

Promise of a Pakistani

This is my promise to the people of Bangladesh. This is a promise of a Pakistani who, like Bangladeshis, always hated military dictators. This Pakistani will always be thankful to Bangladeshis because their founding father Sheikh Mujibur Rahman not only created Bangladesh but was also part of the movement which created Pakistan in 1947



HAMID MIR

MARCH 26, 2010 was an important day in my life. I was staying in India International Centre, New Delhi, where I was invited for receiving Saarc Lifetime Achievement Award from the Foundation of Saarc Writers and Literature. They organised a Saarc festival of literature for three days in Delhi and invited writers, journalists and peace activists from all the South Asian countries. The inaugural session was scheduled to start at 10 in the morning. I woke up early and opened the computer for checking emails. There was a flood of emails from the readers of *Prothom Alo* and *The Daily Star* of Dhaka from all over the world.

This unprecedented feedback was about an article published on the Independence Day of Bangladesh in which I said sorry for the genocide of 1971 by the Pakistan army

and demanded that the Pakistani government apologise to Bangladesh. I have been saying that in Pakistan for many years, but maybe it was a surprise for Bangladeshis on their Independence Day.

The number of emails increased to more than 200 by 8:30. Most of the Bangladeshi readers thanked me for apologising. Tears came to my eyes after reading many emails, and it was difficult to respond to all of them.

Vice-President of India Hamid Ansari and Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao were invited to the first session. Neither of them appeared, and later on I learnt that they were not happy about the publication of a poem in the brochure of the conference. That poem was written by conference organiser Ajeet Cour against the massacre of Sikhs in Delhi after the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984.

This arrogant attitude of two top govern-

ment functionaries reminded me of some people in Pakistan who are still not ready to accept that their army killed thousands of innocent people in Bangladesh in 1971. Delhi and Islamabad are responsible for many massacres, but they don't accept that. Anyhow, nobody noticed the absence of these two VIP's. Ajeet Cour was more popular among the writers of Saarc countries than those two.

I was invited to speak at 10:30 in the inaugural session. When I started my speech I reminded the audience about the significance of March 26 and said happy Independence Day to the Bangladeshi delegates. Hundreds of writers and journalists from all the South Asian countries clapped for the Independence Day of Bangladesh. It was then that I saw tears in the eyes of Bangladeshi writer Selina Hussein. These were the tears of joy because the Bangladeshis celebrated their Independence Day in Delhi with a Pakistani brother.

After receiving my award I again rushed to my computer in the lunch break. I was again stunned. Emails of Bangladeshis were still coming from all over the world. It was difficult for me to ignore the sentiments of hundreds of Bangladeshis. This feedback was more important for me than a life achievement award of \$5,000. March 26 became a historic day in my life because I had never received such a massive reaction to any of my writings in the 23 years of my journalistic career.

I was back to Pakistan the next day. It took me almost one week to read all the emails. My article was also circulated in Pakistan. The president of the Council of Pakistan Newspaper Editors, Mr. Khushnood Ali Khan (chief editor of *Daily Jinnah*), called me and assured me that he supported the idea of an official apology from Pakistan to Bangladesh.

The CEO of Geo TV, Mir Ibrahim Rehman, also agreed and offered his help in this regard. I am not the government of Pakistan. I am just an ordinary citizen of Pakistan but I assure my Bangladeshi brothers and sisters that I am not alone in Pakistan. A big number of Pakistanis want to apologise because the majority of them were actually not aware of what happened in 1971. The reason is that there was military rule in Pakistan at that time. The press was not free and communication between East and West was very limited.

But the Pakistan of today is different from the Pakistan of 1971. Now, Dr. Ziauddin Ahmed from Philadelphia, USA, can contact me after reading my column and he can tell me that his father was a worker of the Pakistan movement who migrated from

Assam to Sylhet in 1947. His father was killed by the Pakistan army on April 9, 1971 in Sylhet Medical College Hospital when he was treating some wounded people.

Dr. Ziauddin used to hate Pakistan, but a turning point came in his life in 2005. He was invited by Dr. Omar Atiq, the then president of the Pakistani Medical Association in North America. Dr. Atiq and hundreds of Pakistani doctors apologised to their Bangladeshi brothers for the genocide committed by the Pakistan army in 1971. Dr. Ziauddin wants Major Riaz and Colonel Sarfraz to be tried in a court of law for the murder of his father.

