

Cancun reflections



A unique form of protest at Cancun.

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SABER H. CHOWDHURY

IN the long list of disappointments arising out of management and outcome of COP15 in Copenhagen, prominent was the fact that the integrity of the UNFCCC process had been undermined. It is thus to the credit of Mexico's presidency of COP16 that it not only realised this deficit but worked methodically

towards restoring faith and confidence in the process by creating the political space and environment for meaningful negotiations and constructive interactions amongst the Parties. During a side event that Bangladesh had organised during the MDG Summit in New York in September this year and one which was chaired by our Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, I had the pleasure of meeting and

speaking with Mexico's charismatic and impressive Foreign Minister, Patricia Espinoza. She identified the problem of the negotiations in terms of the process and reiterated this when I had an opportunity to question her during IPU's Parliamentary meeting in Cancun on how she as president of COP16 would restore faith and confidence amongst the Parties and uphold integrity of UNFCCC process. She responded that Mexico believed in an inclusive process and complete transparency and that there would not be any hidden texts or agenda. Other than skillfully winning over, at the end of the day, the Parties with this open approach and reaching consensus within the Convention framework, the other benefit of this measured and focused

strategy of Mexico was that it helped to play down and manage expectations. From the beginning, Mexico successfully projected and presented COP16 as an intermediate stop between Copenhagen and COP17 in Durban, South Africa, in November 2011. The objective was not to reach grand agreements but to keep the process going so that when we are in Durban for COP17, there is a solid foundation and framework to reach newer and higher heights. My assessment of COP15, which also I had the good fortune of participating in, is that it failed in part due to the fact that it became a Summit of World Leaders and Heads of Government rather than a UN Convention. The overall and media hype and the huge expectations that such a Summit understandably generates, was perhaps paradoxically also a reason why expected agreements could not be reached. The process in Copenhagen froze and stood in virtual paralysis in anticipation of the high level segment delivering and resolving all pending issues. Unfortunately, the global leaders had neither the will nor the time available to deliver. COP16 on the other hand shows that a low-key approach with skillfully managed expectations and allowing the inclusive process to function and operate, as it should, allows for a greater level and prospect of advancement and success. In terms of concrete steps and actions, establishment of a Global Climate Fund under the COP is a very significant step forward and will no doubt build further trust so very necessary to achieve game-changing progress in Durban. Much still needs to be done to ensure that the fund starts to flow, but at least the developing countries (including LDCs, SIDS as strongly advocated by Bangladesh) can now know and see that the outline of the fund is a reality and they have a major stake and ownership in its management thereof. Bangladesh too will secure its rightful share of significant funding. The challenge here though is to develop institutional

capacity and a sound knowledge base, and have in place a requisite protocol of checks and balances, to ensure that funds are utilised in a transparent and prudent manner and optimum benefits do flow to the victims of climate change. The decision of COP16 to establish a Cancun Adaptation Framework and the recognition of the need to look at greater detail at urgent and growing adaptation needs of the most vulnerable countries in particular and the developing world in general who have to whether the worst impacts of climate change whilst having contributed least to the problem and having also the least ability to adapt, is a welcome and necessary development which will be hopefully be fleshed out and resolved satisfactorily by COP17 in Durban. It is also heartening to note that the text of the discussions in Cancun recognises migration and the plight of individuals displaced and uprooted from their communities due to climate change, and that for Bangladesh this is an imperative. Cancun was a significant advancement in context of Copenhagen's failures and shortcomings. It effectively salvaged and saved the process from the brink of collapse and in so doing has given the world a lifeline, albeit tenuous as much still needs and remains to be done on the road to Durban. The critical question to ask is, has it done enough to save the earth and prevent runaway climate change? Most worryingly, the mitigation scenario continues to be bleak. The deep emission cuts so desperately and urgently necessary remain unaddressed, and neither does the Cancun Agreement provide clarity or the mechanism on how global temperature rises will be limited to 1.5 degrees Celsius. Based on the most optimistic scenario and pledges made by Annex 1 countries thus far, we are now looking at temperature increase of close to 4 degrees Celsius, and this hugely impacts on the planet's ability to soak up CO2. Currently, 50% of man-produced emis-

