

Kofi Annan, a champion of human rights

The world should learn from his ideals

KOFI Annan, who served as UN chief from 1997 to 2006, and who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize alongside the UN in 2001, passed away on August 18, 2018 in Switzerland, at the age of 80. Tributes from global leaders and newspaper obituaries remembering his commitment and ideals are testaments to his legacy in promoting world peace. He has been hailed as the man who revitalised the UN, and strived to make the organisation the upholder of human rights at a time that witnessed some of the worst conflicts in human history.

Kofi Annan's career in the UN was indeed marked by wars and conflicts in world history: the genocide in Rwanda, the Iraq War and the Srebrenica Massacre to name a few. His moral clarity—exemplified in his staunch opposition to the invasion of Iraq which he called "illegal"—has been remembered much in the last few days. His career was not beyond censure regarding whether the UN could have done more to stop the tragedies of Rwanda and Bosnia. But, befitting the man that he was, he was his own critic, and was haunted by the same questions.

In the twilight years of his life, Annan witnessed another instance of gross violation of human rights—the genocide of the Rohingyas in Myanmar. His role in trying to break through to the Myanmar government to ensure the life and dignity of Rohingyas shows that his commitment for establishing human rights and global peace went beyond his UN career. The Annan Commission's recommendations regarding the ethnic cleansing of Rohingyas struck at the heart of the matter when it stressed review of the problematic citizenship law which effectively denies Rohingyas citizenship. The commission's recommendations aimed at a peaceful and prosperous future in Myanmar sadly remain unimplemented.

We mourn the passing away of this great diplomat, moral leader, and champion of peace. Following the crackdown on ethnic Albanians in Kosovo, he had written: "For at the end of the 20th century, one thing is clear: A United Nations that will not stand up for human rights is a United Nations that cannot stand up for itself." In today's world, where conflict and killing are everyday headlines, we hope his words and ideals act as a guiding force for world leaders and international organisations.

Save traders of handloom saris

Govt should provide immediate assistance

TRADERS of traditional handloom saris in Tangail district are concerned by the lack of demand for their product. According to a trader quoted by this newspaper, sale before Eid this time came down to two-thirds of what it previously was, on top of the gradual decline in sales that happened in the last few years. Meanwhile, thousands of handlooms have already been forced to shut down in the last few years because of abnormal price hike of raw materials and increasing costs of labour, electricity and transport. Now, with the added factor of declining sales, traders in the market fear that they too might be forced to go out of business.

This decline in sales has mainly been caused by the availability of cheap low-quality Indian saris at local markets that are often smuggled into the country and the saris that are mass produced in power looms, traders said. Additionally, local weavers have also been struggling to cope with the increased prices of yarn and dye, hampering businesses even more.

All things considered, traders say that the traditional industry is now going through a phase of existential crisis. Thus, they have been left with no other option but to call on the government to provide easy-term loan facilities for weavers and to ensure uninterrupted electricity supply during the peak season.

In order to save this traditional handloom industry which is a part of our heritage and that employs thousands of people, we too join their call for the government to provide them with the necessary support and protection from unfair competition.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Keralites' immense suffering

The southern Indian state of Kerala has been hit with what is being called the worst monsoon in a century. Already more than 350 people have lost their lives in the severe floods. Nearly 700,000 people have sought shelter in relief camps, adequate supply of food and medicine is a growing problem and there has been untold damage done to infrastructure.

I would like to extend my condolences to the families of the deceased and the affected people and I hope that Keralites can muster the strength to overcome this disaster and the repercussions it has had on them. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has announced additional relief amounting to Rs 500 crore and even Gulf countries such as the UAE and Qatar have pledged financial assistance. I hope that more countries come forward and offer help not only financially but also in terms of relief supplies, aid workers, etc.

