

Addressing global issues

By HE SHEIKH HASINA

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SHEIKH HASINA is the daughter of Bangladesh's founding father Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Following his assassination in 1975 she went into exile only returning in 1981. She was a leading figure in opposing military rule in Bangladesh, and after serving in opposition was elected to her first term as Prime Minister in 1996. Following more time in opposition and exile during the subsequent political upheavals and military and caretaker governments in Bangladesh, her Awami League party won an overwhelming majority in the December 2008 election. She has vowed to build a Digital Bangladesh by 2021.

The Commonwealth of Nations, comprising the United Kingdom and its former dependencies, was established under the London Declaration of 28th April 1949. These countries chose to maintain ties of friendship and cooperation with each other and with the British Monarch as symbolic head of their past and present association. The Commonwealth grew as former British dependencies chose to join as independent countries whilst others were admitted according to special circumstances. All Member States have a distinctive but shared cultural inheritance and common values, particularly with respect for democracy and human rights.

The Commonwealth is unique in its composition of members in terms of size, location, climatic conditions and levels of development. The members deliberate as equals on a common platform while pursuing common goals through a common agenda. At present, the Commonwealth comprises a third of the world's population inhabiting a fifth of our planet. The Commonwealth is a wonderful embodiment of diversity while celebrating the core values of freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

Bangladesh values its membership of the Commonwealth for its functional role as much as for its historical significance. It was the first organisation that Bangladesh became a member of in 1972 under the leadership of the Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The Commonwealth's moral support for Bangladesh during those harsh, trying days of the independence struggle in 1971 is ingrained in the minds of our people. The sentiment of our initial membership was echoed in Bangabandhu's speech in 1973 in Ottawa when he said: "The importance we attach to the Commonwealth would be evident from the fact that after liberation, one of our earliest acts was to express our deep appreciation and gratitude to all those present for having welcomed us into this association. It was a source of strength in the dark and difficult days of our liberation struggle to know that we are not alone, to know that the freedom loving peoples of the world were with us."

Bangladesh also greatly values the Commonwealth for its evolution as an open, friendly forum for dialogue on both sides of the North-South divide, as well as for its significant South-South cooperation. Besides, the association has proven its importance for its sustained

focus on issues of common global concern and by digging deep into the issues of shared interest of its diverse members. Current cases of concern are the impact of environmental degradation, global warming, climate change and ecological imbalance. These issues came under sharper focus at the Commonwealth Ministerial Meeting of 2007, preceding the United Nations Meeting on Climate Change in Bali that set off the journey to Copenhagen for the UNFCCC 2009.

The Commonwealth has always promoted democracy and good governance, leaving an indelible impression on its members with respect to their future conduct of governance. Such influence has assisted Bangladesh in nurturing the fruits of democracy for the last decade and a half, except for the recent two years of deviation to unconstitutional rule. Bangladesh has, however, bounced back on the road to democracy with the nationwide parliamentary election of 29th December 2008, widely acclaimed as the fairest elections ever held in the country. The presence of Commonwealth observers from other Member States enjoying democratic traditions contributed in ensuring transparency and fairness in the conduct of elections.

The Commonwealth has performed sterling service, through its Steering Committee on Commonwealth Connects, as reflected in its report "Tools for Development – the capacities of ICTs to transform societies." The government in Bangladesh is extremely keen to apply the pragmatic ideas contained therein in this country. In fact, many of the ideas had already found a place in the election manifesto of my government whose aim is to realise "Vision 2021 and Digital Bangladesh".

The strength of the Commonwealth lies in the contemporariness of the issues it discusses at the highest political level, in an atmosphere of genuine engagement. The outcome of these meetings influence its members who consciously try to align their own policies to reflect the contemporary concerns. Bangladesh's current prime concern is the impending permanent flooding of its low lying southern areas due to global warming and the consequent mass migration northwards. The dearth of fresh water and food supplies greatly raise the risk of increased poverty and all forms of extremism. Bangladesh, in the forthcoming meeting of the Commonwealth, will therefore be highlighting the need for a comprehensive, consensual approach to addressing these issues, as they also have global implications. ■