sions are absorbed by the sea and by plants on land. However, the amount of CO2 that can be absorbed decreases as temperatures rise, and we will soon reach a tipping point from which temperatures will go up even faster. This will prevent us from ever returning to safe climate levels and conditions. Related to the above, the critically important issue of agreeing on a peak year for emissions has also not been resolved and, hence, the prospect of runaway climate change is a clear and distinct possibility. What happens after the Kyoto Protocol expires in 2012 is still uncertain and is yet another major area requiring resolution in Durban. Whilst adaptation is a definite priority, and reality, for Bangladesh given that even if the world could achieve zero emissions tomorrow, the current Green House Gases concentrations already in the atmosphere will mean that it will be a good ten to twenty years before the benefits of zero emissions can be enjoyed. At the end of the day, mitigation is the best form of adaptation and the more major emitters can mitigate now the less the world will need to adapt in future. The adaptation string can only be stretched to a certain point, and then it snaps and is no longer sustainable. We may have access to more adaptation funding than we can use or need but then what is the point if due to continued emissions, catastrophic and irreversible climate change and puts our existence in jeopardy? Cancun has certainly restored and saved the process but it has not done enough to save mankind. That task is now squarely on the shoulders of COP 17 and that will possibly be the last opportunity for governments to act in accordance with what science so clearly and categorically has been demanding us to do.

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Pride and (extreme) prejudice

Robust economic critique and a push for reform are always needed. But there's a parallel stream of glee here. Schadenfreude is joy at the distress of others. Blood in the water and others want a bite. The chatter in town is sprinkled with "bhalo hoise," "bujho thela" and "ekhon khela shesh."

