

Razia Sultana

THE 66th UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY SESSION AND THE ROLE OF BANGLADESH: AN EVALUATION

Abstract

Since its inception in 1945, the United Nations (UN) has been playing a pivotal role in restoring peace and maintaining security by taking several measures. One of the regular UN activities is to arrange the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) intending to gather all the Heads of States and Governments to discuss multiple challenging issues faced by the member states nationally and globally. As the continuation of the UN action, the 66th UNGA held in September 2011 came up with several pertinent issues like climate change, global recession, food crisis, nuclear safety and terrorism. Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina also attended the 66th UNGA and proposed a six-point multi-dimensional peace model addressing a number of national and global vulnerabilities including poverty and hunger, inequality, climate change and terrorism. It is in this context that the paper tries to focus on the issues discussed in the 66th UNGA and give an assessment regarding the steps taken by the assembly considering its existing limitations. Concurrently, the paper takes an attempt to analyse the role of Bangladesh as a developing country in the 66th UNGA session. The paper argues that through arranging UNGA for more than 60 years, the UN still tries to provide a unique venue for the member countries to discuss complex national and global issues and solve international disputes. More importantly, it is a common platform for small countries like Bangladesh to raise their voice, place their demands and to work together against the common global challenges.

1. Introduction

In a conflict prone world, the UN has been working as a spokesman to maintain global peace and security since it came into existence in 1945. In course of time, the responsibilities of this international organisation have been widened to a large extent encompassing various national and global issues as the world is gradually facing multifaceted political, social, economic and environmental

Razia Sultana is Research Fellow at Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS). Her e-mail address is: razia@biiss.org.

crises. In accomplishing these challenges and meeting the aspirations of the member countries, the UN is facing enormous predicaments owing to its inadequate resources, ineffective system, structural problems and lack of consensus among the member countries. Despite much criticism about its ineffective role and lack of credibility, the UN has been organising its regular meetings for more than five decades, thereby, creating lots of hope, aspirations and expectations among the member countries. More importantly, each year, the UN gathers different Heads of States irrespective of the rich and poor in same platform through General Assembly, the most deliberative body of this international organisation.

As a regular event, the 66th UNGA opened on 13 September 2011 at the UN Headquarters in New York in which leaders of more than 100 countries participated in the general debate, plenary session and high-level meetings against the backdrop of several confrontations among the member states, global economic down turn and increasing humanitarian crises. On 21 September 2011, the General Assembly Session was inaugurated by the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon followed by Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser, President of the 66th UNGA and Qatar's permanent representative to the UN.¹ The theme of the 66th UNGA was "Mediation in the Peaceful Settlement of International Disputes". The general debate² of the assembly went on from 21-24 and 26-27 September 2011 addressing the dire need of the people who are living under poverty and hunger and facing oppression and suppression in the society. Apart from this, a number of high-level meetings were arranged to discuss the issues of prevention and control of non-communicable diseases (NCDs)³; addressing desertification; land degradation and drought; eradicating poverty and adopting the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action.

Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina attended the 66th UNGA and delivered her speech on 24 September 2011.⁴ On the sideline of the UNGA high-level meetings, the Bangladeshi Premier participated in different conferences and symposiums to address the issues of counter-terrorism, women empowerment, climate change and NCDs. Prime Minister Hasina during her visit led a delegation of 87 members from Bangladesh Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Health, and media. Also, a 23-member high-powered business delegation joined with the Prime Minister during the visit to explore new areas of trade and venture in the US.

¹ "General Debate of 66th UN General Assembly Opens Today", *Americas Quarterly*, 21 September 2011, available at <http://www.americasquarterly.org/node/2893> accessed on 15 October 2011.

² The General Assembly goes on throughout the year. This paper only highlights the general debate and high level meetings that took place in September 2011.

³ Mainly diabetes, cancer and heart disease.

⁴ *The Daily Star*, 30 September 2011.

With this brief background, the main purpose of the paper is to look at those debates and examine the role of Bangladesh in the 66th UNGA. Subsequently, the pertinent queries of the paper are: What were the issues discussed in the 66th UNGA? Do they meet the expectations of the member countries? As a developing country, what was the role of Bangladesh in the General Assembly? To address these, the paper is divided into seven sections including introduction and conclusion. Section 2 gives an overview of the issues discussed in 66th UNGA while section 3 tries to assess the outcomes of the meeting. Section 4 assesses the contribution of Bangladesh in the major events that took place in the General Assembly. Section 5 highlights the issues raised by Bangladesh and finally, an attempt has been made to evaluate the role of Bangladesh in section 6.

