

Date: March 2010

Madam Sheikh Hasina Begum,
Honourable Prime Minister of Bangladesh
And
The Chairperson of the SAARC.

Subject: Bhutanese refugee issue.

Your Excellency,

Sheik Mujibur Rehman, the Father of the Nation and then President of Bangladesh, had a discerning vision of developing a “common platform” for the nations of the South Asia to garner regional cooperation. With the active support of Bangladesh the SAARC was established two decades ago by the leaders of the member nations. Although, the SAARC is at the threshold of its 16th Summit, we all know that its journey has not always been smooth sailing. This itself proves how relevant and significant it is for the SAARC nations to progress in tandem to tackle the regional issues of common interest. In order to eradicate hunger, poverty, illiteracy, terrorism and, above all, poor economic predicament; all common enemies of the region, the SAARC nations have a long way to go yet to develop a synergy among the countries of the region.

Bhutan, a member state of the SAARC is enthusiastically preparing to host the Summit for the first time. All the heads of the government of the member states will, without doubt, exhilaratingly dwell upon the relevance of the SAARC and Bhutan, being the host, will not play second fiddle to its counterparts. With all the positive affirmations, the home truth is that Bhutan’s kitsch of democracy is to legitimize its sectarian regime. Since the 90s people in Bhutan are raising their voice against the government policy of ethnic subjugation which has forced more than one hundred thousand people to leave the country under government sponsored terror by promulgating draconian laws. The majority of such people are Lhotsampa (Southern Bhutanese) while other ethnic communities are also not spared. They are

struggling for justice, equality, democracy and human rights. Two decades have passed since one third of the country's population has been forced into exile under the government's malevolent grand design. Their fixed and movable assets are confiscated and have been occupied illegally by the ruling elites in spite of repeated reporting of Amnesty International and other world bodies. We have tried various channels, as I was one of the members of the Royal Advisory Council and a confidant of the then King Jigme Singye Wangchuck, to initiate dialogue, but the supercilious royal government has remained tone-deaf till today. In such a situation, we feel very sadden when we see SAARC, instead of putting pressure on Bhutan to repatriate its citizens from refugee camps of Nepal, is nonchalant towards this issue of regional importance, that has the potential of eventually being a threat to regional peace and harmony. This has given us an impression that the SARRC, giving an opportunity to host the Summit to Bhutan, is indirectly assisting the sectarian royal regime in legitimizing its apartheid policy of ethnic cleansing of Lhotsampa and others.

Excellency,

Being a leader of the democratic revolution and freedom fighter of Bangladesh you know what democratic polity means to the countries of the South Asia and particularly to the authoritarian country like Bhutan. When an ardent supporter of democracy like your excellency is the chairperson of the SAARC, we suppose it would not be too much for us to humbly appeal that your good office, in the interest of the region, put an effective pressure on Bhutan to solve the festering refugee issue which is slowly taking form as the nation's Achilles' hills.

No doubt, Bhutan was the first country to recognize Bangladesh after its independence, but much to its chagrin, it has completely failed to comprehend the very essence of the struggle of the people of Bangladesh for justice, equality, democracy and human rights, with interest only in largesse of support and sympathy to its sectarian regime as a cost of the reorganization which it extended. Being shamelessly debunked among the international community, Bhutan has not forsaken its apartheid policy yet, and simply dilly-dallying in the repatriation of its citizens who are languishing in the UN sponsored camps in Nepal, and working to its hilt to prove them as unbecoming citizens. When the Joint Verification Team had verified in one of the camps that 80% of the refugees are genuine Bhutanese citizens, the sectarian royal government of Bhutan unilaterally pulled out

from the negotiation with Nepal government in a huff. It has, till the date, remained impudently intransigent and insouciance in creating one pretext after another to avoid carrying out the joint verification task further. With one third of its population languishing in exile, can the 16th Summit of the SAARC morally claim that it has the support and confidence of the people of Bhutan? The SAARC Summit sans people's support and confidence, if not meant for the welfare of the people, is nothing but a burlesque to aggrandize the image of an apartheid regime.

Excellency,

When industrialization brought prosperity in Europe, democratic norms and values since became the life style of the people there. To-day they have reached the acme of democratic philosophy by organizing and implementing the European Union concept, common currency and European Parliament. However, the South Asian nations remain engaged in regional bickering and failing to internalize democracy in their statecraft. South Asia, with its endless opportunities, still remains underdeveloped because the common people feel as though they do not have any say in running the country's polity due to the hegemonic practice of the ruling elites. The SAARC, in order to garner regional cooperation, must look into the political, economic and cultural issues of the member state that have plugged the process of democratization. Till recent years, the only member state of the SAARC that has denied the basic human rights and democratic privilege to its people is Bhutan. We feel that this is a dark spot for the SAARC's ideology. We, therefore, urge Your Excellency to put pressure on Bhutan in resolving its refugee crisis such that true democracy, not its current warped form, can prevail in the nation.

Excellency,

We have heard Bhutan's whooper about democracy where it tinselled on people's participation in the so called democratic election. Much to our chagrin, big powers, without looking at the ground reality, have indorsed this election. Keeping one third of the country's population out and in exile, with a further eighty thousand people in side the country barred from implementing their basic voting rights, the apparatchiks of Druk regime branding the said election a democratic one is nothing but a bunkum and political flippancy. The political parties in exile were not allowed to participate in the election for obvious reasons. Only the King's relatives,

ruling elites and their hunch men were allowed to open the political parties and subsequently run in the election. If this is a democratic election, it was nothing but the same chestnut that every authoritarian ruler flaunts for its survival. Furthermore, the current head of the government was one of the first to initiate apartheid policy in Bhutan. As the prime minister of the host nation, the 15th summit of the SAARC is set to take place under this illegitimate leadership's organizational influence. This is a proof of real deviation from the values under which the SAARC was established in the first place.

Finally, we hope that the SAARC under your able leadership, to fulfill the long cherished dream of Sheikh Mujibur Rehman, will not remain shy from the Bhutanese refugee issue and allow yourselves to be bogged down by the bureaucratic manipulation of the statute, so that a historic opportunity to provide the SAARC a new meaning and dimension is not lost as such.

I extend my good wishes for your success and anticipating your prudent action in resolving the Bhutanese refugee issue.

Yours sincerely,

Tek Nath Rizal

Cc: (for perusal for the cause of Bhutanese refugee crisis)

Members of the SAARC state:

1. H.E. The Prime Minister of India,
New Delhi, India.
2. H.E. The President of Maldives,
Male, Maldives.
3. H.E. The Prime Minister of Nepal,
Kathmandu, NEPAL.
4. H.E. The Prime Minister of Pakistan,
Islamabad, Pakistan.

5. H.E. The President of Sri Lanka,
Colombo, Sri Lanka.
6. H.E. The president of Afghanistan,
Kabul, Afghanistan.

Observers:

1. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs,
Government of People's Republic of China.
2. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs,
Government of Japan.
3. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs,
Government of Republic of Korea.
4. Office of the Secretary of State.
Government of United States of America.
5. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs,
Government of Islamic Republic of Iran.
6. The ministry of Foreign Affairs,
Government of Mauritius.
7. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs,
Government of Australia.
8. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs,
Government of Myanmar.
9. The President,
European Union, Brussels.