

INTERVIEW WITH HARRY K THOMAS

'We would like Bangladesh to live by the ideals of liberation war'

US Ambassador Harry K. Thomas is returning to Washington on July 2 to take up the position of Executive Director of the US State Department, bringing to an end his two year tenure here in Dhaka. The Daily Star's Zafar Sobhan met with him to discuss his time here in Bangladesh and his views on US-Bangladesh relations.

The Daily Star (DS): Recently you were quoted as saying "People may look for an alternative if the major political parties do not work together on issues of national interest and that will not be good for the country." Would you care to elaborate on what you were suggesting?

Harry K Thomas (HKT): People are pretty bright. I think they can figure it out.

DS: But do you have any creative ideas about how we can solve the problem of political gridlock here?

HKT: The problem is simple to see. Finding a solution is not so easy. I don't know, to tell you the truth. President Clinton came here and got the prime minister and the leader of the opposition talking. Maybe we need President Bush to come here now (laughs). Maybe that's what it would take.

DS: The US and you personally are obviously unhappy about any number of domestic issues extra-judicial killings, the persecution of Ahmadiyyas, political terrorism, etc but is there anything the US can or in your opinion should do about these? Basically I am asking what you see the appropriate US role to be here.

HKT: No one likes to be bullied. No one likes to be threatened. We try to persuade. The government. The opposition. Everyone. We would like Bangladesh to live by the ideals of your liberation war and your excellent constitution. We care about human rights. We care about trade. The economic relationship. That's what we try to focus on.

DS: Is there anything you would like the US to do more vis a vis Bangladesh? Any specific initiative you would like to see implemented?

HKT: I don't think we need to do more, frankly. I think we need to do a better job of publicising what we do already. \$100 million has been distributed this year through USAID. We have 70 peace corps volunteers here, soon to be 150. We have the American Corner library in Chittagong and Sylhet. Training centres for peacekeepers. Bangladesh gets more diversity visas than any other country in the world. For the past three years. People don't know this. I mean, we've been here since 1954 doing flood relief. We're the number one export market.

What I would like to see more of are cultural exchange programmes. And I think we will be seeing more in future. We have started to screen films at the American Centre again. That's the type of thing I'd like to see more of. In fact, with air service from India getting better, cultural exchanges will be easier. One problem we've had in the past is getting people here in a timely fashion. I would love to see a renewal of the days when people like Muhammad Ali and Duke Ellington traveled the world as ambassadors for peace. That's something we need to do more of here in Bangladesh.

DS: What would you like to see from us?

HKT: We are pleased with recent steps. The signing of the UN anti-terror convention. The arrest of Ghalib. Stamping out of violence against NGOs. More ministers have started coming to the US on a regular basis. We welcome this. Not just ministers. BGMEA too. This is what is needed. We are happy to host people of influence, whoever they might be.

DS: You have served in New Delhi and were once the Director for South Asia of the National Security Council. What is your view of Indo-Bangladesh relations? Has your view changed since coming here?

HKT: I am hopeful that the relationship is getting better. I am very encouraged that the Saarc summit will finally be held. I hope that Safta can be implemented shortly. Recently there have been what seem to me to be very positive discussions between the two sides on a number of issues and a cooling down of rhetoric. Neighbours have to live together and get along. There



is no alternative.

DS: There is a difference of opinion between Dhaka and New Delhi right now on a number of issues of fact. For instance, on the presence of insurgent camps within our borders. The US has its own intelligence on the matter. Who is right?

HKT: I'm not going to comment on security matters.

DS: Changing gears, do you think the Bush administration has made any missteps in its war on terror and drive for democratisation around the world? What steps can be taken to make these more successful?

HKT: The problem is that small groups, certain elements have violated human rights and there is the belief that we are anti-Muslim. Nothing could be further from the truth. I hope that a stable government in Afghanistan and Iraq will demonstrate this. Iraq is now a democracy. The Iraqis want to vote. Saddam's reign of terror is over. What we need to do for US credibility is to make Iraq and Afghanistan work. This is what will change perceptions.

