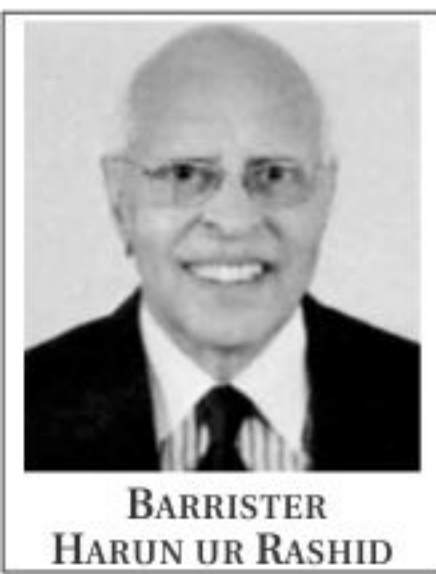


BOTTOM LINE

UNITED NATIONS DAY

The UN and Bangladesh



BARRISTER HARUN UR RASHID

TODAY (OCTOBER 24), THE United Nations celebrates the 67th anniversary of its founding. The Day is devoted to making known to the people of the world the aims and achievements of the United Nations Organisation.

Although states are members of the UN, it is the peoples of the world who founded the UN. The Charter begins with the following words: "We the peoples of the United Nations determined to save succeeding generations from scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind." It means that the peoples of the world, through their states, commit themselves to practice tolerance and to live together in peace with one another as good neighbours.

The UN Charter is a multilateral Treaty and has 111 Articles. The rights and obligations of the members are enshrined in the Charter and so also the powers and functions of the different organs of the UN.

There are three main pillars of the UN: maintenance of international peace and security, socio-economic development and protection of human rights. Whatever the UN does revolves around these pillars.

Unlike the European Union, the UN is not a supra-national authority. The European Union may take decisions on behalf of the 27 member-countries on subjects delegated to it without asking the member-states. However, the UN cannot decide any matter on behalf of member-states.

The success stories of the UN are demonstrated by the agencies of the Economic and Social Council in their humanitarian, economic, social, cultural, educa-

tional, health and poverty alleviation programmes. Special mention is made of the programmes of the UN and specialised agencies including UNDP, WHO, Unesco, Unicef, UNFPA, UNHCR, FAO, WFP, ILO, which have positive impact on socio-economic sectors of developing countries including Bangladesh. The UN is involved in supporting the eight Millennium Development Goals.

However on the political side, because of the divergence of views among the five veto-wielding permanent members, it has become ineffective in maintaining international peace and security. For example Syria's civil war has destabilised the whole region and the world community is frustrated by the ineffectiveness of the permanent members of the Council.

Although the UN was established on the basis of sovereign equality of all states, it was set up by the victorious nations of the Second World War -- the US, Britain, China, France and the former Soviet Union (Russian Federation). They made themselves permanent members of the Security Council, the administrative organ of the UN, with veto power, which means that any one of the five permanent members could kill a resolution by a negative vote.

A few countries including Australia opposed this move in 1945 but the victors would not have the UN without this privilege. The veto power was justified by the victors on the ground that the functions of the UN, in particular maintenance of international peace and security, required concurrence among the five victors.

But today, the veto power has become counter-productive in achieving peace and security.

Furthermore, the rest 188 member-states, including some of the world's most wealthy and populous nations, must fight for the non-permanent ten seats, whose occupants are elected for a two-year period from different geographical regions.

The UN has to operate today in a global environment that is vastly more challenging and demanding than it was in 1945. A revision of the UN structure, not its principles and purposes, is urgently called for. There are many proposals for reforms that have been discussed.

But none of them achieved a result. I suggest the following three major reforms.

First, the call for reforming of the Security Council appears to be justified by the need for its greater credibility, effectiveness and representation. The existing structure does not reflect the political and economic realities of the day.

Second, although the secretary general of the UN is seen to be responsible for maintenance of international peace and security, the powers of the UN secretary general in Article 99 of the Charter do not fulfill the needs of the day and call for substantive overhaul. Article 99 states that the secretary general may bring to the attention of the Security Council any matter which in his opinion may threaten international peace and security. The Article needs to spell out the functions and powers of the secretary general more explicitly so as to avoid confusion and controversy.

Third, the General Assembly has been a silent spectator to international conflicts and has no power to stop them. In matters of international peace and security, if the Security Council is unable to take measures because of the differences of views among permanent members, the General Assembly must have the power to decide measures to maintain or restore international peace and security.

Bangladesh has a good standing in the UN. It does not take any extreme view on any issue at international forums and, therefore, is perceived to project an objective and unbiased view of a situation.

Within 4 years of its admission it became a member of the prestigious Security Council in 1978, defeating Japan for the year 1979-80. Bangladesh was again elected in 1999 as a member of the Security Council through consensus for the 2-year term (2000-2001) from the Asian region. In 1986, Bangladesh was elected as the President of UN General Assembly.