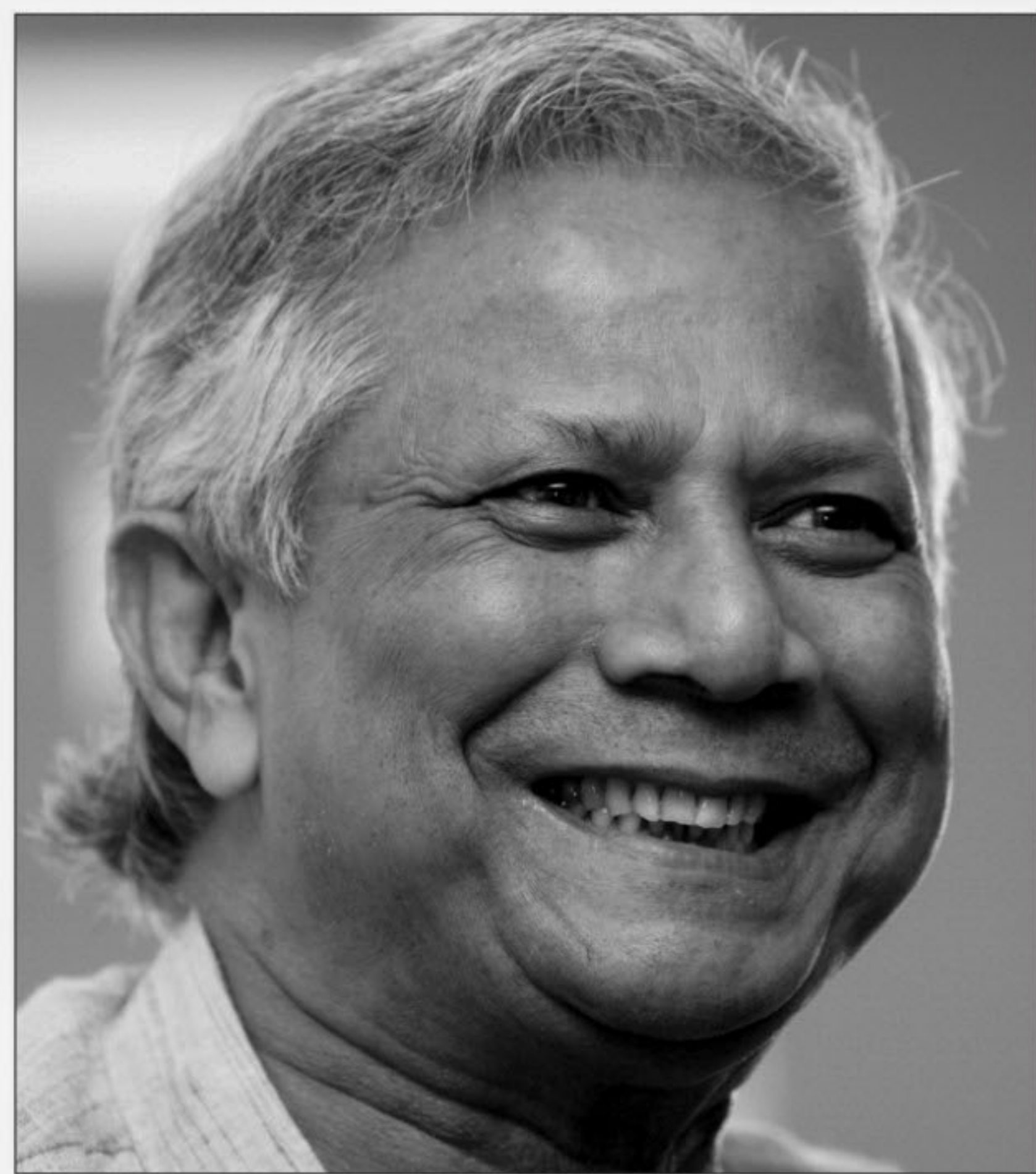
NAEEM MOHAIEEMEN

TODAY, I want to talk about the fickle nature of our hero syndromes. But first, people will ask: "Yes, yes, but where do you really stand?" So, let's get that over with in the first paragraph. Based on the public documents, Grameen Bank acknowledges transferring funds from one entity to another to reduce tax liabilities and support that entity. The transfer helped the overall picture of "Grameen" entities -- a fund surplus in one area moved to the deficit zone. Not a novel practice. But not informing the donors? Bad decision and terrible policy. Tom Heinemann's signature is the "aha, caught you" documentary. From Bitter Taste of Tea to the investigation of Telenor's outsourcing practices in Bangladesh. But this time the target is bigger, as the spiraling reaction to his film shows. Whether the transfer was "notional," whether Norwegian donors give Grameen a clean chit, becomes almost irrelevant. The damage is the first screamer headline: "siphoning." No one has attention span for long news cycles. The Grameen Bank script could have simply been of the Chittagong economist who modified existing economic

models and grew it to global scale. But the universal desire for a "wise man of the east" narrative inserted a highly personalised, Gandhian ethos into the project. In an uber-cynical age, such saintly stories have a predictable arc -- the rise and fall. The bullseye is proportionate to the halo. A Yunus-centric Grameen Bank story has created a problem of succession and leadership. When the Heinemann story broke, senior managers like Muzammel Huq and Khalid Shams and Dipal Barua, who had been with the Bank for decades, were no longer there. The person left to face the media was the woefully unprepared M. Shajahan. Maybe he's a good daily administrator (I don't know), but under the klieg lights of television he was frozen. Road-kill on the "scandal" highway. Microcredit started as a solid concept. Grameen succeeded in developing a business model, targeted sharply on the bottom poor and women. An enhancement and successor to Akhtar Hamid Khan's two tier co-op in the 1960s, and the government's "Integrated Rural Development Programme" of the 1970s. But far more self-financing and successful than those earlier experiments.

Global ambitions pushed expansion to an epic scale, and within that scale is the Achilles heel. Until the mid-'90s, the Bank was relatively small, motivation of staff was strong, and credit was well supervised. Then international attention exploded and the microcredit dam broke. Grameen Bank became gigantic and extremely difficult to manage, and hundreds of large and small microfinance institutions also entered the fray. As documented extensively in research studies, the larger the microcredit movement became, the wider its exposure to those borrowers who could not generate enough earnings and therefore might default. A cycle began: some borrowers took out new loans to cover existing loans, getting stuck in a feedback loop. Other borrowers defaulted, creating more pressure on existing loans. The more famous Dr. Yunus became, the more he travelled abroad, the more the absence of a strong management in Dhaka to get things under control. And here the lack of seasoned managers (the Huq and Shams of early years) was acutely felt. There was no one to enforce rectification, reduction -- a good dose of micromanagement to get fundamentals in order. The flaws of the microcredit model have been analysed by Lamia Karim, Anu Muhammed, Omar Tareq Chowdhury and others. But Grameen Bank's response has been to ignore or steamroller the critique. But now comes Heinemann's fairly average documentary, and as Afsan Chowdhury once remarked about the arsenic crisis, it's

