

Untold story of Grameen Bank

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HUSSAIN MUHAMMAD ERSHAD

Grameen Bank is now a globally recognised and admired institution. However, very few people know that Grameen Ordinance Promulgated on September 4, 1983 was the first micro-credit legislation in the world. This ordinance was passed under my government, even though many bankers and bureaucrats were opposed to the idea of forming a separate institution. I have regretted many things in my life, but I still think that Grameen Ordinance was one of the best things that I ever did.

When I heard recently that Professor Ayesha Akhter Munim, wife of (late) General M.A. Munim had passed away; I was reminded of the Grameen Bank project. General Munim was minister of works, agriculture and finally finance under my government. His wife Ayesha Akhter Munim was a longtime professor of physics at Dhaka University. It was probably during the last week of

March 1983 when I was informed by my APS Major Shabab that General Munim wanted to see me. I was surprised to find both Munim and his wife in the sitting room. They stayed with me for about an hour and gave me a briefing about the Grameen Bank project of Bangladesh, and a strong recommendation that it should be supported. They also left some printed information for me to read.

Ayesha was the one who did most of the explanations on the Grameen Bank project and why it was important to support such an initiative. I now wonder if I would have taken Grameen Bank project so seriously if it were not for the Munim couple.

Gen. Munim kept reminding me of the project whenever he met me and had a chance to say a few words. I later asked him, first as minister of works and later as minister of agriculture, for allotment of land at Mirpur for Grameen Bank to establish its headquarters within the shortest possible time.

Later, as minister of agriculture, he



All for one, one for all.

arranged allotment of land for Grameen Bank at Potuakhali and Rajshahi as well. Between 1984-88, I visited Grameen Bank branches in several districts, thanks to the enthusiasm of Munim for this project. I found the staff dedicated, hardworking and sincere, and almost all of them came from the rural areas.

I found them working even on holidays. Once I saw many large cooking pots in a branch. The branch manager explained to me that they held regular workshops for women borrowers, and the cooking pots had been rented from

decorators to cook meals for members who were borrowers of Grameen Bank.

My government allocated resources for Grameen Bank for its expansion program to cover the entire country at very generous terms, mostly, if I remember correctly, with aid funds from Sweden, Norway and Canada. Grameen Bank legislation was also unique that for the first time in human history a bank was owned and managed (at least in theory) by the poorest women on earth. Initially the share of the Bangladesh government was 75%. Gradually, with

the success of the bank, government share was reduced to 25% while I was still in office.

I was very happy when I heard the news that Dr. Yunus and Grameen Bank had won the Nobel Peace prize in 2006. I wish Grameen Bank well for its continued support for the poor people, particularly the poor women of Bangladesh, who work so hard day after day without any recognition.

This article talks about Grameen Bank, but I really wanted to talk about the Munims. Remembering this story is my tribute to both Gen. Munim and his wife Prof. Ayesha Akhter Munim. Without their persistence, I do not think I would have ventured into supporting the Grameen Bank. Many have taken credit for helping to establish Grameen Bank, but never General Munim and his wife. So this is my memorial for a very honest, sincere and low-profile couple who got a great job done without ever thinking of any personal return or recognition.

Grameen Bank Ordinance was promulgated by me to establish Grameen Bank on September 4, 1983 when I had barely completed my first year in office. One should understand how busy I was during those days.

For the capacity building and expansion of the bank I provided, during 1983 and 1990, about one hundred million US Dollar grants and low cost fund (1% interest) as an equity for the rural poor mostly women.

I did this deliberately so that Grameen Bank could provide loans to the poor at a rate that was affordable to the poor at 9-10%. I was assured by Grameen Bank that interest rate would be lowered to the desired level, when the expansion program ended in 1992. But over the years the interest rate went up from 13% in 1983 to 20% after I left office. I tried my best to prevent undue interference by the government, particularly the finance ministry, in the day-to-day operation of the Grameen Bank.

Finally, I leave the judgment to the people of my country and all others around the world who took keen interest in Grameen Bank to decide for themselves the impact of the bank for the elimination of poverty not only in Bangladesh but all over the world, which was facilitated by the Grameen Bank Ordinance 1983, an Ordinance through which institutionalised partnership between the rural poor and government as partners was established.

In the very near future, I intend to write another article for the benefit of the global micro-credit movement before the next micro-credit summit. In the article I would argue that instead of projects and programs both the public and the private sectors ought to seriously consider institutional partnership with the poor to seriously address global poverty and hunger.

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Nurul Islam's death and our hollow national pride

I can't but help detect a sense of hollowness in our national pride when we know that the country has not been fair to so many of its people. We have made a small step towards correcting that error through the verdict of November 19. Can this be the start of righting the wrongs that have been done to the people of this country?

