

Rise Sir Fazle Hasan Abed

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SYED MUAZZEM ALI

NEW Year began well for Bangladesh. At the very outset, we got the good news that Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II has decided to confer knighthood on Fazle Hasan Abed, the founder and Chairman of Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (Brac) for his outstanding contribution in "tackling poverty and empowering the poor" in Bangladesh and beyond. Earlier, Abed had received numerous awards for his exemplary contributions to social improvement. Notable among them are the prestigious Ramon Magsaysay Award, the UNDP Mahbub Ul Huq Award, and the inaugural Clinton Global Citizen award.

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Another Bangladesh national, Mohammad Yunus, received the Nobel Peace Prize three years ago for his untiring efforts for the elimination of poverty through micro-credit program under the aegis of the Grameen Bank. Brac and Grameen are direct products of our national independence, and Abed and Yunus surely have made the nation proud.

Abed is a contemporary of my elder brother Shaikat. I met him for the first time in Pabna in early 1950s when he was studying in the senior grades at local Zilla School. He was residing with his uncle Rashidul Hasan, who was the district judge and my father Syed Mustafa Ali was the sub-divisional officer. Our families knew each other for decades and, fortunately, our official residences were located opposite each other.

I would go to their house quite frequently. Abed and his cousins Zubair and Munna were much senior to me, and our conversations were brief, but the main purpose of my visits was to listen to film songs on their gramophone. The records would often get stuck, and we would apply kerosene as lubricants and change pins frequently. The other attraction, of course, was the generous snacks which I would get every time I visited their house.

The next time I came across him was in Chittagong in the mid-sixties, when I was in university and he had just returned from London as a chartered accountant and joined the famed Shell Oil Company. At that same time, my cousins A. S. Mahmud and Kaiser Zaman were working as executives at Shell, and my brother Shaikat was in Chittagong with Ispahani; thus they provided the connecting link.

Then came the devastating cyclone of 1970 and altered Abed's corporate lifestyle forever. He was so moved by the death and destruction in the worst affected areas of Manpura that he, along with some friends, decided to set up HELP -- a private body -- and became involved in the relief and rehabilitation efforts in that area. The War of Liberation, which began soon thereafter, completely transformed him. Circumstances forced him to take refuge in England in 1971 and there he got involved in the setting up of

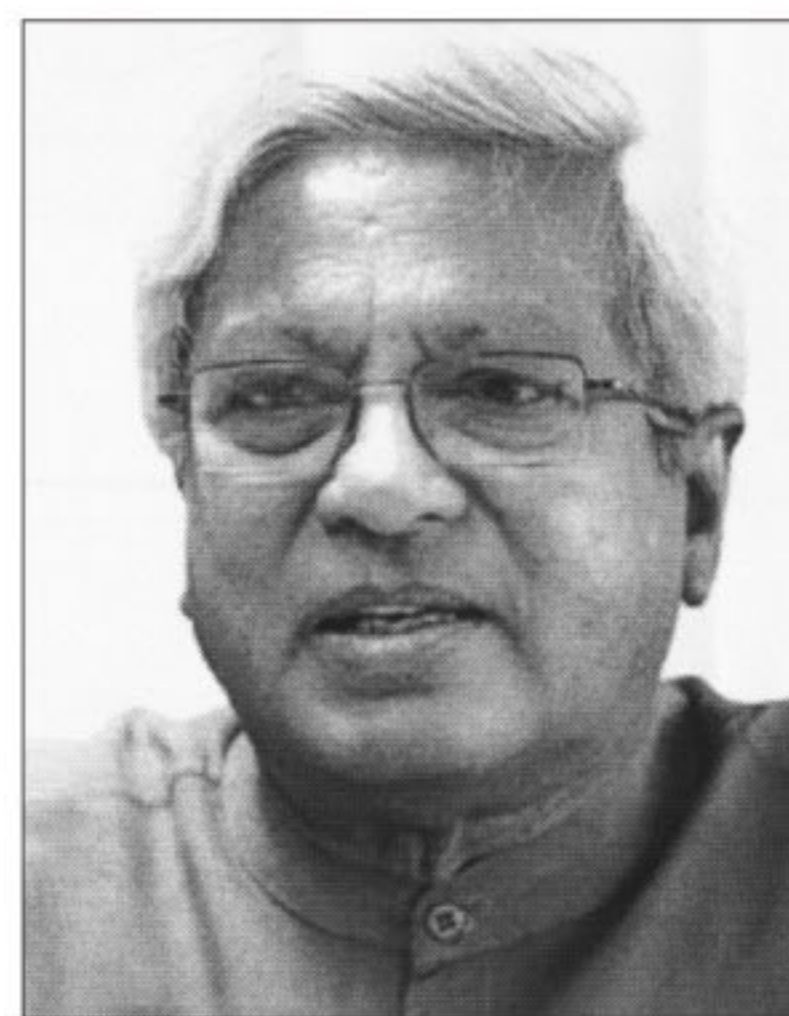
"Action Bangladesh," which vigorously lobbied for our national cause in Europe. They also collected funds and sent relief materials to our people who had taken shelter in India.

