent whenever I asked despite his busy schedule. When I had a difference of opinion and nearly left the institution, he calmed me down and made me see reason without the tinted glasses. He added, "To work out your frustrations, come to my house and shout away to your heart's content." In our busy cosmopolitan life with all our frets we seldom have the time or inclination to give so much of time and ourselves to a mere junior colleague. Sure, he knew my family and even grew up with one of my maternal uncles, but that was not enough reason for all the kindness and care he constantly showered on me.

When I returned from overseas, where doctors could only ply me with medicine Tawfiq Bhai taught me the trick of reading till I fell asleep and so helped me combat a terrible problem. I now pass on this cure to others instead of their resorting to medication or other questionable means.

He would pep up my spirit innumerable times as for instance when I once whined, "My mother says so and so is such a public figure and I am nothing but a cipher." To this he said, "Tell her that you are a writer of some consequence and that is no small achievement." And so he often smoothed my ruffled feathers and wooed pride. He also allowed me to watch the TV in his room and knowing how often I feel lost and,

return without finishing my course and that there was not shame in this. Although I stuck it out and persevered, Tawfiq Bhai's concern was of great support for me in a foreign country where I was trying to study and work. Again, when I went to France, he filled me with many telephone numbers in case I was in trouble. This he did with no prompting and came from his genuine concern for a somewhat absent minded and dreamy person like me.

I had the problem of insomnia



that wrecked my schedule and where doctors could only ply me with medicine Tawfiq Bhai taught me the trick of reading till I fell asleep and so helped me combat a terrible problem. I now pass on this cure to others instead of their resorting to medication or other questionable means.

He would pep up my spirit innumerable times as for instance when I once whined, "My mother says so and so is such a public figure and I am nothing but a cipher." To this he said, "Tell her that you are a writer of some consequence and that is no small achievement." And so he often smoothed my ruffled feathers and wooed pride. He also allowed me to watch the TV in his room and knowing how often I feel lost and,

"You can watch it when I'm not here too". He had powerful instincts and often enough he warned me about going around with friends who were not so genuine. At first I had felt that Tawfiq Bhai was being cynical but today I realize how right he was even though he had not met all those people who he asked me to avoid.

Tawfiq Bhai even helped me phrase my questions for my interviews when the subject was beyond my sphere and he did all this in a matter of minutes. He also took pains to read what I wrote when he had a hundred other things to do, attempting to improve my work in future. It was he who had helped me design the masthead of the then "Living" page for which I had been cudgeling my head for long and which meant a lot to me at that time. Whenever I needed a transport for important occasions, he was there with his car to bail me out.

He showered me with gifts, some being too gorgeous so that I would have to give them away to my nieces. There is still his gray and blue jacket that I have been sporting all winter for three years taking it everywhere from concerts and "mildays" and assignments and everywhere it has been appreciated. I have a snazzy shirt too which I wear with my slacks on casual occasions and this smart piece is another gift from Tawfiq Bhai.

Needless to say I enjoyed the home-made goodies like the baked cauliflower and the "patishaptas" that he brought from home. Often I had cutlets and patties too that came from the Dhaka Club, courtesy Tawfiq Bhai.

He had all the time an energy for his colleagues like me and went out of his way to make their life as pleasant as possible. I shall miss him sore.

"And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!"

## LETTER FROM EUROPE

These are critical moments for the humanity. The WEF and the WSF should take a more positive stand and set up mechanisms for constructive dialogue between them... to come up with a set of concrete recommendations for a fairer distribution of wealth. Why not organise another world conference similar to that of the Bretton Woods Conference? The objective should be to rewrite the rules of the game with a view to achieving a better balance between market economy and social justice. Pious hopes and a few words of contrition in a mountain resort are not enough.

course, it is not considered as a world problem. According to James Wolfensohn, President of the World Bank, only 20% of world's six billion people take 80% of its total income.

Again, according to Ignacio Ramonet, the director of *Le Monde Diplomatique* (in 1960, 20% of the world's richest population was 30 times richer than 20% of the poorest, the ratio reached 82 times in 1995. Although exact figures are not yet available, despite phenomenal world economic growth (at a great environmental cost) over the last thirty years, this disparity has now become even more intense. In 70 countries, today the per capita income is lower than what was 20 years ago. Half the population of the world (close to 3 billion people) live on less than two dollars a day. In his inaugural speech at the 31st meeting of the WEF, the Mexican president, Vicente Fox pointed out that today approximately 1200 million people live on less than a dollar a day. If this is not a current world problem, what is? While all this was happening making the poor even poorer, only 225 of the world's richest persons accumulated wealth equal to the combined annual income of 40% of world's total population. There is nothing to indicate that this trend will be reversed in the near future. On the contrary, the future prospects look even gloomier. In the next 25 years, more than two billion people (most of them in the developing countries) will join the club of the impoverished and the destitute. If 56 years after the Bretton Woods Conference (which defined the rules of the new economic order and established the principal international financial institutions), these are the results, one does not have to be a genius to