2. The 66th UNGA: The Highlights

With the presence of more than 100 Heads of States, a number of issues were discussed in the regular session of the 66th UNGA including nuclear safety, regional confrontations, NCDs and environmental security.

High- Level Plenary Meetings

On 19 September 2011, a symposium on “International Counter-Terrorism Cooperation” was arranged by the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon at the UN Headquarters in New York. The symposium provided a great opportunity for the member countries to discuss the implementation of counter-terrorism strategies. Similarly, on 19 and 20 September 2011, the high-level plenary meetings were held on the prevention and control of NCDs. The main features of the round table discussions were identifying the risk factors, analysing the impacts of NCDs and building national capacity as well as fostering international cooperation in this regard. On 20 September, similar kind of meeting was held on the theme “addressing desertification, land degradation and drought in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication” based on the resolution of General Assembly adopted in 2010. The meeting aimed at addressing the serious drought situation in Africa and increasing awareness to fight against desertification and land degradation. On the issue of climate change, the Heads of States from different countries participated in a Dialogue on the same day in New York Palace and discussed the preparation for Conference of Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change Conference (UNFCCC) which would be held in Durban in November 2012. Furthermore, Clinton Global Initiative hosted an executive roundtable discussion on resource efficiency and green economy.

Following these meetings, the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon hosted a high-level event to consult some strict global rules of nuclear safety on 22 September 2011. In the meeting, a wide range of factors were analysed regarding the implications of Fukushima accident in Japan and means to improve the

nuclear disaster risk preparedness. On the same day, another pertinent high-level meeting was held to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the adoption of the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action. The meeting was held mainly to address the theme of tenth anniversary of Durban Declaration titled “victims of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance: recognition, justice and development.” On the following day, the seventh conference was held in New York to facilitate the entry into force of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). The main objective of this follow-up seminar was to bring the member states into discussion that have not yet ratified or signed the Treaty including China, Korea, India, Pakistan, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Israel, and the US.

Palestine’s Bid for Full Membership

One of the prime focuses of the 66th UNGA was Palestine’s bid for full membership. President of Palestine Mahmud Abbas strongly urged for full membership in the UNGA. Both Israel and the US, however, firmly opposed to give this status. In fact, the US, as a permanent member of the Security Council, warned that it would exercise its veto power to block this membership. Both Israel and the US claimed that any Palestinian state must be formed based on direct peace talks between Israel and Palestine. The US President Barack Obama argued that Israeli-Palestinian peace process is a long enduring process and there is “no shortcut” to end the confrontation. Therefore, he stressed on the mutual understanding of each side’s “legitimate aspirations.”⁵

New Membership

Another important event of the 66th UNGA was the accession of South Sudan as the 193rd member of the UN. Salva Kiir Mayardit, President of South Sudan, expressed his deep satisfaction for this recognition and the end of more than five decades of conflict.

3. The 66th UNGA: An Assessment

In 2011, a number of pressing issues have been discussed in the UNGA. Nuclear safety, climate change and the issues of NCDs mainly featured at the official level meetings. Needless to say, these are the common global crises affecting countries irrespective of their economic status. Thus, building rapport with the world leaders will help to enhance cooperation on these issues in a sustainable manner. Side by side, it is crucial to assess how far the international

⁵ “Obama tells U.N. he sees ‘no shortcut’ to Israeli-Palestinian peace”, *The Washington Post*, 21 September 2011, available at http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/obama-tells-un-he-sees-no-shortcut-to-israeli-palestinian-peace/2011/09/21/gIQAWCO8kK_story.html?hpid=z2 accessed on 18 November 2011.

community is lagging behind to reach the common global challenges (eg. climate change, economic crisis, food crisis etc.) and to determine how to raise global awareness by taking common venture in this regard.

Considering the prevailing global scenario, it could be argued that each challenging issue discussed in the high-level meetings was very pertinent. For instance, one of the perennial challenges of this day is preventing NCDs like cancer, diabetes and heart disease. It is crucial to ponder that two thirds of the deaths around the world occur due to these chronic diseases.⁶ The scenario is more ominous in the low income and middle income countries. The number of diabetic patients has increased 12 times around the world. In 1985, there were 30 million diabetic patients. In 2011, the number exceeded to 360 million. It is estimated that by next 20 years, it might reach 550 million.⁷ Currently, one person dies in every eight seconds because of these diseases. Thus, the first-ever high-level meeting addressing these sorts of health concerns after addressing HIV/AIDs in 2001 in the UNGA was very timely and created an opportunity for the world leaders to take steps together for reducing this global burden.