This year, Bangladesh topped the list of countries in sending its personnel for peacekeeping missions. As of May 2012, it is reported that 10,293 Bangladeshi uniformed personnel were deployed in peacekeeping missions in 13 countries. Besides male keepers, Bangladesh sent women peacekeepers from the air force and police. The professionalism and competence of Bangladeshi peacekeepers are admired by the secretary general.

Finally, the UN is essentially a political organisation and, therefore, it is what its powerful members make of it. Despite its limitations, the UN is a necessity for all states -- big and small, poor and rich. If there were no UN, we would have to invent one.

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

Peace through development

KAZI ALI REZA

WHEN the world was reeling under the devastating World War II, causing untold sufferings for millions of people, some visionary leaders from all around the world put their heads together to work out ways and means to end the severe chaotic situation. That led to the birth of the United Nations on October 24, 1945, with the pledge of saving the succeeding generations from the scourge of war; and to ensure a better life in larger freedom for the human community. Unlike its predecessor -- the League of Nations -- this great Organisation continued its journey for long 66 years, adapting to the ever changing circumstances. The United Nations, born only with 51 countries in 1945, now has all the 193 independent countries of the world as its members.

When the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted by the UN in 1948, safeguarding all human rights for all human beings, it looked like a distant reality. But as we look back today, we can see that the Declaration has changed the whole world dramatically. Almost all the state constitutions of the world now embody its values and principles. While implementation of human rights sometimes is still a challenge, cases of systematic human rights violations have decreased dramatically. The rights of women and children, elderly, disabled, indigenous peoples and the right to development as human rights found grounds due to United Nations' tireless efforts.

United Nations has been a development partner of Bangladesh since our independence in 1971. Beginning with the support for the 10 million refugees in India, the transportations of the stranded Bangalis from Pakistan and salvaging of the sunken ships from Chalna port, UN's partnership with the government and the people of Bangladesh now extends to almost all spheres of development activities.

In 2000, under the auspicious of the United Nations, world leaders, including the then prime minister of Bangladesh, gathered together at UN Headquarters in New York to adopt the Millennium Development Goals (MDG), with the target date of achieving them by the year 2015.

To help achieve these Goals, the UN system is supporting the governments in their efforts to eradicate poverty and hunger, to adapt to the climate change, to reduce child and maternal mortality, to protect women's and children's rights, to ensure education and health facilities and to deal with the refugees and migrants.

Bangladesh has already achieved MDG-3, 4 and 5; and is on track for a number of others. Enrolment of children in primary school is almost hundred per cent, gender parity in primary and secondary education is complete, and the reduction of infant and maternal mortality has been achieved ahead of 2015. Despite some challenges, the progress of Bangladesh in achieving MDGs is impressive.

United Nations extends its support to Bangladesh to

ensure good governance, maintain peace and security and consolidate democracy. For instance, the electoral support to the Bangladesh Election Commission, preparation of national ID cards, voters' registration, setting up of the National Human Rights Commission are some of the best examples of UN support for the country.

Bangladesh's success in international diplomacy is manifest from the fact that it is now an elected member of the governing bodies of twenty-one international organisations, including the United Nations system. For its successful role in promoting women's and girls' rights, it has been branded as the leader in this field by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. Bangladesh is now the Chair of the Peace Building Commission. It is a member of the Committee on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and also elected to the new UN entity -- UN Women.

During the last few years, Bangladesh successfully tabled a number of resolutions at the UNGA, for instance, the observance of February 21 as International Mother Language Day, and the International Year of Micro-credit and the Autism Speaks.

Apart from the leading role in the Education-First campaign and being the role model for adapting to the climate change vulnerabilities, Bangladesh's contribution to international peace and security is outstanding. It is the largest troops contributing country in the world now. Bangladesh was the first country to deploy its all-women contingent in the UN peacekeeping. More than 115 thousand peacekeepers from Bangladesh have so far served in 36 peace-keeping missions. Tragically, 105 of them sacrificed their lives while serving humanity.

On this UN Day let us harness all our intellectual capacities to solve the problems of the twenty-first century in a twenty-first century way and turn this world into a place of peace and prosperity, abhorring conflicts and wars.

The formulation and signing of the United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF) with the government of Bangladesh, highlighting the key areas of UN intervention during the next five years (2012-2015), is a milestone of partnership between the two entities. UNDAF, for the first time, not only aims at geographical intervention by using monitoring tools for development but also to follow a unique model of UN agency-led initiative. It also incorporates the salient features of Vision 2021.

The UN General Assembly, which began its 67th session during the third week of September this year has a theme -- settlement of international disputes by peaceful means -- which is quite similar to the principles of Bangladesh's foreign policy, "friendship towards all, malice towards none" and "peaceful settlement of all disputes."