ASIF SALEH

THE final verdict of the Bangabandhu murder last month has made a lot of people declare that a big stone from their hearts has been lifted. However, can we declare ourselves shame-free so quickly? It's difficult not to dwell on the negatives, the fact that it took so long and that it seems unlikely it would've ever happened under a non-AL government," a close family member of the Sheikh family recently wrote to me.

This may be hard to accept but therein lies our collective shame. That it took not only an AL government to be in power but also to be in power

with a sweeping majority, and the founding father's daughter to be the prime minister of the country, for the family to finally get justice is telling. How high a price is that to pay for something that should be automatically facilitated by the state?

Now that justice is being served for the country's first family, what about the others who are not in a position to be the PM of the country? Even if I leave out the average Rahims from the picture, the delay in getting justice for the people who dedicated their lives in public service only for it to be brutally cut short, speaks volumes about our justice system. Yes, I am talking about Shah A.S.M. Kibria, Ivy Rahman, Ahsanullah Master and Nurul Islams of

this country -- the victims of political violence in Bangladesh. Why is it so hard to get justice for their families?

Exactly a year ago I was in Washington DC for a hearing on human rights in Bangladesh when I got a frantic call from my colleague Ifat Nawaz. "Moutushi's father Nurul Islam is burnt and his brother has died," she was crying on the phone. I had seen Moutushi just three weeks before -- vibrantly going around helping us out for a concert that we organised for our organisation's fund raising. In that visit, Ifat was supposed to introduce me to poet Ruby Rahman, her mother, whose charm and poetic skills I have heard so much about from my mother-in-law and her friend Shamim Azad. Instead of our meeting, our coffee and our adda, they were on the plane to Dhaka find out more about this "mysterious fire" that ravaged their family.

Exactly one year has gone by since then. I have moved back to Dhaka, and got to meet Ruby Rahman in a situation I hardly wished to meet. I see her and Moutushi a lot more now. They go from door to door pushing their case for a

competent investigation. Moutushi spends night after night sleepless -- looking for partners, friends and allies who can work with her in trying to get to the bottom of the mystery behind what killed her brother and father -- with little success.

After a year of their running around, there has been little progress in uncovering the mystery behind the death of Nurul and Tamohar Islam. Days before the fire, sensing danger for his father, Nurul Islam's son Tamohar frantically called his sister in the US. The news of the phone threats that Nurul Islam received before the incident have been echoed by people like Matia Chowdhury and Rashed Khan Menon. On the contrary, the initial police investigation report (January 10) claimed that the fire was the result of an explosion from the gas cylinder in the fridge, even though the ATN news report by Munni Shaha on December 4 2008, clearly showed that the lower back of the fridge was intact and that the compressor of the fridge did not explode.

There is also hardly any explanation of how an unplugged fridge that had

been non-functional for three years could cause an explosion such as this. On top of that, there is no explanation for the broken door key, which made it impossible for Nurul Islam and Tamohar to open the locked door from inside. Like these, there are so many unanswered questions surrounding these two deaths that it is hard to accept them as accidental. There is little chance of making any inroads into this investigation without a comprehensive new look at this incident with fresh and expert investigators. However, what are the chances of seeing that happen?

I had little reason to be hopeful after I met Dr. Nazli Kibria at a conference on Bangladesh in Boston in October. When I raised the topic of the investigation of her father's death, there was a sense of resignation in her face. "Nothing changes," she said. And the sad thing is that her story is not that unique. Look around and you will find that this country is full of people deprived of basic justice and fairness. From 1971 to PiliKhana, this country has seen too many violent deaths that are unaccounted for.

Our country is going to be forty soon; our nationalism is prominently on display everywhere. However, I can't but help detect a sense of hollowness in our national pride when we know that the country has not been fair to so many of its people. We have made a small step towards correcting that error through the verdict of November 19. Can this be the start of righting the wrongs that have been done to the people of this country?

Comrade Nurul Islam, who spent his entire lifetime speaking for the voiceless, deserves better than this. A transparent investigation with utmost priority by investigators with real expertise is the least that his friends, family and the citizens of this country can expect. Nothing short of attaining that will let us get rid of our collective shame and guilt. It is about time that we establish that the verdict of November 19 and justice served to the deceased family as a norm and not an exception in this country.

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Bangladesh is counting on a fair and just climate deal in Copenhagen

The Countdown to Copenhagen Bangladesh campaign demands that any solutions to climate change must protect the most vulnerable, compensate displaced people, guarantee individual and collective rights, and respect people's right to participate in decisions that impact on their lives.

S. JAHANGIR HASAN MASUM

CLIMATE is not only statistical information, rather a fundamental element of human security and common resource for humanity. Climate change is already happening and represents one of the greatest environmental, social and economic challenges for the future.

