

## 'It's the strong human capital the country can build on'

### An interview with the outgoing ambassador of Norway

HE Gerd Wahlstrom was appointed Ambassador of Norway to Dhaka in 1999. On the eve of her departure after serving as the Ambassador for four long years, she exclusively spoke to The Daily Star about her feelings for Bangladesh, the people she met, her contribution to the social and cultural sector. Accustomed to the traditions of Bangladesh, thanks to her earlier visits to the sub-continent as an official of her government's development agency NORAD, the outgoing Ambassador hoped that the strength and resilience of Bangladeshi people would surely take the country forward. The interview was taken by Kaushik Sankar Das.

**Daily Star (DS):** Madame Ambassador, this has been your first assignment as a government representative in a foreign country, and now you have been in Bangladesh for almost four years. What have your experiences been like in Bangladesh as the Ambassador of Norway?

Gerd Wahlstrom (GW): It has been four very very rewarding years. You can imagine that you will always be a little nervous when you are going to take up a new assignment, and for me, since this was my first posting as an Ambassador, I had a few butterflies in my stomach. But they disappeared very quickly. All credit goes to the people of this country – their warm hospitality and all the kind invitations to people's homes and cultural programmes including art exhibitions and project visits. I have been pleased to accept these invitations, because they have given me an opportunity to meet a number of interesting people, both officially and privately, and to learn more about the country and its rich cultural heritage.

**DS: Did you have any preconceived notion about Bangladesh before you arrived here with the new post?**

GW: I had visited Bangladesh on several occasions earlier since I had been working with the Norwegian agency for development co-operation, NORAD, for almost 30 years. My first visit to this country was in 1977. It was a different country I came to as an Ambassador in 1999.

In 1977, I spent three days in a small village outside of Dinajpur in a farmer's house. It was a traditional mud house, quite comfortable both in winter and summer. I had a lovely time meeting people, talking to them, walking along the paddy fields, recording songs etc. A feeling for this country developed in me and grew stronger over the years as I visited Bangladesh many times in the eighties and nineties as part of my responsibilities in NORAD. From my many visits, I knew that along with all the positive aspects, I would also have to face challenges as an Ambassador, both professional and personal.

**DS: You mentioned that you came back to a different country as the Ambassador as compared to your first visit almost 25 years ago. What were the differences that caught your attention?**

GW: There certainly have been a number of changes in this country since the seventies.

What struck me most when I came as an Ambassador in 1999, was the visibility of women. In 1977, I hardly saw any women outside the household boundaries. When I came to Dinajpur and wanted to meet women in a village, I had to go to their houses. I only saw a few girls



Gerd Wahlstrom: Feelings for Bangladesh

outside, going to school. Today, the picture has radically changed in a positive direction.

**DS: What do you think contributed to this change?**

GW: Women have been offered education, a strong women's movement has developed and job opportunities have been created in the garments sector, in various service industries and in the civil society and government services.

**DS: But incidents of abusing women, both physically and mentally are still common around us?**

GW: Yes, this still happens, and it is very unfortunate. Bangladesh has committed itself to the international conventions of human rights. Still there is abuse, trafficking and acid throwing, and we all agree that it cannot continue. We have contributed from the Norwegian side by supporting civil society organisations that are working on advocacy and the rights of women and children. Bangladesh is very fortunate to have a vibrant and committed civil society. I hope that the focus now given on trafficking of women and children will produce positive results. There are laws, but laws do not necessarily help if they are not implemented. Increased awareness among the law enforcing agencies and the civil society

at large will hopefully contribute to a change. However, human trafficking is a worldwide phenomenon. We have a common responsibility to try to stop it, and cross-border co-operation is important.

**DS: What have been your priorities in building new development related ties with Bangladesh?**

GW: We have been development partners since the independence of Bangladesh, and recently we signed a new Memorandum of Understanding with the Government where the focus of our support is on education and private sector development. We think it is important for this country that jobs are created and opportunities for economic activities enhanced. Within private sector development, Norwegian support has been given to rural electrification and medium and small-scale entrepreneurs. Respect for human rights, good governance and strengthening of democracy are also important elements in Norwegian development co-operation policies.

**DS: What would be your reaction to the question raised by some groups about the accountability of the grants provided by our development partners?**

GW: Accountability and transparency are important. As a development partner, we must know how the money is being spent. In our bilateral agreements, various audit reports and progress reports are included as a requirement. If there are reasons to raise questions, independent audits by a third party are commissioned. These matters have been discussed with government representatives, and an open dialogue is important to identify weaknesses in the delivery system and agree on important improvement measures. Building accountable institutions is a must.

**DS: Who, in your eyes, have more responsibilities to ensure accountability?**

GW: The main responsibility lies with the recipient, but a development partner is answerable to its parliament, which has provided the funds. Only if we can find ways to detect the weaknesses in the delivery system and agree on improvement measures, a win – win situation will be obtained.