Another complex challenge addressed in the 66th UNGA was desertification, land degradation and drought as these cause multiple social, economic, political and environmental hazards in the poor countries. According to the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP), one quarter of the world's land and the livelihoods of more than one billion people of over 100 countries are in danger due to desertification and land degradation.⁸ Moreover, drought is considered as a silent killer because of bringing unmanageable human sufferings. This is very much witnessed in East Africa as the region has been facing tremendous drought situation in last 60 years. The worst condition is perceived in Somalia where thousands of children aged under five lost their lives in last few months alone.⁹ These natural hazards hinder sustainable development of many countries by leading to the process of resource scarcity, food crisis, bio-diversity loss, forced migration and climate change. To get rid of all forms of degradation, Secretary General's urge for sustainable land use as a "cornerstone of green economy" is very appropriate and timely. This would help the member countries

⁶ Krysten Carrera, "Non-Communicable Diseases Take Center Stage at the UN General Assembly", DIPNOTE, 21 September 2011, available at http://blogs.state.gov/index.php/site/entry/non_communicable_diseases_in_the_international_community/ accessed on 13 November 2011.

⁷ *The New Nation*, 14 November 2011.

⁸ On the Occasion of the Opening of the High –Level Meeting on "Addressing Desertification, Land Degradation and Drought in the Context of Sustainable Development and Poverty Eradication", General Assembly of the United Nations, President of the 66th Session, New York, 20 September 2011, available at <http://www.un.org/en/ga/president/66/statements/desertificationopening20092011.shtml> accessed on 21 January 2012.

⁹ *Ibid.*

to take decisive actions, increase awareness and ensure active involvement of stakeholders, experts as well as local communities.

With regard to nuclear safety and security issues, the launching of an UN-led study on the implications of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear accident by the Secretary General Ban Ki-moon is very crucial considering its adverse effects in the future. In addition, the preliminary assessment by the UN body on Fukushima Daiichi was well-timed as Japan could not avoid the severe consequences of the nuclear disaster despite being a technologically advanced country. It also helps to reach the key message to other nuclear power producing countries that unless necessary action is taken, the expansion of nuclear power plants would bring new challenges. Therefore, there is a need to take necessary actions about the risk preparedness, plant design, response system as well as operational safety to avoid the hazards resulting from nuclear disaster. Simultaneously, the seventh Conference on Facilitating the Entry into Force of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty carries special significance to make the world free from armaments. It is worth mentioning that since the adoption of the Treaty on 10 September 1996 by the UNGA, it could not come into force due to disagreement of nuclear capable states to ratify or sign the Treaty. The follow up Seminar, thus, was a great reminder to make the Treaty effective through ratification by the nuclear weapon states like France, Russia and the UK. The Conference also generated a great push for the remaining countries, which have signed the Treaty but not yet ratified.

Another special initiative taken in the 66th UNGA was the recognition of South Sudan as the 193rd member of the UN. It can be expected that the decision would help the country to end the five decades of conflicts, and thereby, to maintain peace, harmony and tranquility in the entire region. However, this could be pure rhetoric. This newly independent country could be plunged into internal disputes in the coming days. With its underdeveloped economy, scanty physical infrastructure, internal displacement of about 4.8 million people and one of the worst health scenarios, South Sudan might fall into a trap of fresh conflicts. Besides, due to 20 years of armed conflicts between South and North Sudan, around 1,427 areas were contaminated with landmines and other explosives set under the ground.¹⁰ Although endowed with oil, the country lags far behind in exploiting and extracting efficiently this resource. It might tempt one to assume that stakeholders from the US and other developed nations are likely to intervene in South Sudan's oil industry. Nevertheless, for South Sudan, getting the UN membership is very timely and appropriate as the country could solve its long standing border demarcation problem with Sudan through the international arbitration process and the establishment of the United Nations Interim Security Force in Abyei (UNISFA).

¹⁰ Md Tarek Abdullah, "South Sudan: The Role of Bangladeshi Military Deminers", *The Journal of ARW and Mine Action*, Vol.14, No.1, Spring 2010.

