

Prime Minister at the UN

From a leader to a statesman

We say with pride that among all the heads of states and governments who participated in the 70th anniversary of the United Nations (UN), Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's role was significant on several counts. From a plethora of important issues such as sustainable development goals to the UN peace keeping mission to global terrorism, she spoke with eloquence and made her presence felt. Leaving aside the two awards she got, her participation is a recognition of her long, constructive and active role in addressing global issues like child rights, development of LDCs, etc. She has made a place for herself and earned Bangladesh the status of a country whose achievements are internationally recognised. After Bangabandhu, she is by far the most internationally recognised political leader from Bangladesh.

We congratulate the prime minister for receiving the "ICT Sustainable Development Award" and the highest environmental accolade of the United Nations Environmental Programme (Unep), the "Champions of the Earth".

While we will continue to stress the need for more democratic space, good governance, stronger anti-corruption measures and genuine press freedom, we have no hesitation in saying that this trip raises Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina from the stature of a leader of a developing country to a statesman in the world stage. This is of particular import considering the fact that a few decades ago the country was seen more as a problem than as a place with bright prospects. We congratulate her on her achievements, which are not hers alone but also of Bangladesh's.

Palestinian flag at the UN

Now work towards a full statehood

TODAY we are one with the Palestinian people celebrating the raising of their flag at the United Nations for the first time in history, following a vote approving the action by the UN General Assembly earlier this month. That the motion to raise the flag passed the General Assembly by an overwhelming majority despite opposition from several countries including Israel and the United States signals a significant amount of international support of the Palestinian cause. Now let it translate into a tangible step towards their quest for a Palestinian state.

This is a simple gesture but it had been a long time coming, after more than two decades of unsuccessful efforts to find peace and deliver the much promised Palestinian state that is free and sovereign. It follows a failed bid by the Palestinians in 2011 to join the international body as a full member state that led the UN general Assembly voting to upgrade its status to that of a "non-member observer state" in 2012.

Although the vote was symbolic, we believe, symbols are important and sometimes, necessary. The black, green, red and white of the Palestinian flag fluttering free among the flags of the community of nations would be a stark reminder of Israeli occupation and injustice.

However, a positive outcome in this regard is unlikely unless Israel changes its policy toward a free Palestine respecting the aspirations of the Palestinian people and fulfilling its obligations under international law and the international community brings to bear its full diplomatic weight on Israel to do so.

Demystifying non-tariff barriers in South Asia

SELIM RAIHAN

IN the initial years of SAARC in the 1980s, the popular hypothesis for the reason behind limited intra-regional trade was the prevailing high tariff rate among the member countries. High tariff rates have come down substantially over the years since the formation of SAARC, due to increased globalisation of trade, and establishment of the WTO regime and the South Asian Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA). Despite significant reduction in tariff rates in the region, the intra-SAARC trade has been as static as before, i.e. about only 5 percent of the total trade of this region. Now the popular hypothesis is that it is not the high tariff rates, but the Non-Tariff Measures (NTMs) and the resulting trade barriers, i.e., Non-Tariff Barriers (NTBs) which are the main reasons behind limited intra-regional trade in South Asia. This view is reflected in many contemporary studies and documents.

NTMs are generally defined as policy measures other than ordinary customs tariffs that can potentially have an economic effect on international trade in goods, changing quantities traded or prices, or both (UNCTAD, 2013). In contrast, NTBs are thought to be policy measures that surely affect the quantity traded and prices, and have proven discriminatory effects against foreign firms (as pointed out in a paper by A. Nicita and Peters for the WTO workshop titled 'The Effects of NTMs on the Exports of Small Economies,' Geneva, October 23, 2013).

The UNCTAD classification of NTMs comprises technical and non-technical measures, such as sanitary or environmental protection measures, technical barriers to trade (TBTs) and other tradi-

tional instruments of commercial policy, e.g. quotas, price control, exports restrictions, or contingent trade protective measures, as well as other behind-the-border measures, such as competition, trade-related investment measures, government procurement or distribution restrictions. This classification acknowledges the existence of measures and does not judge on legitimacy, adequacy, necessity or discrimination of any form of policy intervention used in international trade (United Nations Conference on Trade and

Development, Geneva, 2013). Regardless of whether NTMs are imposed with protectionist intent or to address legitimate market failures, NTMs often impose additional costs on trading, and thus may have substantial effects on trade (Nicita and Peters, 2013). And these costs may be higher for some countries or firms than for others. For example, compliance costs are often fixed costs when small firms are in a disadvantageous position. Most of the small and medium-sized firms in South Asia face this challenge, especially with respect to meeting the

principles in South Asia through regionally coordinated efforts.

