

BOTTOM LINE

After Ershad's visit to India



BARRISTER
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On August 10, Ershad visited India for almost a week while Begum Khaleda Zia reportedly is likely to visit next month.

On his return, Ershad spoke to the media. It is reported that during his discussion with India's prime minister, he was assured by Dr. Singh that Teesta river sharing agreement would be concluded soon. On Tipaimukh dam, he said India would not do anything to harm Bangladesh's interests. India wants Bangladesh to be an economically prosperous and politically stable democratic nation.

The very fact that he met, among others, with President Pranab Mukherjee and the Congress chief Sonia Gandhi, demonstrates that Indian leaders consider Ershad, who ruled Bangladesh for almost nine years, an important player in the next parliamentary elections in Bangladesh.

The official spokesperson in the Ministry of External Affairs, Syed Akbaruddin, said: "General Ershad's visit is part of our ongoing engagement with a democratic and multi-party polity in Bangladesh." This is a signal that Indian government does not deal with Awami League only.

The ruling AL-led grand coalition and the opposition BNP party are at loggerheads on the type of the government under which parliamentary elections due in 2014 will be held. BNP wants restoration of a non-party caretaker government while the ruling party opposes it. On the issue of non-party government, the Jatiya Party of Ershad supports the position of the ruling AL.

At the recent BBC interview Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina spoke of constituting a "small interim government" with representatives of the opposition, which would govern during the parliamentary elections. But the BNP rejected it.

Some media in India cited some reasons for the timing of Ershad's visit to New Delhi. India's weekly tabloid *Blitz* writes (August 21) that sensing the difference between the

two major parties about forming the next government in Bangladesh policymakers in India have started looking for an alternative. They invited Ershad to New Delhi and held a series of talks with him to find a way of at least ensuring a government friendly to India after the next general election in Bangladesh.

The weekly states that some others feel that Ershad was invited to India for his views on the next general election if the coalition led by Bangladesh Nationalist Party refrained from joining the electoral run as the next election may not be held under a non-party government. India gave two options to Ershad, which include either forming the government if he can bag required seats or helping Bangladesh Awami League in forming the government.

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Observers say that Ershad appears to have several plus factors in the country. First, his party's active participation in all parliamentary elections shows its commitment to democratic norms. That Ershad is personally popular with people is illustrated by the fact that he has been elected many times, not only from one constituency but also from multiple constituencies.

Second, he gets support from a large segment of Islamists because it was he who introduced Friday as a weekly holiday and made Islam the state religion, although providing equal right to people of other faiths to practice their religions.

Third, as a former general and chief of army staff, the armed forces are not against him, and it is a long tradition in the armed forces to respect their senior retired officers.

Fourth, his administration was not politicised, as administrations have been since 1991. Furthermore, during his rule, he had a working rela-

tionship with India and maintained excellent relations with the US, China and Arab states. It was during his time that Bangladesh became the President of the UN General Assembly in 1986 and it was he who first -- in 1988 -- sent Bangladeshi troops to the UN Peacekeeping Mission, currently an important component of foreign policy.

However, political analysts believe that because he carries the past baggage, many people are not comfortable about seeing him in power again. Furthermore, there is a public view that he does not stick to his opinion for long and changes it too quickly.

Last June, during the budget session, Ershad requested all lawmakers in the Parliament not to call him a dictator any more. "I get hurt when you call me a dictator. I am not a dictator any more. I am an elected lawmaker like you," Ershad claimed in the Parliament.

The statement was supported by former secretary general of Awami League and currently advisory council member of the party, Abdul Jalil, who said that the movement was against autocratic regime. "We agreed to his plea and from on we will not call him autocrat. He is now our co-passenger," the AL veteran opined.

Many people have argued that although presidential form of government was changed to parliamentary system in 1991, it has become "Prime Ministerial" government, and no more is the prime minister "first among equals" in the cabinet. This is because people identify the party with its chairperson, who campaigns vigorously during the election period and is the "vote-getter" for the party candidates.

In fact, in many countries, parliamentary democracies are gradually turning into presidential type of government, and two recent reports by influential bodies in UK have advanced the theory that the British premiership has recently become more dominant, even developing into a presidency.

British MP Tony Benn, in a lecture given in 1979, said: "The wide range of powers at present exercised by a British prime minister ... are now so great as to encroach upon the legitimate rights of the electorate, undermine the essential role of Parliament, usurp some of the functions of collective cabinet decision-making, and neutralise much of the influence deriving from the internal democracy of the party."