The United Nations is working worldwide to bridge the gap between hope and despair and life and death. On this UN Day let us harness all our intellectual capacities to solve the problems of the twenty-first century in a twenty-first century way and turn this world into a place of peace and prosperity, abhorring conflicts and wars.

The writer is Officer-in-Charge, UNIC Dhaka.

Escalating tension between India and China

ASHIT BARAN AICH

TRAVELLERS to the northeast get their first glimpse of the river Brahmaputra, the "son" of the mythical Hindu Lord, Brahma, when they cross the Saraihat bridge across the river to enter Guwahati.

Amidst the greenery of the surrounding hills, one gets a feeling of grandeur, awe and admiration. This river is possibly one of the least polluted in the country and is endowed with enormous water resources that have played a critical role in the development of agriculture, transport, industry, even music in the northeast.

Tragically, however, this riverine development will become a thing of the past if China's plan to construct dams on the Brahmaputra materialises. And one of these dams may be ready very shortly. This will not only disrupt the lives of millions in the region, but might also turn out to be the worst environmental disaster on planet earth.

The river Brahmaputra or Yarlung Tsangpo, as it is known in China, originated in the lake, Manas Sarobar near Mount Kailash in the southern Tibet plateau. It meanders eastwards for more than 2,000 kilometres before entering Siang in Arunachal Pradesh after taking a spectacular and abrupt U-turn -- famously known as the Great Bend -- and merges eventually in the Bay of Bengal after traversing southwards through Assam and Bangladesh.

Without this U-turn of more than 90 degrees, the river would possibly have continued its eastward journey and ultimately gone to the China Sea. But Nature apparently had some other design for the people of the subcontinent. This curious turn of the river and its subsequent impact on the lives of Indians has accorded the Brahmaputra a unique place in the history of Indian civilisation. In terms of importance, therefore, it is as important as the Indus and the Ganga.

But certain ominous trends are noticeable. China has undertaken a number of projects to trap water resources in the vicinity of the Great Bend. The first of a series of six dams on the Brahmaputra is called the Zangmu hydropower project, situated to the south-east of Lhasa.

The people of the northeast and environmentalists throughout the world have taken a serious view of this construction.

China is known for its secrecy. Its government is driven by the compulsion to meet the energy needs of industry, irrigation, and domestic consumption. And most importantly, it has the responsibility to feed more than one billion and a quarter of its people. As a sovereign country, it is free to manage its rivers to meet its needs. But these actions should not be taken at the expense of the survival of other nations, people, and their environment and ecosystems.

Since the '90s, China has denied the construction of any dam on its side of the Brahmaputra. It was only in 2010 that it admitted that several water-related pro-

jects on the Brahmaputra are on its agenda, including the one at Zangmy which may be ready by 2014-15.

Beijing has assured India that these dams are hydropower projects and will not affect the lower riparian states such as Arunachal Pradesh and Assam. Furthermore, it claims that there is no plan to divert the waters of the Brahmaputra to the arid north China or to construct reservoirs as reported in the media time and again.

The government of India has appealed to the north-eastern states not to panic. In the absence of a water treaty between India and China, one has to depend on Beijing's assurance and the available satellite and intelligence data as collected by India from time to time.

The important question at this juncture is the extent to which China is willing to compromise on its grand design on water and energy management involving the Brahmaputra. There has been considerable opposition to its plan from the lower riparian countries such as India.

Admittedly, China is facing a major crisis in terms of water resources. Or will it pursue its projects to meet its requirement, with scant regard for the opposition and concern articulated by others?

An urgent imperative is a water treaty between the two great powers of Asia to ensure that sharing of information can lead to a better understanding of the uses of water resources. This will ensure transparency and develop trust between the peoples of the two countries.

Diplomatic channels and bilateral agreements may be allowed to fructify in due course of time. The people of the northeast can fervently hope that the pristine beauty of their land is preserved and that the green and fertile country is not reduced to a sterile desert by the diversion of the great and mighty Brahmaputra.

In studying the damming of the Brahmaputra, an analyst of international affairs observed: "Current efforts on behalf of China to divert the water resources of the Brahmaputra river away from India will compound a situation that has remained tenuous since the 1962 India-China War." However, nobody talks of war these days, although relations between the two countries have soured over the issue of dams.

Fifty years after the India-China war, the conflict of interests is palpable enough, if a news item circulated in June this year is authentic. It states that the Chinese government has announced its plan to increase tourism and create a national park in Tibet near the Brahmaputra river, rather than pursue the construction of a massive and controversial dam. This ignores the demands of hydropower proponents and lobbyists in that country.

While the common people in India may be inclined to believe this nice story, the authorities in the government would surely do well to examine the veracity of this development. And also initiate adequate checks and balances at all levels regarding the issue so as not to be caught off guard.

The Statesman (India). All rights reserved. Reprinted by arrangement with Asia News Network.

An urgent imperative is a water treaty between the two great powers of Asia to ensure that sharing of information can lead to a better understanding of the uses of water resources.