The world has warmed by an average of 0.76° Celsius since pre-industrial times, and the temperature rise is accelerating. Without action to limit man-made emissions of greenhouse gases, the global average temperature is likely to increase further by 2° to 5°C this century.

Climate change presents significant threats to achieving all of the Millennium Development Goals, particularly those related to eliminating poverty and hunger and promoting environmental sustainability. It may undermine human security by reducing access to, and the quality of, natural resources that are important to sustain livelihoods. It will have a massive impact on food production and may jeopardise food security in many regions. Climate change-related risks may force people into trade-offs that limit their

freedom and minimise choice.

The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) has defined climate change as a change of climate that is attributed directly or indirectly to human activity that alters the composition of the global atmosphere, in addition to natural climate variability observed over comparable time periods. The goal of the UNFCCC is stabilisation of greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere to a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system.

By ratifying the convention, parties agree to develop national programs to slow climate change. All countries have a general commitment to address climate change, adapt to its effects, and report on the actions they are taking to implement the UNFCCC. Bangladesh signed the Convention on June 9, 1992, ratified it on April 15, 1994, and ratified the Kyoto Protocol on October 22 2001.

The UNFCCC conference in Copenhagen is a great opportunity to press for an effective global deal to curb global warming. The developed countries must cut in their carbon emissions by at least 80 percent from 1990 levels by 2050, which



will be crucial in keeping global warming to 2°C or less.

International agreements made between governments of different countries are critical in addressing the global impacts of climate change. It is the moral and ethical responsibility of developed countries to take the lead in ensuring that the level of increase in global temperature is maintained below 2°C over pre-industrial levels.

In this 15th conference (COP 15), governments need to agree on a program to radically slash global greenhouse gas emissions after the current commitment phase of the Kyoto Protocol ends in 2012. They also need to agree to a much bigger

package of resources to help poor countries adapt to the unavoidable climate change. The urgency of tackling climate change justifies an acceleration of people's engagement in 2009.

The Countdown to Copenhagen campaign is an APRODEV initiative to ensure that world leaders deliver a fair and effective deal for the poor at the 15th Conference of the Parties (COP15) signatory to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. APRODEV is an association of the 17 major development and humanitarian aid organisations in Europe, including Church of Sweden, Diakonia, Norwegian Church Aid, Dan Church Aid, Finn Church Aid,

ICCO, EED, Brot für die Welt, Bread for All, and Christian Aid.

Coastal Development Partnership (CDP), a human rights focused not-for-profit, and public interest serving research and advocacy organisation, is one of the key facilitators of the Countdown to Copenhagen campaign in Bangladesh. CDP is a partner organisation in the APRODEV/ UNFCCC delegation team.

The Countdown to Copenhagen Bangladesh Campaign has linked 54 NGOs into one platform to connect more than 100,000 climate vulnerable people to get their solidarity for a People's Memorandum. CDP, along with 54 NGOs, is voluntarily conducting the Bangladesh campaign in 57 upzillas of 35 districts. The geographical coverage of the campaign has already shaped it as national climate justice campaign.

The Countdown to Copenhagen Bangladesh Campaign recognises the grassroots NGOs/CBOs as important facilitators for promoting climate change awareness among the communities as well as building local adaptive capacity for managing climate risks. The Bangladesh campaign has prepared a People's Memorandum that calls on rich countries, who are most responsible for climate change and have the greatest capacity to act, to sign obligations that commit them to:

- Achieve at least a 40 percent cut in domestic carbon emissions (from 1990 levels) by 2020;
- Provide an additional \$150 billion for ensuring that developing countries have all the support and resources necessary to reduce their emissions, develop

- cleanly and adapt to climate change;
- Support developing countries emissions reductions and low-carbon development pathways through substantial financing and technology transfer;
- Strengthen international activities through a Global Adaptation Action Framework under the UNFCCC to support vulnerable developing countries to adapt to climate change and build resilience to the unavoidable impacts of climate change.

All Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) impact assessments recognise Bangladesh as one of the most vulnerable countries in the world to the negative impacts of climate change. The geographic location and geo-morphological conditions of Bangladesh make it especially vulnerable to climate change impacts, particularly to sea-level rise. The United National Development Programme (UNDP) has identified Bangladesh to be the most vulnerable country in the world to tropical cyclones and the sixth most vulnerable country to floods.

The Bangladesh campaign is counting on the urgency and commitment from developed countries to keep adaptation as a top-level priority in international negotiations for a post 2012 deal. The Countdown to Copenhagen Bangladesh campaign demands that any solutions to climate change must protect the most vulnerable, compensate displaced people, guarantee individual and collective rights, and respect people's right to participate in decisions that impact on their lives.

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