After independence, Abed sold his flat in London and decided to use his funds, as well as funds he had received from some of his close friends, to set up a relief and rehabilitation center in the remote area of Sulla in the northeastern war-ravaged Bangladesh.

There was no turning back from that point. He decided to go beyond his initial mission. Slowly but surely he started working towards the long-term venture of improving the living condition of the rural poor in Bangladesh.

Sulla could be termed as the birthplace of Brac, which, within the short span of three decades, has emerged as the world's largest NGO. Abed has always given maximum attention to the landless poor, particularly women, who live well below the poverty line and have been consistently denied access to resources or our conventional development efforts.

Today, Brac is a success story. It operates in 69 thousand villages of Bangladesh, and nearly 110 million people have been brought under its multi-dimensional development programs, ranging from primary education, basic health care needs, agricultural support,



Sir Fazle Hasan Abed

micro-finance, to legal assistance and enterprise development.

Brac's non-formal education model is so successful that during the period I was director general (international organisations) in the foreign office (1992-95) numerous high-level official delegations from Africa visited Dhaka to inspect these schools and replicate the models in their respective countries. These visits had been arranged by Unicef, and coordinated by the foreign ministry.

Brac started its international operation in 2002, when it helped in the develop-

ment efforts in war-ravaged Afghanistan. In addition to Afghanistan, today its anti-poverty multi-dimensional development effort extends to seven other countries, namely Uganda, Tanzania, Southern Sudan, Pakistan, Sierra Leone, Liberia and Sri Lanka. Brac had to make necessary adjustments in each case to suit the local socio-economic conditions, customs and sensitivities.

Abed avoids publicity and prefers to work quietly without much fanfare. He accepts international awards and citations with utmost humility. Today, Brac is not only in our villages but also in every aspect of our civic life here in Dhaka. We go to Aarong to buy handicrafts and gifts, we purchase Brac milk and other dairy products and agricultural produce, our children go to Brac University, and we have accounts in Brac Banks.

The honour that Abed received is a recognition of his tireless efforts to uplift teeming millions from abject poverty to a world of hope and dreams fulfilled. It is a reaffirmation of his faith in the ability and credibility of the poor, especially the women. This award should further boost his indomitable spirit to work towards his cherished goal of eliminating poverty in Bangladesh and beyond.

Rise Sir Fazle Hasan Abed, rise, and raise our national honour higher!

Syed Muazzem Ali is a former Foreign Secretary.

One-year of this government

This elected government could and ought to have committed itself from day one of its tenure to establishing and practicing democracy and democratic culture in this country. Once genuine democracy is established, corruption and crime can be taken care of effectively because the government will enjoy the support of the people.

SHAMSUDDIN AHMED

AS we welcome 2010, we, as conscientious people, must ponder and ask how well we performed as a nation during 2009, which coincidentally began with the installation of this elected government with a massive mandate and ended with the completion of its one-year rule. Let us not forget that this AL-led government came to power amid high hopes of the people after the nation witnessed corruption and crime with state patronisation during the five-year rule of the BNP-Jamaat alliance government, and went through a two-year rule by the caretaker government headed by Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed.

People expected this government to rise above party politics and work sincerely for the poor people of this country. We have seen how the 10-member council of advisors of the caretaker government worked day and night for two years to bring about reforms aimed at institutionalising democracy in this country, and cleansing our national politics of the influence of black money and muscle power.

Some of the praiseworthy initiatives of this caretaker government, like strengthening democracy, freeing national institutions from political influence, making the judiciary independent and capable of delivering justice without fear or favour and defending the constitution, launching a drive against corruption, etc., could

very well be carried forward by this elected government.

