

New twist in the Middle East



ARSHAD-UZ ZAMAN

THE HORIZON THIS WEEK

Left to themselves, the fun loving and business minded people of Lebanon would want nothing else than be left in peace. Will the great and small powers including those who surround it, leave this tiny piece of paradise in peace?

war which left the country in total ruin. Rafiq al-Hariri, who had established a personal empire in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and was involved in the construction business, put his heart and soul in the rebuilding of his motherland. Lebanon reemerged from the ashes of the civil war in its full glory and beauty. At the emotional funeral of Hariri, the most important foreign visitor was President Jacques Chirac of France. This is due to historical ties between France and the Middle East and specially Lebanon and Syria. French language continues to have a place of preeminence in those two countries and Egypt.

Thus when the US continued to point her finger towards Syria in the assassination of Hariri, France could not remain indifferent and joined hands with the US and demanded withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon. We may note that for many years now Syria has maintained nearly 14,000 troops in tiny Lebanon to ensure security and specially against attacks from Israel. Faced with this dual pressure Syrian

President Bashar al-Assad had to yield and thus we see the pull back of Syrian troops begin. For the West this may be the first step for the Hezbollah may very well be the next. After it is the Shia Hezbollah fighters, who have continued to cause damages within Israeli ranks. From the march of events, it becomes clear that the intention of the Western powers, may very well be to transform this Switzerland of the Middle East into a veritable neutral and weapons free state/zone. The only matter that seems to go against this plan is the geography of Lebanon and particularly its strategic location. That Lebanon is located in the heart of the 'burning' Middle East, seems to militate against a peaceful future for this picturesque country.

Left to themselves, the fun loving and business minded people of this pretty country would want nothing else than be left in peace. Will the great and small powers including those who surround Lebanon, leave this tiny piece of paradise in peace?

Arshad-uz-Zaman is a former Ambassador.

WORLD ECONOMIC FORUM

The forum of young global leaders

ZAFAR SOBHAN

SINCE I began writing this series on my time at the World Economic Forum the one question which I have been asked again and again is what exactly was I -- Zafar Sobhan

-- doing in Davos alongside the likes of Bill Clinton and Tony Blair.

Fair enough question. I am neither rich nor famous nor a member of the global power elite. Hell, I'm not even a member of the Bangladesh power elite.

This is how it happened. One day I arrived at the office to see that I had received an email from a gentleman at the Swiss embassy by the name of Mustafa Moinuddin.

It turned out that the World Economic Forum was launching a new initiative called the Forum of Young Global Leaders and that Mr. Moinuddin was in charge of nominating candidates from Bangladesh.

The idea behind the initiative was to bring together a group of young people from around the world who have demonstrated significant leadership (or potential for leadership) and commitment to positive social change in order to create a global network to work towards making the world a more prosperous and peaceful place.

Was I interested, Mr. Moinuddin wanted to know.

Sure, I said. Why not? That was it. A couple of months later, I received a Federal Express package from the WEF informing me that I had been selected as one of the inaugural group of Young Global Leaders and inviting me to Davos.

Perusing the list of the others selected, I couldn't help but think that this had to be some kind of mistake.

But no. Apparently, I was the one they wanted.

What exactly the selection criteria was and how exactly the selection committee came to choose me remains somewhat shrouded in mystery (more so when you compare me with some of the rather more eminent personages who were also picked, such as Rahul Gandhi and Fareed Zakaria).

But mine not to reason why. I was very honoured to be included in such an august grouping and quickly faxed back an acceptance before the organizers recognized their apparent error and rescinded the invitation.

The World Economic Forum was the first time the group was able to meet, and as I thought that it was important for Bangladesh's sole representative to be present from the start so that we would have a seat at the table and a voice in determining the YGL agenda, I made sure that I was there.

In addition -- to be perfectly honest -- going to Davos was an astonishing opportunity that I wasn't going to miss out on if I could at all help it.

In addition to being invited to the World Economic Forum, there was also a special intensive side programme arranged for the YGLs which included, among other things, a special presentation over breakfast one day from Al Gore on the subject of climate change.

I didn't know what to expect when I arrived in Davos on January 24 (two days before the main event) for the start of the special YGL side programme. I

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have learned to remain sceptical when it comes to the usefulness of big meetings like the WEF and of the effectiveness of ambitious organizations like the YGL forum.

The truth is that I expected the forum to be a good opportunity for networking and meeting a group of accomplished and committed young men and women who shared my passion for politics and social change. I was excited to meet some of the big names on the ticket and thrilled to have the opportunity to attend the World Economic Forum and find out what it was all about. But that was about it.

I certainly didn't expect that I would be inspired by the experience and filled with the conviction that together we could actually accomplish something. But meeting the other YGLs and hearing their stories and their ideas for how we can work together for the future was a truly remarkable experience.

Let me tell you a little about some of the other members of the forum and you will see what I am talking about.

I really don't know where to start. Literally every member of the forum had an impressive story to tell and a resume packed with achievement and accomplishment.

There was Gavin Newsom, the 37 year-old Mayor of San Francisco.

There was John Bryant, founder of a social investment bank in South Central Los Angeles.

There was Michelle Guthrie, the CEO of the Hong Kong-based Star Group.

There was Ken Wiwa, the son of executed Nigerian human rights activist and Nobel laureate Ken Saro-Wiwa, and a highly respected activist and journalist in his own right.

There was Malvinder Mohan Singh, executive director of Ranbaxy, the multi-billion dollar Indian pharmaceutical company.

There was Sylvia Matthews, ex-deputy chief of staff for Bill Clinton and currently executive director of the Gates Foundation.

Believe me, I could go on. The forum is a who's who of parliamentarians, cabinet members, CEOs, directors of non-profits, even a couple of heads of state.

This was an impressive group of people and I am honoured (if a little surprised) to be included among them.

It won't last forever, of course. Next year there will be another batch of 200-250 YGLs, and another batch the year after, and every year. My tenure (and indeed that of all the batches) runs out in five years.

But the question is what we will do with the time we have.

This is something that we began to discuss in the sessions we had together at Davos, but we still have a long way to go to reach any kind of consensus as to what would be a workable agenda for the group and what we can realistically hope to accomplish.

We meet again this June in the Swiss town of Zermatt for four days and it is here that we will hopefully hammer

this initiative into something quite meaningful.

Davos does a good job in setting out an agenda for change, but only in the broadest of terms. Both governments and the private sector are heavily influenced by the tenor of the debate at Davos and the issues that are raised there, but many of the participants are there for the experience and not to use the meeting as a spring-board for further action.

The YGLs are a little different. We envision our role as an activist one and the idea is to spend the next five years being active participants in bringing about the kind of change that was put on the table at Davos.

Whether we can live up to this ideal, of course, remains to be seen.

Zafar Sobhan is Assistant Editor of The Daily Star. This piece is the third of a series.

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