

UN Millennium Development Goals: Prioritising rights and resources



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In her statements in New York, the prime minister called for more commitment to increase resources for poverty eradication. That is good, but she should also emphasise respect for human rights. Rights and resources are two sides of the same coin to make development more effective. The poor need both.

IRENE KHAN

AT the beginning of the new millennium world leaders adopted the UN Millennium Development Goals as a common commitment to end poverty by 2015. Last week, they gathered in New York to take stock of progress.

There was much rhetoric, many inspirational speeches and some awards -- including one to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina for her leadership in reducing infant mortality rates in Bangladesh. However, the outcome document adopted by the Summit admitted that achievements have fallen far short of what is needed to end poverty.

Over 1.4 billion people still live below the \$1.25-a-day global poverty line. Rising food prices have pushed up the numbers of hungry or undernourished people. Little progress is being made on reducing maternal mortality or increasing environmental sustainability. Economic growth in China and India distorts the aggregate results -- take them out and the picture worsens.

Even where progress has occurred, it is uneven. Take Bangladesh. It is doing well on several MDG targets. But the poverty rate has declined only marginally from 40% in 2005 to 38.7% in 2009. Food security remains a challenge. Child malnutrition, especially among girls, is a serious problem. The maternal mortality rate is high and has not budged in recent years.

Take Kenya, which has reached gender parity in secondary education. Dig behind that statistic and you will find that only around 10% of children go to secondary school. Overall enrollment figures must rise significantly for parity to be meaningful for girls in Kenya.

As governments gear up for the race to meet the MDG targets by 2015, some hard questions need to be asked about what's holding back real progress and what must be done about it.

When the MDGs were adopted ten years ago, they brought fresh vision, commitment and energy to the fight against poverty. Rejecting earlier poverty alleviation strategies based on economic growth and per capita income, the MDGs see poverty as multi-dimensional.

There are five goals on health, education and gender empowerment, and a goal each on reducing extreme income poverty and hunger, tackling environmental sustainability and enhancing global partnerships for development. All goals except one have clear measurable targets to be achieved by 2015.

By combining a human development paradigm with a results-based management approach of concrete targets and a clear time frame, the MDGs have managed to garner the support of rich countries and developing ones, the UN and Bretton Woods institutions, NGOs and private corporations.

The MDGs enjoy unprecedented political legitimacy. So why are governments struggling to meet the targets?

Because key issues on resources and human rights have been fudged or omitted. Donors are half-hearted about aid, trade, investment and technology transfer. Developing countries are wary of tying development to human rights and good governance. So, in the interests of consensus, the MDGs leave development cooperation to other processes, pay lip service to good governance and are silent on human

rights. These are fatal flaws.

Goal 8 on trade, aid, debt relief and technology transfer is the only MDG without measurable time bound targets. The rich countries are keen to measure progress on development but do not want to be held accountable for their own performance on resources. They talk of free trade but do little to open up their markets to poorer countries. Overseas development assistance (ODA) is way below what is needed and will fall further as donors tighten their belts in the economic downturn.

For a country like Bangladesh, freer labour markets so that more workers can find work abroad would bring in significantly higher revenues through remittances than the government will ever receive in aid from donors. But neither the MDGs nor the Summit's outcome document mentions labour migration.

Unfair trade barriers, unjust debt burden, declining aid and restrictions on migrant labour are obstacles to development.

Denial of human rights is another major impediment. The MDGs regard poverty as the deprivation of basic goods and services. That does not give a full picture of the problem.

The poor remain poor because they suffer from inequality, discrimination, violence and oppression, and because institutions are too weak or corrupt to protect their rights. Poor people are denied access to information and excluded from opportunities to participate in decision-making processes. Often, they are attacked rather than protected by the law enforcement agencies and are unable to hold the authorities to account. Increasingly, they are victims of pervasive inequality.

The Unicef report to the MDG Summit in New York highlighted the gulf between rich and poor children within developing countries. For instance, in Bangladesh the dropout rate of slum kids in primary schools is six times that of the national average. Gender parity in education is more common among better-off urban children than among children from poorer households.

Reports by Research Initiatives Bangladesh (RIB) show that inequity, cultural bias, racial and social discrimination are keeping indigenous people and marginalised communities like the bedey (river gypsies), kewras (pig rearers), rishis (leather workers) and horijons (sweepers) out of the development stream in Bangladesh.

When MDG reports show progress, the aggregated statistics hide who is being left behind. In the pressure to meet quantitative targets in the run up to 2015, it will be tempting policy makers to focus on those who are easy to reach, rather than those who are the poorest, most vulnerable and marginalised.

