

An interview with Peter Bell

# 'The resilience and energy of Bangladeshis amaze me'

Peter Bell, President of Care, USA, has long been a friend of Bangladesh. Recently he returned to the country for the third time to see for himself how we were doing and to review the pace of development and the advances that have been made since his last trip six years ago. He was also here to oversee the progress made by Care, Bangladesh, which operates under the auspices of Care, USA, the organisation that Bell heads.

Bell is a world-renowned humanitarian who has been a senior figure in international development since the seventies. He has held senior leadership positions at the Ford Foundation, among other private foundations and organisations he has worked for in development, and has worked in government as a high ranking member of the Carter administration.

Initially the Chairman of the Board of Care, USA, he has served as the organisation's President since 1995.

Much of Bell's time in Bangladesh was spent touring the country's rural areas to gauge the effectiveness of Care, Bangladesh's programmes. Nevertheless, he made the time last week to speak to The Daily Star's (DS) Zafar Sobhan about the state of the nation and the world. The following are excerpts from their conversation:

**DS: Tell us your impressions of Bangladesh**

Bell: This is the third time I have been here. The first was fourteen years ago and the second time six years ago. I can't tell you how happy I am to be back and how much I enjoy being here. In the first place, especially when you get out of the cities, I am always struck by the sheer physical beauty of the countryside. There's something very special and seductive about the lushness of the landscape. So it's always a pleasure!

But more than merely the physical beauty of rural Bangladesh, I really appreciate and am impressed by the energy and industry and ingenuity and resilience of the people. The resourcefulness people show everyday in the face of great difficulty and really daunting challenges is a welcome thing. What has always struck me about Bangladesh on my visits here is the courage and the determination of the people. There's a great deal of energy here and it is very heartwarming to see how people who

often have very little are so committed to improving their lives. It's a humbling experience. It helps me to remember why I do what I do and what my function is. It is to help people to help themselves. And the people have such a hunger to improve their lives -- such dedication to their children and the future -- when many others might be tempted to give up or to despair -- that it really makes giving them that helping hand so worthwhile.

**DS: What do you see as the main challenges Bangladesh faces?**

Bell: I think that there are basically three principal challenges. The first is basic education, the second is women's rights, and the third is combating corruption and crime. I actually see a lot of positive steps being taken on the first two. I think that a lot of good work has been done by all sectors to improve access to education and improve the status of women in Bangladesh. I think I have witnessed real commitment on the part of the government to educate the people -- and that's always an encouraging thing. And the number of people educated by the NGO sector is just astonishing. It shows real commitment on a nationwide level. I'm incredibly proud of the work that Care has done in this field. But their is still a lot of work to be done. At Care, we concentrate on remote and underserved areas and try to reach populations and communities that need the help the most.

We try to emphasise girls' education because that is one area in which Bangladesh does lag and where the gains made over the past few decades have not fully been enjoyed. And it's not just education. Expanding rights and opportunities for women is critical -- absolutely critical -- to the country's development. Any country's development. Any country in the world where human development is not fully actualised the bulk of the problem lies in empowering the women. But again there have been astonishing achievements in this area. Of course there is still far to go, but it is clear to me that people take the issue as seriously as they should and that Bangladesh is moving in the right direction.

But the increasing level of criminalisation -- the extent to which crime and corruption have become institutionalised -- is a real concern. It threatens to undo so much of the good work that has been achieved. Now I don't think that Bangladesh is going backwards. Or ever will. Far from it. The country has made impressive gains since independence and all the important indicators are pointing in the right direction -- infant mortality, maternal mortality, literacy, immunisation, nutrition, access to education -- all these things. So there has been tremendous advancement. But I fear that the crime and corruption which you read about -- and which everyone tells me about -- really has held things back. It's a serious concern.

**DS: Tell us a little about yourself and the path you took to working in development.**

Bell: I was born in Gloucester, Massachusetts, the oldest fishing port in North America, the eldest of six children. But the most formative experience I had when young was when I went to Japan as an exchange student in 1957 at the age of seventeen.

I spent several months living with a family who had lost members in the Nagasaki bombing. I only found this out on the anniversary of the bombing. The family I stayed with had taken me in -- an American -- to try to foster some kind of reconciliation with America.

Their generosity and openness of spirit moved me in a profound way and my experience among them helped to shape me into the person I am today.

It made me want to become a peacemaker. And in different ways this is what I have tried to be ever since then.

**DS: How did you pursue this when you returned home?**

Bell: I attended college at Yale, graduating in 1962. But even before I graduated I had decided what my calling was. In the summer of 1960 I worked in Cote d'Ivoire, helping to build a rural school out of cinder blocks. This was an amazing time to be in Africa. I witnessed the independence of Cote d'Ivoire and was caught



up in the excitement and enthusiasm of the time all around me.

