

# State at war with its most distinguished citizen?

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It seems that the state of Bangladesh under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina has declared an open war on its most distinguished citizen. Last year, in an unexpected move, the Bangladesh Bank removed Prof. Yunus from the leadership of the Bank on the pretext that a statute of the partly state-owned bank had been violated for years and the government had acted to rectify the situation.

Last year, in the midst of this smear campaign against the most illustrious living son of our soil, the prime minister's statement in the Parliament, saying that Prof. Yunus was a "bloodsucker," was simply uncalled for and unbecoming of an elected prime minister. The PM's remarks put even her most unflinching admirers on the defensive. Since the victim was none other than Professor Yunus, her words reverberated through the pages of the world media, which did not in any way enhance the image of the PM in particular and politicians of the country in general.

Even during her recent interview in BBC's HARDtalk she was asked: "Why did you call him a bloodsucker of the poor?" The PM tried to counter the question: "Did I mention his name? I didn't. I said someone." By camouflaging her own remark, who the PM was trying to fool? However, at the same time she argued: "You go to Bangladesh, you see with your

eyes, then you will see." She further misrepresented the fact with numbers: "Taking interest 40%, 30% or 45% from these poor people -- is it fair? It is not. How can these poor people stand by themselves? If you lend money and take 35 to 45% interest, it's a shame."

GB, in a rejoinder, contradicted the PM's interest rate numbers, adding that it has five different types of interest rates for its five loan programmes. The bank charges a maximum of 20% interest for income-generating credit loans, which, according to GB, is 7% lower than the government-fixed maximum rate for microcredit organisations. Their flat interest rate is 10% and the Bank charges 8% interest on house building loans. In case of higher education loans, it does not charge any interest except after completion of education, when it charges 5%. We have not seen any statement from PM's office contradicting the statement of the GB challenging the misrepresentation of GB's interest rate policy by the PM to the international media.

Quite to the contrary, the nation received shocking and vindictive news from the cabinet meeting of August 2, 2012 that the GB ordinance 1983 has to be amended to give more powers to the GB

chairman, a government appointed, to choose the managing director of the microlender. The decision is shocking for the fact that it will give the Bank's chairman almost absolute powers to appoint the organisation's chief executive sidelining other members of the GB board.

GB is not only a private bank, but also a people's bank, three-quarter of its 12 board members are elected from and by its 8.3 million share holders, who own

emulation all around the globe.

The vindictive part of the cabinet meeting comes from a directive to the finance ministry to inform the cabinet immediately about the salaries and benefits that Prof. Yunus received during his tenure as the Bank's managing director past the retirement age of 60 and whether those facilities were in line with the Bank's rules. The cabinet also asked the finance ministry to find out whether Prof. Yunus received any money from abroad under the wage earner scheme facility "as a government official."

Is this not a little too much, Madam Prime Minister? Is it not that the PM (I want to be blunt) has declared an all-out war to assassinate the character of a man who, among other things, is known

around the globe for

his simplicity and austerity in personal life. Many might differ with the banking philosophy that he preaches but would never cast an iota of aspersion on his honesty.

Prof. Yunus was naturally shocked at the cabinet decision. In an impromptu appeal to his fellow citizens he said: "I am so dejected that I have become unable to express my feelings. I am requesting the people of Bangladesh who are feeling dejected like me to tell the government

that a big mistake is being made and the government should abstain from doing it."

But will our democratically elected PM pay any heed to the appeal and advice of her fellow citizens? What if a democratically elected prime minister fails to listen to and comprehend the voice of the people and the advice of her well-wishers? The final resort for the people of a democratic society is to exercise the power of the ballot to punish the government that fails to abide by their wishes.

Notwithstanding last year's verdict of the nation's highest court, which the PM loves to replay, the government has failed to make its case in the people's court that the removal of Professor Yunus, the impending amendment of GB ordinance and proposed investigation of financial matters are guided by the equal applicability of law.

It is the people's court that matters most to a government elected by the people. The PM for sure has waged an unwinnable war, despite multiple failed attempts by the victim to extend an olive branch to her, albeit in a one-sided war, against a man whose majestic glory, whether his brainchild remains unscathed or not, will keep him in the hearts of the millions in Bangladesh and all around the globe for ages to come. No one can assassinate an immortal.

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## INTERNATIONAL YOUTH DAY

# An age of opportunity

NOELEN HEYZER

THE recent Rio+20 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development focused world attention on building the future we want. On the occasion of the International Youth Day, we should remember that we have a very precious resource in providing for a sustainable future, namely our young people.

Over 60% of the world's youth live in Asia and the Pacific, which translates into more than 750 million young women and men aged 15 to 24 years. They represent a key asset for the countries of our region.

The Asia-Pacific region has undoubtedly been the dynamic engine of global growth. Yet today's generation of young people is growing up in a world of uncertainty. Volatility exists in the global economy and financial markets, high levels of unemployment are prevalent, education systems are being pressured to adapt to new and emerging needs, and there are many threats to the health and well-being of our youth.

A key challenge facing the Asia-Pacific region, but also the world over, is youth employment. The European sovereign debt crisis has reduced global demand, and Asia-Pacific has started to suffer as a result. Industrial output in several countries in East and South-East Asia is falling. With weak overseas demand, many export oriented manufacturing economies are beginning to contract. It is young people who will bear the brunt of these effects through a job squeeze and cuts in spending on social services.