when the western/white narrator arrives that issues finally become "important." The state machinery has taken up aggressive positions. The public disagreement between the finance minister and the prime minister gave everyone signals and marching orders. Dr. Yunus' election foray in the early days of 1/11 laid the course for this unraveling as well. I would not expect the Awami League to forgive that political adventure, and some payback seems inevitable. Robust economic critique and a push for reform are always needed. But there's a parallel stream of glee here. Schadenfreude is joy at the distress of others. Blood in the water and others want a bite. The chatter in town is sprinkled with "bhalo hoise," "bujho thela" and "ekhon khelashesh." I'm remembering the grand reception at China-Bangla Moitree Shommelon Kendra. That huge reception after the Nobel Prize. It seemed everyone in shushil Dhaka was there (you were there too, don't deny it). People crowded around the honey-pot during fame times. I wonder what happened to that crowd, the multitude? Very few of those people seem to be stepping forward to defend Grameen Bank, even a little. Nobody wants to say: the Bank made mistakes, the model has flaws, things need to change, but this can't become a personal crucifixion. Humayun Azad once wrote: "When Bengalis wants to lift someone up, they lift him to the skies. And when they want to bring him down, they rip him down into the mud." The secret plea-



Prof. Md. Yunus

sure over the controversy speaks volumes about the crowd. I'm reminded of the nihilistic dance at the end of Lord of the Flies: "Kill the beast! Cut his throat!"

The visceral and poisonous thrill of communal bloodletting. Naeem Mohaiemen is a member of Dristipat Writers' Collective. E-mail: naeem.mohaiemen@dristipat.org

Remembering Quazi Azhar Ali

MD. SAKHAWAT HUSSAIN

QUAZI Azhar Ali was an outstanding and brilliant officer of the erstwhile Civil Service of Pakistan. Not only a civil servant, he was a reformer in the education and socio-economic fields. He was a dedicated philanthropist who founded many educational institutions and launched poverty eradication programmes. Quazi Azhar Ali was born on March 10, 1934. He passed Matriculation and Intermediate from Mulghat High School and P.C. College, Bagerhat. He passed B.Sc (Hon's) and M.Sc from Dhaka University, with a first-class-first in M.Sc. He studied public administration in Cambridge University, UK, and obtained a Diploma. He got Master's Degree from Harvard University. Azhar Ali was a teacher at M. M.

College, Jessore, and later at MC College Sylhet and Dhaka University. In 1959 he joined the Civil Service of Pakistan and received foundation training in the Civil Service Academy, Lahore. After completion of training, he was posted to Rajbari as sub-divisional officer. On promotion, he was posted as deputy commissioner in Rangpur and Comilla districts. He also served as director general of BARD, Comilla. Azhar Ali became the first secretary of BADC under Hatch Barnwell, I.C.S., who was the founder chairman. He was chairman Power Development Board, Tea Board, T.C.B. and FDC, Bangladesh. He also served as alternate Executive Director, Asian Development Bank. As a civil servant and secretary he represented Bangladesh in many important international conferences and seminars.

As a philanthropist patron of education and learning he established many educational institutions with his personal funds and raising subscription from the generous public. The following are the educational institutions established by him: Bangladesh University, Mohammadpur; Mohammadpur Preparatory School and College; Sakina Azhar Technical College at Fakirhat, Bagerhat -- with his personal funds and his wife's pension; Ashraf Uddin School and Khodeza Khatun Girls High School (in the name of his father and mother) at Fakirhat, Bagerhat; Fakirhat College; Rajbari College and Rajbari Girls High School; Khulna Public School and College.



Quazi Azhar Ali

Azhar Ali was one of the founders of Bangladesh Medical College and founder vice-chairman of

Bangladesh Heart Foundation, Mirpur, Dhaka. He was a man of courage, conviction and commitment. He was a man of sterling qualities of head and heart. He dedicated his retired life to the cause of education and socio-economic activities. He established an NGO for poverty eradication. In the process, about 5,000 youths were trained in vocational fields and were suitably employed. A man of strong will and missionary zeal he overcame all obstacles and achieved success towards people's welfare. In 1964, a communal riot broke out at Narayanganj. Though he was working as deputy secretary in the ministry of finance he was deputed to control it. Azhar Ali was equal to the task. With firmness and neutrality he controlled the riot. He earned the confidence of

common men. He was appointed as administrator of Narayanganj Municipality. Azhar Ali was founder president of Bagerhat Samity and greater Khulna Samity in Dhaka. He was honorary treasurer and secretary of the then East Pakistan Sports Federation. He worked hard towards development of Dhaka Stadium. During the cyclone in 1963 he was deputed for relief operation in Chittagong, Noakhali and Barisal. He authored 15 books in English and Bengali on different subjects. He was loved and admired by his colleagues and common men. He will be long remembered for the services he rendered. He is the pride of Fakirhat and a great man of Khulna. Md. Sakawat Hussain is a former Secretary.