Despite several positive initiatives and measures for progress, the efficacy of the UN is still questionable. Many critics raised question about its efficiency stating that this body really acts as a “sounding board” in which the member states get involved in different actions with no meaningful outcomes. It is also alleged that the UN could only act during war or sanctions against the weaker countries dominated by the Western countries.¹¹ This time the most talked about issue in the UNGA was the bid of Palestine to become a full UN member. However, the assembly failed to respond positively as the US with its veto rights stood behind Israel. The UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon vowed for a new international endeavor to break the Middle East stalemate situation. Moreover, he pleaded for continuous UN efforts to advance peace process for he agreed that the Palestinians deserve a separate entity and Israel needs its internal security. Despite positive intention of the Secretary General, Palestinian effort did not progress due to the double standard policy of the US. On one side, President Barak Obama expressed his frustration about the stalemate of Israel-Palestine peace process, on the other hand, he vowed for a veto when Mahmud Abbas bid the issue of Palestinian statehood in the assembly. President Obama is still emphasising on bilateral negotiation knowing the fact that his last year’s endeavor about direct negotiation between Mahmud Abbas and Benjamin Netanyahu collapsed when the latter declined to renew a moratorium on the construction of Jewish settlement in the West Bank. In the 65th UNGA, President Obama called for an independent Palestine state whereas this year he strongly opposed because of strong lobby from Israeli side.¹² His inconsistent remarks have frozen the Israel-Palestine peace process. The UN also could not function properly as an international organisation because of the monopoly attitude of the US.

Nevertheless, the light of hope is that the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), as a first UN agency, approved Palestine’s full membership after getting the majority vote from the members of the General Assembly on 31 October 2011.¹³ It was indeed a historical moment and strategic victory for the Palestinians for having met their demand after a long time. Apparently, obtaining this membership would help to gain the international recognition as an independent state and would be a significant forwarding step to

¹¹ Ashahed M. Muhammad, “UN General Assembly offers little hope for peace”, World News, 5 October 2011, available at http://www.finalcall.com/artman/publish/World_News_3/article_8193.shtml accessed on 22 February 2012.

¹² Krysten Carrera, *op.cit.*

¹³ Out of 173 member countries, 107 states gave vote in favour, 14 opposed and 52 abstained. For details, see, BBC News, “Palestinians get UNESCO seat as 107 vote in favour”, 31 October 2011, available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-15518173> accessed on 23 February 2012.

get full membership in the UN. However, the negative stands of both Israel and the US have become a real concern for continuing peace talks between Israel and Palestine. On one side, the US was against the Palestinian bid for membership and announced to withdraw its financial contribution to this body as per the US law passed in 1990s; on the other, Israel expressed its fierce response stating that it would further expand the building of Jewish settlement houses in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Other punitive measures offered from Israeli side were freezing the funding for this cultural agency and withdrawal of Gilat Shalit prisoner exchange deal between Israel and Palestine. Under this circumstance, it appears that peace talks and other diplomatic efforts between Israel-Palestine might be at a stake again.

4. Bangladesh's Role and Position in the High-Level Plenary Meetings and its Contribution to Major International Issues

Bangladesh, being a developing country, had a positive tone in each plenary session. The country actively participated in the high-level meetings and was very vocal on certain global challenges. For example, Bangladesh's Prime Minister urged for cooperation in common global issues like combating terrorism and fighting the effects of climate change. She also put forward a 7-point proposal to combat terrorism which encompassed legal measures about counter-terrorism, agreement on a universal legal definition of terrorism, early conclusion of Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism, national capacity building and training for counter terrorism personnel of developing countries, establishment of International Center for Counter-Terrorism with full data base and intelligence sharing, finding out the root causes of terrorism and respect for Human Rights and Rule of Law.

In a Dialogue of Leaders on Climate Change organised by the Presidents of Mexico and South Africa, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina suggested a number of actions to address in the 17th Conference of the Parties (COP-17) in Durban in 2011. These include: a compulsory agreement to cut the green house gas emission, and sharing of this global burden, suitable relocation of climate refugees and migrants, free technology transfer, creating a "Climate Fund" for real contribution by all the member countries. Also, she requested the global community to take necessary actions to save the planet from all kinds of natural calamities and disasters. Put precisely, she urged the industrialized countries to take voluntary measures for implementing Kyoto Protocol based on equity and justice. She also mentioned some important initiatives that Bangladesh had already taken such as adopting Bangladesh Climate Change Strategy that incorporates a 134-point adaptation and mitigation action plan and creating a Climate Change Trust Fund worth \$300 million from its own resources.

