

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

# 'What you will hear from the UN is more and more requests to contribute to world affairs'

*With the increased frequency and intensity of disasters in Bangladesh and elsewhere, the international community is changing its strategy, especially amid financial crisis in the western world. They want long-term solution. The governments in need of international aid also have to plan accordingly to ensure better effectiveness of the money they receive. That is the key message shared by Margareta Wahlstrom, special representative of the UN Secretary General for Disaster Risk Reduction. She also heads the UN International Strategy for Disaster Reduction. Wahlstrom came to Bangladesh on March 28 for a four-day visit. Porimol Palma, senior correspondent of The Daily Star interviewed her.*

**The Daily Star (DS): What is the purpose of your visit?**

**Margareta Wahlstrom (MW):** I am here to raise awareness on how to prevent and mitigate disasters, because countries are paying increasingly high costs for disasters. There are instruments and means of doing that. Disasters have traditionally been dealt with as a disaster response issue. Like here in Bangladesh, you have to have a good preparedness and response system. That is necessary, but there is also a lot to do when it comes to development planning, investment in safer infrastructure and reducing risk factors. The experiences of Bangladesh are important for the world.

**DS: How do you perceive Bangladesh's position?**

**MW:** Bangladesh is one of the most vulnerable countries. Its exposure is high because it is in the low-lying cyclone belt and the population is also very large. The challenge here is to preserve their livelihood. At the same time, the country has enormous economic growth, which also tends to increase exposure. These combinations are there in many countries. The developed countries which are disaster prone, however, have the capacity, infrastructures and mechanisms in place. There are middle income countries that are growing very fast and are also exposed to disasters, but their institutional frameworks are not fully ready. What you are doing here is developing things disaster management system, legal basis, policies very fast. The work that is being done on seismic risks, reviewing building code and training engineers has to be built up. The other thing is there are instructions that all sector development projects need to be assessed for risks. This means investing in public works infrastructures and agriculture. Location of schools needs to be assessed for risks, and the staff have to be trained.

**DS: A lot of things need to be done. But, what should be the priorities?**

**MW:** Well, all these things are in the process. You worked on cyclones for 30 years. New elements are urban risk issues and awareness of seismic risks. What you can do is integrate disaster risks in development planning, which will also lead to budgetary allocations.

**DS: After the cyclone Aila, Bangladesh appealed to the international community for help to build a stronger and higher embankment along the coast, but it received no response. How do you look at it?**

**MW:** I think the answer is this. Just after the disasters, donors give money for humanitarian relief. But they are not the ones who will go for long term development projects. I met a group of donors here, and I don't think in this context they can do it. They can only make recommendations to their headquar-

ters. It is also important for the country itself to make it a development priority. So when the government decides on priority, it can take the lead by making investment in better housing and raising embankments. And then, I believe others will also come to help so that the project continues. It is a long term project.



Margareta Wahlstrom

**DS: Bangladesh is considered a leader in climate adaptation. How can this be supported by others?**

**MW:** I think it is. Bangladesh has taken important initiatives and provided some leadership in many different contexts. When you negotiate climate issues globally, it becomes a political process. Disaster is not a political process. Bangladesh has its own national investments and will receive international contribution. These should be utilised in reducing disaster risks and for climate adaptation. It means the country needs to build stronger embankments, have drought-resilient agricultural practices and manage water. In that sense, Bangladesh can benefit from optimising investments in climate adaptation with positive impacts on disaster risks. That will depend on the infrastructure.

**DS: Do you think governance and efficiency are crucial in managing disasters?**

**MW:** I think Bangladesh has a very strong structure. One thing that struck me is inter-ministerial coordination, which is very strong. It is not in every country that ministers sit together and collaborate. This is very positive thing. Disaster management council is there, but at central level. The system, however, is tested at local level. The issue is what capacity and resources local governments have and how it works during crisis at the centre and the periphery. That part of the system often needs a long time to build. But, in Bangladesh, you started building your preparedness and response capacity from local level. That is a very strong base in itself. But no doubt there will be situa-

tions that can outstrip the capacity of the local level, because the tradition here in Bangladesh is to work with community-based preparedness. That has also made you very strong in the face of serious challenges posed by disasters. So, things are good. But, unfortunately, we can never know the full truth until they are tested. Hopefully, they will not be tested.

**DS: What can Bangladesh learn from other countries?**

**MW:** There are many countries in Asia like China, which has built a system for managing disasters like earthquake, cyclone, flooding, etc. In Latin America, Peru, Columbia and Mexico have strong institutions. Peru has fiscal incentives for the local government. If you don't plan to reduce risks, you don't get fiscal benefit. They have found that this is an effective method.

**DS: Seismic risks are looming in Bangladesh. What is your suggestion?**

**MW:** Mapping of high-risk zones has been done. The government has also prepared an inventory of high risk buildings. To prepare for earthquakes, it is important to strengthen hospitals and ensure that schools are safe. You need to ensure that you have an efficient response system. Government buildings, police stations, fire brigade stations have to be protected. What you need to do is inform people, practice evacuation drills and learn what to do when an earthquake occurs. But, over time of course, you need to re-plan the city. In order to ease the pressure in the riskiest zones, at least make them less densely populated and try to motivate planned expansion of the city.