The writer is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

Grameen Bank is an inspiration: Don't let Bangladeshi politicians meddle with it

RICHARD BRANSON

THE sign of a truly great business is that it changes lives. There are few more noble examples than Muhammad Yunus's Grameen Bank, which has helped to drag millions of Bangladeshis out of desperate poverty since 1979. Organisations such as Grameen, and pioneers such as Muhammad Yunus, should be cherished in today's global economy where big business more than ever needs to be a force for good in the world.

Unfortunately, things are not looking good for Dr Yunus or Grameen, which makes tiny loans without collateral to the country's poorest people. The Nobel prizewinner has been forced out of the bank because of unfair slanders against him, while the government of Bangladesh is now close to gaining de facto control of an organisation that is 97% owned by its customers. I have witnessed first hand Dr Yunus's contribution to the global movement to overcome poverty. The enthusiasm and energy that he brings in helping to spread the lessons of Grameen has proven invaluable in helping to find solutions to the great economic and social struggles of our age. It is work he continues to undertake to great effect -- he is a terrific inspiration, particularly to young people all over the world.

The seizure of Grameen Bank is a tragedy. From its small beginnings in 1983, it now operates in more than 80,000 villages. Grameen has distributed more than \$10 billion in loans to its borrowers, nearly all of whom are poor women. Now almost every country in the developing world has micro-credit institutions based on the Grameen model.

You would think an organisation that has made Bangladesh proud and transformed so many individuals, families and communities -- and was itself awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006, along with its founder -- would be celebrated by its government. Sadly, this does not seem to be the case in Bangladesh.

The government has agreed in cabinet a change that stands to break Grameen Bank and threatens the work it has achieved. The

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bank's government-appointed chairman, instead of its millions of shareholders -- the same people who are its borrowers -- will now decide on Grameen's new managing director and, with it, the future of the bank. This prepares the ground for de facto nationalisation of Grameen Bank. Soon, it will no longer remain the same bank that it always has been. The rights of shareholders to decide its future will be removed. This will be a sad end of a globally admired institution.

The World Bank recently cancelled more than a billion dollars in financing after it pulled out of a project to build Bangladesh's biggest bridge because of concerns about corruption. It is vital that everyone in the international community ensures that we hold the Bangladeshi government accountable for providing a fair, transparent and safe environment for leaders such as Dr. Yunus and others to work with the people of Bangladesh to ensure that they can live the lives of dignity they deserve.

Dr. Yunus has been urging his fellow citizens to come forward and protect the right of the poor women of Bangladesh to own Grameen Bank. The British government should join him. These owners are being deprived of the right to chart the course of the bank in which they are shareholders. Grameen is their bank and they should decide who leads it. Taking away that right is a blow and a threat to the vibrant civil society that Dr. Yunus and his colleagues have worked hard to create. Grameen Bank is a vitally important institution. It carries the hopes, dreams and aspirations of millions of women and their families. It is not only Bangladeshis who need Grameen Bank. It keeps the flame of hope for all poor women around the world. None of us must let it disappear.

All of us as the international community need to break the silence and stand up for the wonderful work of Muhammad Yunus.

The writer is the founder of the Virgin Group of Companies. (We reprint this article originally published on August 24 in *The Times*, London.)

Davos Conference: Finding way out or legalising carbon emission?

SYED SHAHNAWAZ ALI and M. MIZANUR RAHMAN

THE fourth International Disaster and Risk Conference (IDRC) opened at Davos on August 26. The experts on risk and disaster have joined here with the aim of promoting "integrative risk management in a changing world." The Global Risk Forum (GRF) has very strategically identified its objective for this conference, i.e. finding out "pathways to a resilient society." Don't we find a gradual change in the standpoint which the international drivers in the field of Disaster Risk Reduction were concentrated on earlier?

With this agenda of the conference, the initiative of restraining the developed countries from uncontrolled carbon emission has been over-shadowed and now the international forum is looking for promoting a new agenda where it will concentrate more on affected countries, forgetting the earlier agenda.

Some very pessimistic critics argue that the international politics around climate change has been and is being controlled by some specific and limited agents; they are directing the discussions on it internationally. They are fixing the areas of discussion on which the developing and poor countries will concentrate, and in this game the invisible hand of world political economy favours the developed countries invisibly.