If we have been carrying the stigma of a least developed country for the last 39 years, with very little possibility of graduating into a lower middle income country status in the next two decades, it is because our corrupt political elites and their business partners have looted and plundered the state wealth and property without having to answer to any court of law. It is so because those who ruled us, regardless of whether they were civilians with a political pedigree or military dictators, never allowed democracy to strike roots.

This elected government could and ought to have committed itself from day one of its tenure to establishing and practicing democracy and democratic culture in this country. Once genuine democracy is established and the rule of law is put in place, corruption and crime, including religious militancy and terrorism, can be taken care of effectively because the government will enjoy the support of the people.

But what has this government done in the last one year to assure the people that it is committed to democracy and rule of law? What sort of democracy does this government want to build when AL held its orchestrated party council to make Sheikh Hasina the president of the party unopposed, and invest her with powers to nominate all influential members of the party? No wonder BNP, another major

party and the main rival opposition party, followed suit as it held its party council in the same way also.

With the majority it enjoys in the Parliament, the government could have easily restored the 1972 constitution with necessary amendments to ensure that only clean, honest, educated and patriotic men and women can become members of Parliament. After all, this is by far the best constitution the nation can boast of. Article 66 (2) of the constitution can be suitably amended to disqualify bank loan defaulters and persons owning wealth and properties grossly incompatible with their legitimate source of income. At present, corrupt and tainted people having tons of money and muscle power have driven out good and honest people

from the arena of politics as bad money drives out good money from the market.

To make the Parliament vibrant and functional, and specifically to guard against the political culture of boycott by opposition members, a suitable amendment can be made to the constitution to penalise a member by forfeiture of pay and allowances, and all other perks and privileges, for the number of days he/she remains absent from the Parliament without leave from the speaker, for more than seven consecutive sitting days. With such a constitutional provision in place, no member of Parliament will risk losing his or her pay and allowances and other perks and privileges.

The government could very well initi-

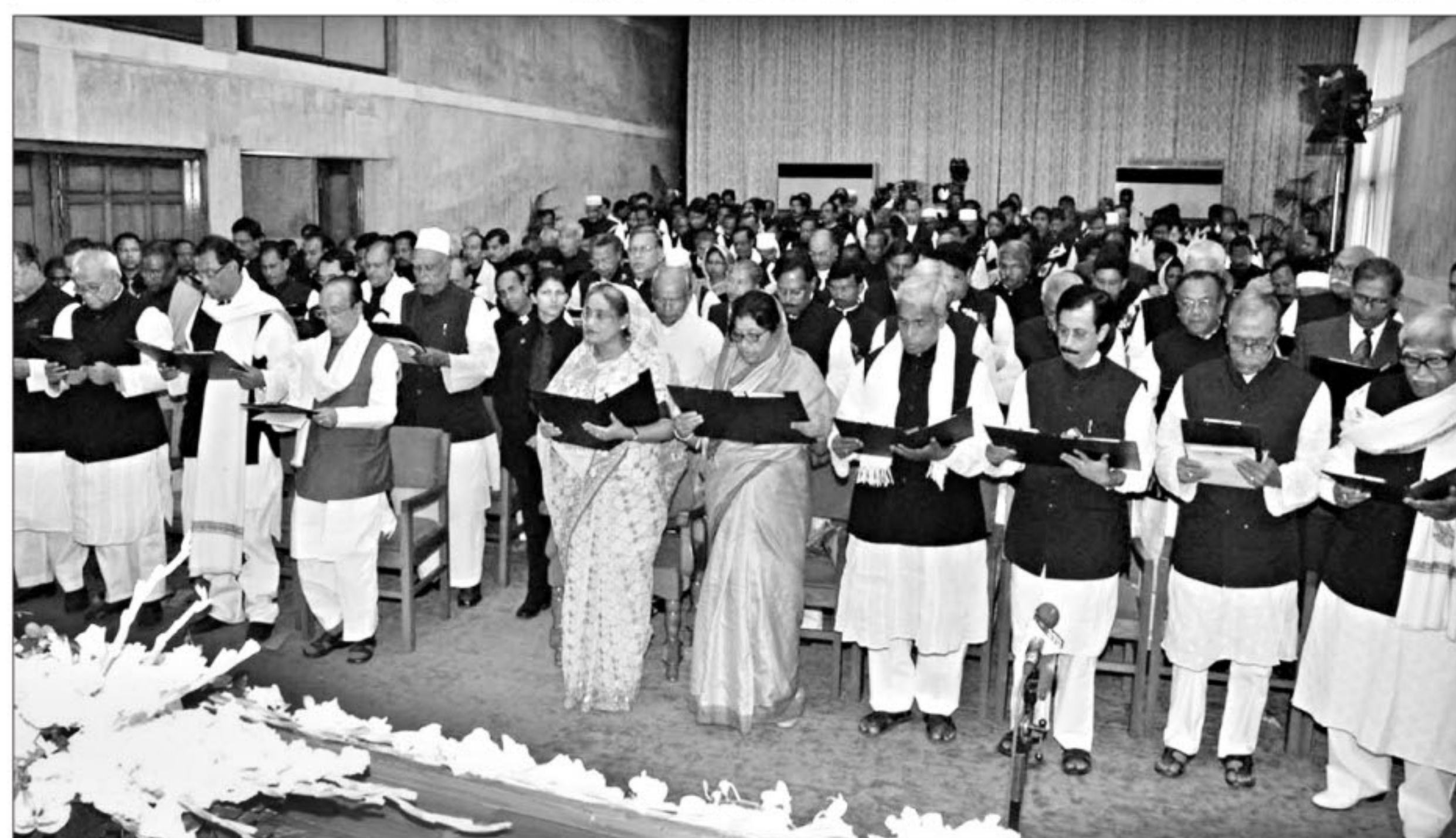
ate legislation whereby the Election Commission (EC), the Public Service Commission (PSC) and the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) can be constituted by the majority decision of a National Selection Committee (NSC), comprising the immediate past chief commissioner of EC, the immediate past chairman of PBC, the immediate past chairman of ACC, two retired national professors and two retired media personalities without political affiliation as members, with the chief justice as the head. This will put at rest all attempts by political parties to agitate on the ground that the government has politicised these vitally important national institutions.