**DS: The West is going through financial crisis. Is it going to affect the aid flow to the developing countries like Bangladesh?**

**MW:** Generally speaking, yes for sure. It already has. In some countries ODA is increasing because they are sticking to the 1 or 0.7% target of funding to the developing countries from their GDP and their economic growth has continued. So, there is an automatic increase. But, in every crisis they look at how they can go for more fiscal discipline. They start rationalising and reducing the number of development partners. And, when they do that, they will be looking at which countries are doing well. In many ways, Bangladesh has good economic growth; it has national priorities, which means it is doing well. You have to be more focused on what is most important. I am sure that will take place.

The other question is humanitarian relief. That is also a matter of concern. There is no doubt that the cost of disasters for donors is becoming very significant and they cannot come up with huge resources for disaster relief, hence they are also interested in prevention or risk reduction of disasters. And they have given a very important policy direction over the past few years, in which many donors say reducing risks is a priority now. Of course, we will continue to support relief in disasters, but we will need to make conscious efforts to use the knowledge we have now to reduce future losses. That is the way I look it.

**DS: What can the people of Bangladesh expect from the UN?**

**MW:** The UN is increasingly engaged in Bangladesh to demonstrate how a country facing such challenges works to ensure more prosperity of the people. This is the focus of the country team here. I think what you will hear from the UN is more and more requests to contribute to world affairs through the models and examples that you provide.

**DS: Thank you very much.**

**MW:** Thank you, too.

SHIFTING IMAGES

## Where is home?



MILIA ALI

**A**S a child, whenever I found myself in a challenging situation, the first thought that crossed my mind was: "I want to go home." For most of us "home" represents love, warmth and, of course, a nurturing familiarity. However, today, with people moving across continents and

oceans, and migrating to distant lands, the definition of "home" has become ambiguous, even inscrutable. The notion of a permanent abode is now more a set of memories rather than a physical location. For example, given my itinerant lifestyle, my memories are scattered in several places and I often wonder where home is for me!

My earliest recollection of a home is a sprawling bungalow on a hilltop in Chittagong where I spent hours chasing butterflies in the garden under a clear blue sky. Today, home is a house in McLean, Virginia where each evening the ochre light of the setting sun filters through the heavy branches of four tall oak trees shading the backyard. The environment and setting are a world apart but the feelings of shared comfort and warmth are the same. Fortunately, our boundless imagination permits us to dwell simultaneously in many locations. As a result, wherever we are, we can build a home by transposing our past memories into our present situation.

I have often wondered what my life would have been if, like many of my friends, I had lived in the same city for most of my childhood and adult years. It would be different, no doubt. There would have been a sense of comfort in waking up each morning to familiar surroundings, sounds and faces. Moreover, I could be assured of a solid support system, a network

*Despite all their efforts to integrate, most immigrants struggle with a dual identity. Somewhere deep within, there is a nagging feeling that something is missing. It's a sad, sweet yearning called nostalgia. Maya Angelou, describes this dilemma in a few simple words: "You can never go home again, but the truth is you can never leave home, so it's all right."*

of reliable friends, and an overall sense of stability related to operating in a known environment. In contrast, a dislocated life creates a degree of uncertainty, even anxiety, because the familiar is swept away and forging new relationships can be challenging. Despite the fact that I have been through this transition for at least half a dozen times, I have not suffered from insecurities or xenophobia. Fortunately, I found most people open, accepting, and considerate -- one only needs to extend a hand of friendship and inspire confidence.

Of course, there are challenges. The constant effort to integrate into an alien culture and the pain of missing friends and family can be mentally corrosive. Thankfully, we live in times when the email, cell-phone and Skype have made it possible for us to stay connected, even on a minute to minute basis. But nothing can compensate for the physical presence of the loved ones we leave behind. The caring embrace of a parent, the tender grip of a grandchild or even the spontaneous visits by friends for a casual cup of tea cannot be transported through Skype or Facebook. And the intense longing for the familiar touch, sound and smell persists in every bend of our roving life.

The question is: "Why do folks migrate or relocate despite the strong gravitational pull of their homes and childhood memories?" Frankly, there is no simple explanation since people move for a variety of overlapping reasons. In my view, the overpowering motivation is the desire to build a better and, may be, more affluent life. There are also some who leave home to seek education and temporary employment with a clear mindset that they shall return home, eventually. It is the latter that excruciate the most -- constantly oscillating between the life they leave behind and the one they cherish but are hesitant to embrace. Last but not the least, people like me move because we have been thrown out of our orbit by the forces of destiny. Whatever the reasons for migrating, the key is not to dwell on "what could have been." It's best to accept the culture of one's adopted home and seize the opportunities that the present moment offers.