In this world of promise and allurements, it is not wise for the climate affected countries to experiment with the ever-emerging frameworks and models, other than taking some concrete and definite standpoint on which they should be rigid and confident. But of course, for this, we need to strengthen our strategy and knowledge source that are based on proper investigation and research. Apart from these, we need to capacitate (both institutionally and individually) on these issues and, at the same time, strong commitment and honesty towards the goal are mandatory.

Moreover, the time has come now to assess our past endeavours, objectives and achievements. In 2005, governments around the world committed to take actions to reduce disaster risk, and adopted a guideline to trim down vulnerabilities to natural hazards, called the Hyogo Framework for Action (Hyogo Framework). The clock has ticked so fast, and the international community has already started to discuss what the next disaster risk management framework should look like. The progress report on monitoring achievement of the goals set in the Hyogo Framework for Action submitted by 133 countries in year 2011 has shown improvement in several areas, which is just the tip of the iceberg. The cruel reality is that the vulnerability of communities in developing countries like Bangladesh continues to show increasing trend in terms of loss of life, property and development opportunities. It needs to be noted that a lot of local disasters and the losses are not properly recorded by most of the governments.



As the fourth IDRC wants to promote resilient society, let us all focus on it and determine that all the attempts from local to global level will be to promote this, and let our governments and international agencies concentrate on it sincerely and take some concrete actions. This has to be now or never!

It is high time we started thinking beyond developing another framework which will divert international attention to another direction and will not improve the lives of the poor climate vulnerable people around the world. The Davos Conference is more interested in seeing that any new effort should not consider disaster risk reduction as a stand-alone issue. The world leaders also need to realise that in an era of limited resources we should not promote disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation separately.

All the new initiatives to be promoted by donors, institutions, non-governmental organisations, civil society and private sector should be a truly coordinated effort -- only as joint venture with the governments and other mandated organisations to ensure impact and long term sustainability of the initiatives. Global statistics on disaster losses are only indicators and they do not properly account for the actual loss of property and development opportunities at the local level. Moreover, the loss of lives due to disasters remains out of sight in the reports.

Following up and monitoring of the earlier action points and accumulating and escalating trend of risks and disasters is another major challenge. Cities in Bangladesh and some other countries are signed up to the global safer cities campaign of UNISDR -- "My City is Getting Ready" -- but honestly this initiative in most cases is on paper only. It is a worthy first step to involve local government and increase the visibility, but the long journey to fulfill the commitment only starts here.

We continue to live in complete darkness as there is absolutely no effort to record baseline of the situation in any of the countries. Countries and development agencies are also busy with some other agenda and doing their interventions in an uncoordinated way in most cases. Unfortunately, individual branding or benefit at the cost of the problems and the solutions has become a priority of the disaster risk reduction stakeholders in order to specialise and to attract visibility and funds for the organisations in this era of competition. In certain instances this has not harmed most of us, but honestly the situation would be much improved if we could concentrate on our work.

When governments of the poor countries are getting tired of finding out the ways to access climate funds, some experts argue that the climate vulnerable countries should not be outward looking in fighting with the adverse impact of climate change, rather, they need to seek solutions from their own communities by being inward looking. The communities we work with do not lack when it comes to potential, experience and knowledge of disasters, and their active role in the whole design, planning and implementation needs to be clearly defined in the new instrument and related tools of disaster risk reduction. All the newly introduced solutions and measures should be need-based and perception of the stakeholder to use and manage it should be pre-examined.

Political interest, local capacity, social consciousness, existing coping mechanisms and indigenous knowledge of the government and communities are the factors that need to be properly analysed beforehand.

The achievements in the field of disaster risk management on ground, recorded through various evaluations and HFA monitoring progress, shows that a huge gap persists in the knowledge (science), policy (political commitment) and practice levels. We should not anymore remain entangled with the discussion around framework, concepts, and terminologies in these difficult and uncertain times. The situation is only going to get worse from here with the future unknown if we do not take immediate collaborative actions as disaster risk reduction community.

Arranging conferences, getting together and setting new commitments and agenda cannot continue forever. Now, the time has come to be specific in goals and definite in determination. As the fourth IDRC wants to promote resilient society, let us all focus on it and determine that all the attempts from local to global level will be to promote this, and let our governments and international agencies concentrate on it sincerely and take some concrete actions. This has to be now or never!

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