

Some ideas for the G-20 summiteers

ABDULLAH SHIBLI

LEADERS of G20, a group consisting of the world's 19 rich and emerging nations and the EU, will meet later this month in Los Cabos, Mexico to discuss issues of common and global interest. This gathering comes on the heels of the G8 meeting held last month at Camp David in Maryland and is widely expected to focus on the brewing economic crisis triggered by the debt problems of the European countries known as PIGS (Portugal, Ireland, Greece, and Spain) and the imminent threat posed by Greece's withdrawal from the Euro zone.

Before I discuss the agenda for the G20 summit, let me briefly recap the accomplishments of the G8 meeting hosted by President Obama and attended by all the G8 heads of state. As news agencies have pointed out, the bucolic setting of Camp David, with "nature walks" and cozy mountain top cabins to comfort the attendees who left behind major economic crises back home, did nothing to patch the tension coming to a head between the champions of economic austerity led by Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel, and the realists led by the newly elected President of France, Francois Hollande.

From Camp David, we also received some good news for the "99 percent" of the world's population living from hand to mouth. The G8 nations endorsed a new initiative on food security and nutrition at this summit and -- to quote President Obama who launched this initiative -- the goal is to "achieve sustained and inclusive agricultural growth and raise 50 million people out of poverty over the next 10 years."

One only needs to take his words with a grain of salt because only time will tell how much this initiative will improve the lot of the world's poor and the hungry since such commitments made at previous summits are still at the drawing board! As some of my readers will recall, the Joint Statement on Global Food Security announced with great fanfare at the G8 summit in L'Aquila, Italy, in 2009 promised \$22 billion for food security, while only 50% has been delivered so far.

Now, returning to the hot issues that the G20 leaders are likely to address, and this is likely to include the dismal global economic outlook, transfer of resources from the wealthier to the needy nations, stability of oil prices, and a carry-over item from the G8 agenda, i.e., "growth vs.

austerity." The host nation, Mexico, which is a member of G20 but not of G8, is expected to push for the issues important for the emerging nations in G20, as well as the poorer countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. In 2012, Mexico, as host, has invited Spain, Benin (as African Union Chair), Cambodia (as Asean Chair), Colombia and Chile to join the powwow.

I look forward to the G20 moving towards some realistic common strategy towards addressing some of the problems that affect the world's population by and large, and not only the rich and middle-income countries. It is with this expectation that I offer my platform for the group:

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lion living in abject poverty in Africa, Asia and Latin America, the leaders need to look beyond their own borders, and also turn their attention to the pockets of poverty within each nation;

- Recognise the importance of narrowing the gap between rich and poor nations in achieving balanced growth. In this respect, the nations of G20 have to come up with a plan to expedite growth and development in the poorest countries, not only as a means to improving the living standards of these countries, but also for its contribution to achieving sustainable economic growth for the whole world;
- Don't lose sight of the forest for the trees. While the crisis in Europe is important, and austerity measures have a place in the policy package to break out of the current debt cycle, the poor and the most vulnerable seg-

ment of the countries affected should not bear the burden and be sacrificed in the name of austerity;

- Develop a sustainable mechanism for transfer of resources to the developing countries. In their preoccupation with the European crisis and the financial crisis prior to that, international agencies and the G20 countries have tabled issues that are important for smaller developing countries like Bangladesh. These include trade, stable oil prices, foreign investment, and multilateral loans. Exports from many of these countries will be hurt as a prolonged period of global slowdown might increase currency market volatility. A major power like USA can challenge China as it tries to manipulate its exchange rate to boost export, but it is well known that "a surge in Chinese exports in the middle of a global economic slowdown could also ruin the livelihoods of large numbers of workers in other developing countries that compete with China to supply the same goods."
- Break the current logjam in the areas of global warming and "environmental equity." Progress on a post-Kyoto agreement has been slow, and marred by endless bickering over "carbon entitlements." China and India, which are members of G20, expect the G8 countries to shoulder responsibility for the current state of affairs. This "zero-sum" mentality must end soon, and the G20 leaders can take a major step in that direction.
- Recognise the impact of G20 countries on ROW (Rest of the World). The vast majority of the world's population might be adversely affected by some major unknowns: oil prices due to Syrian and Iranian crisis; Greek elections and possible pullout from Euro zone; sluggish rates of growth in India and China which are now in the 5% and 9% range, respectively, lately; fallout from another round of financial crisis triggered by credit crunch in Spain or Ireland; and global economic slowdown. To paraphrase a line from the head of IMF Christine Lagarde, the elite club of G20 needs to focus on building global financial "firepower and firewall" to shield ROW from the ill effects of major external shock.

