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BANGLADESH, ZIA AND THE NONALIGNED MOVEMENT

Bangladesh was born out of poverty and discrimination, despair and fatalism. Her past experience in the political, economic and social milieu taught her the bitter truth about a subjugated land, and conditioned her on what to expect in a world still struggling against the vestiges of colonialism, hegemonism and aggressive intent from powerful countries. The Westphalian system's right of might in the European-Third World context needed to be replaced by a new egalitarian political order and the colonial and imperial mentality needed to be supplanted by a new international economic order. Bangladesh subscribed to these views; thus was born the rationale to join the nonaligned movement, for it symbolised the struggle for emancipation.

Bangladesh found ideological, moral and spiritual compatibility with the nonaligned countries because of the common experience, shared perceptions and unanimity of views vis-a-vis the *ancien regime*. There are other similarities between the nonaligned countries and Bangladesh. Politically, all reject bloc politics and political dominance and desire a new world order. They wish to bring to an end the indignity of apartheid. Econo-

mically, all are raw material producing countries with a common interest in safeguarding their resources. They all seek an equitable distribution of the earth's resources. With a handful of exceptions, all are capital-scarce countries. They all desire a new international economic order. Culturally, none share the Anglo-Saxon tradition and they are generally non-European in character and temperament. In terms of socio-economic development they are all in various stages of development and are generally technology-deficient. Geographically too, with the exception of Malta and Yugoslavia, all are non-European and indigenously non-English speaking.

II.

Like most Third World countries, immediately after independence Bangladesh was faced with a plethora of problems. The internal problems had to do with social rehabilitation, economic re-construction and political re-organization. But there were also some external compulsions such as Bangladesh's immediate priority to bring about a swift international recognition of her statehood in order to guarantee her viability and legality. Thus it was a tremendous moral and psychological boost for Bangladesh when she was welcomed as a full member by the nonaligned movement at the Fourth Nonaligned Conference in Algiers in 1973. Subsequently Bangladesh was elected to the Nonaligned Coordination Bureau at Colombo in 1976 and again for a half term in Havana in 1979.

Besides this political and emotional need for international recognition, the nonaligned movement also provided Bangladesh the "in-group" identity that was so important after independence. Thus during the initial period of membership the emotional and psychological content was of greater value and Bangladesh's participation in the nonaligned movement was largely ceremonial and much less active than the subsequent period.

With the advent of Ziaur Rahman bilateral relations between Bangladesh and India underwent drastic changes since Mujib's departure from the political scene brought about the collapse of the "special relationship" with India, although the previous problems remained. Though there were some positive bilateral gains in the accommodations reached between Desai's government and that of Zia's, the election victory of Indira Gandhi once again caused an unfortunate turn in Indo-Bangla relations. Bangladesh began to swing away from her pre-occupation with USSR and India to a warmer relationship with the Mideast and the West, and Indo-Bangla relations could not remain unaffected. The nonaligned movement assumed a new importance to Bangladesh at this point where Bangladesh internationalised some of her bilateral problems with India. In particular, the problem of amicable augmentation and distribution of the waters of the Ganges became critical.

Reference was made to the resolution on Environment (Resolution X) adopted by the Fourth Nonaligned

Summit Conference where it was stressed that "environmental measures taken by one state should not adversely affect the environment of other states or zones outside its jurisdiction." Bangladesh also referred to "the unanimous resolution adopted by the Seventh Islamic Foreign Ministers' Conference on the equitable sharing of the waters of the international river Ganges which recognised the problem and expressed the hope that it would be resolved expeditiously and satisfactorily through discussions among the countries concerned in the larger interest of peace and stability in the region."¹ Thus at the nonaligned venue Bangladesh made public her concerns to bring about a greater moral pressure, if not political pressure, to bear upon the larger neighbour. This could not be expected in any bilateral talk between the two.

