

RUSSIAN SUPPORT AT CRITICAL TIME

BOTTOM LINE



BARRISTER HARUN UR RASHID

It was reported that on January 11 the Russian foreign ministry issued a statement backing the January 5 general elections in Bangladesh and said it was ready to continue constructive partnership with the next government.

Russia also regretted that the key opposition parties in Bangladesh boycotted the elections. "We hope that the authorities and the opposition will not go beyond the Constitution in order to ensure stability and strengthen democratic institutions in the country," it added.

Furthermore on January 14, President Putin congratulated PM Sheikh Hasina for being elected the prime minister of Bangladesh for the third time.

Russia has thrown its weight behind Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina at a time when her government has been desperately looking for international support.

The Russian statement and congratulatory message to the PM stand at stark contrast to the position of the Western countries including the United States over the elections.

Russian support for Bangladesh came because Bangladesh and Russia built good and friendly relations from the early '70s. The erstwhile Soviet Union (predecessor of Russian Federation) actively supported Bangladesh's independence struggle in 1971 and stood against the US and China who had sided with Pakistan..

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman visited the Soviet Union in April 1972. Later he went to Moscow for medical treatment.

After a lapse of many years, the Hasina government, during 1996-2001, re-engaged Russia for mutually beneficial interactions and procured 10 MiG 21s from Russia. As a gesture of goodwill toward Russia, on March 27, 2012, late Admiral Zuenko was awarded a medal by the Hasina government in recognition of his contribution in quickly clearing mines from the Chittagong port in 1972.

Thereafter, the Hasina government took a decisive step last year to consolidate its relations further when the prime minister visited Moscow to have bilateral meeting with President Putin. This was to send a clear signal to the US and other Western countries that Bangladesh did not put all the eggs in one basket.

During the visit of the prime minister, Bangladesh inked its biggest arms contract worth \$1 billion with Russia, which also announced a \$500 million loan to Dhaka for the construction

of the country's first nuclear power plant. The two major deals were announced after Russian President Vladimir Putin met with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on January 15 last year.

Bangladesh decided to install a 2,000 MW third-generation nuclear power plant (reactors) with Russian assistance at Rooppur (Pabna). The estimated cost of the each proposed plant will reportedly be \$1.5-2 billion. It is also reported that Russia may provide state loan with interest to Bangladesh to build the plants. Russia announced a \$500 million loan to Dhaka for the construction of the nuclear power plant.

In April, 2012, three subsidiary companies of the state-owned Petrobangla signed a \$193.5 million agreement with Russia's Gazprom Company for drilling 10 gas wells in Bangladesh.

Under the deal, Gazprom will construct the drilling pad and warehouse, carry out rig shifting and commissioning, procure drilling materials and engage with third party service providers, among other things.

Last November, in the first round of voting, Bangladesh supported the Russian city of Ekaterinburg instead of Dubai of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in its bid to become the venue for World Expo 2020. This surprised everyone because it was deemed detrimental for Bangladesh-UAE relations with particular reference to resumption of labour visa issue. This stance of Bangladesh could not win in the first round, Bangladesh finally voted for Dubai, which won beating Ekaterinburg, Izmir of Turkey and Sao Paulo of Brazil.

Dhaka's policy towards the US and Russia needs to be well-calibrated and balanced. Bangladesh seems to be fully aware of the need to do so. Observers believe close interaction with Russia, a veto wielding power at the UN Security Council, has been a mature policy of the Hasina government and now it is amply vindicated by the support lent by Moscow at the critical hour of her new government.

Moscow, as a global power, continues to have a solid foothold in India and does not want South Asian countries to fall under the increasing influence of the US. Although Moscow and Beijing are strategic partners against the domination of the US, their interests differ in South Asia. While Moscow looks at growing Indian influence in South Asia as positive, China does not. Further, Bangladesh is strategically important to China and India because of Myanmar being a neighbour where their interests collide.

Finally, the implication of the brief Moscow statement is huge internationally, and it will not be easy for the Western countries to exert pressure on Hasina's new government, at least from the UN.