**DS: Japan... Cote d'Ivoire... and you were still not yet 21! Where else have you lived?**

Bell: Well, when I was in graduate school at the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton I spent time in Mexico working to help the integration of the indigenous peoples into mainstream society. My graduate work was in economic development, you see. Then, after graduation, I worked for the Ford Foundation in Brazil for four years and then worked in Chile for three and a half years. So you could say that I've been around the block a little!

**DS: And then back to the US?**

Bell: Yes. I moved to DC and went to work for the Carter administration in the Department of Health and Welfare before moving to a private foundation that worked on urban poverty. I initially became involved with Care's work because I was working on the domestic resettlement of refugees. So I have been involved with Care in some capacity since way back in the seventies. I was elected to the chairmanship of the board in 1989. I continued in this capacity until 1995 when we needed to find a new president. I couldn't think of a better way to continue making a meaningful contribution than to assume that role and that is what I have been doing ever since.

**DS: Tell me, what do you feel is your greatest achievement -- what are you most proud of?**

Bell: I have been privileged to have had one great job after another, but sometimes one's greatest accomplishment is making the best of a bad job. I was the head of the Ford Foundation in Chile at the time of the military coup which overthrew the government of Salvador Allende. This was the time when people were being "disappeared." It was an incredibly dangerous and frightening time for Chileans. There'd be a knock on the door and you would never be seen again.

In this time, we were able to rescue dozens of people from torture and hundreds from imprisonment by the simple and straightforward method of inquiring after them, identifying them, finding ways to get them out of the

country, to resettle them. It was simple stuff. Making calls. Keeping up the pressure. But I am so glad that we were able to do even what little we could accomplish.

The other achievement I would say that I am proud of -- and I guess that my experience in Chile was formative in this way -- was to see Care move from a development focused organisation to a human rights one. To see the evolution of the organisation to one that is more explicitly principled with the dignity and the rights of every human at its heart.

I think this evolution has had a real impact on our effectiveness and our ability to really help people in the way they need to be helped. We have done great work in basic education -- educating girls -- many things -- but I do think that the secret for us has been to focus more on rights and dignity than economic development.

**DS: What are some of the frustrations you have faced in your career?**

Bell: Frustrations! Well, I am frustrated by the apathy there is in the world -- specially the first world -- about extreme poverty. To my mind there can be no question that it is the most important issue of our time, the greatest challenge that faces us as a people. It is frustrating to know that the technology and wealth to eradicate extreme poverty exists but that extreme poverty is still with us. What is lacking is the political will.

That's why a lot of the work we do in the US -- a lot of our most important work -- is simply spreading the word. Letting people know what needs to be done and what can be done and what is being done.

**DS: Who were your childhood heroes? Do you have one now?**

Bell: In my teens and early twenties -- as many of my generation of Americans were -- I was greatly influenced by the teachings of Gandhi and Martin Luther King. They had a profound impact on how I viewed the world and my place in it. The moral authority they brought to their leadership was what made them so inspiring. But I was equally if not more influenced by some people who no one else might ever have heard of. Foremost among these was my Japanese "mom" Mrs. Okajima whose motto was to "try to make the world more wonderful." Then, when I was in college, I had a philosophy professor -- Prof. Weiss -- who ended the semester with the admonishment: "Go forth and make the world less miserable!" I have never forgotten that. It's still good advice!

**DS: Which world leaders today do you find inspiring?**

Bell: Sadly, we seem to live in a time when true leadership is in short supply. He no longer is in government but I think that Nelson Mandela still counts as a world leader. I can't think

of anyone else today of comparable stature.

**DS: Do you have kids? What do they do?**

Bell: I have a son Jonathan who used to work in the Peace Corps. He now has an MBA and works in emerging markets fund management -- focusing on Asia. We used to joke that he would rebel against me and his mother by getting a job on Wall Street. Well, he hasn't done that -- but this is pretty close (laughs). I'm joking of course, we're very proud of what he's accomplished. My daughter Emily is at Princeton where she works on health policy, focusing mainly on HIV and tuberculosis.

**DS: Switching gears... globalisation... boon or bane?**

Bell: I think the issue is not so much whether globalisation is good or bad as much as it is how to make it fairer. A good example of this is the farm subsidies that protect farmers in the West at the expense of farmers in the third world. We need to focus on making the rules of the game fairer to all.

**DS: How do we accomplish that?**

Bell: There's no real easy answer. The issue is really far more complex than one of, simply one of North versus South. Globalisation needs to be regulated better. But I do think that what we are seeing is a real debate on how to frame the rules in a more equitable manner. One step which needs to be taken to help accomplish this is to strengthen the UN to empower it to really be able to take a muscular role in setting the agenda and protecting the interests of all, not just the wealthy nations.