forum organisers have finally become aware of world's major economic and social problem, which may soon become a political one as well. If there are riots and social disorders on a massive scale in the poorer parts of the world, it may become impossible to contain them within the national boundaries of these countries. It is only a question of time before they spill over into the rich countries of the North.

There is no doubt, the first step towards resolving a problem is to be able to identify it clearly. But now the questions are: How to resolve it? Is the narrow capitalistic system capable of giving a solution to this huge social problem? Is the market economy, by nature devoid of any social conscience and therefore socially unfair? Is capitalism in its present form "the end of history"? Are there any alternative thoughts, messages or systems? If so, what are they? Should an economic system function without any social and moral responsibility? Do we need to make profound changes to the post-war economic order? Can the international trading system be considered fair or is it organised in such a manner that under the guise of globalisation the industrialised countries of the West can keep selling their products to the poorer and less industrialised countries at prices marked by them, while they (the less industrialised countries of Asia, Africa and South America) face huge restrictions while trying to market their products in the North? Is free trade, as espoused by the WTO really free or the rules are deliberately rigged against poor agricultural countries? How to enforce ecological and environmental considerations on multinational corporations? Is Tobin tax on specu-

outside by the World Bank or the WTO or other organisations which take their instructions from the big players of global capitalism? In short, how can we obtain a better and more equitable distribution of wealth, which can restore human dignity to thousands of millions of people all over the world? The idea is not to destroy capitalism but to humanise it.

There are no simple answers to these questions nor any magical solutions to these problems. But the realisation of the fact that the current economic order was incapable of addressing the above-mentioned issues created the need for an alternative forum, i.e. the World Social Forum. The WSF's first meeting was held in Porto Alegre, Brazil with more than 12,000 participants. The idea was not simply to protest against globalisation but to address the relevant issues in a constructive manner. There were both symbolic and substantive reasons for the choice of the venue. Davos is in the North, which is rich, Porto Alegre is in the South. Unlike Davos, which is an exclusive little town with a population of 10,000, situated high up in the mountains, Porto Alegre is a busy port-city (population: 1,500,000) on Lake dos Patos, near the Atlantic coast and is situated only 4 m above sea level. Davos caters for pleasure, while Porto Alegre is Brazil's most important commercial and industrial centre, south of Sao Paulo. For the last twelve years, the city, which is run by a coalition of leftist parties has been experimenting with a novel form of local government through direct democracy. Every year, the citizens through their district representatives participate in the preparation, revision, execu-

# Ensure freedom of expression

NAZMUL HUDA

**L**UCKILY indeed, the US presidential election race was an extremely close one. The world could watch a live documentary on a judicial system of the highest class, and also get a view of real freedom of expression, in one of the most developed countries on earth. Replying to a question from a US Supreme Court judge, Gore's attorney said, "There should be the same standard for all the individual voters, but the question is whether the intent of the voter is too broad or general as that standard." Bush's attorney could not give a clear idea on that standard. The judge who questioned him, frankly said, "I do not have an exact answer either."

The inventor of the vote-counting machine, although he came from the Bush-camp, also frankly admitted, "There may be some percentage of error in the machine, that may not happen in hand counting." Everybody, whether for or against, and even the judges, were well prepared and to the point. There was no false statement or witness, not even any willful misleading or confusing statement, everybody tried to justify his point honestly. To me, it appeared like a single party affair, everybody was sincerely working together for a quick justified conclusion, nobody was ready to waste even half a second, and above all, everybody was ready to accept the decision. It took only two hours' oral argument plus hardly a day to announce the judgement, in a case, on the verdict of which depended the next Chief Executive-to-be of the most powerful country on earth.

