

The great martyrdom

The Great Martyrdom of Karbala indeed occupies a very significant place in the annals of history. It convinces one and all of the sincerity, dedication and resolution of the devout followers of God and testifies to their readiness to undergo any hardship and any loss to uphold the Faith of Muhammad (pbuh).

SYED ASHRAF ALI

THE tenth of Muharram is a red-letter day in the annals of history. Known as Ashoura in the Muslim world, it is the anniversary of the supreme and inimitable sacrifice which Hazrat Imam Hussain (RA), the youngest grandson of the holy Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), made, along with seventy-two near and dear ones, to uphold the true teachings of Islam befitting "the Prince of Martyrs."

Death is inevitable for every mortal. But the *Shahadat* of Imam Hussain (RA) was no ordinary demise. Allama Iqbal rightly claims: "Although all deaths are sweet for the *Momin*, the death of Ali's son is unique indeed, for it passes beyond the death that is content with the grave." The great *Shahadat* of Karbala, inspired by love for Allah, indeed showed superhuman courage and conviction and endurance, enabling the beloved grandson of the holy Prophet (pbuh) to overcome so easily the well nigh insuperable forces of evil and untruth.

It is this dying nobly for the cause of truth and justice that confers immortality on man, the immortality which the great son of Hazrat Ali (RA) won on the banks of the Furat (Euphrates). The Holy Quran eloquently testifies: "And say not of those who are slain in the Way of Allah: 'They are dead.' Nay, they are living, though ye perceive it not." (2:154)

The heroic episode of Hazrat Imam Hussain (RA) has passed into a legend. The deeds of this "Prince of Martyrs" are

sung by minstrels throughout the Islamic world. He reigns supreme in the hearts of millions of people, both Moslems and non-Moslems.

With the rise of Mu'awiyah, the oligarchical rule of heathen times displaced the democratic rule of Islam. Paganism was revived and vice and immorality followed everywhere. The wealth that he pitilessly extracted from his subjects, he lavished on his mercenaries, who in turn helped him to repress dissent. Before his death, Mu'awiyah convened the chief officers of his army and made them take the oath of fealty to his son Yezid, whom he had designated as his successor to the throne - a gross and treacherous violation of the terms of peace signed between Mu'awiyah and Hazrat Imam Hassan (RA), the eldest son of Hazrat Ali bin Abu Talib (RA).

On Mu'awiyah's death, Yezid ascended the throne founded by his father on fraud and treachery. As cruel and treacherous as his father, he, however, lacked the cunning to clothe his cruelties in the guise of policy.

Imam Hussain (RA), on the other hand, had inherited the chivalric nature and all the virtues of his great and illustrious father. He united in his person the right of descent from the *Shari-e-Khuda* Ali (RA) with the holy character of the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). Great as a devout Muslim, great as an idealist, great as a patriot, great as a valiant warrior, great as a man of action, a dreamer of dreams, he was a man daring and adventurous, reckless of consequences and yet intensely practical, one who embodied the highest qualities that giants among men might desire.

Hazrat Hussain (RA) never deigned to acknowledge the title of the tyrant Yezid, whose vices he despised and whose character he regarded with abhorrence. Naturally, therefore, when the Moslems of Kufa besought his help to release them from the curse and cruelty of Ommeyyade rule, he felt it his duty to respond to the Iraqis' appeal for deliverance, and with the assurance that the whole of Iraq was ready to rise to the occasion to hurl the despot from his throne, he set out for Kufa with his family.

He traversed the desert of Arabia undisturbed, accompanied by his brother Abbas, a few devoted followers, and a retinue of women and children. But as he approached the confines of Iraq, he was alarmed by the solitary and hostile face of the country. He saw no signs of the Kufan army, which had promised to meet him. Suspecting treachery, he encamped at Karbala near the western bank of the Euphrates. The great Imam's apprehensions of betrayal only proved too true, and he was overtaken by an Ommeyyade army sent by the brutal and ferocious Obaiddullah bin Zaid, nicknamed the Butcher. For days their tents were surrounded.

The cowardly hounds dared not come within the reach of Ali's son, but they cut the victims off from the waters of the Euphrates. Three days and nights of intense agony ensued, but the indefatigable Imam and his dedicated followers endured this unflinchingly.