The law whereby MPs have been foisted upon the elected upazilla

parishad appears to have been driven by the desire of MPs to be involved in rural development works. The whole exercise not only negates the very concept of local government as envisaged under relevant articles of the constitution but also serves to stimulate corruption and hamper rural development. Besides, the government's decision to withdraw all corruption cases instituted against the ruling party leaders during the caretaker government rule, and term them as politically-motivated, runs counter to the rule of law. These cases should have been left to the appropriate court to decide.

An elected political government does entail huge expenditure from the state exchequer if we take into account the staggering amount of money spent for the upkeep of a large council of ministers with advisors, state ministers and deputy ministers, and an august Parliament with speaker, deputy speaker and all the law makers elected directly and indirectly. Think of the law makers enjoying pay and allowances, and other perks and privileges, with the prospect of getting more -- as we hear of new cars being imported for them which they can retain after use at a nominal price, offices being provided both in the parliament house and in their constituencies, and a plot of land in a government housing project. It is a pity that our MPs, representing the affluent section of our poverty-stricken country, still hunger for more perks and privileges. Even developed countries do not extend such privileges to their lawmakers.

The government still has four years left in its tenure. There are a number of capable and patriotic people in the cabinet. Let us hope that this government with its pro-liberation image will not have disappointed the people by the time it completes its mandated stint in power.



Doing well so far.

FABRUR RAHMAN/DRIKNEWS

Brig. Gen. Shamsuddin Ahmed (Retd.) is a former Military Secretary to the President.

COP15 summit fiasco

Many of us see both success and failure in the COP15 deal -- although, the failures are mostly talked about in the global media. It was a success, given what was realistically attainable, and a failure because of unattainable expectations that had been ratcheted up far beyond what was realistic. It's certainly a step in the right direction.

ABDULLAH A. DEWAN

WHO is to blame for the COP15 summit disaster? The US? China? The EU? The G-8? In fact, all of the above. It was a coming together of states that killed off a vital resource for the world: Trust (Christian Schwagerl in Der Spiegel).

"Copenhagen showed us the new normal: the U.S. has lost influence, China plays spoiler, and tiny nations veto anything they don't like (Leslie H. Gelb in The Daily Beast)."

Mark Lynas (guardian.co.uk) writes: "Copenhagen was a disaster. The truth is this: China wrecked the talks, intentionally humiliated Barack Obama, and insisted on an awful 'deal' so western leaders would walk away carrying the blame. How do I know this? Because I was in the room and saw it happen. [...] I saw

Obama fighting desperately to salvage a deal, and the Chinese delegate saying 'no, over and over again.'"