As happens in the so called third world countries, it was not a mere game for wasting time, which is the most convenient way of denying justice to a stubborn poor justice-seeker; nobody pushed the poor justice-seekers to untold sufferings by repeatedly shifting the hearing dates unnecessarily, thus forcing people to accept the court-buildings as date-shifting institutions; the sleep-head of justice was not seen to suddenly awaken and work at superhuman speed for a few lucky, powerful and wealthy persons; the 'holy evidence act' was not used in convicting an innocent 12-year-old child to be a prostitute through false evidence of a group of people who had actually raped her; thus rapping the very word 'justice'; the 'magic power' of the same evidence act was not used in honourably freeing a dreadful criminal on the plea of 'want of substantial evidence', knowing fully well that it was impossible to find an 'immortal prophet' who would dare to come to the court

as witness against him; a world record or history was not seen to be created where the date of hearing (fixed by the court itself) was shifted innumerable times in consecutive years where all the parties for or against and even the judges were present every time; as in the busy courts of capital cities, in spite of a comparatively large number of official and unofficial holidays, a period of only 1-1/2 hours (11-10-13-10 hrs) hearing time was not seen to be kept the whole working day; no judge of the lower court said "Verdict of the higher court is not applicable for lower courts"; no judge was seen to say "Issues of all the six lac different filed cases in the country are the same"; no civil judge was seen to be ignorant of certain basic orders of the civil procedure code.

Actually, in a not so civilised third world country, the blindfolded statue of justice does not see any wrongdoing by any powerful and wealthy person and does not also feel the miseries and sorrows of the tortured poor people. However, the statue becomes alive and active when a Utopian fool (?) seeks justice and refuses to accept the old tradition of 'might is right' and she makes this fool pass through different machines at the disposal of the judiciary (the most popular ones being repeatedly shifting of hearing dates unnecessarily and accepting time-petitions happily) for sizing and shaping him till a state is reached when the dream of justice dies within him!

Both, the then US President and the Vice-President, although they disagreed with the decision of the highest court in the country, accepted the verdict. The Senate minority leader refused to accept Bush as the legitimate President in spite of enormous pressure from the media. An American Human Rights activist leader did not hesitate to express all kinds of discontent against the decision of the US Supreme Court and termed Bush as the President of the court and not the President of the people. Defeated Gore received a victorious reception by his camp with continuous shouting of "next 4". Still, there was no question of contempt of court. In such a close-race, there was not even a single instance of physical fighting between the supporters. The whole world was stunned at the wonderful transparency of the court.

In Bangladesh, as the solemn expression of the will of the people, the Constitution has been made the highest law of the country. In the Bangladesh Constitution, all citizens are equal to the protection of law and freedom of thought and

conscience is guaranteed, subject to reasonable restrictions. Even with so many rights given in the Constitution, most of the citizens of the country would prefer to accept his loss rather than report at the police station if anything is stolen, for fear of being entangled with the court, police and the case. A senior journalist of a vernacular national daily aptly narrated the story of what happened to one Ms Geeta Rani, when she came to the court of justice as a last resort. I do not think there is any way of knowing what percentage of justice-seekers embrace the fate of poor Ms Geeta Rani. One would start wondering whether she actually has any real freedom of expression or not, after going through 16 DLR 535, although freedom of expression has been guaranteed in the Constitution, and would not dare to open his mouth. In that DLR, it is said that the liability of contempt of court would exist, even if there is truth in the statement and any attempt to prove that truth would be considered as further contempt.

It is heard that constructive criticisms of the court are allowed. But if any patriot wants to do that, a detailed comprehensive report of the existing situations along with areas for improvement together with the suggestions is needed. While explaining the areas for improvement, the loopholes and hard facts would automatically come, and if one cannot even state facts freely, such a report cannot be prepared. My humble appeal to all patriotic leaders of the country whether in Government or not, is to please come forward for ensuring real freedom of expression in Bangladesh. Once people can narrate facts freely, the valuable data collected thereby will make the job of bringing transparency and accountability in all people-oriented institutions, including the judiciary, much easier. The hon'ble Law Minister says that the people are required to pay money in 26 places for putting up one's case for hearing. From a summary of the present Law Commission report, it does not appear that the harassment and miseries of the people would be lessened and the number of places money has to be given would be reduced either. If any patriot wants to do any good for the common distressed people, he should listen to them first, and try to feel the unnecessary and unjustified sorrows and miseries they undergo.

Nazmul Huda is a former Adviser, Tariff Commission

# Indiscipline corrupts

A HUSNAIN

**T**he nation is suffering from tardy measures on curbing indiscipline in national life, starting with the absence of political will, and indifferent implementation by the civil service. Unless the political regime is firm and clean, the seepage will affect all sectors of public administration and public services.

In a money-hungry developing society, the lure of economic security outstrips the professional responsibilities. The top is not immune to questionable influence, as the stakes are high, and the time available is short (per term). This weakness is not confined to one political party (the ruling regime or the opposition), as ad-hocism and opportunism rule the day. Get-rich quick is a stark reality in the metropolis.