Junaid Khan, by email

GOLAM MORTOZA

ALTHOUGH the issue of "infiltrators" or "illegal Bangladeshis" has currently been the main topic of discussion in India's northeastern state of Assam, the issue has neither generated any discussion in Bangladesh's political arena nor been given due importance in the media. There has been an ongoing movement called "Deport Bangalees" (Bangalee Tarao) in Assam for many years now. By Bangalees, they mainly mean Bangladeshis. As part of this movement, the process to make a list of citizens of Assam has been going on. In the final draft NRC (National Register of Citizens) list, approximately four million people were left out. Of course, it is India's "internal" affair to identify their own citizens, but what worries us is the decision to send back those whose names have been omitted from the list by calling them "Bangladeshis".

In the 1980s, the "Deport Banglaees" movement, led by All Assam Students' Union, had erupted in the state of Assam. At that time, Rajiv Gandhi was the prime minister of India. The movement ended with the signing of Assam Accord on August 15, 1985.

According to the agreement, foreign citizens living in Assam were divided into three categories: (i) Those who migrated to Assam before January 1, 1966 would be considered Assam's legal citizens and so would be awarded India's citizenship, (ii) Those who migrated to Assam between January 1, 1966 and March 24, 1971 would not be given India's citizenship in the first ten years, but could live in Assam, and (iii) Those who entered Assam after March 25, 1971 are not Assamese citizens and would not get India's citizenship. They should be sent back to their own countries.

Those who fall in the third category are the people who took refuge in Assam during our Liberation War but didn't return to the country after our independence. So basically, the movement was about sending these people back to Bangladesh.

However, although an agreement had been signed, no initiative was taken to implement it. Many years later, in 2014, before the national elections of India, the issue again gained momentum as the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) election

campaign was focused on this issue. At that time, the central leadership of BJP, including Narendra Modi, had pledged to send back the 8,000,000 "illegal Bangladeshis" to Bangladesh. And after coming to power riding on this issue, the BJP government began making a list of Assamese citizens based on a Supreme Court verdict.

It needs to be mentioned here that protesting the "Deport Banglaees" movement, Bangalees of Assam also became very vocal. In 2005, Maulana Badruddin Ajmal, a Muslim leader of Assam, formed a political party called All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF) which gained acceptability not only among the Bengali-speaking Muslims,

Bangladesh is in a far better position than Assam in all the economic and other indicators such as per capita income, job opportunities, standard of living, etc. There is no reason why Bangladeshis should migrate to India.

but also among a section of Hindi-speaking Hindus. The party currently has three representatives including Badruddin Ajmal in the Indian Lok Sabha and 13 members in the Assam Vidhan Sabha.

Among the 40,07,707 people whose names are not in the list, 2,48,000 would not get any chance to prove their citizenship, as they have failed to prove their family roots. So basically 37,59,707 people will get a chance to prove their citizenship. Those who fail to prove their citizenship would be identified as "foreigners" or "Bangladeshis" among whom the Muslims would be sent back to Bangladesh.

Meanwhile, a number of tribunals for "identification of foreigners" have begun their work. A few thousand Bangladeshis have been kept in camps and are being interrogated. They are being called

ASSAM'S CITIZENSHIP LIST

Not just India's 'internal' issue

Bangladeshi citizens despite the fact that they have the necessary land documents and voter IDs to prove themselves as Indian citizens.

Mamata Banerjee, chief minister of Pashchim Banga, has raised her concern against calling the Bangalees "infiltrators" or "Bangladeshis." Apparently, there are two reasons for Mamata's opposition. One, some of these "Bangladeshi" people may migrate to Pashchim Banga, whose responsibility the Pashchim Banga government does not want to take. Secondly, since BJP is now demanding to make a similar NRC list in Pashchim Banga, it has become a reason for worry for Mamata Banerjee. Because those who migrated from Bangladesh to Pashchim Banga are now the vote bank of Mamata Banerjee.

On August 5, 2018, Amit Shah, the president of BJP, said, "The opposition party wants to keep the illegal Bangladeshis in India." Again on August 12, he said, "Bangladeshi infiltrators are a danger, no? They are behind the terror all across the country." (Daily Jugasankha, published from Assam).

Surprisingly, Indian Chief of Army General Bipin Rawat also commented on this issue saying, "I think the proxy game is very well played by our western neighbour supported by our northern border (China) to keep the area disturbed."