In the context of Bangladesh, it is our programmes here that will change perceptions. Scholarship programmes for kids, which I hope we can expand. We are now exposing our people to Bangladesh more. One quarter speak Bangla. We have to show that we really do care and we have to be above reproach.

DS: Do you think Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo should be closed down?

HKT: The Vice-president has said they won't be.

DS: But in the interests of the US image?

HKT: Look, we have to live up to our ideals. No question about it. Those guilty of human rights violations need to be charged and prosecuted and sentenced. But let me say one thing about the US image in the world. You never see visa lines to come to the US get any shorter. Seems like the old saying: "Yankee go home, but take me with you."

DS: Thank you very much, Mr. Ambassador. I wish you well in your new career and hope to see you again down the line.

HKT: Thank you and good luck to you as well.

An alternative for flood management

DR. MD. RASHED CHOWDHURY

ONE of the most important objectives of the 'Flood Forecasting and Warning Response System' (FFWRS) is a better comprehension of variability of seasonal flooding and forecast products for community adjustments. Consequently, improved translation of this information into products, and their coordination to various governments, non-governments, and private agencies is essential. Forecasts, either short or long-range, remain underused if these are not disseminated properly to the lowest administrative tier (i.e., the village level of any flood vulnerable community). This objective can be achieved by implementing an integrated 'Flood Forecasting and Warning Response System' (FFWRS). The focus of this article is to the interpretation and dissemination of the consensus seasonal flood forecasts. For this purpose recent developments and experiences from other countries like the model of the 'Southern Africa Regional Climate Outlook Forum' (SARCOF) have been discussed to establish or improve seasonal forecasts and improved warning response system in Bangladesh.

Consensus Seasonal Forecast: Experience from SARCOF

Several international initiatives are in progress to develop models with stronger orientation to users. There are areas in the world, mainly the tropics, for which forecasting is more reliable and consequently seasonal forecasts are already considered to be relatively reliable for practical use. In Brazil, seasonal forecasts are also sufficiently reliable to enable farmers to plan for the anticipated drought. Lessons can be learnt for South Asia by examining forecast strategies applied in above mentioned areas. Globally, the research on seasonal products is increasing while the research related to seasonal forecasting in Bangladesh is just beginning. Some of the recent findings show a great potential for seasonal flood forecast in Bangladesh.

The success of seasonal forecasts requires a closer cooperation between the forecast providers and the forecast users. One example of a project designed to bring together forecasters and users is entitled SARCOF (the Southern Africa Regional Climate Outlook Forum), a pilot scheme in which many of the issues of forecast creation and provisions for estimation of benefits are being examined. The SARCOF process first operated prior to the 1997/98 wet seasons in southern Africa. The process consists of an annual program of three meetings, with the first meeting held in September prior to the onset of the wet season. The principal participants to the Forum are delegations from the National Meteorological and Hydrological Services (NMHS) of the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) region, which have the ultimate responsibility to disseminate the forecast product to their user communities. Within a workshop format, technical and

discussion sessions are held on global and regional climate dynamics, forecast methodologies and seasonal forecast presentations.

Based on the predictions provided by each of the forecast groups for different homogeneous zones of the region, a consensus forecast is achieved through discussions among the participating climate community. For each zone rainfall forecasts for the coming season are expressed as probabilities of occurrence of rainfall in three tercile classes, average, below average, and above average rainfall. This probabilistic product is then distributed to users. In December, a mid-season correction is held. Again, through a process of consensus an assessment of the early season forecast is made. This assists in the update of Forum forecasts for the remaining main wet season period. Finally a post-season meeting is held in April or May in which extensive validation of the Forum product is conducted and the process is debated within the context of user feedback. This allows the aims and methods of the process to be related directly to the requirements of a range of users.