To evaluate these issues that Bangladesh's Prime Minister and Foreign Minister underlined on the UNGA, it is perceived that each crisis brings

challenges not only for the poor countries but also for the rich countries as well. Some national issues could turn out to be a global challenge if it is not addressed in proper time. Therefore, a concerted effort or global linkage is required to tackle the crises at a larger scale. For instance, Prime Minister's 7 point proposal about fighting against terrorism upholds the country's stand in this regard that terrorists do not belong to any religion, race or ethnicity and it is impossible for any member country to combat this challenge solely; particularly to halt global outreach and financing. Her suggestions about agreement on universal legal definition of terrorism, set up of International Center for Counter-Terrorism with complete data base, capacity building of each LDC and respect for rule of law indicate that Bangladesh has full faith on the UN bodies and has willingness to work closely with the member countries. Also, her information regarding banning of all Bangladeshi blacklisted terrorist groups identified by the 1267 Committee, updating of country's first Anti-Terrorism Act 2009 in 2011, revising of Money Laundering Prevention Act 2009 and ensuring constructive role of clergies and religious leaders denote that the country has taken positive and effective measures to combat terrorism and that could be a lesson for other countries facing regular terrorist activities.

Climate change was another concerning issue for the Prime Minister in the 66th UNGA. It is alarming that one meter rise of sea level caused by global warming would inundate one fifth of Bangladesh and displace around 30 million people. Thus, Prime Minister's appeal for creating a global framework to reduce the vulnerability of the climate change-induced people is very timely. Keeping in mind the forthcoming Durban Climate Change Conference, the Premier expects robust support from the international community in four recognised areas (often called global pact) such as adaptation, mitigation, financing, and technology transfer. Once the global pact is implemented, Bangladesh would be immensely benefited. Besides, Prime Minister's suggestion for operationalisation of the 'Green Climate Fund' would help to bear the cost of adaptation of many vulnerable countries.

As a proactive member of the UN, Bangladesh's role was important in case of other high-level meetings. For example, Bangladesh's appraisal on the issue of NCDs, denoted that the country is very concerned about strengthening its national capacities. By now, the country has approved five year health sector programme giving priority to NCDs which are rising at an alarming rate in the country. The adoption of a series of national strategies like National Cancer Control Strategy, Injury Prevention Strategy, Deafness Prevention Strategy, National Eye Care Plan and amendment of other national legislations pertaining to NCDs show that the country is sincere to address the issue and is giving utmost importance to work together with the other UN member countries.

Bangladesh's Foreign Minister Dr. Dipu Moni attended the high-level Meeting on Desertification, Land degradation and Drought in the context of

Sustainable Development and Poverty Eradication. On this occasion, Dr. Dipu Moni expressed her concern about the rising trend of desertification and climate change which will not only affect the developed countries but also many poor countries including Bangladesh. The country is continuously facing the challenge of land degradation which affected almost 6 million hectares or 43 per cent of country's land area.¹⁴ Also, the salinity intrusion of southern part of the country and increased drought in the northern regions due to short rainfall are leading to agricultural land scarcity and food insecurity. Under this circumstance, the Foreign Minister expressed her desire to work jointly with other climate vulnerable countries based on 'equity' and 'historical responsibility' to combat desertification and mitigate the worst effects of drought through effective measures.¹⁵ As Bangladesh would be one of the worst victims of climate change in the years to come, its positive stand in this regard obviously will boost the cooperation at the regional and international levels.

Bangladesh's Foreign Minister also attended a high-level meeting on Nuclear Safety and Security organised on 22 September 2011.¹⁶ In this gathering, she stressed on full implementation of the international legal frameworks and safety standards recommended by International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) on nuclear safety and security. She further informed that to accomplish 'Vision 2021' goal and ensure energy security, Bangladesh is going to build its first nuclear power plant in Rooppur taking proper safety measures. However, her statement ensures that Bangladesh believes in peaceful use of nuclear power at every stage and owing to this, the country would follow the nuclear conventions, international treaties, agreements and protocols already signed or endorsed. Keeping in mind the recent dreadful Fukushima Nuclear Power Plant accident, she suggested to increase the capacity of Integrated Incident and Emergency Centre (IEC) under the guidelines of IAEA and create a Nuclear Security Fund on a voluntary basis. This would help the developing countries including Bangladesh to handle such crises.

Apart from the above mentioned issues, Bangladesh played a positive role in other important events. Bangladesh recognised Republic of South Sudan on 20 July 2011, just a day after it was declared an independent country on 9 July

¹⁴“Significance of 66th UNGA”, available at <http://www.un.int/wcm/webdav/site/bangladesh/shared/files/Significance%20of%20the%2066th%20UNGA.pdf> accessed on 25 February 2012.

¹⁵ “Foreign Minister stresses on Asian solidarity to collectively address common challenges faced by the ACD members”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), People's Republic of Bangladesh, available at <http://www.mofa.gov.bd/PressRelease/PrintPRDetails.php?txtUserId=&PRid=462> accessed on 26 February 2012.

