

BOTTOM LINE

Bangladesh at 67th UN General Assembly



BARRISTER HARUN UR RASHID

THE 67th session of the United Nations General Assembly commenced on September 25 in New York. 37-old Foreign Minister of Serbia, Mr. Vuk Jeremic, was elected as the President of this session of the General Assembly. The session will be participated by 193 state-members of the UN, out of which 120 heads of states/government

will attend at various times. President Jeremic reportedly said: "I'm going to call on the member states to participate in the general debate with the aim of providing us with new thoughts and ideas on revitalising the General Assembly. We do have some plans and ideas of our own but I would rather hear out the leaders of the world participating in the general debate."

The main theme selected for the general debate of the Assembly was peaceful resolution of disputes, mediation and conflict prevention. The theme actually reflects the tumultuous time that the world, especially in the Arab World, is going through.

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon predicted that the session would be among the busiest ever, reflecting "the tumultuous time in which we live -- a time of turmoil and transition." It is also taking place "against a backdrop of widespread violence linked to intolerance," he said.

Although the meeting is intended to celebrate the world's common values, this year is exposing instead the gulf between Western and Islamic perspectives on freedom of expression.

Democratic uprisings across the Arab world and the Palestinians' bid for UN membership sparked excitement and hope among world leaders. But with war raging in Syria, and deadly protests generated by an anti-Islamic video, the mood as this year's UN gathering begins is one of disappointment and frustration.

Several issues are dominating the debate:

- Freedom of speech is not licence to provoke religious sentiments;
- Armed conflict in Syria;
- Israel-Palestinian issue;
- Iran's nuclear programme and Israeli threat to attack;
- Global climate change

The mood of the delegates of Muslim countries is restive. Prompted by the anti-Muslim video produced in the US, that has stirred riots around the world, delegations from Muslim nations have arrived at the UN prepared to demand international curbs on speech or media that they believe defames their religion or

Assad to step aside.

Iranian President Ahmadinejad said that Iran has been threatened but is committed to peace, though he also accused world powers of double standards in pursuing an arms race. Iran has a "global vision and welcomes any effort intended to provide and promote peace, stability and tranquility" in the world.

On the other hand, Prime Minister Netanyahu of Israel pointed to a graphic of a bomb and asked UN leaders to draw a "red line" on Iran's nuclear bomb plans.

Mahmoud Abbas, Chairman of Palestinian Authority, will present the General Assembly with a more modest proposal -- to upgrade Palestine's current status as a

this video and I believe its message must be rejected by all who respect our common humanity. All of us are to address honestly the tensions between the West and an Arab world moving to democracy. Leaders of all countries must speak out forcefully against violence and extremism, and the use of hatred of America, the West or Israel as a central principle of politics."

On September 28, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina called upon UN members to reaffirm their political and financial commitments for the sake of sustainable international peace and security. She called for reforms of the United Nations, World Bank, IMF and other international financial institutions so they can serve the interests of large majorities instead of a privileged few.

Hasina said the new millennium warranted a changed world order based on justice, mutual respect and sovereign equality. Mentioning the recent popular uprisings, intra-state conflicts, climate change disasters and global financial crises, the prime minister stressed the need for collective efforts for peaceful resolution of the crises on the UN floor.

Lauding this year's UNGA theme -- "Settlement of International Disputes or Situations by Peaceful Means" -- Hasina said Bangladesh's commitment to global peace had been demonstrated through its contribution to the UN peacekeeping missions and in being a founder member of the UN Peace Building Commission.

The General Assembly is a forum of developing countries to flag the contemporary issues of the day. By airing views in the Assembly the issues get attention, and many disputes which are potential threats to peace and security receive publicity in the world media. The General Assembly can only be as effective as its members allow it to be, especially the veto-wielding permanent members of the UN.

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

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Prophet Muhammad (pbuh).

The demand for limits on anti-Islamic expression is coming from leading Islamic groups such as the Organisation for Islamic Co-operation, and leaders as diverse as Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Egyptian President Mohammed Mursi, and Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

These leaders consider anti-Islamic material a kind of "hate speech" that should be banned around the world. They are expected to make the demand when they speak in the General Assembly.