The writer is former Bangladesh ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

She is our shadow PM

SHAKHAWAT LITON

Is Raushan Ershad ready to assume the office of the prime minister? You may say this question is in fun, because you know how she has been made the leader of the opposition. The high office she is holding in the 10th Parliament is of immense important in parliamentary democracy. It is a slight to our democracy if we knowingly undermine the dignity of this high office.

In UK, the birthplace of Westminster style of democracy, the opposition in the House of Commons is called "official opposition." British expert Eriskin May, more than 170 years ago, said of the opposition: "It is the largest minority party which is prepared, in the event of resignation of the government, to assume office."

About the significance of the office of the leader of the opposition, Indian experts M.N. Kaul and S.L. Shakhdar say: "He is a shadow Prime Minister and he has to be prepared to take up the responsibility of forming a government if his party secures a majority at an election or if the government resigns or is defeated."

May, Kaul and Shakhdar have spoken of an ideal situation in parliamentary democracy. They could not have envisaged the abnormal situation which we are now facing in identifying the opposition and its leader in parliament. By making Raushan the leader of the opposition, the ruling AL has set a dubious distinction in the history of parliamentary democracy. How? The AL-led government held the January 5 election keeping its archrival BNP-led alliance away from the ballots. It needed some MPs who would take seats in the opposition bench. So, AL ensured win of 33 candidates of Jatiya Party led by Ershad in the polls.

Ershad's refusal to quit the electoral race did not work as Raushan emerged as the leader of the opposition. She defied Ershad's command and stayed in the electoral race. Some Jatiya Party leaders made her their leader. Ershad lost control over his party in this game when Raushan appeared as his opponent. He was kept confined at a hospital during the run-up to the election.

Jatiya Party leaders who were elected as MPs with the support of the ruling AL were not happy with MP status. They demanded a share of power. To make them happy, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina inducted three JP MPs in her cabinet formed on January 12. This set an unprecedented record in contemporary parliamentary democracy.

Raushan, a senior presidium member of Jatiya Party, may feel proud of this unprecedented record she has set. Under her leadership, the party has achieved much success -- ensuring share of power and status of the main opposition in parliament. Ershad, who has been leading the party for more than three decades, could not achieve such successes in the country's democratic period. So, she may even claim to be at the helm of the Jatiya Party!

Whatever the reality is, Raushan occupies the third position in Parliament, after the Speaker and

the Leader of the House. She will be enjoying the status and all benefits of a cabinet minister. None of her predecessors, excepting the opposition leader in the 4th Parliament, got the dignified status so easily. In the 4th Parliament, formed through a farcical election held in 1988 amid a boycott by AL, BNP and other parties, A.S.M. Abdur Rab was the leader of the opposition. But that opposition party was handmaiden of the then regime led by Ershad. So Rab was labelled as the "domestic opposition leader" by the agitating opposition parties. Hasina and Khaleda Zia, in turn, had held the office of the leader of opposition since restoration of democracy in 1990. Before them, AL veteran leader Asaduzzaman Khan was the opposition leader in the 2nd Parliament formed in 1979. None was recognised as the opposition leader in the 5th and 6th Parliaments formed in 1973 and 1996, respectively.

Previous records show that individuals having political career and enjoying people's support had got recognition as the ones to lead the opposition bench. But Raushan is different from them. She does not have such political career. She was the first lady because she was the wife of then president Ershad. In her brief biography published by the parliament secretariat in 2012, she claimed that she made contributions to many state and development works as first lady.

After the fall of the Ershad regime in 1990, Raushan lost the status of first lady. Her biography did not say anything about her activities in the six years before she was elected MP in the 7th Parliament with JP ticket. She was elected MP in 1996 and 2001 elections. She, however, failed to win in the 2008 parliamentary polls. Later, she was elected as MP in a by-election from a seat vacated by Ershad, who won two seats in the polls. Her role as MP was not worth mentioning. But she became lucky when Ershad announced that his party would join Hasina's election time cabinet and join the 10th Parliamentary election. Hasina inducted some JP MPs, including Raushan, in her election-time cabinet in the middle of November last year. Raushan got the portfolio of the health ministry. She must have fallen in love with the power. Therefore, she was unwilling to resign as minister following Ershad's announcement to quit the electoral race and the election-time cabinet.