Badruddin Ajmal reacted to the army chief's comment by tweeting, "General Rawat has made a political statement, shocking!"

Prime Minister Narendra Modi and BJP President Amit Shah have clearly and repeatedly said that no Hindus would be deported. They even said that the Hindus would be given citizenship. We still do not know how many among the 2,48,000 who have failed to prove their citizenship are Muslims. According to AIUDF and several media reports, among the 4,000,000 people who were not included in the draft NRC, Muslims are the majority.

Recently, our State Minister for Foreign Affairs Shahriar Alam said, "Bangladesh does not need to worry about Assam's NRC list." (Bangladesh Pratidin, August 3, 2018). Indian ambassador to Bangladesh also said that this is an internal issue of India and Bangladesh need not be worried.

Whereas our foreign ministry has not said anything about the issue, Nazibur Bashar Maizvandary, MP and president of Tariqat Federation, a partner of a 14-party coalition, went to Delhi and held meetings with the Indian ministers and the media where he talked about this. Recently, representatives of Awami League and HT Imam, an adviser to the prime minister, visited India but we have not heard of any discussions taking place during the visit.

We understand that it is an "internal" affair of India as to who are its legal citizens and who are not. Clearly, Bangladesh does not have a say here. But when we know that the Bengali-speaking Muslims of Assam who are not able to prove their citizenship would be deported to Bangladesh, it becomes a problem of Bangladesh too. If our government remains silent on this issue now and does not hold any discussions with India, it might raise many questions in future.

It is not for Bangladesh to know which states these people, who are not the inhabitants of Assam, belong to. The Bangladesh government can clearly say that they are not the citizens of Bangladesh. Bangladeshis who had gone to India as refugees after March 24, 1971 returned to their home after December 16, 1971. Bangladesh can't take the responsibility of those few who had not returned after 47 years.

Also, there is no ground to the claim that "Bangladeshis are still migrating to Assam." Because Bangladesh is in a far better position than Assam in all the economic and other indicators such as per capita income, job opportunities, standard of living, etc. There is no reason why Bangladeshis should migrate to India.

It is not that India will start sending back the Bengali-speaking Muslims all of a sudden. Maybe they will limit their activities to political statements. But at the same time, the issue is not so simple and there is no guarantee that these people will not be sent back to Bangladesh. Therefore, although this is an "internal" affair of India, there are logical reasons for Bangladesh to worry.

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Vajpayee's enduring legacy

He left an indelible mark on India's foreign policy

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

IF PV Narasimha Rao was the initiator of the process of India's globalisation diplomatically and economically, it was Atal Bihari Vajpayee who cemented that process irrevocably. In doing so, Vajpayee, three-time prime minister of India, went against some of the basic ideological tenets of Bharatiya Janata Party such as economic nationalism and Gandhian socialism and left an indelible mark on India's foreign policy outreach both in economic and political arenas.

This article would, however, focus on how Vajpayee broke fresh grounds in India's relations with the United States and China and how he was the original practitioner of New Delhi's "neighbourhood first" policy. In all the three areas, India has been carrying on till today the template of the policies formed during the Vajpayee era from 1998-99 to 2004.

What becomes clear from Vajpayee's neighbourhood initiatives is that India must connect and engage with neighbours from a position of strength.

Vajpayee's biggest decision was, undoubtedly, the nuclear test in May 1998. It was the best thing to have happened to India's foreign policy and its international standing. It not only earned India the status of a de facto nuclear weapon state but also established a strategic deterrent in the face of its two neighbours China and Pakistan. It also ensured the gates to international technologies having dual use—civil and military—had opened for India. True, the nuclear tests sparked a tsunami of international condemnation and sanctions barring France and some other countries.

The global sanctions led by the United States came at a time when India was still coping with the fallout of the Asian currency crisis of 1997 and its economic



Former Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee broke new ground and helped shape India's foreign policy.

PHOTO: DOUGLAS CURRAN/AFP

liberalisation was at a nascent stage. But Vajpayee knew that India would ride out the storm. He stuck to his course as the pragmatist in him realised that the US, Japan and uranium-rich countries like Canada and Australia were looking at India's huge market for nuclear power.