An important component of the

including south and Central America, other parts of Africa and South-east Asia (Harrison, 2000). Products from a number of RCOFs are available online (http://www.cpc.ncep.noaa.gov/products/african_desk/rain_guidance/)

It is envisioned that the model structure of SARCOF is an applicable tool to bring the forecasters and users together in Bangladesh. Moreover, SARCOF model handles on climate information (wet/dry), flood is essentially a component of total climate system -- here in Bangladesh the focus is on the combined effect of rainfall and runoff. Additionally, the socio-economic setting in Bangladesh, which is presumably agrarian, makes Bangladesh a potential candidate country that can benefit from the experience of SARCOF model.

Consensus Seasonal Forecast: An alternative in Bangladesh

Decision-makers worldwide face a difficult challenge in developing an effective response to the threat of water-induced disasters. In Bangladesh, this task is more complex, not

only because of the multitude of such disasters, but also because of the country's vulnerable geography. Major parts of Bangladesh occupy the deltaic plain of the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna river system. Bangladesh is criss-crossed by a labyrinth of rivers. As the country is located at the lowest reach of the fluvial system, and in the area affected by coastal surges, flood disasters of different types are frequent, including river, urban and

tidal or storm surge. It has been observed that the technical components of the FFWRS are relatively better developed in Bangladesh, but the non-technical (soft) components need more attention that can only be achieved by clear understandings and cooperation between various agencies. An operational framework for an ideally suitable FFWRS for Bangladesh may be synthesized in the following 5-stages:

Stage 1: Forecast Preparation -- On the basis of previous and current meteorological, oceanic, and hydrological conditions, this stage predicts the occurrence and magnitude of a flood in advance.

Stage 2: Interpretation and Stakeholders -- This stage identifies the probable impacts of flood upon vulnerable communities, to warn people about the onset of flood and its probable impacts.

Stage 3: Process of Dissemination -- This stage communicates and distributes the warning messages to disaster management agencies and vulnerable communities.

Stage 4: Response -- This stage generates actions by concerned agencies and threatened commu-

In order to enhance the existing FFWRS, Bangladesh currently faces two types of problems: i) seasonal flood forecasts -- the research of which has just begun, and ii) warning dissemination and response -- the research of which has yet to start. For the forecast part, Bangladesh has to rely on the latest ideas and technology from developed countries. Regular exchange of data and a close cooperation between the local institutions [e.g., Space Research and Remote Sensing Organization (SPARRSO), Bangladesh Meteorological Department (BMD), Flood Forecasting and Warning Center (FFWC) of the Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB)] and those of existing regional and international forecast centers would be very essential. For the dissemination part, the model structure of SARCOF as described and discussed in this paper in the context of Bangladesh could be an applicable tool that can bring the forecasters and users together. The advantage of this model is that it increases the skill of forecast for a better comprehension of seasonal flooding variability and change through providing significant opportunities to synthesize the regional climate dynamics ahead of time by virtue of meetings among the local, regional, and international institutions.

It is very important that there is a feedback between forecasters and users so that forecasters focus on providing what users need. Forecasters must explain what might be possible, and users must take on the responsibility of providing definitions of adverse weather, and appropriate values for costs of treatments and losses. The process of feedback can be strengthened by the participation of the flood response group (FRG) -- that can be formed by organizing Government agencies and NGO's working at the field -- who will periodically contact the local authorities with information about the error of forecasts. This information will then be transmitted to the 'Outlook Fora' for corrections. It is in this sense that this is the best way to ensure people participation in the total decision-making system.

In conclusion, it is not only prudent but also essential that the social aspects of FFWRS be thoroughly assessed. In some cases, it is necessary to re-conceptualize FFWRS, with the involvement of effective multi-disciplinary teams. There is no doubt that information and communication technology has opened up new avenues for accessible and rapid flood warning dissemination in a manner that can be designed to address the needs of the at-risk community more than ever before. The government should, therefore, strive to enhance the FFWRS for flood forecasting in Bangladesh.