Raushan even negotiated with Hasina after Ershad's announcement to persuade the prime minister to give some 'advantages' to Ershad so that he would change his decision. She got support of some other ambitious JP leaders who had also fallen in love with power after being inducted in Hasina's election-time cabinet. So, Raushan and her MPs will play the role of shadow cabinet in the parliament. Will the opposition bench under her leadership hold the cabinet accountable for its actions? Or will the opposition bench remain accountable to the government for its actions, instead?

Many more curious things may unfold in the coming days.

The writer is Senior Reporter, The Daily Star.

TRIBUTE

A.S. Mahmud: A man of vision remembered

SIMON DRING

I remember a man who really loved his country -- who fervently believed in the strength and the independence of Bangladesh. Most importantly, he also believed in its future and in the tremendous potential of its people and their ability to bring about change where before there had all too often been only isolation, inequality and despair. That man was the late A.S. Mahmud.

Abu Sayed Mahmud died on January 22, 2004. He should not have died in England, so far away from his homeland. This would have been the last place he would ever have wanted to die. So why did it happen? Because he dared to dream and because he had the courage and the commitment to realise that dream: Ekushey Television.

Twelve years ago, it was the very success of ETV, with the huge reach of its news, information, cultural and entertainment programmes (40 million + audience) and its ability to open up the world and build a bridge between all the peoples of Bangladesh, that was, in the end, its downfall.

Little more than two and a half years after Ekushey Television went on air, A.S. Mahmud and his family had little choice but to leave the country as those determined to bring down ETV moved in.

In many ways, the special place that Bangladesh has assumed in my life was shaped by my work as a journalist here during the liberation struggle in 1971-72. But it was when A.S. Mahmud brought me back again to help him and his son Farhad to build, develop and manage Ekushey Television that I was really able to play my part.

And it was with the encouragement of

Mr. Mahmud, his belief in our abilities and the willingness to learn of the 300 young people who came to work at ETV, that inspired us to take on the somewhat daunting task of building and making a success of the country's first independent national terrestrial television network.

From the beginning, A.S. Mahmud, the Chairman and CEO of ETV, was involved in every aspect of shaping Ekushey Television; its philosophy, its content, its image and its overriding commitment to help bring about change in the country.

Farhad Mahmud remembers: "My father was an ardent believer in equity, justice and secularism and hence the founding values of our country resonated strongly within him. He wanted Ekushey Television to be built around those values and I believe that these values struck a chord among the young and helped make ETV so immensely popular."

ETV was indeed vision of a new and modern Bangladesh.

There were many days when Mr. Mahmud would remind me of the need to ensure that our news and our educational programmes reached out into the rural areas. That they not only showed the rest of the world the life and struggle of the small farmer and the village businessmen but that we helped make them feel a real and contributing part of their own country. That is the power of a fair and balanced electronic media.

What gave him his greatest satisfaction was to know that people throughout the country, in villages where roads and electricity were still not in place, would be gathering around a TV set powered by car batteries to watch the ETV News and quite often, proudly, live musical evenings broad-

cast from rural areas not unlike their own.

Mukto Khabor, the news and information programme produced and reported by children (some as young as 10), was another of his favourite programmes. He would often spend hours sitting with the young people listening to their ideas and encouraging them about the stories they planned to report.

And another was *Deshjire*, the programme that travelled throughout the country with the aim, eventually, of putting life in every district and village on television (more than 900 were featured before ETV was forced to go off-air).

ETV was in many ways the natural culmination of A.S. Mahmud's career as a businessman and entrepreneur. Farhad Mahmud describes him as an "egalitarian to the extreme, a person completely devoid of prejudices who believed in a classless society and felt very strongly that inequity in our society stifled the potential of so many."

Farhad recalls that his father started his career in 1957 working in the multi-national oil company Shell, in what was then East Pakistan. "He later joined the Pakistan Oil Company but he made it clear to us that he found it very difficult to deal with the prejudices of the West Pakistanis who ran the company. Like so many others at the time, in early 1971, he began actively working against the interests of Pakistan."

As the man in charge of oil supply operations in the then East Pakistan, he understood that the so-called power-sharing talks in Dhaka were going terribly wrong when he noticed that huge amounts of logistical resources and manpower were suddenly being deployed under the direct command of the army in preparation of

what we now know as the crackdown of March 25. He instructed the Fatullah Oil Terminal not to serve the army tankers, the terminal was closed and he soon found himself under the gun of the army and in late March he escaped with his family to London."