I also received an email from Lt. Col (rtd) Omar Huda, who was a captain in 1971. He was posted in Lahore but refused to accept the orders of his commander after the operation started in Dhaka on March 26. He was arrested by the Pakistan army. He was released in 1974 and eventually became a colonel in the Bangladesh army. Now he is retired and lives in Los Angeles. He still has many friends in Pakistan.

He is worried about the operations of the Pakistan army in Baluchistan and the Frontier Province (now Pakhtunkhwa) and thinks that perhaps one day someone like me will again write about the loss of human lives in these operations. He wants that the armies in Pakistan, India and Bangladesh should not open fire on their own people, or even on each other. I agree with him.

I cannot mention all the emails and all the names of those who wrote their words with tears and finished my tears. I thank all of them. I assure my Bangladeshi friends that I will no more write only columns in newspapers. I will write a letter to the president and the prime minister of Pakistan and demand that they apologise to the Bangladeshis. If they do not, I will write a book on that issue. After that I will make a documentary so that the new generation of Pakistanis come to know about the blunders committed by their elders in 1971. I am sure that one day my words will come true because I am fighting for truth.

This is my promise to the people of Bangladesh. This is a promise of a Pakistani who, like Bangladeshis, always hated military dictators. This Pakistani will always be thankful to Bangladeshis because their founding father Sheikh Mujibur Rahman not only created Bangladesh but was also part of the movement which created Pakistan in 1947. Bengalis actually created two countries. First Pakistan and then Bangladesh. You are really great people.

Hamid Mir is an eminent Pakistani journalist.

One Asia at Cancun



The issues and problems are very different and so many issues come in as bilateral. This can weaken negotiations.

YASMIN LEE ARPON

ASIA needs to have a strong and united voice in the next round of climate talks in Cancun, Mexico, in December, experts said Thursday.

However, they also noted that its very diverse concerns remain to be its greatest challenge in forging a common goal.

"The issues and problems are very different and so many issues come in as bilateral. This can weaken negotiations," Suwit Khunkitti, Thailand's minister of natural resources and environment, told a climate change forum here.

"If Asia can get together and speak the same language, it would create a very strong driving force," he added.

Suwit was speaking at the "Reacting to Climate Change: Vision, Action Plans and Media Involvement" forum organised by China Daily, Konrad Adenauer Foundation and the Asia News Network. The forum, attended by some 300 representatives from Asian governments and non-government organisations, was held at the Kempinski Hotel in China's capital.

Lot Felizzo, director for policy, campaign and communications of Oxfam in Hong Kong, agreed saying that Asian negotiators must build trust among themselves and consult with stakeholders if the region was to present itself as a strong lobby group in the Cancun talks.

"Asia is a very diverse grouping and therein lies the greatest challenge," Felizzo said. "We should remember that a united voice is a stronger voice."

Han Wenke, director of the Energy Research Institute under the National Development and Reform Commission of China, said developing countries need to have a "very clear target" and that the "ultimate direction is development."

Pan Jiahua, deputy director of Research Centre for Urban & Environmental Studies of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, said there are common challenges among Asian countries that could serve as a starting point, as follows: most are in their early or medium stage of industrialization, thus, making it more difficult to reduce emissions; Asian countries are very vulnerable to climate change and not all have plenty of oil reserves.

"Developed countries are already enjoying the result of industrialisation, it is unreasonable to share equal responsibilities (in cutting emissions)," Pan said.

He added, "The Asian voice is not that strong and we have to make noise to increase our voice." He also noted that China has taken the lead by cutting emissions by 40 percent to 45 percent by 2020. "We have taken the lead with the hope that US will follow," he quipped. The United States, on the other hand, is a reduction of 17 percent from 2005 levels by 2020.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean), meanwhile, is expected to come up with a set of goals within the week, Suwit said in an interview after the forum. He noted that Asean has set up a networking group to provide a platform for member countries to forge a common stand, hoping this could further boost the region's position in the Cancun talks.

"The most significant points have already been agreed," Suwit said, adding that if the region as a whole could thresh out their differences, it would be easier to forge an agreement.

He also said that a large population in Asia is already suffering from the effects of climate change, such as drought in southwest China and the drying up of the Mekong river, affecting the countries around it.

"The key to combating climate change is to close the gap and create a sustainable atmosphere. Asia is the engine of growth and the main production base of the world. We hope that Asian countries will have a voice in the negotiations to achieve a rational and effective solution," Suwit said.

©Asia News Network. All rights reserved. Reprinted by arrangement.

Feeding the fifteen crore

While increased subsidy to agriculture will help boost production, it will not be sufficient to attain food autarky. If the population problem cannot be solved, it will not only exacerbate food insecurity in the country, but also eat away the fruits of our development programs and activities.

