

# Focusing on the most vulnerable

INTERVIEW WITH **HE SHEIKH PROFESSOR ALHAJI DOCTOR YAHYA ABDUL-AZIZ JEMUS JUNKUNG JAMMEH**  
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**How important is the Commonwealth to The Gambia?**

The Commonwealth is very important to The Gambia. Yesterday we were a colony of Britain and today we are independent but it is important since we had a four hundred year relationship with Britain. Independence did not mean that we should sever our relations completely. We have continued to work together where we can work as partners and equals. Even after independence it is still important that nations come together in the form of a committee to see how we can help each other out. Thus the Commonwealth is very important to The Gambia because all the countries that were once British colonies share a similar system and many things in common and can work together as a family helping each other out. The Gambia is also very important to the Commonwealth. Every country has a role to play no matter how small and poor the country may be. We may not be able to contribute in material and financial terms but we can contribute in terms of human resources and ideas, because nobody has a monopoly on good ideas. The Commonwealth allows us to sit together under one umbrella where we can remember yesterday, not in the negative sense, but where we were yesterday, and importantly see where we want to be tomorrow.

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**It has been said that the CHOGM meetings focus too much on short term issues, problems with certain countries etc; rather than focusing on the longer term issues which impact on the majority of Commonwealth members. Do you agree with this?**

When we meet as the Commonwealth family we need to be progressive. Yes, there can be a conflict to solve, that is very important, but we cannot allow the issue with one member dominate discussions of the other important issues that we have to contend with. The Commonwealth should be a family where of course there is a form of family court, where some member if necessary can be brought to order. But not to the point which distracts from other issues.

At CHOGM we need to look especially at the issues which affect most of the members. If you consider the Commonwealth as a family, but then divide it into households that we call countries, some households are better off than others. What we need to do is see how best all of us can at least be at a certain point above the poverty level by working together. We need to

create a system whereby those that are lagging behind are brought forward and helped to improve their livelihoods. In the past we did not talk enough about these issues. We spent so much time talking about issues such as Zimbabwe and before that of Nigeria and so on. Nigeria at the time was not represented. The idea of talking about a country where the country concerned is excluded from the discussions is not correct. I think it is wrong to discuss a matter at CHOGM when the country itself has been barred from attending.

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**What can smaller countries like The Gambia do to be able to set an agenda which is more relevant to them at CHOGM meetings?**

I feel that within the Commonwealth family the smaller countries suffer from this. However I believe that it is not a question of smaller countries setting the agenda, rather it is a question of us as the Commonwealth, as a family, setting an agenda that focuses on the most vulnerable amongst us. However the reality is that he who pays the piper, calls the tune. The smaller countries, most of whom are very poor are offset by the big countries in the Commonwealth that are donor countries, and we are usually in the position of asking for help. I think the Commonwealth as an institution, as a family, should set an agenda, and for example prioritise poverty. Today there are so many Commonwealth countries where the majority of citizens are living below the poverty line. We should say to ourselves that in five years we want to make sure that at least a certain percentage of them are raised above the poverty line. This development agenda should set targets and we should assess the actions taken to meet them. Poverty is a major problem especially amongst smaller Commonwealth countries. But the Commonwealth is not as generous as it used to be. Previously Gambian students used to have many scholarships from the Commonwealth every year. Now we have less than five scholarships. This is important because most of the problems of humanity today are due to ignorance. Ignorance cannot be eradicated by politics or political idealism. The cure for ignorance, which is a very dangerous disease for humanity, is education. As there are so many people in Commonwealth countries who are illiterate, why can't we set up a Commonwealth programme to eradicate illiteracy within the Commonwealth in let's say fifteen years from now?

To summarise, in the Commonwealth there is some

abject poverty, and illiteracy, which are common problems for many countries and I think these are what we need to focus on. The objective of the Commonwealth should be for us to all develop and prosper together. I hope that when we sit as a Council in Perth, we will ask where do we want to be in five years? How can we eradicate poverty and illiteracy and close the gap within the Commonwealth between the some who are very rich and the many who are poor, some of whom are very poor?

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**Has the Commonwealth been useful in leveraging investment into The Gambia?**

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The Gambia's socio-economic development from 1997 comes from one Commonwealth member state. There is very little trade between The Gambia and other Commonwealth members, that's the reality. We have very strong ties with Nigeria and this is not thanks to the Commonwealth but rather to ECOWAS. In reality most Commonwealth member states stand very much on their own or with other countries that are outside the Commonwealth and this makes a difference when you have a problem in your own country. Instead of negotiating with you the Commonwealth has a tendency to come and say how you should do things, and say that we have our own standards and you should do it our way. To put it bluntly because I'm not a diplomat, I think the Commonwealth is often guilty of hypocrisy and double standards.

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**Would it be fair to say that at the very least the CHOGM meetings are a good way of exchanging opinions and ideas?**

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Please understand that I want to see a Commonwealth that is cherished by everyone. It is sad that today if you go to Somalia and talk about the Commonwealth they will say "oh go away". Zimbabwe has been a very important member of the Commonwealth. Of course we have differences with them but if we follow this rigid attitude, tomorrow another country will say I want nothing to do with the Commonwealth. I'm not anti-Commonwealth, Gambia is proud to be in the Commonwealth, but what we need is for the Commonwealth to work for all members. Once upon a time Commonwealth Day was a very important day, but this is no longer the case because of the negative perceptions of the Commonwealth today and the fact that most of the social activities of the Commonwealth have been scaled down.