¹⁶ Speech of H.E. Dr. Dipu Moni, MP, Foreign Minister of the Peoples Republic of Bangladesh on Nuclear Safety and Security (NSS), United Nations, New York, 22 September 2011.

2011.¹⁷ It welcomed the Republic of South Sudan as a new member of independent states and wished its prosperous future. In its journey, Bangladesh government declared to assist the country in all aspects such as ensuring democracy, development and social justice. It is important to ponder that in the 65th UNGA, Bangladesh was one of the co-sponsors of the UN General Assembly Resolution titled “Admission of the Republic of South Sudan into the United Nations (A/RES/65/398)” through which South Sudan has been accepted as the new member of the UN on 14 July 2011.¹⁸ In fact, the people of South Sudan had been struggling for the rights of self-determination and it was difficult for the two states to co-exist due to cultural diversity, religious differences as well as heterogeneous political positions. To stop genocide, ethnic cleansing and human rights violation, Bangladesh played a constructive role by sending its 1500 peacekeepers in the United Nations Missions in Sudan (UNMIS) for the implementation of Comprehensive Peace Agreement signed in January 2005.

On the issue of Palestine’s full membership, Bangladesh’s stand was very clear and consistent. In the Ministerial Meeting of the NAM Committee on Palestine held on 22 September 2011, Bangladesh’s Foreign Minister re-emphasised the country’s strong pledge for a free and independent Palestinian state. Conceivably, Bangladesh is one of the few countries which has been recognising the statehood of Palestine from the very beginning. As Bangladesh has formal diplomatic ties with Palestine, the country has always provided its full support to the latter and gave votes in favour of its proposal. Besides, according to the Constitutional commitment¹⁹ of Bangladesh, the country is committed to give full support for self-determination, statehood, solidarity and integrity of Palestinian people. Being a Muslim country, Bangladesh always expresses its brotherhood towards this country and wants to see the social and political emancipation of the oppressed Palestinian people. Bangladesh believes that a comprehensive settlement through UN resolution is required for lasting peace and security in entire Arab region. Hence, the country not only supported the full membership of Palestine in the 66th UNGA but also took initiative to contribute more through co-sponsoring all the possible UN resolutions.

5. Prime Minister’s Speech and the Issues Raised from Bangladesh

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in her speech on 24 September 2011 highlighted a number of national, bilateral, regional and global issues.

¹⁷ *The Daily Star*, 20 July 2011.

¹⁸ “Significance of the 66th UNGA”, *op.cit.*

¹⁹ “The state shall uphold the right of every people freely to determine and build up its own social, economic and political system by ways and means of its own free choice; and support oppressed people through out the world waging a just struggle against imperialism, colonialism and racialism”.

Peace-centric Development Model

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, during the 66th UNGA, came up with a six-point multi-dimensional peace model which includes “eradication of poverty and hunger, reduction of inequality, mitigation of deprivation, inclusion of excluded people, acceleration of human development and elimination of terrorism”.²⁰ The model is considered as the “people's empowerment and a peace-centric development model” in which all would be treated equally in the society and peace could be ensured through increasing human capabilities. Also, its goal is to achieve sustainable development at national, regional and international stages through peace and tranquility. In this regard, Prime Minister viewed that “peace is the basis for development” and prosperity of a country could be ensured through social justice and establishing rule of law under the guidelines of the UN.²¹ Therefore, she had an earnest request to the international community to test the model which has the power to transform the earth of 7 billion people into one.

Discussion on National Issues

In the 66th General Assembly, the Premier stressed on key national issues such as CHT Peace Accord, settlement of the BDR mutiny and trial of the perpetrators responsible for 1971 war crime which were posing challenges to the country and highlighted some peace centric development initiatives to overcome these challenges. As a leader of a least developed country (LDC), Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina called for cooperation from the development partners in a number of areas such as granting free access to the US market, removal of certain trade barriers, implementation of Overseas Development Assistance (ODA), as well as support for the poor countries to fulfill the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). She also seeks support from the UN to overcome annual flagship resolution called “A Culture of Peace” which the country adopted in 2000. The Premier restated her appeal to announce ‘Bangla’ as one of the official languages at the UN. Prime Minister Hasina made the similar appeal in the 65th UNGA. She also mentioned the contribution of Bangladeshi peacekeepers to the UN Peace Building Commission and sought greater representation in the Department of Peace Keeping Operations (DPKO) at the planning and strategy levels.

