

# International scene 2014

## MAHMOOD HASAN

**T**HE year 2014 came to an end yesterday. As we bid adieu to 2014 let us look back and see some of the major events of the year. During the past year we witnessed turmoil in different parts of the world. Terrorism, insurgency, political conflicts and wars have taken many lives. Changes in leadership in some countries and reappearance of cold war phenomenon will no doubt influence world events in 2015. Natural disasters and diseases have wreaked havoc in some regions of the world.

## EBOLA

What terrified people around the world was the outbreak of Ebola. Ebola virus disease (EVD) was first discovered after its outbreak in South Sudan and Zaire (now Congo) in 1976. The name Ebola is derived from the Ebola River in Congo. The disease reappeared in February 2014 in West Africa, and so far has resulted in 6,388 deaths (WHO). The countries worst affected are Guinea, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Senegal. Cases of infection have also been reported from, Mali, Nigeria, Spain and USA. WHO issued a Global Alert that if not controlled the disease may spread beyond West Africa and cause havoc to humanity.

## UKRAINE

A new crisis was developing in Eastern Europe between the West and Russia over Ukraine since late 2013. By early 2014 it had blown into a major crisis. Pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich fled to Moscow after the West instigated civil unrest that left more than 100 people dead in Kiev.

Tensions arose when economically battered Ukraine wanted to become a member of European Union against the wishes of Moscow. Moscow wanted to keep Ukraine within its sphere of influence and use it as a buffer between its borders and US-led Nato countries. The West, mainly the Americans, has long conspired to pull Ukraine into EU and Nato and encircle Russia.

This geopolitical confrontation provoked President Putin to annex Crimea and launch an insurgency in eastern Ukraine, which has a large Russian speaking population. In April, Washington imposed sanctions on Moscow, followed by EU. In June, Petro Poroshenko was elected the new president but his woes are not yet over, despite several peace deals with the insurgents. So far the insurgency has caused the death of over 4,000 people on both sides. Over 800,000 fled to Russia and 200,000 displaced within Ukraine. President Obama has signed fresh sanctions against Russia in December and US Congress has decided to arm the fledgling Ukrainian army. Sanctions and falling oil price have eroded the value of Ruble and put strains on the economy. The West and Russia distrust each other openly and President Putin is treated as a pariah. It appears Washington wants regime change in Moscow. The current conflict is a classical episode of cold war.

## MALAYSIA

Two tragic incidents hit Malaysian Airlines during 2014. The Airline's Boeing 777 disap-

peared en route to Beijing from Kuala Lumpur on March 8. Flight MH 370 is presumed to have crashed into the Indian Ocean with 239 passengers on board. The plane has not yet been traced. The disappearance of the plane is a mind boggling mystery.

Again, on July 17, another Malaysian Airlines Boeing 777 was shot down over eastern Ukraine with 298 people on board. Washington accused Russia for shooting down flight MH 17 enroute from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur. Moscow blamed Ukrainian army fighting insurgents in Eastern Ukraine for the incident. Investigations into the incident have not yet identified the culprits. Both the accidents have left the world in a state of shock and disbelief.

## AFGHANISTAN

After two five-year terms President Hamid Karzai's tenure came to an end in early 2014 in war-torn Afghanistan. To elect a new president 20 million Afghans went to polls in April. Out of 11 candidates only two -- Abdullah Abdullah and Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai --were front runners.



Results of first round of voting on May 15 put Abdullah with 45 percent as against 32 percent of Ashraf Ghani. After the second round on June 14 the Independent Election Commission reversed the results on July 7 and put Abdullah at 43 percent and Ghani at 56 percent. Abdullah immediately accused the Commission of widespread fraud and demanded recounting of votes. US Secretary of State John Kerry then mediated and announced that ballots would be recounted under UN supervision. The Election Commission announced on September 19 that Ashraf Ghani was the winner. To avoid bloody tribal confrontations, Abdullah and Ghani signed a power-sharing deal in which Abdullah will hold an important position in the new government. Though the election process was long and complicated it was the first time that Afghanistan witnessed a peaceful transfer of state power on September 29.

However, the situation in the country remains dicey as the US troops leave winding down their combat role and Taliban threat looms large.