China, paddled at times by India, pushed aggressively to nullify all the crucial carbon emission restraining figures that mattered. A 2020 peaking year in global emissions, essential to hold back temperatures to 2°C, was removed. The global target of 50% emission cut by 2050 was also expunged. China even demanded the removal of the 1.5°C target, which was saved only when President Nasheed of the Maldives, backed by British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, pointedly asked China: "How can you ask my country to go extinct?"

After much squabbling, China, India, Brazil, South Africa, and the US, led by a desperate President Obama, negotiated a nonbinding deal to hold back global temperatures to 2°C above pre-industrial

levels by 2050. However, the announcement of rich nations contributing \$100 billion a year over 10 years to help poor nations restrain their carbon emissions and cope with climate change adversity was the highlight of the COP15 conference.

The low point of the conference, as reported in the media, was China's attitudes and behaviour. When President Obama and Secretary of State Hilary Clinton proposed a proviso requiring all nations to comply with outside monitoring and "transparent verification," China rejected it vehemently and Premier Wen Jiabao even left the conference center angrily and afterwards snubbed President Obama in two previously planned bilateral and multinational meetings (John Lee, Dec. 21).

In desperation for a deal, Obama compromised to accept an accord that merely requires developing countries to self-report their emissions every two years.

China's design, as opined by an analyst, was to weaken the climate regulation regime now "in order to avoid the risk that it might be called on to be more ambitious in a few years' time." Even though China is strong in wind and solar technologies, its growth, and increasing global pre-eminence, is based largely on cheap coal energy. The Chinese leadership wants to

preserve this coal-based economy as long as it can.

Many of us see both success and failure in the COP15 deal -- although, the failures are mostly talked about in the global media. It was a success, given what was realistically attainable, and a failure because of unattainable expectations that had been ratcheted up far beyond what was realistic. It's certainly a step in the right direction.

The conference witnessed the participation of the whole world (193 countries) for a national and global cause. The poorest nations, for the first time, made their presence recognised. The African countries established themselves as a force to be reckoned with when they walked out en masse fearing that the Kyoto Protocol would be disbanded. The aggrieved small island states, especially the Maldives and Tuvalu, also had their voices heard.

The deal would benefit the poorest and the hardest hit by climate change. For example, Rwanda with current per capita emissions of 0.35 tons could receive carbon credits for remaining below two tons and engage in carbon trade with any country that exceeds its cap. This naturally offers an incentive for poor countries to adapt to climate change and adopt new emission reduction technologies.

Like Rwanda, Bangladesh, which

contributes about 0.3 tons of CO2 per capita annually, would also be rewarded immensely by the cap and trade regime. Like many other aggrieved nations, the country needs climate change adaptation funds now. Some estimates claim that the adaptation projects would cost Bangladesh about \$5 billion. This amount isn't too high considering the dreadful prediction that the rising sea level would devour 17 percent of the country, leaving nearly 20 million dead and homeless.

One other positive aspect of the deal is its near uniform treatment of the big economies. This is a clear break from the asymmetric Kyoto Protocol, which is environmentally and economically untenable.

One serious concern is that the deal is not legally binding and whether the transparency deal agreed to in principle can be put into practice in a meaningful way.

As for the US policy makers, three big issues remain to be tackled: Translating the pledge of a 17 percent cut in US emissions from 2005 levels, working with others to deliver \$100 billion annually for 10 years to developing countries by 2020, and engaging in a long-term effort to augment the ambitions of several major developing countries. The world now has to wait and see what actions the

US Congress take.

It seemed, at the end, that the spoiler countries were happy going home while the losers, whose people may be submerged under water by rising sea levels in a decade's time -- if not earlier -- returned in discontent and dismay. These nations may now look to the December 2010 meeting in Mexico. Hopefully, a legally binding international protocol would be crafted to facilitate the developing nations with the means to help themselves and deal with the dilemma of climate change irreversibly.

Rich nations, already industrialised by cheap carbon based energy, must sacrifice much more by reducing carbon emissions by at least 200% instead of the proposed 80% and also sacrifice some growth for a decade, allowing the poorer nations to catch up.

The COP15 fiasco has displayed what many had been forecasting -- a challenging global leadership for the US, with China waiting as a thriving spoiler. Resolution of global issues may no longer be dictated by a powerful few "from top down" it will possibly be the outcome of a wholly different "coalition of the willing."

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