A.S. Mahmud returned to the newly independent Bangladesh in 1972 and later went on, in 1977, to be a part of Transcom, the organisation with which he stayed until 1995/6. At the same time, he became Chairman of Phillips Bangladesh, which was bought by Transcom. He was also president of the Dhaka Chamber of Commerce and Industry for four consecutive years and a member of the governing body of Brac until he died.

His first foray into the media was when he started, as its Founder Publisher and Managing Director, what is now the immensely successful English-language *The Daily Star*.

By all accounts, A.S. Mahmud was a unique man with uncommon beliefs. People in the world of arts, culture and literature knew him as "one of their own" and as an active supporter of new and innovative artists such as the filmmaker Tarek Masud and the young director Abu Sayed.

Television was the natural follow-on to these interests and beliefs. And it was when the then Awami League government of Sheikh Hasina let it be known publicly that they were considering granting a license for the country's first independent national network, that Mr. Mahmud went to work.

There were many applicants and the tender process was a hard-fought competition between many good submissions. It was perhaps one of the most rewarding moments in Mr. Mahmud's life (and in

many ways in mine too) when Ekushey Television won the license. The rest, as they say, is history.

The birth of Ekushey Television was the perfect illustration of what Mr. Mahmud had believed in all along -- that the potential of young people in this country can be embraced and harnessed to help lift the future of their country to new and higher standards. And it was the energy of those 300 people employed at ETV that made the network the success it became, nationally and internationally.



A.S. Mahmud

If there is a living tribute to the dream and to the memory of the late A.S. Mahmud, it is that the doors that Ekushey Television once opened would never again be fully closed. Successive governments have been encouraged to grant a number of new licenses and many of the ETV staff have gone on to become the experienced and professional backbone of a new and dynamic independent electronic media in Bangladesh.

The writer is a journalist who reported on Bangladesh during the Liberation War.