As it is, youth employment is already often precarious. Young people abound in vulnerable employment where jobs are characterised by insecurity, low wages, poor working conditions and lack of social protection. This results in working poverty being significantly higher for young workers than for their older counterparts.

Almost 50 million young people are looking for jobs across the Asia-Pacific region. Lacking economic and social opportunities, many are forced into high-risk and vulnerable forms of employment. In the face of few prospects, others have given up on the job search.

Such vulnerability disproportionately affects women. Young women are particularly underrepresented in the labour market, and are thus an untapped resource for future economic growth and development. In South Asia, a mere 30% of young women participate in the labour force, while the percentage is more than double that for young men.

In the face of rising inequality in the region, vulnerability in the labour market hits youth of lower socio-economic status hardest. This disadvantage begins well before the world of work given the correlation between family income and youth educational attainment. It is widely recognised that young people from lower income backgrounds have poorer educational outcomes than their better-off peers, which in turn limits their employment prospects.

For young people, jobs provide a source not only of income, but also dignity and self-respect. In the absence of decent work, young people subsist on the margins of the economy and are particularly vulnerable to social exclusion,

which breeds political instability.

The current situation points to the pressing need to ensure effective school-to-work transitions. We must invest more in education and training to prepare youth for the world of work. We need to pursue job-led growth by creating more, and better and greener jobs, for young people through the decent work agenda. We must provide for equal opportunities for young women and men, and promote an enabling environment for entrepreneurship. And we need to provide youth-friendly information and services to promote healthy lifestyle choices for youth and reduce harmful risk-taking behavior.

With the rapid ageing of many Asian societies, there is also a golden opportunity for us to strengthen inter-generational contracts as older workers today will have to rely on younger workers in the years to come.

Future economic growth is dependent upon our young people. Yet youth should not be seen as just a target group for

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which employment must be found. We must recognise young people as partners for development.

Across the world, youth from all walks of life are leading social movements and challenging the status quo. They are calling for political leadership that delivers greater accountability, opportunities and social justice. They are telling business and industry to promote more transparent, accountable and just business practices. And they are demanding that their voices be heard and their role be recognised not only as tomorrow's future leaders, but as today's partners.

We can provide young people with the opportunities to become effective leaders and participate meaningfully in the developments that shape their lives. There have been notable achievements in Asia and the Pacific with regard to the building of institutions, such as youth parliaments, and other mechanisms to support young people's leadership and participation in national decision-making.

These successes need to be built upon, drawing from the dynamic energy and creative force of youth. We must reach out to all youth, regardless of ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status, or disability, to support their full development and participation in economic, social and political life. By investing in our youth the Asia-Pacific region can ensure a more inclusive, resilient and sustainable future for all.

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engage them in becoming more actively involved in making positive contributions to their communities. It is the day which celebrates the energy, liveliness and passion of young people towards global peace and development and recognises their importance in its process. The first IYD was on August 12, 2000. As of other political awareness days, such as Earth Day, the purpose of IYD is to draw attention to a given set of cultural and legal issues surrounding an endangered demographic. It is meant as an opportunity for governments and others to draw attention to youth issues worldwide.

Each year, IYD is assigned a theme; a conceptual slogan that communicates the scope, direction, and objectives of the year's youth initiatives and also provides a unifying banner from under which individuals can draw the inspiration to take action. The theme chosen for IYD 2012 -- Building a Better World: Partnering with Youth -- is a global call to action for young men and women, as well as other stakeholders around the world, to develop and engage in partnerships with and for youth towards building a better world.

Young people are a wellspring of ideas for innovation. They are today's thinkers, problem-solvers and catalysts for peace. They are often the world's strongest advocates of justice and dignity. Partnerships with youth can increase oppor-

tunities for success by leveraging comparative advantages, resources, shared interests and diversity to enhance the impact of each individual partner's efforts. Through working proactively to forge meaningful partnerships with young people and youth organisations, we can ensure that we lay the foundation for building a better world.

But the problem is in the engagement of youth in the process of development. According to International Labor Organization's (ILO) Global Employment Trends 2012, the rate of unemployment for the youth in the world scale is about 13%. Although this rate remained unchanged over the last decade, the absolute number has been increased tremendously with the increase in the world population. But the point to notice is that this rate is much higher in developed countries and countries of European Union (EU)

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than of many parts of the world, especially that of Asia, due to the recent economic crisis.

For the youth, the rate of unemployment in developed and EU countries has increased from 13.5% in 2000 to 17.9% in 2011. In the same period, East Asia's rate decreased from 9.1% to 8.8%, South Asia's rate decreased from 10.2% to 9.3%, Latin America and Caribbean's rate decreased from 15.8% to 13.3%. Although there is a success trend in the entire region of the world except developed and EU countries, the rate still remained high in the world scale. To get the youth involved in the process of development, we need to lower the rate as early as possible.

There will be a huge range of events taking place across the world. There will be photography exhibits and competitions at the UN headquarters in New York showing how our world youth experience economic, environmental and social life. There will also be a showcase of youth talent, showing how young people think these problems should be tackled. Concerts, workshops, cultural events, and meetings involving national and local government officials and youth organisations take place around the world in honour of the Day.

"Young people are a wellspring of ideas for innovation. They are today's thinkers, problem-solvers and catalysts for peace," said Unesco Director-General Irina Bokova. So let us ensure the participation of the youth in the development process around the world and thus make the better world we want to. Let's hope for the best.

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