Issues of Sideline Meetings

With regards to duty-free access for Bangladeshi products to the US market, Bangladeshi Prime Minister eagerly sought assistance from the US business community during a meeting hosted by the US Chamber and the Asia Society at

²⁰ *The Daily Star*, 25 September 2011.

²¹ Speech of Hon’ble Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, Government of the Peoples Republic of Bangladesh, Prime Minister’s Office, 24 September 2011.

the Asia Society auditorium on 20 September 2011. She remarked that the removal of regular tariff on Bangladeshi products and the US's cooperation in the garment sector would uplift the social and economic status of Bangladeshi poor women. She also requested the US business community to invest more in the areas of energy, power, manufacturing, insurance, banking and services, agriculture, food processing, shipbuilding, renewable energy, tourism, ICT goods and services, pharmaceuticals and ceramics industries. To encourage the US business community, the Premier highlighted Bangladesh's GDP growth rate, investment-friendly policies, ranking of Bangladesh as one of the 3G countries²² and the report of Goldman Sachs.²³

The Ministerial meeting on commitment to accelerate progress on MDGs on 21 September 2011 was an important momentum for the country to share experience and good practices with the other. Prime Minister remarked that health is an important prerequisite for peace and development. Thus, after achieving UN Award for attaining MDG-4 in 2010, the Prime Minister remarked that the country had been successful to reduce maternal mortality rate at about 66 per cent because of ensuring primary health care services in the rural areas. Also, she expressed her hope to achieve MDG-1, MDG-2 and MDG-3 within the targeted time frame by taking certain socio-economic development initiatives throughout the country.

On September 22, the Premier presented a keynote speech at the UN programme on "Economic Empowerment and Rural Women and Food and Nutritional Security" in New York. In this Seminar, she requested the international community to rescue poor women from dire straits. In this regard, she mentioned about the country's "National Women Development Policy" that encompasses education, health and employment opportunity. She further added that this policy is also reflected in Awami League's "Vision 2021" aimed at transforming the country into a middle income state by 2021. She referred to

²² Willem Buiters and Ebrahim Rahbari, the Citi group analysts, used the term "3 G countries" or "Global Growth Generator countries" referring those 11 states (Bangladesh, China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Iraq, Mongolia, Nigeria, Philippines, Sri Lanka and Vietnam) which have growth potential and investment opportunities measured by 6 parameters/indexes including domestic savings, demographic feature, health, education, quality of state's policy, and openness of trade. For Details, see, Joe Weisenthal, "Forget the BRICs: Citi's Willem Buiters Presents the 11 "3G" Countries that will Win the Future", Business Insider, 22 February 2011 available at <http://www.businessinsider.com/willem-buiters-3g-countries-2011-2>, accessed on 13 November 2011.

²³ According to Global Economic Review in February 2011 conducted by the Citi Investment Research & Analysis of Citigroup, Bangladesh is ranked as one of the 3G countries in terms of high growth rate and investment opportunities. Also, Goldman Sachs enlisted the country as "next eleven" in a report. For details, see, *The Daily Star*, 21 September 2011.

government's certain initiatives like preserving seat for women in local government and the parliament, implementing Micronutrient Supplementation and National Nutrition Programmes for rural women through satellite community nutrition centers, providing access to free education for girls at certain levels, implementing Rural Employment Opportunities for Public Assets (REOPA) to empower rural women and raising 12 million people out of poverty to achieve MDG 1 by 2015.

Bilateral and Regional Issues

Prime Minister also touched upon the bilateral issues that she has been trying to resolve with its neighboring country, India. One of the conflict resolution initiatives is the signing of 30-year Ganges Water Sharing Treaty with this next door neighbour. She also considered the signing of agreements, MoUs, and protocols during the recent visit of Indian Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh to Bangladesh as a great success. Apart from India, the Premier highlighted the country's connectivity initiatives with Nepal and Bhutan to boost mutual benefits of all the countries in South Asian region. Considering the country's suitable geographical position and favorable democratic conditions of other South Asian countries, Prime Minister Hasina also shared her plan to make Bangladesh as a business hub in the region by taking some positive initiatives including creating deep sea port at Sonadia in Cox's Bazar.

Global Issues

In her keynote speech on 24 September 2011, Prime Minister Hasina called upon the international community to enhance regional cooperation mechanisms to fight against terrorism. In this regard, she highlighted the "zero tolerance policy against terrorism" by which her government is trying to eliminate terrorism, extremism and radicalisation. On climate change issue, the Premier sought cooperation in mitigating the effects of climate change

6. Role of Bangladesh: An Evaluation

The six-point proposal of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina with regards to a multidimensional peace model carries significance for the whole world to establish peace and democracy. Certainly, her suggestion holds a wide range of importance particularly for those countries which have been facing difficulties due to lack of democracy practice. Her notions and ideas regarding a new peace model are thought provoking for other countries. Because, poverty elimination, inequality reduction, deprivation mitigation, incorporation of excluded people in the mainstream, fighting against terrorism and overall human development are the issues of common interest across the countries.