But everything has a limit, and sufferings of the entrapped band became too terrible to bear. As a last resource, Imam Hussain (RA) besought the cruel monsters not to wage war upon the helpless women and children, but to kill him and be done with it. But the devil was in the hearts of his enemies and the brutes knew no pity. He pressed his friends to ensure their safety by timely flight, but none would desert their beloved master. The sacrifice of warring against the holy Prophet's (pbuh) grandson struck one of the enemy's chiefs with horror and he deserted with thirty followers "to claim the partnership of the inevitable death."

On the morning of the fateful day of the

tenth of Muharram, the auspicious day of *Ashura*, Hussain's (RA) faithful band of heroes arrayed themselves in battle formation. No hope of victory was there against the thousands of mercenaries of Yezid. Yet, they knew that they had come to fulfill their destiny -- not to win a battle but to achieve a moral and spiritual victory which was definitely much more glorious and lasting than a victory on the field.

The valour and indomitable spirit of the Fatimides were invincible, and they readily won every single combat and close fight. They slew many more than their own numbers. But the enemy's archers treacherously picked them off from a safe distance. One by one the defenders fell, until at last there remained but the noble and virtuous grandson of the last and greatest Prophet (pbuh).

Severely wounded and dying, he dragged himself to the riverside for a last drink; the inhuman cowards turned him off with arrows. As he returned to his tent, he took his infant child in his arms but they transfixed him with a dart. Alone and weary, he seated himself at the door of his tent. One of the women handed him a cup of water to assuage his burning thirst; as he raised it to his lips he was pierced in the mouth with a dart. He lifted his hands to heaven -- they were full of blood -- and uttered a funeral prayer for the living and the dead.

Not merely a grandson of the holy Prophet (pbuh) but also a devout and ideal follower of his tenets, the great Imam even in his last hours displayed the highest ideal of spiritual and moral greatness by praying for the very enemies who had killed his infant son and were ready to put him to death. Raising himself for the last desperate charge, the valiant fighter threw himself among the Ommeyyade brutes, who fell back on every side. The beautiful lines from the great poet Anis gives a graphic description of the Imam's legendary sword and its strokes:

And driven by hand alone whenever it smashed,
There out a gushing pool of blood had splashed;
And changing a hundred colours it flew;



Commemorating the supreme sacrifice.

And drinking blood, it vomiting rubies flashed.

But the grueling ordeal was too much even for the indomitable Hussain (RA), and faint with the loss of blood he sank to the ground. The murderous cowards rushed upon the dying hero like vultures; they cut off his head, trampled on the holy body and subjected it ignominy.

Hussain (RA) indeed did not die in the ordinary sense of the term. He simply shuffled off the mortal coil and set sail towards the Great Unknown through the glorious channel of *Shahadat*. In the memorable words of Nazrul (translated): "Death itself was immortalised at the touch of his life."

His precious life indeed was sacrificed for the salvation of the suffering humanity, testifying so eloquently to the fact that the brows of the martyr shall eternally reflect the brilliance of the elect of Allah, that those who submit to God and suffer and bleed unto death for the cause of righteousness, truth and justice, for the unfortunate millions that knock about the straits, for the sustenance and durability of their rights and privileges, never decay, never die, never perish; they live a newer life, a fresher life, a higher life, a

sublime life in the recurrent ethos of community and country. In the memorable words of the poet:

*Khastegane Khanjare Taslimra
Har Zaman Az Ghaeb Jame Egar Ast.*

The Great Martyrdom of Karbala indeed occupies a very significant place in the annals of history. It convinces one and all of the sincerity, dedication and resolution of the devout followers of God and testifies to their readiness to undergo any hardship and any loss to uphold the Faith of Muhammad (pbuh). That is not all. Ashoura comes back every year to rejuvenate and boost up the dormant vigour, stagnated spirit and dampened morale of the misguided and oppressed Moslems all over the world. In the inimitable words of Maulana Mohammed Ali Jauhar:

*Katle Hussain Asal Me Margaye Yezid Tha;
Islam Zinda Hota Hai Har Karbale Ke Baad.*

(The Martyrdom of Hussain was indeed the Death of Yezid; Islam is rejuvenated after each and every *Karbala*.)