During a visit to Washington soon after the nuclear test, Vajpayee caused a flutter in political circles in India, including in his own party and its spiritual mentor the RSS, when he termed the US as India's "natural ally." The Indian political class and the RSS had at that time remained too deeply steeped in the Cold War ideology of non-alignment to come to terms with what Vajpayee was doing. At home, Vajpayee came under fire from the right, left and centre for his foreign policy course and was accused of breaking away from the traditional path of consensus. One of the main qualities was his immense patience and he was an avid listener, as many of his cabinet and party colleagues and officials who worked under him or saw him from close would vouch. This helped him take bold decisions.

It was the Vajpayee government which began the tortuous negotiations with the United States on a civil nuclear agreement that finally culminated in 2008. All other western countries, and Japan and Australia gradually followed suit and engaged with India paving the way for New Delhi's integration with world nuclear order. It was the Congress party government under Manmohan Singh as prime minister that signed the

2008 nuclear deal with the US but the journey towards it was set off by Vajpayee who nudged India away from its pro-Soviet and Cold War mindset.

Coming to India's neighbourhood, Vajpayee began the process of normalisation with China way back in 1977-79 when he was the External Affairs Minister in the Janata Party government headed by Prime Minister Morarji Desai. At a time when anti-China feelings were prevalent in India—15 years after the Sino-Indian War of 1962—Vajpayee undertook an official visit to that country ignoring severe criticism at home. However, it was during Vajpayee's visit to China later as prime minister that the two countries set up a framework for addressing the core boundary dispute between the two countries—the Special Representatives, an arrangement which continues even today. It was during Vajpayee's reign that a landmark give-and-take in ties between New Delhi and Beijing took place: China recognised Sikkim state as part of India and India accepted Tibet as part of China.

In South Asia, Vajpayee reached out to both Pakistan and Bangladesh in 1999 by personally launching two key people-centric initiatives within four months of 1999—passenger bus services between Delhi and Lahore in February and between Dhaka and Kolkata in June. True, before Vajpayee it was Inder Kumar Gujral, another former prime minister, who had articulated India's

neighbourhood policy with what came to be known as the Gujral Doctrine. But Gujral neither had the strong political backing nor the time to implement his ideas in 1996-97 as he was the PM only for a few months. But Vajpayee had both.

For Vajpayee, Bangladesh was very important irrespective of the party in power across India's southeastern frontier. If he launched the Dhaka-Kolkata bus link when Sheikh Hasina was the PM, he had rushed his national security adviser and his trusted aide Brajesh Mishra to Dhaka soon after Khaleda Zia came to power in 2001 to convey India's willingness to deal with the new dispensation in Dhaka. It is a different matter that the Khaleda government squandered that opportunity by not responding positively.

With Pakistan, Vajpayee's February 1999 bus journey to Pakistan was a milestone in the backdrop of troubled relations between the two countries. But Pakistan responded by pushing in its troops into Kargil in Jammu and Kashmir a few months later, triggering the Kargil conflict. Vajpayee resisted the temptation of expanding the theatre of the conflict but showed firmness that Pakistani troops be driven out of India's territory.

After the terrorist attack on the Indian parliament in 2001, India under the Vajpayee government amassed troops along the border with Pakistan but the two countries pulled back from the precipice of another war. Vajpayee, the peacenik, invited Pakistani military ruler Pervez Musharraf to the Agra summit in 2001 but it ended in a fiasco. He, however, travelled to Islamabad in 2004 for a bilateral visit and the Saarc Summit and succeeded in extracting from Musharraf a pledge in writing that Pakistan would stop sponsoring cross-border terrorism into India. That is a commitment still cited by India which helped pin down Pakistan on the issue of cross-border terrorism.

What becomes clear from Vajpayee's neighbourhood initiatives is that India must connect and engage with neighbours from a position of strength. The poet in Vajpayee had also written "Jung na honay denge hum" (We will not allow a war). Two successive Indian prime ministers, Manmohan Singh and Narendra Modi, have broadly stuck to that path despite the downturn in ties with Pakistan in the last two years.

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