This pattern is evident in Bangladesh since its inception. Speaking cynically, politics is passing through an extremist phase, due to the deprivation syndrome, hence fundamentalism has become a catchword today, and accusing fingers abound. We have to live through this phase; but the question is: for how long. It is a tough test for the top leadership, who have to define the boundary line where the buck stops.

It is not that the policymakers are not aware of the weaknesses in administration, but the dilemma is in the very first phase of house-cleaning. Charly begins at home, before the second phase can start involving the 'others'. So far no regime is Dhaka has faced the

situation squarely and boldly. The measures taken (for show) are too late, and too few. The big guys escape the net. The latest regime has to process the accumulated garbage, and the task is too big to handle without national consensus. If birds of bad feather are not discouraged to flock together, the strength of the dubious communities increase to uncontrollable levels, and this is what we see today in the political and social scene.

The regulating teams have to come from the same contaminated society, therefore nepotism and cronyism exist together. These forces are very powerful at the higher levels. The public see some visible action during the preliminary rounds, but at the semifinal and final stages, the game is not played according to rules. This vicious circle is strong, and difficult to disintegrate (in any capital of the world). What is needed is some sort of political nuclear bombardment.


Belief and action are two different words. If something is not accepted on principle, it cannot be implemented in that circle. Powerful positions and posts are coveted, but the public interest suffers if principles are compromised, specially in a partisan manner. Do unto your brother what you would do unto others is a tough principle which few can pass.

In the LDCs there is a vast gap between political ambitions and political morality. This gap cannot be reduced in one phase, because developing a culture (of honesty) is an evolving process, even after a revolution. The latter is not a routine process, but the solution lies in routine measures. Hence good

regulations are not enough, without proper monitoring and implementation. It is an unpleasant task to maintain discipline, day in and day out, because the forces of evil outnumber the good Samaritans. Hence the paradoxical job survives: The majority is always wrong! The majority cannot work for themselves; the chosen minority (leadership) has to work for the good of the majority.

Floating pious wishes are noble, but these have to come down to earth and take root. Ultimately the burden comes down to individual level of leadership, which act as nuclei for correction of an impure system. Progress in this area has been sporadic, lacking sustainability. One reason is that a leader is too much dependent on outside support, and the inner strength is lacking, to stand firm, once in a while. Few are willing these days to suffer on principle. "Popularity" is a subjective assessment, and cannot stand the test of time. Party success is also subjective, delegating national success to a secondary position.

The workers and the activists can be molded, but the top leaders have to mould themselves without outside support. The inner strength is in short supply. Looking at the polar diagram of leadership, the core is weak, surrounded by elaborate trimmings in the marginal areas. The latter will devour the weak core (weed effect). We need hard-core leadership, not plastic, spongy, foamy stuff.



**HAVE A NICE DAY**

**Dr. Rubaiul Murshed**

**All health information to keep you up to date**

**Vitamins**

Some questions and answers

Q: What are vitamins, minerals and supplements?

A: Vitamins and minerals are naturally occurring substances which are needed by our bodies in very small amounts. This is why vitamins and minerals are sometimes known as 'micronutrients'. They are essential for maintaining a healthy, functioning body. Vitamins fall into two types: fat soluble vitamins (such as A, D and E) which dissolve in fat and can be stored in the body; and water soluble vitamins (such as B and C) which dissolve in water and cannot be stored in the body, therefore they need to be taken regularly.

Other supplements come from a range of different sources, for example food (Co Enzyme e.g. ginseng). These can be helpful to take in order to maintain health.

Q: Where do they come from?

A: Vitamins and minerals are found in the everyday foods which we eat. To ensure that your body gets all the vitamins it needs, it is important to eat a varied, well-balanced diet.

Q: What do they do?

A: Vitamins and minerals are essential to maintain a healthy body. Some vitamins can help with specific parts of the body, for example Vitamin A is vital to maintain good vision. Minerals such as calcium are needed for strong bones and teeth.

Q: Do I need to take a vitamin and mineral supplement?

A: All the vitamins and minerals you need can be found in your diet. However, busy lifestyles and an increase in eating ready prepared foods, getting over an illness, being a vegetarian, pregnancy or simply growing older can lead to you not getting all the vitamins and minerals your body needs. Taking a supplement is a simple solution, a way of ensuring good health and well being.

Once you know in which areas you may be lacking vital vitamins and minerals, you can choose a supplement which meets your needs.

**Tomorrow: Always children first**