Syed Ashraf Ali is a former Director General of Islamic Foundation, Bangladesh.

Chinese premier's 60 hours in Copenhagen

International cooperation to cope with climate change has moved a step ahead in the right direction through the joint efforts of the international community. It delivered hope and confidence to the world. In this process, it was China that showed the greatest sincerity, tried its best and played a constructive part.

ZHAO CHENG and TIAN FAN

ON December 16, Premier Wen Jiabao left Beijing for the climate summit in Copenhagen, Denmark. "It will be a tough task. Now I can feel how heavy my duty is to attend the meeting on behalf of the Chinese government," Wen told reporters aboard his plane en route to Copenhagen. "As so many world leaders are gathered there, I believe there should come some achievements," he said. "No matter what the result is, China's action plan will not change, its voluntary reduction target will always be non-negotiable, and its determination in hitting the target will never waver," he continued.

Premier Wen's schedule on December 17 was almost fully occupied by meetings with world leaders. During the meeting with Danish Prime Minister Lars Lokke Rasmussen, Wen suggested that all parties should stick to the consensus they had reached while leaving differences for future negotiations.

In his talks with UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, Wen proposed to formulate a political document that may reflect the consensus of different parties. When meeting with Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, the two countries agreed to firmly stand with other developing countries to safeguard their common interests.

The Chinese premier's meeting with representatives of island countries and underdeveloped nations lasted for over two hours, the longest during his stay in Copenhagen.

Wen said that although China had always urged developed nations to fulfill their funding commitments, it would not vie for even a cent with other developing countries if such a fund were available. In addition, China would continue to assist those countries to cope with climate change, Wen told President Mohammed Nasheed of the Maldives, Prime Minister of Grenada Tillman Thomas, Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh



Prime Minister Wen Jiabao.

Hasina, and Sudanese Presidential Assistant Nafie Ali Nafie.

Wen's whirlwind negotiations that afternoon also involved British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Japanese Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama.

On the second morning, Wen met with Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. The two countries agreed to firmly defend the interests of developing countries. At 9:45 a.m., Premier Wen arrived at the main venue of the conference, 15 minutes earlier than the scheduled opening.

However, nobody was present even at 10 a.m. No explanation was given by anyone.

It was not until 11:30 that Danish Prime Minister Rasmussen announced the opening of the summit. Premier Wen was the first to deliver a speech, titled "Build Consensus and Strengthen Cooperation to Advance the Historical Process of Combating Climate Change."

Wen made it clear that what China thought, it did, and would do, to cope with climate change.

At the end of his speech, Wen said: "It is with a sense of responsibility to the

Chinese people and the whole mankind that the Chinese government has set the target for mitigating greenhouse gas emissions. This is a voluntary action China has taken in the light of its national circumstances. We have not attached any condition to the target, nor have we linked it to the target of any other country. We will honour our word with real action. Whatever outcome this conference may produce, we will be fully committed to achieving and even exceeding the target."

After US President Barack Obama's speech, Premier Wen held talks with him. The two leaders agreed that the conference should achieve a political resolution as soon as possible.

Developing and developed countries discussed the final document, but failed to make any progress, even when the Copenhagen climate change conference was scheduled to conclude hours earlier.

At this moment, it was Premier Wen who played a key role in the last-minute attempt to exchange ideas and reach consensus. "As long as there is hope of one percent, we should not give up and must instead make 100 percent effort," he told the Chinese delegation.

Wen decided to meet other leaders of the BASIC countries again and make a final attempt. At the same time, President Obama said he wanted to have a second meeting with Premier Wen. Wen agreed.

The BASIC countries' leaders agreed to reach consensus on key issues first and then negotiate with the United States and European countries on the basis of safe-

guarding the interests of the developing countries and with the highest degree of flexibility. At 6:50 p.m., when the BASIC leaders were reviewing their final common position, President Obama showed up. Premier Wen politely invited Obama to join them. Premier Wen made clear the position of BASIC countries on several key issues. Obama briefed the leaders of BASIC countries about the latest US stance.

Applause was heard before long as the BASIC countries finally reached agreement with the United States on the wording of some key issues. After some time, all parties concerned agreed on the draft and were ready to submit it for a voting at the conference. It was already nine hours after the scheduled conclusion of the conference.

