

INTERVIEW WITH SHEIKH HASINA

'I did not fire Yunus'

Sheikh Hasina, prime minister of Bangladesh, spoke with The Washington Post's Anup Kaphle in New York last month during her trip to attend the United Nations General Assembly meeting. The following is an edited transcript from the interview.

The Washington Post (WP): Last year Bangladesh's poverty rate dropped to 31.5 percent, from about 40 percent in 2005. Can you tell us what's working for Bangladesh?

Sheikh Hasina (SH): Since my last tenure we have been trying to find the root causes of poverty and how we could reduce it. We wanted to ensure food security so we put all our force into producing more food and also the distribution system so that food should first reach to the poorest of the poor. Then we tried to create job opportunities for them in the rural areas. Now our farmers can open bank accounts with 10 taka (about 13 cents), a very small amount, and the subsidy we give goes directly to the farmer. So they use this money for cultivation and also it creates job opportunity. We also established one bank to create job opportunities for the younger generation. Without any collateral, they can take out a loan from the bank to start a business. I believe that educating our people will also help to reduce the poverty level. So our education is free up to primary level (fifth grade) for everyone, and for girls it is free up to high school level.

WP: Since you brought up the microcredit initiative, let's talk about Grameen Bank. During the first term in the late '90s you had praise for Mohammad Yunus and you talked about how his vision would help Bangladesh. Lately there have been controversies that you've fired him and you called him a loan shark?

SH: I am sorry, I didn't fire him.

WP: Local media in Bangladesh have reported that he was fired.

SH: No.

WP: But you are not a fan of microcredit?

SH: It's not true. Microcredit is to help people, not to create problem for people, right? We found that it was not helping people and it was not reducing the poverty level. Rather, they were nursing poverty.

WP: Can you talk a little bit more about that? How is it nursing poverty?

SH: Look, Grameen Bank is a government bank; it is not private bank. It is government statutory body, it has its own law. According to Grameen Bank law, one can remain its [managing director] up to 60 years of age but not above that. We just reminded him that it is the law, rule of the law of the country and you have to follow that. He was absolutely a government employee but he never followed any rules, regulations, nothing. Now

you tell me how I can reduce his age?

WP: But when you say it is not helping to alleviate poverty but it nursing poverty, what do you mean?

SH: Tell me one thing. If I give you \$20,000 can you pay 40 percent interest every week?



WP: Probably not.

SH: Probably not, right? Sitting in New York, if you cannot do it then tell me if a poor person from a village can earn money and pay such a high rate of interest. After that how can you claim that you are reducing poverty? The government now gives microcredit to the poor people; sometimes it is interest free, sometimes it is 5 percent or 3 percent interest. Like for housing, we give money to the NGO with a 1 percent service charge, but there is a binding that they cannot charge more than 5 percent interest.

WP: So no banks can charge more than 5 percent?

SH: No, this is a specialized fund we have created. In Bangla, that means "building houses for the poor." It's a special bank from which people can take loans for hous-

ing. We created all this just to give incentive to the people.

WP: Let's talk climate change. It is a huge issue for Bangladesh and there are reports that say that by the end of this century, a quarter of your country will be under water. As a prime minister of a country, what do you think when you hear things like that?

SH: Bangladesh is one of the worst victims of climate change while it contributes practically nothing to the emission of the greenhouse gases. Bangladesh's share is only 0.02 percent at most of the global total. Bangladesh would face the adverse conse-

quences of climate change in a way that her development will be arrested if the global community does not come forward to help her. Food security will be under grave threat while millions upon millions of people will be pushed below the poverty line. Health will be a major casualty. Coastal storms and surges will kill and displace people who will migrate both internally and also outside the country while the economy of the coastal areas will be shattered.

It is impossible for Bangladesh alone to take action against the rising sea level, as it has been a cumulative effect of global emission in which Bangladesh does not have any role. It is the responsibility of global community to address this issue as urgently as possible. But Bangladesh has developed some of its own strategy to fight the threat.

WP: Can you talk about the major steps that the government is taking to ensure

that the country is climate proof?

SH: My government has developed a Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan as a quick response to an immediate need to address the impacts of climate change. The Strategy and Action Plan is built on six pillars of which five are related to impact management and one is related to mitigation through low carbon development. The government has also promulgated the Climate Change Trust Fund Act 2010 by which a Climate Change Trust Fund has been constituted from its own resources. We have already allocated \$300 million to it since 2009. Next, my government has

established the Bangladesh Climate Change Resilience Fund to receive contributions from development partners for implementing projects. But we need the developed countries to keep their promise and help us.

WP: How much money would Bangladesh need in order to fight climate change?

SH: As much as you can get. I cannot say a specific number because day-by-day the situation is becoming worst and demand is increasing. If I give you some specific number, it may increase the following year.

WP: What does Bangladesh hope will come out of the next climate summit in Durban?

SH: Well, I told you that we received only very good commitment but it is not fulfilled. The demand still remains. We see no results.

WP: There is a perception that Bangladesh's Rapid Action police play the role of judge, jury and executioner and they operate with impunity. Is that true?

SH: No, there is a law, there are rules, regulations. This Rapid Action Battalion is under home ministry, so they work according to their rules. And Bangladesh at one time had terrorist activities. Since we have formed our government, we have reduced this terrorist activities.

WP: So the perception that these police operate with impunity is wrong?

SH: If anybody indulges in any wrong, we immediately bring them to book. If you go through old reports, then you will find out that this force was used politically.

WP: What I am trying to get here is that there are news reports saying this police battalion operates with impunity.