The Security Council remains divided on the Syrian conflict with Russia and China arguing that the opposition needs to be curbed while the West wants President

UN observer to a non-member observer state.

On September 25, United States President Barack Obama, in his address to a packed United Nations General Assembly, railed against the "crude and disgusting" film as well as the ensuing violence. Obama stressed America's distaste for insults to religion while insisting there was no excuse for violence.

He conceded that governments are becoming increasingly powerless to control the content of social media criticising the recent amateur film that disrespected Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). But he said free speech needed to be upheld -- and that must be tackled with free speech, not mindless violence.

He said: "The US government had nothing to do with

THE RAMU INCIDENT

Islam directs Muslims to protect minorities

RUBY AMATULLA

IT is a failure of our government that such a heinous event has taken place in Bangladesh. While we are a Muslim-majority society, 50 houses and 12 places of Buddhist worship were recently vandalised merely because a web link on a boy's Facebook account -- intentionally or unintentionally -- depicted a photo defaming the holy Quran.

These events are unacceptable for a civilised society. People like these must be stopped, as they are a threat to humanity. In this world of seven billion people, if such violence and conflagrations can be ignited anywhere due to irresponsible acts from a small group of people -- as we have seen in recent times such as in Nigeria in 2003, the "cartoon" events of 2005, and the recent violent protests against the Innocence of Muslims movie -- humanity then faces serious problems.

The home minister of Bangladesh conveniently finger points at others -- but what did his ministry do to secure the country after the Rohingya incidents in Myanmar earlier this year, which made the area ethnically volatile? He should answer as to where exactly his chain of command and intelligence failed. Why did local police fail to take necessary actions to disperse a disturbed crowd at 10:00 pm? Why were adequate reinforcements not sent out to the locations immediately?

Why were the fire services three hours late to arrive, with the 250-year-old temple along with 11 others and 50 houses burned to the ground? These are the questions the honourable home minister must answer before the Bangladeshi people and the world. A government fails when it fails to protect the safety, security, and rights of minorities. And society fails when it fails to respond in kind.

What is being done to bring the criminals to justice? What is the agenda to establish exemplary punishments for such violence-mongering groups, in order to establish strong precedence? Would not it be a moral failure for this society if timidity and tolerance prevail regarding these heinous events a few weeks or months later, with the authorities taking full advantage of public amnesia? In order to invalidate, marginalise, and stop such small groups of extremists and terror-

ists, society must become vigilant and active against them.

Where are the people who are to teach Islam to its followers? They must now address where they may have failed. The Quran (22:40) commands us to protect the places of worship of different faiths and to recognise their sanctity. Islam establishes the standard of "crimes against humanity" as one innocent person from any denomination being killed. We frequently see countless innocent people killed as a result of mindless actions violating Islam in many places in the Muslim world today. Muslims should move with the main thrust of the Quran, which commands to work from a moral high ground in order to establish a higher standard in human affairs.

Repeatedly, the Quran exhorts believers to overlook and to forgive others' failures and faults [2:106, 2:237, 7:199, 15:85, 24:22], to forgive those who inflict harm even though retribution is allowed [5:45], to forgive those who betray and

even to pray for them [4:106, 5:13], and to restrain anger [3:133-35]. It declares emphatically that true servants of God are those who offer peace to those who insult and ridicule them [25:63]. The Prophet (pbuh) exemplified these characteristics in his life, as he endured much insults, criticisms, opposition, and even violence yet remained gracious and constructive in tone. He was the ultimate example of the religion that promoted these values of generosity and restraint.

Islam commands to make life sacrosanct, property secure, and society just and peaceful. Why these cardinal commands conveniently ignored and frequently violated? If Muslim-majority societies and their leaders fail to uphold the standards Islam established a long time ago and work tirelessly only to assume the religion's outward identity and rituals, Muslim followers fail in their purpose. If followers fail to uphold the values and principles of Islam -- principles that the rest of humanity is increasingly beginning to comply with -- they are going to be left behind.

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This article has been written in memory of Late Mr. Muslehuddin Ahmad's by his son Mr. Junaid Ahmad outlining Mr. M. Ahmad's vision of higher education in Bangladesh and the role of private universities.