Several of the MDGs focus on gender but they reflect women's and girls' human rights only partly and rather poorly. There is no mention of gender violence, discrimination against women in civil, penal and family laws, property and ownership rights or discrimination at work. By setting targets below what international law requires and what women's movements are advocating, the MDGs are retrogressive on gender equality and women's empowerment.

Many studies, including by the World Bank, show that empowerment, opportunity and security are key to poverty reduction. Recognising health, education, housing, food, decent work, water and sanitation as rights is empowering. Promoting participatory rights, including the right to information, to organise and to free speech, encourages citizen engagement and makes governments more transparent, effective and accountable.

In her statements in New York, the prime minister called for more commitment to increase resources for poverty eradication. That is good, but she should also emphasise respect for human rights. Rights and resources are two sides of the same coin to make development more effective. The poor need both.

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Military coexistence in new era

To coexist, they should be aware of their differences and deepen mutual understanding, so as to prevent any disturbing emotions and irrationalities precipitating antagonism. Last but not the least, based on mutual respect, the two forces should fully understand the limits of their relations and find a way out of any difficulties through joint efforts.

XU HUI

CHINA and the United States were once again embroiled in a war of words recently, this time as a result of the military drills near China's coastal waters. Media in both countries decoded the recent war games from various angles: tit-for-tat actions, one country's anxiety over the other, or the extending of strategic feelers.

However, a review of China-US military relations in recent years reveals two basic facts.

First, the two countries and their military leaderships have more than once emphasised their desire to develop bilateral military ties and strengthen communication. Second, the two militaries are dedicated to promoting and stabilising a friendly relationship between the two countries.

Between the 1970s and 1980s, military cooperation between the two forces blazed a trail for normalising bilateral relations at a time when trade ties between the two countries were still weak. This kind of military cooperation also contributed greatly to the end of the Cold War.

Post-Cold War spats between China and the US over issues such as the 1999 Nato bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade and the 2001 collision between US and Chinese military aircraft, have all

delivered severe blows to bilateral ties. Yet even so, the two military forces prioritised their general interests and responded rationally to these crises in spite of enormous pressure from the media and the public.

As a key part of Sino-US relations, the stalled bilateral military ties should be brought back on track for the better development of bilateral relations as well as world peace. To that end, the two forces must reach consensus on two points.

First, they should remain focused on the overall global situation and China-US relations as a whole. Suggestions that conflicts or war between the two countries are inevitable are misguided from a 21st century perspective since there will be no winner in the nuclear and globalisation era. Second, the two forces must learn how to coexist and establish mutual trust on the premise that both have a clear understanding of the bilateral ties.

Recent events, especially the military exercises, have once again revealed the mistrust between the two and given rise to speculation that the two countries will lapse into an arms race similar to the one that obsessed the US and former Soviet Union.

Some on the US side have described the bilateral relations as neither friend-like nor foe-like, while they have been defined in China as the coexistence of cooperation and competition. These definitions,

though, have complicated China-US relations, including their military ties, and have shown that neither government is taking the other as enemy and neither wants a military confrontation.

In reality, over the past three decades, the rise of one country has not been predicated on the decline of another. The sustainable development of two powers enables both to benefit from non-rival policies, and that is why Sino-US relations should be based on mutually assured dependence. Only on such a foundation can the so-called structural contradiction between the status quo power and the rising power be solved.

Given this, the US should understand that the modernisation of Chinese military will make it more confident in cooperating with the US military and be more conducive to it taking on further responsibilities abroad.

In order to have sustainable bilateral military relations, a full awareness of the huge differences between the two countries' strategic culture and tradition is also important. For the US, leadership and threat are two key words in its military culture and strategic doctrine, a mirror to the sense of crisis and alarm engraved on the US soul and the impulse for the US to retain its leading role on the world stage.

In the meantime, "China is influencing the world through its self-changes," as Zhang Baijia, an expert on the history of the Communist Party of China, once put it. China does not, and will not seek, hegemony. It advocates building a harmonious world.

The Chinese military has also participated with other militaries in cooperative humanitarian endeavours such as international peacekeeping, disaster relief and anti-pirate initiatives. Viewed in this light, China and the US appear at odds, despite sharing considerable interests.

To coexist, they should be aware of their differences and deepen mutual understanding, so as to prevent any disturbing emotions and irrationalities precipitating antagonism.

Last but not the least, based on mutual respect, the two forces should fully understand the limits of their relations and find a way out of any difficulties through joint efforts.

Among all the stumbling blocks to a stable and sustainable military ties, the most significant one is the US arms sales to Taiwan, always a trigger for deteriorating relations between the two militaries. The two countries should therefore discuss the issue frankly.