Associated with this geopolitics may also be the military factor. It must have crossed the minds of the Bangladesh leadership that Bangladesh's membership in the nonaligned movement could also serve as a deterrent to any untoward design against the sovereignty of the country. While the nonaligned movement, per se, cannot guarantee against any form of aggressive design by one neighbour against another, the confidence that international support and sympathy would be forthcoming in the event of an attack by a militarily

1. Quoted from "Text of President Mr. Justice A. M. Sayem's speech at the 5th Non-aligned summit conference in Colombo on August 18, 1976," Government of Bangladesh, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, External Publicity Division p. 3.

powerful neighbour could not have been lost on the Bangladesh leadership.

A further political advantage that Bangladesh counted on was the international support she needed on issues and stands important to her, in addition to the international support she needed to get elected to the high offices of the international organizations and forums. A notable mention is her election to the Security Council of the United Nations. Bangladesh's election to the various world bodies during Zia's regime is indeed numerous.

Besides the OIC, the nonaligned gatherings gave Bangladesh the opportunity to voice her strong sentiments regarding the Jerusalem issue. This concern was recognised in her election to the 3-member Al-Quds Committee formed under the auspices of the Organization of Islamic Conference. The nonaligned gathering helped to reinforce the mutuality of views and the increased feeling of shared alienation and despair among the Islamic members of the movement. This sincere compatibility of sentiments and feelings endeared Bangladesh to the Mideast membership of the nonaligned movement and this is of great psychological importance to Bangladesh which has often felt the need to compete with Pakistan for favours from the orthodox regimes of the Islamic Mideast. The feeling of being a pariah among the Islamic nations was an unpleasant carry-over from the days of united Pakistan when East Pakistan was looked down on by West Pakistan because of her receptivity to and appreciation of the rich Hindu heritage

and culture.

The economic advantages were potentially as diverse as the political ones. Although Bangladesh's dire necessities like food and capital generally came from western countries and western institutions, the nonaligned movement collectively was a potential source for capital, mineral resources, raw materials and food, all of which Bangladesh needed. The opportunity to cultivate her friendship with most of the Third World countries and her emotional support of Arab causes held the promise of economic aid from the members of the movement.

Thus, the nonaligned forum allowed Bangladesh the opportunity to bring to the notice of her friends her economic, financial and political plight. There was the promise of dependable energy supply with potential for favourable trade terms through successful negotiations; a steady investment of Mideast petrodollars into the Bangladesh economy; and an assured market for the export of Bangladesh manpower.

III

With the advent of Zia's regime Bangladesh became a very active participant in world organizations, not least in the nonaligned movement, and this participation was strongly guided by Zia's personal beliefs and perceptions. To contribute her share in removing stress and strain from the existing international political order and particularly from the bilateral relations with neigh-

hours it became necessary for Bangladesh to attempt to create global, regional and neighbourly trust and confidence in her. This urgency was felt far more strongly by Zia's regime than by any of the previous regimes.

One way Bangladesh sought to gain this trust and confidence was by actively committing herself to the principles of the nonaligned movement, including the *Panchsheela*. It allowed Bangladesh to widen and deepen the base of inter-state cooperation and the scope of bilateral relations, as well as an increased access to multiple platforms from which to conduct her foreign policy.

Bangladesh steered clear of doctrinaire approach, concerning herself more with issues than rhetorics. She avoided bloc identity and was constantly weary of possible bloc orientations within the movement because, in the words of the Bangladesh Foreign Minister, "in our view the greatest threat to the nonaligned movement comes from the erosion of solidarity."

At the nonaligned forum Bangladesh the condemned Soviet military attempt to bolster the Karmal regime in Afghanistan and gave full support to the liberation struggle of the Afghan people, demanding immediate withdrawal of the Red Army.

Bangladesh also took "principled" stands regarding nonaligned principles; perhaps the finest example being her stand vis-a-vis the Vietnam-Kampuchea dilemma. When Vietnam was fighting a war of national independence, Bangladesh publicly supported the liberation of

this Third World country. When Vietnam achieved political, ideological and cultural emancipation, Bangladesh declared at the Fifth Nonaligned Summit Conference in Colombo in 1976:

We rejoice with the people of Indo-China at the culmination of a long, relentless and painful struggle and the realisation of their aspirations in the re-unification of their country. Their victory is of profound significance for all the struggling people of the world. The unfinished task still remains to clear the debris of war and to reconstruct and rehabilitate their region. It is our collective task to assist in this endeavour.²