**DS: You have also been actively involved with the social and cultural scenario of Bangladesh. How did that interest originate?**

GW: Bangladesh has a rich cultural heritage that the people of this country can be proud of. It is unique and so much alive and part of people's daily life. When I came here as an Ambassador, I received so many invitations to cultural functions and art exhibitions, and even though the traffic jams sometimes have been a hassle,

attending these functions has been very rewarding. It has given me an opportunity to see the country from a different perspective and provided me with an entry point into people's lives.

I have always been very attached to the nature of my own country. The beautiful nature of Bangladesh is reflected in the art and cultural heritage. Artists are depicting the nature through their works and the nature is also reflected in the traditional music. When the flute and the tabla are played together, this is to me describes Bangladesh – the paddy fields, the rivers.

**DS: What prompted you to promote the painters of Bangladesh? Your government has been one of the sponsors of a book called 'Contemporary Art of Bangladesh' which illustrates artwork by 68 artists of the country.**

GW: When I was exposed to the work of the painters, I was amazed at what I saw. Much of it has an international standard. I must admit I wasn't fully aware of this. One afternoon when I enjoyed a cup of tea with renowned artist Mohammed Kibria, he told me that unfortunately there was no book that could introduce contemporary paintings of Bangladesh to an international audience. Only books on individual painters had been published. That set me thinking – Why not? The painters of this country deserve an international exposure, and through positive and dedicated co-operation between artists and art lovers, the book became a reality.

**DS: Lastly, what kind of memories do you take back with you?**

GW: I carry with me good memories of the unique warm hospitality of the people of Bangladesh. I have experienced this on so many occasions – whether it has been out in the rural areas, walking in the paddy fields, visiting people's homes and being offered a cup of tea, or enjoying all the symphonies of food that people have offered me.

Apart from that, I also carry with me a great respect for the strong human capital of this country. The strength and resilience of its hardworking and committed people, the role of the media and the civil society at large, and not the least, the strong women's movement. I have met so many extraordinary women – entrepreneurs, teachers, artists, activists, social workers and rural women. This strong human capital is the resource the country can build on. It is a great asset that allows me to be optimistic about the future of this country. I leave with good wishes for the people and their happiness, and I hope I will have the opportunity to return one day.



MUHAMMAD HABIBUR RAHMAN

## Has the Emerald Buddha talked to you?

Oh Tonuruchi! Has the Emerald Buddha talked to you?

Yes, he smiled and opened and flickered his eyes.

Then he looked at me and smiled again.

Then some thing happened!

What happened that I do not know.

I did close my eyes in awe,

But when I opened them again

I found Buddha was not there.

I could only see a coil of lotus fragrance soaring to the sky.

Tell me, please tell me, am I telling you the truth?

Or, is it all my hallucination?

The Emerald Buddha did not talk to me, I know

But he opened his eyes and smiled at me

What more could the Emerald Buddha do?

That was more than talking to me.

I clasped my hands together and closed my eyes.

Then when I opened my eyes again

I found the Emerald Buddha sitting serene as before.

Muhammad Habibur Rahman is former Chief Justice and head of caretaker government

## HAVE A NICE DAY



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

#### It's about epilepsy

Epilepsy is explained by seizures causing convulsions and loss of consciousness. It is defined by a tendency to recurrent seizures that can lead to loss of awareness or consciousness, disturbances of movement, sensation (including vision, hearing and taste), autonomic function, mood and mental function.

In this subcontinent, basic perceptions about epilepsy were refined and developed during the Vedic period of 4500-1500BC. In the Ayurvedic system, epilepsy is described as "apasmara" which means "loss of consciousness". It has described plentiful of references to all aspects of epilepsy including signs – symptoms, etiology, diagnosis and treatment. Babylonian textbook of medicine also described about this illness in detail. In fact, many of the different seizure types were described in that book as far back as 2000BC, doctors recognise today.

Of the 50 million people in the world with epilepsy, unfortunately some 35 million have no access to suitable treatment. This is either because services are non-existent or because epilepsy is not observed as a medical problem or a treatable brain disorder.

After the invention of human electroencephalograph (EEG-brainwaves) in the field of epilepsy, the presence of electrical discharges in the brain is clearer. It also showed different patterns of brainwave discharges associated with different seizure types. The EEG also helped to locate the site of seizure discharges and expanded the possibilities of neuro-surgical treatments. Another recent stimulus towards the understanding and treatment of epilepsy in the last few decades has been the development of neuro-imaging equipment. Such technology has revealed many of the more subtle brain lesions responsible for epilepsy.

Phenobarbitone and phenytoin were the main drugs for its treatment during most of the time of last century. In recent years, a number of new drugs are available and seizures can be controlled much better than before. There are many people around us who still prefer not to disclose or discuss their epileptic situation. There should be social (as well as by doctors) campaign against epilepsy to improve prevention and management for people with this illness. We need public awareness for a supportive environment in which people with epilepsy can live better.

#### Did you know

Julius Caesar, Czar Peter the Great of Russia, Pope Pius IX, Fyodor Dostoyevsky and poet Lord Byron were all epileptic. Although Dostoyevsky's caring wife described his seizures in a way that would indicate they were of the major variety, involving an aura which had a mystical quality. In contrast, his doctor thought many of his fits were of hysterical nature, as the aura was described as being ecstatic.