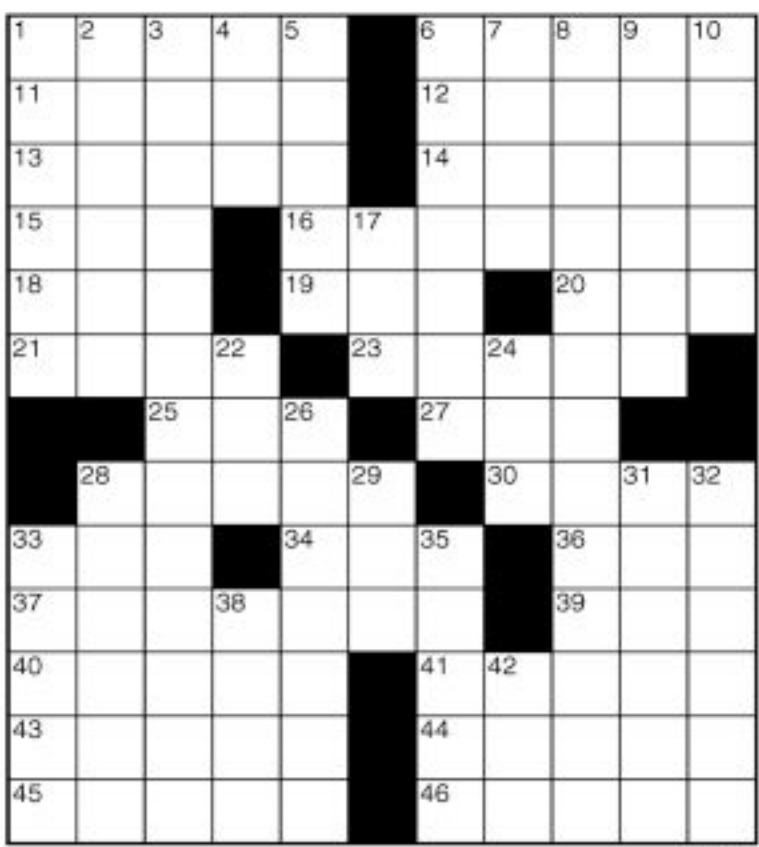
CROSSWORD by Thomas Joseph

ACROSS

- 1 Breaks, perhaps
- 6 Low singer
- 11 Really impressed
- 12 Over
- 13 Yard worker
- 14 Acts the nomad
- 15 Will Smith biopic
- 16 Cancel, as a debt
- 18 Oxford bigwig
- 19 - Paulo
- 20 Trawling need
- 21 Quiche base
- 23 Salad servers
- 25 Greek consonants
- 27 May honoree
- 28 Hog the mirror
- 30 Plunge
- 33 - favor
- 34 Prepare to fire
- 36 Two-piece piece
- 37 Somewhat
- 39 Help out
- 40 Astronomer's prime time
- 41 Generous one
- 43 Lucy's pal
- 44 Sock site
- 45 Door holder's words
- 46 Finishes last

DOWN

- 1 Angry rant
- 2 Like some watches
- 3 1987 John Malkovich move
- 4 Merino mom
- 5 Feudal workers
- 6 Watering hole
- 7 Wildly eager
- 8 2013 Emma Thompson movie
- 9 Colanders' kin
- 10 Dawn
- 17 Cereal bit
- 22 Take to court
- 24 Auction signal
- 26 Mariners' home
- 32 Civil
- 29 Goose egg
- 31 Colorful bird
- 32 Chaplains
- 33 Comics unit
- 35 Military award
- 38 Those people
- 42 Musician Yoko



CRYPTOQUOTE

SWDX DX SWH RDVXS SHXS FR L ZHISYHQL: WDX VHXNHPS RFV SWFXH OWF PLI GH FR IF NFXXDGYH ALYTH SF WQJ.

- ODYYDLQ YKFI NWHYNX

Yesterday's CRYPTOQUOTE:

The greatest good you can do for another is not just to share your riches but to reveal to him his own.

- Benjamin Disraeli

Yesterday's answer



A XYDLBAAX is LONGFELLOW

One letter stands for another. In this sample, A is used for the three L's, X for the two O's, etc. Single letters, apostrophes, the length and formation of the words are all hints. Each day the code letters are different.

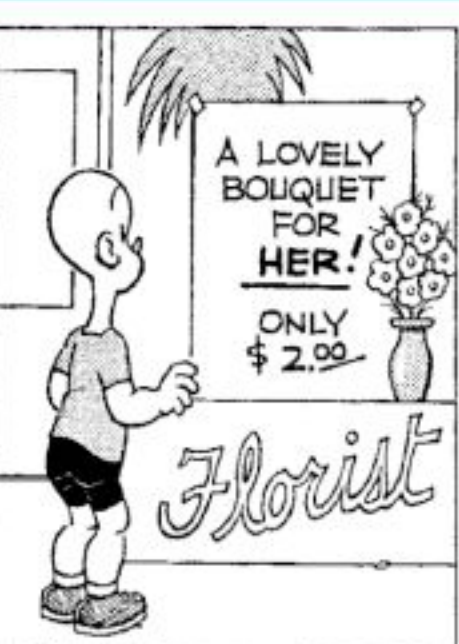
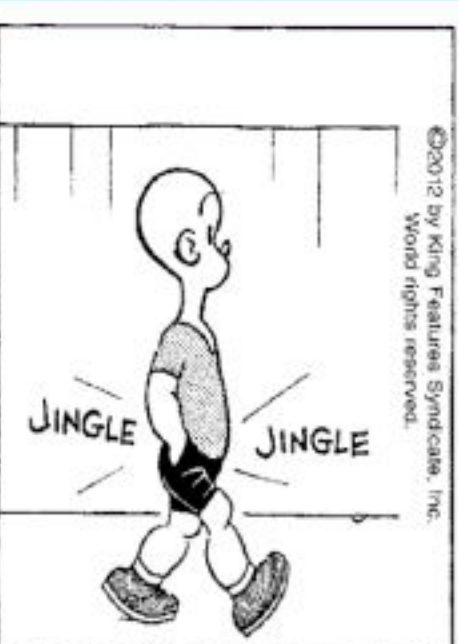
BEETLE BAILEY

by Mort Walker



HENRY

by Don Trachte



Democracy is interactive... It's a constant job of information, education, explanation, listening, and interactive communication.

Dick Gephardt