Dr. Rashed Chowdhury is the Research Scientist (Faculty) of the Pacific ENSO Applications Center (PEAC), University of Hawaii, USA; Email: rashed@hawaii.edu

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process is the capacity building exercises in which training on climate science and seasonal forecasting methodologies is provided by international and national experts through technical sessions at the Forum meetings. Although initially experimental, the SARCOF process is continuing each year and has been adopted worldwide as a model for seasonal forecasting. Regional Climate Outlook Fora are currently operating for other regions

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nities for protection against flood hazards in response to warning. **Stage 5:** Review and analysis -- This stage continuously monitors the performance of various components of the FFWRS for possible improvement.

(Note: A detailed description of these stages are available in *Environmental Management* 35:61, pp 716-725)

Concluding remarks

A journalist who is making a difference

Colombia's Vice President Francisco Santos

RON CHEPESIUK

WE know that journalism in Bangladesh can be a dangerous profession, but, during the past two decades, no country has been more dangerous for a reporter than Colombia. The remarkable journalism career of Francisco Santos illustrates this point well. As I found out in a recent interview with Santos, his career also shows how one journalist can transcend his environment and make a difference. In November 1990, thirty year-old Francisco Santos, then working as an editor with El Tiempo newspaper in Bogota, Colombia, was driving home from work in his Jeep. Suddenly, several masked men, armed with Uzi submachine guns equipped with silencers, swooped in on Santos' car and dragged him away. The kidnapers worked for Pablo Escobar, the head of the Medellin cartel and history's most violent and notorious drug trafficker. Santos had become a victim of ten prominent Colombians kidnapped by Escobar in his war with the state.

The young journalist spent the next eight months chained to a bed, not knowing if he would live or die. Finally, Escobar released him unharmed. After one of history's biggest manhunts, Escobar was killed in shootout in December 2, 1993. In 1997, Colombia's Nobel Prize winning writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez told Santos story in his book, "News of a Kidnapping," and the former hostage became famous.

On a damp Bogota evening last May, Santos, now the country's vice president, and I sat for an interview in his spacious office in Casa Narino, Colombia's equivalent of the

White House. The Vice President became reflective in recalling that harrowing experience. "Being kidnapped changed my life," he said softly. "After my release, I didn't want to become a victim. So I got actively involved first hand and not just from behind the scenes in the political issues facing my country."

Santos formed two non governmental organizations (NGOs) that have assisted kidnapping victims and their families and promoted civil society resistance against kidnapping and terrorism. He has used his newspaper column in El Tiempo, Colombia's equivalent of the New York Times, to urge Colombians to become more aggressive in finding a peaceful solution to the country's problems. And then in 2002 he entered politics when presidential candidate Alvaro Uribe selected his as his running mate. When the ticket won in landslide, Santos became the second most powerful political figure in Colombia, a constitutional democracy with about 35 million people. While I waited for the interview to begin, the Vice President was a blur of energy as he moved quickly, papers in hand, among the offices in the Casa. Aides in dark business suits scurried after Santos who was dressed in brown suit pants and a pale green oxford shirt. Santos was not wearing a suit jacket and his tie hung loosely. He looked too young to be a vice president, but his intense, non-nonsense manner left no doubt who was in charge. It's another long day for the Vice President, his press assistant, Cristina Rodriguez, told The Daily Star, and she apologized for the fact that her boss was a half hour late for the interview. "I have never been afraid of hard work," said Santos when our interview



Santos wrote a letter to Uribe from exile telling him that he agreed with many of his campaign positions, especially his vow to get tough with the country's guerrillas and paramilitaries. Uribe contacted Santos and asked him if he could write some position papers for him about how to deal with the corruption and drug trafficking in Colombia. Santos agreed and then Uribe arranged a meeting in which he asked the journalist to run on his presidential ticket.

Santos viewed the offer as a chance to make a difference in Colombian politics,



attended many protests and meetings," he recalled. "I remember protesting Henry Kissinger's visit to the campus."