The writer is an economist based in Boston, USA.

SHIFTING IMAGES

Stuff that dreams are made of?



MILIA ALI

THIS column might raise a few eyebrows, even spark off a debate. As a matter of fact, I mulled over it for a day or two, but finally decided that I owed it to my readers to present my point of view on a contemporary event that seems to have created so much media hype! Hopefully, this rather longish

preamble has adequately aroused your curiosity. The topic of discussion is the Queen's Diamond Jubilee Celebration. Right from the "build up" to the actual event aired on television, the question that kept cropping up in my mind was: "Why on earth are millions of pounds being spent to celebrate sixty years of the queen's reign, at a juncture when many families in the Kingdom are struggling financially to make both ends meet?"

Before I continue, let me clarify that I believe that Queen Elizabeth II has been remarkably successful as a monarch, given that her reign has seen the relative decline of Britain as a global power and the monarchy touched its nadir after Lady Diana passed away in 1997. There is no doubt in my mind that the queen has executed with extraordinary skill and dignity, a responsibility that she did not assume by choice but which was passed on to her by chance of heredity.

However, does that justify the opulence and extravaganza of the Diamond Jubilee Celebrations? The amount of money spent on the celebrations remains undis-

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closed, but, according to informed reports, it is likely to equal the annual budget of a small country. Besides, the pageantry and splurge come at a time when Britain is experiencing its severest austerity and expenditures on social support programmes are being drastically curbed.

The British authorities repeatedly emphasised that the Jubilee celebration is for everyone and urged common people to take part in the festivities. Supporters of the celebration also highlight the fact that the queen is a symbol of stability and a reminder of Britain's glorious past. Hence, celebrating her Diamond Jubilee evokes a much-needed sense of pride among the Britons. Critics, however, may well ask: could this not be achieved by a more modest jubilee event?

The lavish demonstration of wealth and status has starkly highlighted the gap between the rich and the poor in the country. The jarring quality of the celebration is aptly described by British columnist Simon Barrow, who notes: "A thick curtain has been drawn between patronage, power and unaccountable wealth embodied in monarchy, and the deepening inequality and injustice felt by those living at the sharp end of 'austerity Britain.'"

The Jubilee Celebration was kicked off with a flotilla of 1,000 vessels on the river Thames. As I sipped my morning tea (English Breakfast, by the way) on June 5 and watched the Royal procession moving from St. Paul's Cathedral, I was stunned by its splendor and magnificence. Unfolding on the TV screen was an amazing pageant of liveried footmen, gleaming red and gold horse carriages, trumpets blown by the "longest line of fanfare trumpeters."

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Her Majesty's loyal subjects who are reading this column may be incensed and ask: What blooming right do I have (not being British) to express such harsh views on the Jubilee Celebration of their popular monarch. Apart from my interest as a concerned citizen of the world, the only other reason I can think of is that, by happenstance, my parents and grandparents were British subjects -- a fallout of 200 years of colonisation and a baggage that the British must carry for some more time to come!

In any case, who cares about my opinion? I belong to a different world and a different country. A country where each year the tax returns of the democratically elected president are painstakingly scrutinised by the media and citizens. In the United States, no part of a public official's life is sacrosanct or above criticism. A year ago, when the first lady was on a private vacation in Spain, questions were raised about the cost to taxpayers (security and staff) and whether her lavish holiday sent the right message during tough economic times.

Until now, I was critical of these intrusions into the private lives of public figures. But today, I am happy that my country is the way it is!

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

Taking domestic political fights abroad

ZIAUDDIN CHOUDHURY

FUJING between two major political parties of Bangladesh has taken another dimension now. The differences and inter-party quarrels are now being displayed overseas, in the United States, in the form of protest meetings, marches, and demonstrations in public places in major cities such as New York and Washington DC by US based supporters of both parties. Not a week passes when the US loyalists of these parties do not hold a meeting either decrying or upholding government action.