In the 65th UNGA, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was awarded for achieving MDG-4 (reduction of child mortality). In the 66th session, the Premier stressed on

the overall development of poor rural women in the country to attain MDG-1 (eradication of extreme poverty), MDG-2 (achievement of universal primary education) and MDG-3 (promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women). She acknowledged the importance of women's right and mentioned that unless women are provided with economic security, job security and education, they cannot be rescued from dire straits and in turn other MDGs could not be achieved in time. The proactive policies of Bangladesh regarding gender equality and empowerment might be the guidelines for other developing countries to achieve MDGs and overall socio economic development.

Apart from social development, the Prime Minister emphasised on country's economic development through ensuring duty free access to the US market. At present, the tariff on Bangladeshi textile products is very high in the US market whereas the European Union, Canada, Australia and Japan provide duty free access of the country's textile products. Likewise, if the US waives, it would immensely boost the economic development of the country. Moreover, it would help to transform the society through improving education and child health as 85 per cent of the garment workers are women. On the other side, the Premier's invitation to the US business people to invest more in energy, power, tourism and other sectors would create a win-win situation not only for Bangladesh but also for the US. Also, her remarks about Bangladeshi cheap work force, its significant strategic location and conducive environment for investment would enable to improve trade relations between the two countries.

Despite being a developing country, Bangladesh's role in the UNGA is praiseworthy as it came out with a few concrete suggestions to address issues related to peace, security, economy and climate change. However, the success depends on many challenging issues. For example, regarding climate change, the Premier requested the developed countries to cut carbon emission at a certain level, ratify the Kyoto Protocol and conclude a global pact in the forthcoming Durban Conference. But it still remains a question how far the world leaders would cooperate in this regard. From the experience of COP-15, it can be claimed that the rich countries had been less forthcoming to cooperate; rather their interest overshadows the global benefit. In this regard, Bangladesh in association with the other LDCs could jointly raise their voice to put pressure on the big powers through the UN body.

Undoubtedly, Bangladesh has made significant progress in reducing child mortality that helped to achieve the country the MDG Award last year. In the 66th UNGA, Prime Minister stated that Bangladesh is on track to attain MDG-1 on poverty alleviation, MDG-2 on universal primary education, MDG-3 on gender equality and MDG-5 on reducing maternal mortality. This year, the Prime Minister also emphasised on empowering women to reduce poverty and achieve other goals especially Goal-1. However, the concern is that the country is still lagging behind in achieving other goals. In case of MDG-1, there have been

important progress in reducing poverty and hunger during the last several years, but the development is measured in terms of percentage and the absolute number of people below the poverty line is still high. At present, poverty reduction is in a stalemate situation due to price hike of basic commodities.²⁴ Regarding MDG-2, the country is facing difficulties in reducing dropout rates in primary education despite introducing the stipend programme. To achieve MDG-3, the increase of reserved seats for women in the Parliament is a positive step but still a significant number of women remain in a socio-economically vulnerable situation and do not have sustainable employment opportunities.

Regional connectivity is another issue that the Prime Minister touched upon with importance. Although it is an optimistic venture to enhance economic development for the entire region, its positive outcome depends on the infrastructure development, increase of power generation and improvement of roads and railways. Indeed, the fragile condition of infrastructure in Bangladesh would work as a major stumbling block to make the country as a business hub unless no immediate action is taken.

7. Conclusion

Each year, the UNGA comes up with different agenda for the wellbeing of all the member countries. As a main policy making organ, the contribution of the UNGA is immense. Quite often, it could not reach its goal due to some technical and structural problems, and the role (or lack of it) on the part of big powers. Despite that it can be said that the UNGA provides a platform for LDCs like Bangladesh to raise their voice for their overall well being. This year, the contribution of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is praiseworthy as she endowed with her new Peace Model encompassing six multidimensional points. It was a good message for all the nations that prosperity cannot be achieved without peace. Prime Minister's earnest request to test the model might bring peace and prosperity in the years to come if there is good intention by the member countries to implement it.

²⁴ Md. Akhter Hossain, "Financing the MDG: Expectations and Reality", Social Watch, available at <http://www.socialwatch.org/node/12061> accessed on 24 January 2012.