Upon graduating, Santos returned to Colombia to work for El Tiempo, the family newspaper. He started out as a reporter and by 1990 had worked his way up to executive editor. It was a pivotal and dangerous time in Colombian history. In 1984, Escobar, the Medellin cartel murdered Justice Minister Rodrigo Lara Bonilla, and President Virgilio Barco declared war on the gangsters, igniting a turbulent period of narco terrorism in which Escobar operated in Colombia in the 1980s and early 1990s much like al Zaraqawi has done in Iraq today.

It was a difficult time to be a journalist, a situation that has not changed to this day. Between 1980 and 2000, at least 179 Colombian journalists were murdered doing their job. "I never practiced self censorship, and that's why I was targeted for kidnapping," Santos said. "Narco terrorists target journalists who speak truth to their power."

After his kidnapping, Santos spent a year at Harvard University as a Nieman fellow. In 1992, he

returned to Colombia, where nothing had changed, as the grim statistics reveal. Annually, an average of 800 people were kidnapped and another 20,000 to 30,000 people murdered during the 1990s. Four years later, Santos organized Pais Libre (Free Nation), the organization to assist kidnapping victims and their families. Santos led marches and protests that culminated in a huge 1999 march involving millions of Colombians rallying under the banner of "No Mas" (No More).

"When we announced that we were going to march to publicize all the kidnappings, people said to me: 'You're crazy. Nobody marches in this country,'" Santos recalled. "But they did by the hundreds of thousands. It was a cry from the people of Colombia for change. They were saying: 'We need to stop the kidnappings and violence. We need to stop destroying the country.'" By the late 1990s, the country's guerrillas had become heavily involved in the country's drug trade and their power and arrogance grew. When they started to blow up the country's electrical utility towers, Santos helped start another campaign. "If the guerrillas wanted to turn off the country's lights, then we Colombi-

ans would show them we could do the job better," he explained. "We asked Colombians to turn out their lights in their homes, and four million Colombians did do that, defying the powerful guerrillas." By now, however, the crusading journalist had become a marked man. Santos learned from reliable sources that "Frente 21," a unit of Colombia's biggest guerrilla army, planned to kill him. Santos began to move carefully about Bogota, always accompanied by two bodyguards. In March 2000, Santos decided to visit his farm near Bogota. On the way, he stopped at his favorite restaurant located near the farm. "Some armed men are looking for you," the proprietor told Santos. He knew it was time to leave Colombia, for discretion is the better part of staying alive. Santos joined the many colleagues who had gone into exile in Spain. While in Spain, Santos worked as an assistant to the publisher of Madrid's El Pais newspaper. He sent a column to El Tiempo each week, while keeping a close eye on Colombian politics, especially the presidential campaign of candidate Alvaro Uribe whom he admired.

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Colombian politics, but the move didn't go over well with his family, which had always tried to distance itself from politics. In an editorial, El Tiempo criticized Santos, complaining that his decision to run would "discredit many years of effort to distance this daily from politics and partisan connections, and to be clearly independent of public and private power." During the election, guerrillas tried to assassinate Uribe three times, forcing the ticket to stop campaigning publicly. This didn't sit well with Santos. "I said forget it!" Santos recalled. "I campaigned out in the open and went all over the country. We won easily."

Relations between Santos and his family remain cool, but he does not regret his decision. "I'm serving my country and I really think our administration is making a difference," he said. "We have improved the security of the country more than the people thought we could. The economy is strong and we are giving the people hope for a better future, the first time that's happened in long time. Our popularity as shown in the polls is sky high." Traditionally, Colombian presidents have served just one term by law, but the country's constitution was recently amended so Uribe can serve another four-year term beginning in 2006. Does Francisco Santos one day want to run for the presidency? He answers with the passion that characterizes his style: "All I know is that we have to keep working hard to change this country. I'm 43, still young. I've a survivor. I feel blessed!"

Ron Chesepiuk (www.ronchesepiuk.com) is a Visiting Professor of Journalism at Chittagong University and a Research Associate with the National Defense College in Dhaka.