SH: It is totally wrong. Actually in 2004 this force was established, but it is true that at that time the former government used this force politically and they were allowed to kill many people and this and that. At one stage they become so popular because there was no one to talk against them. I think I was the first one who opposed those actions. Since we formed the government, they act according to rules and regulation and there is no case for political victimization and if you see, go through all the records then you can see that. If anybody, any person, or any member of this force does anything wrong under the rules and regulations, they face trial, they can lose the job. But you should notice one thing that since we formed government we are able to reduce the terrorist activities.

WP: So how has Bangladesh become successful in dealing with terrorist activities?

SH: On Aug. 17, 2005, within half an hour, there were 500 bomb blasts in Bangladesh in 63 districts. Then there was a grenade attack, of which I was the victim, and 22 people died. Since we formed government we declared zero tolerance to terrorism and we have taken action and you can see the result. In the last two and a half years, there have been no bomb blasts, no terrorist activities, nothing. All our law enforcing agencies, police, then RAB, all the intelligence groups, they are working very hard. We have also involved local imams, local community leaders and other social elites to raise awareness about terrorism. But I don't understand one thing: when the previous government used this Rapid Action Battalion against the political opponent, somehow nobody raised their voice at that time...but when we reduced terrorism, suddenly some quarter started blaming all this on law enforcing agencies who are helping us to curb the terrorism. I don't understand why.

WP: So you feel like people are wrong for accusing the special police force?

SH: Exactly. There is no impunity to anybody.

Buddhist Prabarana and its message

SUKOMAL BARUA

TODAY is the full-moon day of holy Prabarana, the second-biggest Buddhist festival. It is the day of breaking fast of three months "Upasathabrata" and is known as Aswini Purnima.

The three-month long "Barshavasa" (rain retreat) of the Bhikkhus-Bhikkhunis starts in the Ashari Purnima and continues up to Prabarana Purnima. The Buddha, on this day, directed his disciples to propagate the Dhamma "Carata bhikkhave carikam bahujana hitaya, bahujana sukhaya...lokanukampaya."

Goutam was the son of Shuddhodhan, the king of Kapilavastu from the Khattiya (warrior) clan. But that was not his actual identity. He became known as the Buddha after attaining enlightenment (Buddhahood). That is his real identity.

After attaining Buddhahood, Goutama preformed his seventh Barshavasa in the heaven of Tavatimsa. He explained the Dhamma to his late mother Mayadevi with many other deities for three months. On the night of Prabarana Purnima he descended to the Sankashya Nagara from heaven, and displayed the miracles of spiritual power to his disciples. So it is a very sacred festival for the Buddhists.

The observance of the auspicious Kathin Civar Dana (yellow robes offering ceremony) begins the day after this Purnima, and continues for one month in the monasteries. The day-long programme includes a

religious procession with devotional songs in the early morning. Religious discussions and candle lighting are held in the afternoon and evening respectively. At night, rocket balloons made of coloured paper are set free to soar towards the sky.

Buddhism is based on Sila (precepts), Samadhi (meditation) and Panna (wisdom). According to Buddhism, they are the way of salvation from all worldly sufferings and can make someone a perfect human being.

Sila, which consists of rules, principles and discipline, is the way for building good nature and noble character. By practicing Sila, one can keep the mind peaceful and pure, while abstaining from any kinds of unlawful deeds.

Samadhi means using contemplation to control the mind to do the right things. Meditation, bhavana, yoga and contemplation are all synonyms of the word "Samadhi." Through Samadhi man can achieve right wisdom or Panna. Wisdom is the highest among the three. Buddhism says wisdom is not only for getting salvation from suffering, but is also most essential for reaching the human goal and destination.

The Buddha preached His Dhamma (religion) for the good of all human beings of the world. He traveled from one place to another, irrespective of their political ideology, constitution or administration. He was equally respected by greedy emperors planning to conquer another's land and the

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If we accept the teachings of Buddha then human society will be peaceful because they advocate the practice of non-violence, equality, brotherhood and friendship. This message is for all humans, regardless of religion, caste and creed.

Men cannot live without society.

Humanity is the core of society, and can be developed by following socio-religious norms and practices, which help to build up the moral character that plays a vital role in promoting unity, peace, brotherhood, integrity, etc.

A human being must practice the five precepts prescribed by the Buddha, i.e., not to kill, not to steal, not to indulge in unlawful sex, not to tell lies and not to take intoxicating substances. Besides, Buddha's universal theory, i.e., loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and meditation can drive away all the unwholesome activities from the society.

The Buddha said self-power, self-reliance and unity are the key for the development of human society. Unity growing out of strength of weapons does not last long. True unity comes from courtesy and self-sacrifice. The Buddha advised the Sangha to

develop morality. For this, they develop self-reliance and dutifulness to proceed towards the goal.

To get rid of greed, Buddha advised four types of right thinking and meditation. This is called Brahma Vihara in Buddhist tradition. Brahma Vihara is the combination of (i) Maitree (friendship): to wish happiness and welfare for all living beings in the world, (ii) Karuna (compassion): to feel sympathy for all and think how to reduce others' sorrow, (iii) Mudita (sympathy or pity without any jealousy): to feel happy for other's happiness and prosperity and not to feel jealous, and (iv) Upekkha (indifference): to be free from all anger, jealousy, ignorance, prejudice and partiality.

In the words of the Buddha: "Na hi verena verani-sammanti'dha kudacancam averena ca sammanti-esa dhammo sanantano" (hated never ceases through hatred; through love alone it ceases. This is the eternal law). Hatred towards none and loving kindness to all can conquer enmity.

Let the strict adherence to and practice of the great teachings of the Buddha eliminate wars from this earth and establish truth and good for all. May mankind be able to achieve compassion and selfless love for all. "Sabbe satta sukhita hontu" (may all beings be happy. May peace prevail on the earth).

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