Meanwhile, in order to ease the strained military ties, both parties should engage in dialogue about US military reconnaissance of China and its transparency.

Moreover, the two military forces should explore the potential and prospects of cooperation in some non-traditional security fields. This kind of cooperation helps ease tensions, builds mutual trust and would help stabilise China-US relations.

Given that the two military forces are at a critical period and demonstrating a serious lack of mutual trust, the establishment of a sustainable and stable relationship between them requires a process of learning and adjusting, during which friction and contradiction can hardly be avoided.

Clashes should be prevented; the two military forces should reach consensus where possible, especially on issues involving a third party, and then conform to the due standard of behaviour.

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Ayodhya verdict

Commendable restraint by both communities

NORMALLY, we should not have been making a comment on a court verdict in another country. Yet, since the sub-continental countries are, by and large, populated by Muslim and Hindu communities, it is natural for us at this end to be airing views on a matter of inter-religious import.

The Allahabad High Court's judgment apportioning the Ayodhya site where Babri mosque stood since the Mughal emperor Babar's reign up until 1992, when it was demolished by Hindu extremists, to three parties to the case, is an extra-ordinary verdict from which ever perspective it is seen.

In the first place, the court ruling has had to do with, and be deferential to, religious sentiments, spiritual beliefs, myths and differing narratives of history. Its legal import is to be discerned in the prescription of a solution it has provided based on the socio-communal-political dynamics which had been revolving around the Ayodhya issue. It is a very complex and highly emotive matter that came before Allahabad High Court for adjudication. The points of determination before the court had not so much to do with legal issues as with history and with the objective realities involving the relations of the two major communities in India.

Indeed, the complexity of the issue as a whole is inherently so pronounced that both the Hindu and Muslim contestants have preferred appeals to the Supreme Court as they are not apparently content with the verdict of the High Court. The Supreme Court of India as the highest arbiter of justice in the country will deliver its judgment in time with the wisdom and legal finesse that it is widely reputed for.

Status quo will be maintained for three months at the Ayodhya site and hopefully the Supreme Court will have disposed of the appeals in a way that will strengthen harmony between the two communities on stronger foundations.

Historically, the followers of the two mighty religions -- Hinduism and Islam -- have lived and pursued their faiths side by side in peace until a bone of contention sprang up centring around Babri Mosque marked by an acrimony which needed to be resolved befitting the spirit of the 21st century so we reckon.

The Hindus and Muslims rather than engaging in exchanging claims and counter claims as to who won and who lost through the verdict, both sides need to be positively circumspect and restrained in their reactions and attitudes. Through a crisis they should find ways to bring about a resurgence of harmony between the two communities for the greater good of India and of the whole region.

Good news for CEPZ

Now, infrastructure and port efficiency must be the priority

WE are certainly pleased that the Chittagong EPZ has been given a high ranking by the UK-based journal FDI. That despite all our problems, multifarious in nature, the CEPZ has been recognised in a survey of 700 economic zones as the fourth best in terms of economic potential and third best in the competitive category is certainly a moral boost for us. And indeed we do think that such a placing of the CEPZ can well be taken as a sign of the long way our investment-related activities can go. More importantly, though, we believe that the ranking should act as a spur to us in the matter of streamlining things on the national economic scene through injecting more vitality into other economic zones in the country.

The ranking achieved by the CEPZ in FDI magazine is without question an acknowledgement of the investment-friendly conditions we have in Bangladesh. For the last many years, successive governments have consistently carried the policy of investment, both local and foreign, forward as a way of stressing our need to come level with the rest of the world where economic steps are concerned. Now this ranking should rightly be seen as a vindication of all those efforts. However, it is also proper that we do not rest on our laurels because the FDI ranking refers only to the potential of the CEPZ. What we in Bangladesh must now do is translate that potential or possibility into reality. For that to be done, there are certain priorities that need shaping and implementing. The first of course is a guarantee of political stability that will permit free, undisturbed economic activities all across the country. The agitational nature of our politics has, therefore, to be discarded if the economic future of the people is to be secured by the state and its essential components.

And then comes the very important question of infrastructure. In the world of fast competition we happen to be part of, no amount of appreciation for the potential we have will do us any good unless we have the very fundamentals of a modern, working economy in place. That economy must, of course, be one connected to the broad global economy. Finally comes the question of port efficiency. Our ports are yet to arrive at a stage where they can approximate other ports around the world in terms of handling goods. It is therefore of huge importance that the Chittagong port be transformed into a sphere where total efficiency and absolute professionalism serve as its underpinnings.

The FDI journal ranking cheers us. Let it now be followed by what needs to be done on the ground.