In a mirror image of events happening in Bangladesh we have the reflections of the events here in the US, although thankfully not in the violent way they take place back in the mother country. I do think, however, that the non-violent reflection of events has to do with the laws of this land, which the supporters of either party do not want to challenge, and not due to their natural proclivities.

Recently, a group of people, ostensibly US-based supporters of the current opposition party in Bangladesh, held a demonstration before the White House complete with banners, claiming that democracy and freedom were at risk in Bangladesh. I do not know if the organisers expected an immediate phone call from the White House to the Bangladesh prime minister to raise any alarm; but the passers-by were amused by yet another gathering of motley protesters in front of the White House.

A few days before that another group of US-based Bangladeshis, supporters of the government party, met in a gathering in New York to honour a visiting Bangladesh MP (government party) where speakers termed current actions of the opposition as a deep conspiracy to overthrow the government. Fortunately, there was no gathering of the opposition loyalists nearby, or there could have been a showdown. Interestingly, this meeting took place on the heels of a meeting by the opposition loyalists in the same city in honour of a visiting opposition leader, where the government was accused of taking oppressive and heavy-handed actions against the opposition.

Earlier this month, a delegation of government party loyalists met a US Congressman who happens to be the chair of Bangladesh Caucus in the Congress. The occasion was used by the delegation,

as reported by the press, to express its concern on possible return to politics of Bangladesh by some individuals suspected of corruption. No sooner this visit ended a group belonging to the opposition met the same Congressman to tell him about their concerns. I do not know if the two visits enlightened the Congressman on the current state of politics of Bangladesh, or left him further confused.

Protest and counter protest meetings by loyalists of both parties based in the US can be understood given the nature of acrimony between the two parties in the home country. But the party loyalists take their bickering to another level when they hold

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demonstrations replete with slogans and banners when leaders of any of the two parties visit here. Last year, when the leader of the opposition arrived in US, supporters of the government party held demonstrations against her when the party loyalists gathered to greet her.

Exactly the same happened when the current prime minister visited New York, to the extent that law enforcers had to intervene in the confrontations between the two groups of supporters. In other words, we have a microcosm of political intolerance and bickering created here in the US by transplants from back home. At least this is the image we are building for ourselves abroad.

With growth in the number of Bangladeshi population abroad, what we are witnessing is a parallel growth in the number of branches of home-based political parties -- chiefly the two main parties. Every major city in the US will invariably have local branches named after the two parties. Sometimes that is not all. Internecine quarrels for leadership would also lead to division within the party and

creation of factions, each claiming that it has the blessing of the leader of its party. There are full page advertisements in Bengali tabloids published locally announcing meetings and counter-meetings of the factions. What is most puzzling is that our national leaders openly patronise these local branches, and attend gatherings held in their honour. I wonder if they think that the US is an extended constituency for them, and the US-based loyalists are their party workers who will deliver them crucial votes.

No other country in South Asia has such a plethora of branches of home-based political parties abroad except Bangladesh. To my knowledge, the Indian Congress has an Overseas Association in the US, and so has Bharatiya Janata Party. But the main purpose of these Associations is to lobby for Indian national causes with US Congress and US private sector. Pakistan also has very centralised US Associations of the two main political parties back home to pursue similar objectives. It is only in the case of Bangladesh citizens abroad that we see associations by the dozen for one or the other of the two major parties, created with only one objective -- to fight each other over issues back home.

Many years ago, a political leader of Bangladesh who had held high office during Bangabandhu's time came on a private visit to the US. His party was out of power at that time. A group of people who had set up a local branch of the party came to see the leader and asked him to attend a gathering. He declined to attend, and advised them that they (the supporters) could better support the cause of Bangladesh by involving themselves in US politics, and joining public office in the localities they live.

I wish our Bangladeshi population here could adhere to the sane advice of a political leader from their own country. I wish they would stop mimicking the perfidious and dishonest politics at home, and stop creating microcosms of national politics abroad. If we want to enter politics there are better ways to do so, and this can start by helping the localities where we live. If we want to serve the country that we have left behind, there are better ways to do so. This can start by creating a better image about ourselves abroad.

The writer lives in the USA and works for an international organisation.