Cost of complying is often dependent on infrastructure. Since the intra-regional trade in South Asia happens predominantly through land borders, a large part of the NTM-related complaints in South Asia are linked to weak infrastructure at land custom stations in South Asian countries, as well as to the lack of testing and laboratory facilities near the stations. In this process, many legitimate NTMs turn into NTBs, affecting the intra-regional trade. Therefore, improvements in relevant infrastructure should be a top priority.

Due to various procedural obstacles, which are related to complicated bureaucratic process, delays, corruption, and frequent changes in the policies, many legitimate NTMs turn into NTBs. In South Asia, a significant part of the NTBs is related to procedural obstacles. Therefore, policy efforts are critical to ensure that NTMs serve their intended legitimate purposes.

Policymakers in respective countries of South Asia, while negotiating for streamlining NTMs and reducing NTBs at the regional level, need very clear analysis, information and updated data on NTMs/NTBs for all South Asian countries. These data and analysis need to be relevant with concrete examples so that effective measurable actions can be undertaken. Analysis should emphasise on the respective roles and responsibilities for both home and partner countries in solving the problems.

A large part of the NTM-related complaints in South Asia are linked to weak infrastructure at land custom stations in South Asian countries, as well as to the lack of testing and laboratory facilities near the stations. In this process, many legitimate NTMs (Non-tariff Measures) turn into NTBs (Non-tariff Barriers), affecting the intra-regional trade.

Development, Geneva, 2013).

Detailed information, and appropriate and specific analysis is required for better understanding of the impacts of NTMs on trade. It is important to emphasise that many NTMs are legitimate and thus cannot be negotiated away. For example, sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) measures and TBT are there to protect consumers and environment; pricing and licenses are there to regulate domestic markets; anti-dumping duties, subsidies, quotas are there to protect domestic firms; and rules of origin is there to avoid unintended trade deflections.

SPS and TBT standards. Therefore, there is a need to develop the capacities of these firms so that they can meet the justified SPS and TBT standards in other countries. In this regard, technical assistance in their production and export processes is required, and different aid for trade and similar initiatives should be put in place on a priority basis. Also, there is a need to strengthen the capacities of the National Standards Authorities so that certificates issued by them are accepted in other countries. Furthermore, there is a need for harmonisation of standards, custom procedures and establishing mutual recogni-

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LESSONS FROM THE roof of the world

 CHINTITO
 SINCE 1995


NIZAMUDDIN AHMED

THERE is remembrance of the 9000-plus dead, yet there is an underlying resolve among the people. The dead shall not rise for sure, but the living are not ready for their last rites.

The vase was broken, as the multitude of injured (almost 25,000) will evince albeit in silence, yet the marks of mending are not prominent to the compassionate mind.

A few brick buildings erected over several centuries have crumbled, and the stacks next to a flattened edifice echo their determination not to lose a single piece. Each brick is a reminder of the past they lost and the future it might hold.

Awaiting restoration, many more structures are propped up by steel struts and thick logs, perhaps willpower too, but there is no haste. The cracks in the wall and structure appear to almost belong there.

The spire above some temples, stupas and palaces have been ruffled, a few brought down, but experts work studiously to revive their intricate glory. The devotees bide their time by engaging in other rituals. There is no annoyance.

The entire nation of Nepal has embraced the April 2015 earthquake in dignity.

At Kathmandu's Pashupatinath, one of Nepal's most sacred Hindu temples, a couple of funeral pyres are ablaze, one or two from earlier hours smouldering, but in the shady hilly area across the Bagmati River, the incense of cremation reach some amorous young people looking distantly to a future of promise sealed in the day's pledge.

The Bouddhanath Stupa, viewed with great reverence by the Nepalese, reached up to a height of a ten-storied building. Since the recent earthquake, that too is history; the top of the Tibetan stupa is gone. But, there is no space for grievance or anger or acrimony. You can in fact already hear the pigeons humming in serenity as they graze the open ambulatory corridor around the largest Buddhist shrine in the world. Reconstruction work on structure and gold elements, in full view of devotees and visitors, is on. The UNESCO World Heritage Site is already regaining its reputation as one of the most frequented tourist spots.