Despite all their efforts to integrate, most immigrants struggle with a dual identity. As much as I love the United States, where I have truly been accepted as an individual with "inalienable rights," a part of me will always dwell in Bangladesh where my roots are. Somewhere deep within, there is a nagging feeling that something is missing. It's a sad, sweet yearning called nostalgia. The American author, poet, actress and civil rights activist, Maya Angelou, describes this dilemma in a few simple words: "You can never go home again, but the truth is you can never leave home, so it's all right."

The writer is a renowned Rabindra Sangeet exponent and a former employee of the World Bank.

IN MEMORIAM

## Saiful Islam: Friend of the distressed

ANANDA ASAD

**S**AIFUL Islam, a veteran freedom fighter, journalist and writer, and a progressive politician, passed away on April 1. He was suffering from acute renal failure and had a massive heart attack on March 6. Since then was in a coma. He breathed his last at a city hospital and was laid to rest at his home village Rahmatganj in Shirajganj.

Mr. Islam was born on 1932 in Shirajganj, and witnessed the rampage and aftermath of the Second World War in his early childhood at his hometown. He lost his elder brother in communal riot during partition of the sub-continent, which implanted the urge in him to do something in favour for the oppressed people. This started for him with "Mukul Fouj." He was virtually banished by his family for his involvement in politics and the leftist movement.

In 1948, when the mother language movement was building up in the then Purbo Bangla, he put himself in the midst of it in Shirajganj and eventually played an important role in the endeavour. He

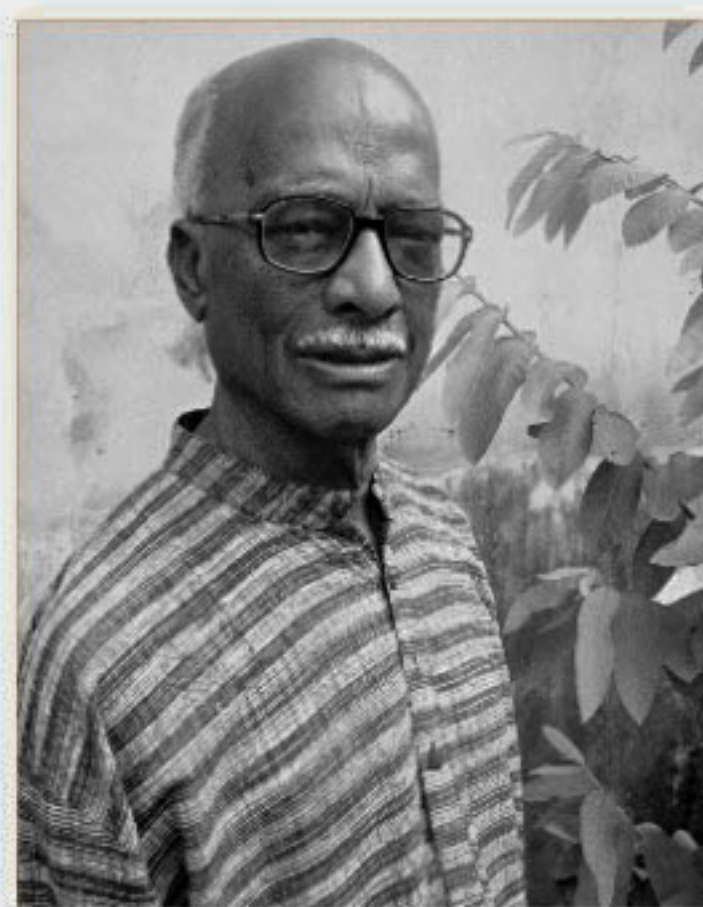
joined National Awami Party (NAP) and became its district president. By virtue of his intelligence and keenness, devotion and honesty, he gained a position in the central committee. During the martial law of General Ayub Khan, he absconded so as not to interrupt his fight for the oppressed and against the oppression. But he could not avoid going behind the bars several times, which ultimately boosted his eagerness to contribute for the wellbeing of the common people and establish a secular world of socialism.

At the time of our great war of liberation, he acted as the personal secretary of the legendary leader Moulana Bhashani during the latter's stay in India. With guidance from the leader and his own prudence, he contributed significantly in building up people's voice in India against Pakistan brutality. He represented the Moulana in several significant meetings, press conferences and a meeting with Indian PM Indira Gandhi.

Saiful Islam was also prolific in the field of Bengali literature. He has a few novels, compilation of short stories and some significant, historic political books to his credit. His most prominent

book "Shadhinata Bhashani Bharat" reveals the facts, stories and important information on Bhashani's stay in India during our liberation war. Another book, "Bangali Voili," is a research based analytical novel which sheds light on the evolution of the Bangali nation.

Saiful Islam led a very simple life, made lots of friends and spent most of his valuable time for the wellbeing of distressed people. As he no longer belongs to this mortal world, we can only cherish his memory and deeds to inspire our own lives.



Saiful Islam

The writer is a communication specialist.