## NIGERIA

Islamic terrorist group "Boko Haram" abducted 276 school girls from a secondary school in the province of Borno in Nigeria in April. Most of these girls were not Muslims. Boko Haram had declared that they will convert the girls to Islam and marry them. Unconfirmed reports suggest some of these girls were taken to Chad and Cameroon. While world opinion was outraged, the Nigerian government seemed unable to trace or free the pupils. However, several Western governments offered to help rescue the students from the terrorists.

Nigeria has been under ruthless military dictatorships from 1966 to 1999, when democracy was restored. It was during this period that ethnic militancy grew in Kano in northern Nigeria. Boko Haram ("Western education is forbidden") appeared in northern Nigeria in 2002, where the Muslim population is in majority. It is a "Salafi" (extreme radical Islamists) terrorist group opposed to Christians and responsible for many violent bomb attacks. Corruption in

security services and human rights abuses by the government have made it difficult to contain Boko Haram. In December, the terrorists again abducted 185 people during an attack in Borno state.

## INDIA

BJP-led NDA dethroned the Congress-led UPA in the 16th Lok Sabha elections in India and formed the new government under Narendra Modi, former chief minister of Gujarat.

Amazingly, the election campaign saw a sharp division of the Indian polity into two camps -- the secularist and the followers of "Hindutva". Hindutva has several connotations but is generally understood as Hinduism mixed with ultra nationalism. Even more surprising was the way BJP conducted the campaign. The party skillfully projected Modi more like in presidential candidate. The campaign revolved around Modi not the BJP manifesto.

Modi surprised everyone by inviting all the Saarc leaders to his investiture. Many believed that the era of confrontation between Pakistan and India will soon be

over after Modi and Nawaz promised a new beginning. But that prospect fell flat at the 18th Saarc Summit in Kathmandu in November. Modi's policy towards India's neighbours is yet to unfold.

However, the West, which had so long treated Modi as a pariah because of his complicity during the 2002 riots in Gujarat, were overjoyed at his election victory. Washington, which refused him visa repeatedly, was head over heels to welcome him to US. President Obama is scheduled to be the guest of honour during the Republic Day parade in Delhi in January 2015.

Modi's detractors deride him as a divisive, violent, prejudicial person as he is a lifelong member of RSS, a fascist paramilitary Hindu nationalist organisation responsible for murdering Mahatma Gandhi in 1948. He is seen as a far right Hindu nationalist and a corporate man.

Nevertheless, Modi has broken the dynastic tradition of rulers in Indian democracy. He is the first non-Delhi politician to become prime minister of India. His greatest challenge will be to revive the sluggish Indian economy and pull teeming millions of Indians from poverty. It would be worth watching whether Modi will create a new Republic.

## EGYPT

Politics in Egypt has gone round full circle. From a military dictatorship (first Republic of Gamal Nasser) it went for multiparty democracy (second Republic of Mohammad Morsi) and back to military democracy (third Republic of General Abdel Fattah Al Sisi). The year 2014 was a defining period. After having ousted the elected President Mohammad Morsi in July 2013, Gen Sisi consolidated his power and position and called for presidential election in May 2014. In a one-horse race he was declared elected with 97 percent vote. Sisi came to power amidst political violence that has caused the death of over 2,500 people.

The Muslim Brotherhood has been outlawed and hundreds of its activists thrown into jails. Mohammad Morsi is under detention and faces charges. The problem is MB has remained a potent force to challenge the Egyptian army. During the past year there were several serious attacks on the army, killing dozens of soldiers. What is even more worrying is that the MB has relations with ISIL.

General Sisi has his plate full. He has to revive the sagging economy, reunite the divided nation and resurrect Egypt's secular credentials. Above all, he has to maintain peace with Israel. Anyway, though the situation in the Middle East remains extremely fluid, Gen Sisi has effectively snuffed out Arab Spring from Egypt.

## THAILAND

For the past couple of years Thailand had been submerged in political crisis. Trouble began when Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra tried to pass a political amnesty bill in early 2013. The bill would have allowed her brother Thaksin Shinawatra, a former prime minister accused of corruption, to return to Thailand from exile. The Constitutional Court rejected the bill and the opposition