I remember when I was at high school we had science teachers from other Commonwealth member states. The Commonwealth then was very visible, today the Commonwealth is not very visible. When we meet let us see how we can revive the Commonwealth, how we can make everybody believe that it exists for the common

good and that you should be proud to be a member of the Commonwealth.

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**Are you and is The Gambia fully understood by the Commonwealth and other countries?**

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I believe that I am misunderstood, that I am deliberately being portrayed as something of an odious person. I have my beliefs, I have my ideals and I have my principles and my views. I will not change those for whatever reason because these are the principles I believe in. I believe that African leaders should be responsible for the economic development of their countries. I believe that we have to be dignified and we must have pride, and you cannot be dignified and you cannot have pride when all the time you are barely keeping the basic things one needs on the table, and have to go around and knock on doors all the time asking for money.

I believe that any assistance to us for economic development should be complementary to our own efforts. My effort as the leader of this country should be complemented by external assistance. This is what I believe. I also believe as a serving head of state that I can say no to what is not in the best interests of the country. I can say yes to what is acceptable and what is beneficial to the Gambian people. And I also make sure that our integrity, our personal core values, our culture are maintained.

It is interesting that the international press hardly ever says anything positive about African countries that are led by people who do not dance to the tune of certain great powers. Most of the time what they say about

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FIRST with HE President  
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Africa is negative and they are being very selective in the type of countries they praise or not. But I am not in the least worried about that. What is important for me is to turn The Gambia into a stable economy where there is peace and respect, where Gambians will not have to go through rigorous visa interviews when they want to go to another country. I'm not interested in wealth, I'm not interested in being glorified – what glorifies me is when I see the number of people whose livelihood this government has helped to improve. When I see that the fisherman's child, or the cobbler's child or the street cleaner's child can go to the same university as the son of the Prime Minister or the President or Vice President or any Minister, this makes me proud.

I want to make sure that Gambians have access to education. I want to make sure that everyone has equal access to healthcare but not only education and healthcare, quality education and quality healthcare. This is what I want. In the pursuit of that I will not allow anybody's ideology to deflect me. This is my philosophy and some call me a dictator for it. What is important to me is how Gambians see me. At the end of the day it is the Gambian people who will judge me. So my first responsibility is to the Gambian people to take them out of abject poverty. It is also only the Gambian people that are going to vote for me, not the rest of the world. So what is important to me is what I do and also as a Muslim I am very careful with what I do because tomorrow God will judge me. Here in Gambia we have done so many positive things and none of the international media houses mention it and have not mentioned it for years. That is why what everybody says about me is irrelevant to me.

Regarding the forthcoming CHOGM, I have never been to Australia, but Australia has always been very close to my heart. I wish them all the best with all the floods and other natural disasters that happened to them. I wish them all the best and I also wish the entire Commonwealth all the best. Even to people who are outside of the Commonwealth, I have this message of humanity. Let us not be judgemental about others, let us work together as a family for common goals. Let us work together, rather than blaming each other. We should work together to develop a new world for our children, so they can live in a world without racism and just work as a family. That is my message.

### **How are Gambian-British relations?**

British-Gambian relations are multi-faceted. We have the official relationship and we have the individual relationships. Today Gambia and Britain share a lot in common, and are creating blood relations between the two countries. There are Gambians married to British and British married to Gambians. But what is even more important is that a lot of British regard The

Gambia as their home and they live here peacefully. We also have Gambians who call Britain home, even though they quite have rough weather. This is a good metaphor for our relationship. Sometimes it is cold, very cold, sometimes it is very very hot but on balance we have more fine weather than bad weather. Please understand that we are not enemies of Britain. When we were a British colony they did a lot of positive things for us, in a very important way. More recently Britain has enhanced our capability to defend ourselves and our interests. We may have our difficulties but at the end of the day we realise that we need each other and we are friends, which is the most important thing.

### **Are there any other issues you wish to raise?**

Well I think the question I want to raise here is the threat to humanity today. I see it in the context of Islamic fundamentalism, but there are also many other types of extremists who hide under a religion or who do not subscribe to Islam or any religion. One also sees the rise of the same type of people, with the same ideology but not hiding under any religion, but instead hiding behind nationalism. I think the challenge now is for us to fight against terrorism, intolerance and racism in all its forms. It is only when you do that that as members of the global family will you be able to eradicate this. We are all human, whether we are in Britain or The Gambia, or in the US, or in France. There will always be people who will aspire to evil ideologies. This should not be allowed. And that's my message if we really want peace for the world. And this goes for the Commonwealth. I look forward to the Commonwealth Day when every child will look up to the Commonwealth, and say this is where I belong. This is what I'm proud of belonging to. I'm not proud of the colonial past, but at least I'm proud of one thing, that the Commonwealth is an ideal means of communication with others.

There is another issue I wish to highlight with regard to the fight against extremism. African countries and Asian countries played a very significant role in the fight against fascism during World War II but unfortunately when there were the recent 60th Anniversary celebrations the role of the Africans was never mentioned. There are still World War II veterans in almost every African Commonwealth member state, and what was disheartening was the fact that at that crucial celebration not a single African was invited. I think this is something the Commonwealth should look at and address this anomaly because this is sad and unfair. A lot of Gambians fought in Burma under the British flag and they are not mentioned anywhere. We still have World War II veterans in this country who proudly display their medal on the 11th of November but they are never invited to a ceremony or have their contribution recognised in any way. F