Yet a few years later when Vietnamese troops overran neighbouring Kampuchea installing a regime of its choice, Bangladesh found it totally unacceptable since it violated the principles of the nonaligned movement that called for, inter alia, the respect for territorial integrity and national sovereignty, non-interference in the internal affairs of another country and the peaceful resolution of disputes. In an indirect reference to Kampuchea, among other similar situations, President Zia stated that

What appears to be extremely distressing to us are the armed conflicts that are taking place. In some cases these conflicts have taken the tragic form of armed intervention

2. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

by one non-aligned country against another. Such gross violations of the basic principles of our movement cannot but undermine the unity and solidarity of the movement.³

And the Bangladesh Foreign Minister in his address to the Nonaligned Foreign Ministers' Meeting in New Delhi this February stated that

it is also very disquieting that the crisis in... Kampuchea remain unresolved...we urge for the immediate withdrawal of all foreign troops from these troubled lands and the creation of conditions which would enable the people of these countries to determine their own destiny without any outside interference or intervention, military or otherwise.⁴

Thus while Bangladesh rejoiced with Vietnam its independence after a protracted struggle against the western powers, Bangladesh with the same voice condemned Vietnam for denying the Kampuchians the same rights. And Bangladesh justified it on the grounds that the "principle strength of our movement...stems from the moral content of all its activities."

IV

On other issues too Bangladesh was guided by the requirements of the nonaligned movement. Her

3. From President Ziaur Rahman's address at the Havana Summit on September 3, 1979; quoted in *Bangladesh in International Affairs*, Dacca, Vol. 2, No. 9, p. 9.
4. Quoted from the "Speech by Professor Muhammad Shamsul Huq, at The Conference of the Foreign Ministers of Non-aligned Countries in New Delhi" External Publicity Wing, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Bangladesh, p. 6.

forceful arguments and vocal commitments in support of what she believed to be just and equitable remained neither non-committal nor neutral, but nonaligned.

Concern for human life and dignity is one such issue where Bangladesh spoke forcefully. In the 1976 Colombo Conference Bangladesh declared that

It is time that we remove the remaining vestiges of colonialism and racism in Southern Africa and secure for our brothers in Namibia, Zimbabwe and South Africa their rightful place in the comity of nations with dignity and respect.⁵

This commitment to the emancipation of the oppressed peoples of the world was reiterated at the Sixth Nonaligned Foreign Ministers' Conference in Belgrade in 1978. Again in 1979 at Havana, President Zia declared that the persistence of apartheid in Southern Africa was "an outrage on humanity." And in the Nonaligned Foreign Ministers' Conference in New Delhi in 1981, Bangladesh declared that

the obstinacy and intransigence of the racist regimes in refusing to recognise the existing realities must be countered by the intensification of our united efforts.⁶

The admission of both SWAPO and the Patriotic Front as full members was considered a significant milestone in the struggle against colonialism, and Bangladesh optimistically declared that "it heralds the

5. Sayem, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

6. Huq, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

final deathknell to the continuance of the scourge of racism and colonialism in Namibia and Zimbabwe.”⁷

Besides colonialism and racism Bangladesh has spoken forcefully on other human indignities such as poverty, hunger, disease and malnutrition, calling on those who are fortunate to “wage a war on poverty and hunger...with speed and a sense of urgency for the hungry millions cannot wait forever.”⁸

Bangladesh also raised other humanitarian issues such as the protection of the weak from the strong, the state protection of minorities and the refugee problem. Citing the occasional minority problem and the frequency and magnitude of the refugee problem, Bangladesh declared at the Havana Summit that

concerted efforts are now required to tackle this problem. Our experience indicates that so long as there is a feeling of mutual trust and cooperation such a problem can be resolved. We would...stress that the real solution to this problem lies in each state affording full protection and security to its minority.⁹

On issues of more global nature, Bangladesh consistently showed its concern regarding political polarization into blocs and the arms race. Bangladesh maintained that the continuing tension and conflicts in the contemporary world resulted directly “from the widening polarization between the great powers, the escalating arms race and the increasing disparity among

7. Ziaur Rahman, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

the rich and poor nations.”¹⁰ And the panacea, Bangladesh argued, lay in concerted moves towards the limitation of nuclear armament and other weapons of mass destruction so that an atmosphere of trust could be generated thereby raising realistic possibilities for detente. Bangladesh declared that

If we want a warless world there must be a series of comprehensive measures directed not merely at the stabilization of armaments but (*sic*) for a substantive reduction and elimination of such arms through a graduated and phased programme.¹¹

And this would allow for the diversion to productive purpose of vital resources that are being squandered on the arms race and the upkeep of the military-industrial complex.