Bhaktapur Durbar Square, 13 km from the capital, bears great religious significance and is listed as a heritage site by UN. Damage to this 600-year old site was significant; a major temple lost its roof and a sandstone temple (Vatsala Devi) was brought down. Yet



PHOTO: MENAHEM KAHANA/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Nepalese visitors walk on ruins near the Nyatapola temple in Bhaktapur. The temple itself survived the earthquake.

in the same vicinity we were served Nepalese thale (traditional spicy meal of rice and curry) by a beaming waiter who brought food from a floor below with spring in his feet. I believe they sense better days are just around the corner.

We did not walk up the 365 steps to the 2000-year old Swayambhunath Stupa, said to be the most important Buddhist shrine in KTM. We took a taxi and a few steps to the top. It was delightful that vendors were peddling Nepalese artefacts at a reasonable price; no sign of quake-o-nomics. Overseen by Buddha's primordial eyes, espousing unity of all things, the main stupa and ancillary shrines are largely intact. I regret, however, not walking all the way up, as I missed some very important areas of history, culture, and Buddhism.

The most famous Kathmandu Durbar Square and the Lalitpur Patan Durbar Square lost several major buildings of architectural magnificence, but the UN heritage sites appear ready to rise from the rubble. Tourists are trickling in. Guides are getting busier. Nepal is almost back on its feet.

As we moved from one place to another in taxis, not a single driver used the ravaging earthquake, which shook the Himalayan country six months ago, as an excuse to hike the price. No shopkeeper mentioned the cataclysm to extort some extra rupees from us foreigners, if I understood them correctly.

For the cynics, their Hindi is as good as mine, and Nepali is almost half-Bangla. I did not have the time or the talent to try any one of the 123 mother tongues that characterises the ethnicity of the land, nor did I have the opportunity to exchange pleasantries with the fifty-nine indigenous nationalities. Or did I?

Over the Eid-ul-Adha vacation, my wife, her father and I visited Kathmandu, a trip I have wanted to take ever since that fateful Saturday afternoon. One of the first things my Architecture students from BUET, Prajwal Hada and Hima Shrestha, now practising in the city of temples, said was that things (after the quake) were never as bad as shown on television.

Eid congregation at the Kashmiri Takia Masjid was heaven-sent. Muslims, men and women, thronged the centuries-old premises. An unknown brother's prayer mat on the rooftop of the four-storied structure allowed me to seek His blessings in a land of religious harmony. The day was a public holiday.

Nepal rising above devastation has reminded me that we all need to practice more patience and tolerance in deed not words, interact with each other more cordially and humbly, and help one another to look forward.

The author is a practising Architect at Basha Bari Ltd., a Commonwealth Scholar and a Fellow in the UK, a Baden-Powell Fellow Scout Leader and a Major Donor Rotarian.

COMMENTS

 "Protests on"
 (September 30, 2015)

Alamgir Mahmud

This is protest against corruption; the demands of the protesters are very legitimate.

Hashem Mian

Bring the culprits to book.

 "Haji disaster: Foreign officials question Saudi death toll"
 (September 30, 2015)

Sameena Hossain

Shame on the Saudi authorities for not being able to ensure safety of the Hajj pilgrims.

Aryfeen Repon

I think the Saudi authorities are responsible for this disaster.

 "Cop withdrawal not enough"
 (September 22, 2015)

Anindita

There truly remains no difference between police and criminals if police kill people that way.

 "BASIC Bank Loan Scam: ACC sues 56"
 (September 22, 2015)

Kazi Md Ashiqur Rahman

But they (ACC) have exculpated the chairman, Bravo!

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Malpractice rampant in medical sector

Recently, I went to a hospital in Dhanmondi with my father to see a well-known doctor. I saw a group of men in formal wear looking at patients' reports. They apparently work in pharmaceutical companies. They were there to check whether the doctors were prescribing medicine made by their companies.

Nowadays, it's a common practice among the pharmaceutical companies to send their representatives to hospitals and provide the doctors with gifts and free samples of medicine so that the latter prescribe medicines made by their companies. In many cases, doctors prescribe medicine that is unnecessary and expensive. We urge the doctors not to be influenced by pharmaceutical companies.

 Tahseen Rashid
 Sunbeams School

"Human rights get a boost"

- This refers to the above news analysis published in TDS on September 16, 2015. By scrapping the law that had indemnified all actions including killing in the Operation Clean Heart by joint forces 12 years ago, the High Court upheld people's right to life and right to protection of law. We hope this verdict will usher in a new era to boost our human rights.

 Shakhawat
 On e-mail