M. ABDUL LATIF MONDAL

WHILE addressing a meeting of senior officials at the Sylhet Circuit House on April 3 to review the situation in the Sylhet division, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina pledged more subsidy to farmers to attain food autarky. She said that, if necessary, the government would increase subsidy to farmers to Tk.5,000 crore from the present Tk.3,000 crore.

Since coming to power, the AL-led government has been pursuing a policy that will boost agricultural production. On January 14, 2009 the government slashed the prices of non-urea fertilisers by almost half to reduce farmers' production cost of the 2009 *boro* crop. This brought down the prices of TSP, MoP and DAP to Tk.40, Tk.35 and Tk.40 from Tk.75, Tk.65 and Tk.80 per kilogram respectively. The government also reduced the price of diesel to run power pumps to irrigate agricultural land. The reduction in the prices of fertilisers and diesel and provision of other infrastructural facilities led to the bumper production of *boro* in 2009.

The government reduced the prices of TSP, MoP and DAP again in November, 2009. Under the revised rates, the prices of TSP, MoP and DAP came down to Tk.22, Tk.25 and Tk.30 from Tk.40, Tk.35 and Tk.40 per kilogram respectively. Under the newly introduced Agri-input Assistance Card and Cash Assistance program, the government has decided to provide cash subsidy to farmers (Tk.800 to a marginal farmer and Tk.1,000 to a big farmer) through banks to buy diesel for diesel-run power pumps in the on-going *boro* season.

The prime minister's announcement to give more subsidies to farmers to boost agricultural production has been timely. After all, farmers do require all the support that they can get from the state to produce more food.

Our economy is agro-based. Agriculture is the single largest producing sector of the country. About 21 percent of GDP of the country comes from agriculture sector.

Agriculture has indirect contribution to the overall growth of GDP. Many services, such as wholesale and retail trade, hotel and restaurants, transport and communication, are strongly supported by the agriculture sector.

According to the latest Labour Force Survey 2005-06 of BBS, our working age population (15+) stood at 61.59 percent, and the agriculture sector employs over 48 percent of the total labour force.

Subsidising fertilisers and other agricultural inputs and providing infrastructural facilities like expansion of irrigation, expansion of cultivable land, creation of opportunities for multiple cropping, etc., will help reduce the cost of production of food grain and other agricultural produce. This will benefit both the growers and the consumers.

Annual population growth rate is outpacing the food production growth rate. According to various studies, the population of the country will double to 280 million at the current rate of growth by 2080 and reach about 180 million as early as 2020. Accelerated rate of food production can meet the challenge of population growth rate.

Food ranks the highest in household expenditure in the country. According to Household Income & Expenditure Survey-2005 of BBS, 53.81 percent of the average monthly household consumption expenditure accounted for food and beverage at national level in 2005. The figure varied between urban areas and rural areas. In rural areas, where 75 percent of our population lives, the share was 58.54 percent against 45.17 percent in urban areas.

Developed countries subsidise their agriculture sector heavily, to the disadvantage of the developing countries. Available



They lead the way.

sources suggest that under the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), agricultural subsidies to European farmers and fisheries make up more than 40 percent of the EU budget. The US heavily subsidises grains, oilseeds, cotton, sugar and dairy products. The US farm programs have cost about \$20 billion per year in government outlays in recent years. Canada, Switzerland, Japan and South Korea subsidise their agriculture substantially. This strengthens the case for giving subsidies to our farmers to encourage them to grow more food to ensure food security of the people.

While increased subsidy to agriculture will help boost production, it will not be sufficient to attain food autarky. If the population problem cannot be solved, it will not only exacerbate food insecurity in the country, but also eat away the fruits of our development programs and activities.

Every year, the country is losing around 80 thousand hectares of arable land for non-agricultural purposes. If this process continues, hardly any arable land will be left

after 50 years for agricultural production.

Our agriculture is primarily based on traditional methods. If the process of farm mechanisation cannot be speeded up, there will be no increase in productivity.

In the absence of a well-organised farmers' co-operative system for marketing agricultural produce throughout the country, the producers at the grassroots level do not get fair price. There are big gaps between prices at growers' level and consumers' level, particularly in cities and towns. Prices also differ between markets. It is the middle-men who rule the roost. As a result, producers sometimes lose interest in producing a particular product due to unreasonably low price at the producers' level.

Along with providing subsidies to the agriculture sector, including farmers, remedies to the above and other related problems have to be found for attaining food autarky.

M. Abdul Latif Mondal is a former Secretary. E-mail: latifm43@gmail.com