In every major nonaligned forum Bangladesh has supported the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, indirectly urging those members of the movement not signatory to it to reconsider. In view of the successful explosion of a nuclear device in 1974 by India who is not a signatory to the treaty, this is of particular concern to Bangladesh who is a signatory herself.

Bangladesh has also consistently supported the concept of zone of peace in the Indian Ocean arguing that it would safeguard peace and security in the region through the elimination of great power rivalry. At the same time Bangladesh underscored the fact that

10. Huq, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

11. Ziaur Rahman, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

it would be self-defeating to advocate the concept of peace zone without littoral countries first themselves recognising the need to renounce threat or use of force against each other. Mere disappearance of the great power rivalry in the area would not automatically bring about tranquility in that zone.¹²

To give substance to her thought, Bangladesh recently proposed a South Asian cooperation forum aimed at apprising the subcontinent countries of each other's problems and needs and thereby generating appreciation and concern for each other's welfare. Bangladesh hoped that some of the complex and long-standing problems of the region would be resolved through peaceful negotiations thus creating a climate of trust, understanding and cooperation in the region.

The Arab-Israeli problem, the Palestinian issue, the crisis in Labanon and Cyprus and the fratricidal war between Iran and Iraq, *inter alia*, have all been subjects of concern in Bangladesh's deliberations in the nonaligned forum, and Bangladesh argued for the peaceful and just resolution of these disputes within the framework of the nonaligned principles. Bangladesh has repeatedly maintained that solidarity among the members of the nonaligned movement was really the key to successfully upholding the principles of *Panchsheela* that alone could guarantee peace and security in the world.

12. Sayem, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

But besides the political issues, the economic issues were also of great concern to Bangladesh, and the nonaligned forum served her well. At the Nonaligned Conference in Colombo in 1976 Bangladesh supported the Sri Lankan proposal for the establishment of a commercial bank of the Third World countries—a Bank of Asia, Africa and Latin America. Bangladesh felt that the control of international money market and the economic activities derived from it remained the monopoly of the West and therefore the proposed bank “would provide an opportunity to the countries of the Third World to reassert their proper role in the world economic order and cater to their needs in the international field”.

At the same conference Bangladesh raised the desirability of the transfer of resources, arguing that such a transfer could be affected only if the industrialised West recognised the need for urgent solutions of the problems of debt burden and balance of payment deficits of the developing countries. In the same context Bangladesh supported the expeditious establishment of a new international economic order that would help to eliminate the widening gaps between the rich and poor nations. But the progress towards a new international economic order has not been satisfactory as President Zia pointed out at the Havana Summit in 1979 :

The results, on the whole, have been rather disappointing. Too often there has been dialogue without decision; decision without action; action too little and too late;

the end result has been a crisis of inaction, of fateful postponement.¹³

President Zia argued that to break out of the vicious circle of poverty and deprivation the more fortunately endowed members of the nonaligned movement have a special responsibility towards the least privileged, thus strongly urging that "the Non-aligned Solidarity Fund should be activated without any further delay and sufficient funds should be made available to it for the overall economic development" of the least developed countries.

V

Under the active and far-sighted leadership of Ziaur Rahman, Bangladesh also made some positive contributions of her own. At the Havana Summit, President Zia proposed six concrete measures for immediate implementation by the nonaligned movement.

- (i) He proposed the establishment without delay of a food security system that would involve setting aside of a certain specified quantities of foodgrains by the food surplus countries of the nonaligned movement. Operating within the framework of the nonaligned movement, these stored foodgrains would be made available at short notice to meet crises situations in food deficit countries. The advantage of such a system would be that not only fast delivery of guaranteed foodgrains would be

13. Ziaur Rahman, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

made available in times of emergencies, it would also considerably reduce the Third World's dependence on the industrialised West.

