

DEVELOPMENT: A NEW CHIEFTAIN



Anwarul Karim Chowdhury of Bangladesh.
Photographed by Amarjit Sidhu in New
York City, March 2002.

Aiding the least developed

By Devika Sahdev

His voice rising slightly as he leans in to make a point, former Ambassador Anwarul Karim Chowdhury of Bangladesh is clearly passionate about the United Nations and about the work it does for the poorest of the world. "The UN spends 80 percent of its resources on economic development issues," he said. "Every aspect of life in Bangladesh, my home country, has been touched by the UN—roads, telecom, housing. I always tell my colleagues that they should take time to let the world know about the UN and the good work it does, because sometimes people don't fully understand." The UN has been a part of Chowdhury's professional life for more than two decades, and now he has committed to another decade of UN development work.

On International Women's Day, March 8, Chowdhury was named the UN's high representative for the Least Developed Countries (LDCs), Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States.

A man who says he is optimistic about the future of LDCs but aware of the hurdles in the road to development, Chowdhury will serve as a focal point in the UN's development efforts.

"This high office was created to follow up on, review and regularly monitor implementation of the program of action decided upon in Brussels," said Ambassador Chowdhury the day after his appointment. That program of action, the Brussels Declaration, is the product of a UN conference on the Least Developed Countries in May 2001. It calls for the opening of markets to LDC products, cancellation of their debts and an increase in financial aid to them.

"Over the last two decades programs of action were well drawn out but failed mostly because of a lack of follow-up and implementation. There was no one central office that could look at the wide spectrum of issues."

The UN designates 49 nations as LDCs, and they account for 10.5 percent of the world's population. Adding "landlocked developing countries" and "small island developing states" brings the number almost to 60 countries. Chowdhury, who was the UN's coordinator for the Least Developed Countries for 10 years, will focus on the review and implementation of the Brussels Declaration to benefit these countries.

According to Chowdhury, three areas in the declaration are key: providing duty-free market access for LDC products, the cancellation of bilateral debt and an increase in the flow of financial resources to LDCs. "LDC products today have a 0.05

percent share of world trade," he said. "There is a general fear that LDC products would flood the market, but this is simply not true. They need help to enter the market. Also, two-thirds of all Highly Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) are LDCs, and many of them are paying more in debt servicing than they earn from exports. The reality is they'll never be able to get out of debt and this is affecting their development. We have to work on cancelling their debt."

Apart from the obvious development-related areas, the ambassador said that three other areas have to be given special attention when promoting development in LDCs. "Out of 30 countries identified as being at the highest risk for HIV/AIDS," he said, "sixteen are LDCs. It is very necessary to provide resources to these countries because their development prospects are complicated by HIV/AIDS."

These poorest of poor countries have also seen some of the worst conflicts in recent years. Of 34 LDCs in Africa, 15—including Rwanda, Burundi and Angola—have suffered severe conflicts, which has hampered their development. "Special resources should be provided for these countries—rehabilitation for child soldiers, help in rebuilding and disarming," said Ambassador Chowdhury.

The third area the ambassador wants to see given more attention is governance. "Democracy helps development," he said. "Good governance is needed to distribute aid fairly, to ensure proper participation." Good governance is also the key, he said, in gaining the confidence of donor countries and institutions by showing them that the money they give is effectively spent.

"What the UN has done is provide a forum to bring all the parties together on an equal footing," he said. "Now the problem is whether there will be a real commitment toward development. Perceptions differ and donor objectives differ. Ultimately, we all need resources; LDCs just need more."

Since 1971, when the LDC criteria were established, the number of countries in the category has risen from 25 to 49. This is because, said Chowdhury, gross national product per capita has fallen, the Human Development Index has not progressed in these countries and their share in global manufacturing and industry has fallen. In the past three decades only one country, Botswana, has "graduated" out of the category.

"It is very depressing," said Chowdhury, shaking his head. "Unless we really implement the Brussels Declaration, there'll be more additions to the LDC list. We hope that at the Fourth LDC conference we can say that there are fewer than 49 members, not more." □