IN 1987, *Mahrum* Muslehuddin Ahmad set out on a mission to support the higher education system in Bangladesh. He was inspired by "*Iqra Bismi Rabbika*," words he interpreted as Islam's invitation to spread knowledge. Equally important was Mr. Muslehuddin's commitment to the younger generation of Bangladesh and his hope that access to better education would help them serve their nation. His contribution to the education sector was to form a coalition of stakeholders that catalysed a new national legislation opening private sector to higher education, and establish North South University (NSU) as the first private university in Bangladesh.

While working on NSU, Mr. Muslehuddin proposed a clause in the legislation to open the education sector to a competitive and transparent process. He did not want it to be restricted to a privileged few with access to special permissions. This approach had an immediate impact. Within a few years several private universities emerged, each with its own brand and focus.

The emergence of the private universities in Bangladesh, while unique, has global precedence. A similar process in Latin America created a proliferation of private universities. Mr. Muslehuddin's view of the Latin American experience and his personal observation of the private university movement in Bangladesh led him to be concerned about the quality of education being provided by private universities. He feared that the open competition for students was leading to a "race to the bottom" where some private universities were sacrificing quality to win quantity -- student enrollment -- and the impact of these few was driving down the performance of the private university system as a whole. So since 2000, with a group of key vice chancellors and academics, Mr. Muslehuddin focused on how best to regulate the private universities in order to prevent the loss of quality.

The focus was on three options. First, was to let markets regulate the education sector -- survival of the fittest. But, experience suggested that in many circumstances the Adam Smith form of competition could lead to inefficient outcomes -- the fly-by-night operators and the race to the bottom. A second option considered was government regulation. As a former government officer Mr. Muslehuddin's instinct was for full public regulation, but he also understood that government sector capacity was stretched and prone to being top-down.

A third option was peer regulation, where a group of universities would jointly support quality assurance -- not the old style quality control -- support each other's capacity; and hold each other accountable. Fundamentally, this approach draws on the concept of peer oversight and peer pressure.

The key is the willingness of the peer group to adopt a standard of outcome, set goals to achieve that standard over time, and be willing to evaluate themselves against that standard and publish the results for the public to judge the outcomes. Also, by forming a peer group the members are committing themselves to jointly protect their credibility. Compared to top

down regulation this approach places the accountability and responsibility on the universities themselves through a mutual agreement.

Mr. Muslehuddin added a twist to the peer model of regulation. He contacted the New England Accreditation of Schools and Colleges (NEASC), which provides accreditation to institutions like Harvard University, to act as a capacity support to the private universities in Bangladesh, help establish the standards and assist in undertaking the periodic evaluation. NEASC would provide "third-party" credibility to the peer group.

According to Mr. Muslehuddin, the most exciting part of this effort was the positive response of the vice chancellors and academics of several private universities who endorsed the idea of peer regulation for quality assurance. Equally important was the welcome offered by the chancellor, government and the UCG. Their enthusiasm confirmed Mr. Muslehuddin's instinct and faith in the leaders and stakeholders of the private university movement, and in the potential of a dynamic public-private partnership on quality assurance.

On the basis of this framework, in partnership with several of the top private universities, and with endorsement of the president of Bangladesh and the government, a group of dedicated academics and university administrators launched the Educational Quality Assurance Foundation (EQAF). Its goal is to offer a framework for quality assurance through which private universities would hold themselves accountable to students and parents for the quality of the education they provided.

EQAF has started with about six private universities and the first round of work with NEASC has been completed. The next step is for NEASC to support the six private universities to undertake the first evaluation and thus form a baseline which will help them set goals for improving the quality of their performance. EQAF would then be in a position to recognise good practices followed by different universities and help share these across private and public universities. In this process, EQAF would hopefully become a partner of the newly formed Higher Education Commission and the UCG to assure quality of the private university system and all universities more broadly.

Mr. Muslehuddin, as the champion of the EQAF process is no longer with us. The responsibility of EQAF and the challenge of taking forward the private university movement are now in the able hands of the vice chancellors and academics of all the private universities that have joined EQAF, and many more who are willing to join, and to whom Mr. Muslehuddin Ahmad has handed over the baton he most humbly carried. The time for peer regulation of private universities is here and now. *Iqra Bismi Rabbika*.

The writer is Director, World Bank.