- (ii) The next suggestion was the quest for autarky. Zia urged all food deficit countries to make a special effort to ensure self-sufficiency in foodgrains in the shortest possible time. Since a sizeable portion of a food deficit country's foreign exchange reserves is depleted in procuring food, Zia called upon the nonaligned countries to share their respective capacities and resources in providing technological know-how, capital investment and manpower. To realise this objective Zia supported the setting up of a special fund with the resources of the nonaligned countries themselves so that the money could be utilised to achieve food autarky in the shortest time.
- (iii) Zia's third proposal concerned the proper utilization of surplus capital in the developing world. Noting that many developing countries invested their surplus capital in the industrialised West, Zia urged that the excess capital be diverted to the underdeveloped world thirsting for foreign investment. The investment of these surplus funds "would immeasurably strengthen the political position of the developing world as

- a whole...arresting the trend of progressive pauperisation of the Third World.”¹⁴ Zia argued that these investments in the developing countries would generate larger returns.
- (iv) The next proposal dealt with energy. Zia argued that the Iraqi proposal to adopt special measures to alleviate the energy crisis in the developing world should be expeditiously implemented. It was further argued that “immediate relief should be provided to LDCs through the adoption of a scheme for the assured supply of oil...on concessional terms.”¹⁵
- (v) The fifth proposal submitted by Bangladesh dealt with the establishment of an economic coordinating unit for the implementation of the economic action programmes of the nonaligned movement. Arguing for the need to better the Third World’s negotiating positions and skills vis-a-vis the West, it was felt that the proposed unit would not only prepare the under-developed countries with an adequate strategy for negotiation, but also “provide the much needed thrust and direction for the economic programmes of the nonaligned movement.”¹⁶

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 26-27.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

16. *Ibid.*

- (vi) And finally, Zia proposed the establishment of a non-aligned research centre for development studies. The current research on the problems of nonalignment and Third World development emanates from the research centres in the West. Zia argued that the nonaligned research centre would be able to shed the external biases often associated with the studies in the research centres in the West and create fresh ideas and approaches of its own. This was necessary to implement developmental studies and strategies on the basis of the indigenous cultures and needs of the nonaligned members rather than on the basis of external theoretical constructs.

Earlier, at the Colombo Summit Conference in 1976, Bangladesh had argued for the creation of adequate institutional arrangements to meet and whenever possible prevent natural disasters and calamities. As a country where natural disasters play havoc with her economy and the lives of her people, Bangladesh strongly supported the "need for a global strategy that should direct its attention not only to monitoring and supplying immediate relief requirements, but also to determine longer term measures for rehabilitation and pre-disaster planning and disaster prevention."¹⁷

17. Sayem, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

VI

Regarding the future of the nonaligned movement, Bangladesh has through her actions illustrated that the movement is what its members make of it. With her enthusiastic involvements in almost every facet of the movement's activities—for instance, Bangladesh moved 20 amendments in the Final Declaration of the Havana Summit—Bangladesh has shown that even small countries can and should play a constructive and conscientious role in preserving equity, stability and peace. The movement seemed to assent to this by electing Bangladesh to a Vice-Chairmanship at the Havana Summit, while the Asian group chose Zia to deliver the address of thanks on behalf of the Asian leaders.

While supporting the need for urgent resolution of political disputes in the world, Bangladesh has increasingly guided the movement towards putting greater emphasis on the socio-economic issues that would directly benefit the vast majority of the countries of the world. It is the view of Bangladesh that the nonaligned movement should increasingly divert and concentrate its main energies and capabilities on the pressing economic and social issues of the world. Bangladesh is convinced that even at the face of external intransigence, the nonaligned movement—the largest gathering of sovereign states after the United Nations—is here to stay. And the key seems to be solidarity, “the hallmark of this movement and the source of its strength”, one that would provide the “springhead of inspiration in the struggle” against human indignity, social injustice, economic inequity and political disorder.