The achievement was a result of joint efforts by all the participating countries, other than out of the will of one or two countries. Copenhagen witnessed the role China played in this complicated and tough process.

There have been different interpretations of the outcome over the past few days, but people have to recognise that international cooperation to cope with climate change has moved a step ahead in the right direction through the joint efforts of the international community. It delivered hope and confidence to the world. In this process, it was China that showed the greatest sincerity, tried its best and played a constructive part.

Zhao Cheng and Tian Fan, correspondents of the Xinhua News Agency, accompanied the Chinese Premier to the Copenhagen Conference.

Diplomatic loose cannon

Meanwhile, there is no reason why the government should take out a sledgehammer to deal with Savage. Let the hoity-toity, curmudgeonly, cold and prejudiced diplomatic Scrooges be forgiven on this blessed time of holidays.

NEWS DESK, The Island

ALBERT Camus has famously said that any mediocre person begins to put on airs and graces the moment he or she is put behind a counter. This being a personality trait common even among the ordinary folk, how pompous the artful could become when placed in a position of authority goes without saying.

EU Ambassador in Colombo Bernard Savage has got into hot water over an unnecessary statement he made recently. It is being viewed as an

endorsement of Sarath Fonseka's presidential candidacy. He is reported to have compared Fonseka with Eisenhower!

The government is making a song and dance about Savage's statement on the grounds that it amounts to his interference with Sri Lanka's internal affairs. Technically, the government has a point but the question is whether it would have protested in a similar manner if Savage had compared President Mahinda Rajapaksa with Eisenhower.

Never mind what the government says of Savage. One may argue that he

has a right to make such a comment in keeping with the principle of freedom of expression. Yes, indeed he does, but not in public or in his official capacity as a diplomat in this country. If his right to make political utterances is to be recognised, then the Sri Lankan diplomats, or all foreign envoys for that matter, should have the same freedom to endorse candidates contesting national elections in Europe. A former Sri Lankan ambassador once revealed in this newspaper that he had been summoned to the Foreign Ministry of a EU member state and faulted for having met an Opposition politician of that country.

By making a statement favourable to a particular candidate in the presidential race, Savage has given the lie to his own claim in the aftermath of the EC decision to suspend Sri Lanka's GSP Plus that the EU had no favourites in the presidential contest here and its policy

towards Sri Lanka would remain the same whoever won. We, in these columns, disputed his claim and pointed out that the EC decision had been craftily timed for the closing of presidential nominations.

We said the GSP Plus was being used as a political tool. Opposition Leader Ranil Wickremesinghe has already capitalised on the GSP Plus suspension; he claims tens of thousands of workers are bound to lose their jobs and the way to avert a crisis is to defeat the incumbent president so that he (Ranil) and his chums would be able to regain that trade concession! JVP leader Somawansa Amarasinghe, exuding conceit, declared at KIA on his return from a recent tour of the EU that some unnamed EU leaders (whom he claimed to have met) had told him that they would consider extending the GSP Plus concession in case of a change of government in Sri Lanka! Now, we have

Savage endorsing Fonseka's candidacy!

When the pieces of the GSP Plus jigsaw puzzle are put together, a clear picture emerges: The EU is all out to effect a regime change in this country as the present political dispensation is perceived as anti-Western.

Whether to change a government or not is a decision that should be left entirely to the people of this country. If they are desirous of a change, so be it! If they opt for maintaining the status quo, let their verdict be respected. Diplomats like Savage or the countries that they represent have no right either to promote or to thwart popular campaigns for or against a government in power.

The late President Ranasinghe Premadasa, it may be recalled, had a British High Commissioner (David Gladstone) declared persona non-grata for having protested against vote rigging at an election in the South. He was sent back home unceremoniously.

President J. R. Jayewardene, too, took on a US diplomat for 'talking out turn' at a function. He was furious about an adverse remark the diplomat concerned had made on the Referendum in 1982.

It behoves Savage and others of his ilk to remember that they are no viceroys, however small and poor this country may be. They ought to exercise control over their ambassadorial tongues without over-stepping their diplomatic limits and meddling with the international affairs of the host country.

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