Next: Men's health after the age 50.

## Potential earthquake threat and our coping strategies

DR M SHAHIDUL ISLAM

**A**LTHOUGH earthquake in Bangladesh has not yet been recognised as a case of serious natural disaster, but recent occurrences and assumptions have already generated a potential threat. The incidents of recent repeated earthquakes on 27 July in Chittagong have raised a great concern among the people of the country, particularly among those around Chittagong region.

What is an earthquake? It is a shock or a series of shocks on the earth surface resulted from release of pressure due to sudden movement of crystal rocks along active fault lines or plate boundaries of the earth surface or in areas of volcanic activities. Some parts of the world are earthquake prone more than others, although such event may happen at any place, any time and that of any magnitude. Japan, the Philippines, Southeast Asia and North America are particularly vulnerable to earthquake.

Geographically Bangladesh is located close to the boundary of two active plates: the Indian plate in the west and the Eurasian plate in the east and north. As a result the country is always under a potential threat of earthquake of any magnitude at any time, which might cause catastrophic devastation in less than a minute. In the seismic zoning map of Bangladesh, Chittagong region has been shown under Zone II with basic seismic coefficient of 0.05, but recent repeated jerk around this region indicate the possibilities of potential threat of even much higher intensity than projected.

A total of about six lakh incidents of quakes of different magnitudes occur annually throughout the world of which that of magnitudes 6.7, 7.8 and above 8 are 120, 18 and 1, respectively. The records in Bangladesh during the last 175 years shows total number of 25, 18 and 4 incidents of earthquakes having intensity more than 6, 7 and 8 on Richter scale, respectively. Among such incidents Bengal Eq of 14 July 1885 (R-7), Great Indian Eq of 12 June 1897 (R-8.7), Srimangal Eq of 8 July 1918 (7.6) and Assam Eq of 15 August 1950 (R-8.5) are well known. However, people's awareness regarding earthquakes in Bangladesh began to generate after the tragic death of Sadia (a little girl) in a quake of only R-5.6 magnitude on 21 November, 1997. Moreover, the incidents of repeated shocks between 22 July and 2 August, 1999 at Moheshkhali and the damages to lives and properties could draw the attention of the nation considerably.

Since then earthquake in Bangladesh has been considered as a potential natural killer to human lives. The last major earthquake in Bangladesh occurred about 30 years back. Statistically the threat of such a high magnitude tremor has the highest possibility to happen at any time, which might cause devastations particularly in Dhaka and Chittagong cities.



The devastation an earthquake can cause: Bhuj instance.

The occurrence of earthquakes is part of the natural process in the earth's geological system. Under the present stage of scientific development it is not possible to stop such natural events, and even if it was possible to do so, we should not intervene such internal system of the earth. However, understanding the characteristics of internal geo-physical process of the earth and possibility of its forecasting can reduce the casualties from such incident considerably.

It is not the earthquake rather it is the building that kills people. If the collapse of even a single building can become possible to stop, it can save many lives residing in that building. It is not possible to abandon all old buildings, under the potential threat of earthquake. However, it is quite possible that all newly constructed buildings and structures must be brought under strict building code that resists earthquake damage.

Bangladesh is possibly one of the countries most vulnerable to potential earthquake threat and damage. An earthquake of even medium magnitude on Richter scale can produce a mass graveyard in major cities of the country, particularly Dhaka and Chittagong, without any notice. Construction of new buildings strictly following building code or development of future controls on building construction are the activities which will be functional in future. However, under the present stage of human occupancy, buildings, infrastructures and other physical structures of different areas of a city will not be equally vulnerable to any such shock. Earthquake vulnerability of any place largely depends on its geology and topography, population density, building density and quality, and finally the coping strategy of its people, and it shows clear spatial variations. It is thus necessary to identify the scale of such variations and take necessary measurements to cope with that.

Although the earthquake tremors cannot be stopped or reduced, the human casualties and loss of properties can be reduced with the help of an earthquake vulnerable assessment atlas. An earthquake atlas is the presentation of facts relating to earthquakes and the guideline for earthquake mitigation measurements at regional scale in the form of map, graphs, pictures and text. Such an atlas provides clear guidelines to post disaster rescue operation, regional scale people's awareness can reduce the casualties from any earthquake

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assessment atlas of Bangladesh in general, and for the major cities in particular.

Large scale mitigation measurement needs huge initial investment; however, to save human lives and properties, we should not hesitate to do so. Particularly strict control of building codes, enforcement of laws and orders, and development of people awareness has no alternatives. However, some immediate measures are suggested below:

+ Make an inventory of all old buildings which are vulnerable to earthquake, and either repair or evacuate occupants from those buildings.

+ Make an inventory of houses, which are constructed at the foot of steep hillsides, particularly where hill slopes have been cut, even ten years back. Relocate those families to suitable places.

+ Make earthquake vulnerability atlas of major cities, which will show in detail the list of vulnerable sites, their possible consequences and possible measurements of mitigation at different scales of earthquake events.

+ Strict application of building codes for all newly constructed buildings, particularly all high rises buildings.

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