

Indian envoy's avoidable remarks

By Barrister Harun ur Rashid

Former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

Most people in Bangladesh are surprised to note that an experienced and well-seasoned diplomat, such as India's High Commissioner to Bangladesh, has been involved in preventable controversy for his reported public statements.

The top Indian diplomat is known to have two earlier postings in Dhaka and knowledgeable people say that he should have known much better the sensitivity and sentiments of people of Bangladesh than any body else. However it seems that his past experience has put him on the wrong side for inexplicable reasons.

A diplomat is one who can tell a person "to go to hell" in such a way that person looks forward to the trip. This is how a diplomat can tell many unpalatable things in sugar-coated pill.

Diplomacy is all about human relationship and a top envoy (Ambassador/ High Commissioner) is a person who has to build trust and confidence among people in a country where he/she is posted. Trust and confidence does not come easily because it has to be nurtured carefully. It is like reputation that does not grow easily. It not only takes time but also needs tact, skill, patience and perseverance to develop an array of relations with the host-country.

The diplomat's job is not only to promote bilateral relations at an official level but also to strengthen friendly relations between peoples of two states. In that capacity a diplomat has to cultivate friendly working relations with every tier of society including various political parties and the civil society.

One basic ingredient for a diplomat is when, where and how to speak and what not to speak. Other qualities include tenacity, presence of mind, sense of humour, coolness under pressure, ability to win people's minds, and appreciation of another point's of view.

The views of mainstream opposition political parties on major national issues need to be taken into account whenever a diplomat speaks. Because in democracy, today's a major opposition party could form the next government.

The top India diplomat has not been too blessed lately and has said some curious things. His propensity to misspeak has created problems in Bangladesh.

Three matters have been subject to hot controversy and they deserve mention as follows:

First, at a public seminar on regional connectivity in June, where the Bangladesh Foreign Minister was present, the diplomat referred to Bangladeshi water experts as "so-called

experts". For a diplomat, it has been perceived as totally unwarranted in diminishing the image and reputation of Bangladeshi experts.

Furthermore wherever a Foreign Minister is present at a function, a diplomat scrupulously observes circumspection in what he/she says. The diplomat must not run his frustration or emotion carry away his/her serenity and coolness. The Bangladesh Foreign Minister later said that in her view, the top India diplomat might be in breach of diplomatic propriety. In diplomatic terms, it is perceived as a mild "rebuke" from the Foreign Minister.

Second, in July, his reported allegation that 25,000 Bangladeshis who get visa overstay in India each year, landed him into a controversy and the allegation has been promptly refuted by the Bangladesh Foreign Office.

The Foreign Office said that the "information with the government does not correspond with the observation of the High Commissioner. Moreover Bangladesh has not received any official communication from the government of India in this regard." Furthermore the High Commissioner has found it suitable to share this information at a meeting titled "Bangladesh-India Economic Relations" where ordinarily positive aspects of bilateral relations are highlighted.

Third, about delays in visa processing, it is reported the diplomat also has made another unpleasant observation that over 80% per cent of those who queue up in front of the Indian High Commission in Dhaka for visa are "touts and brokers." These words are undiplomatic for referring to Bangladeshi nationals. Many things or matters could be said in different ways without offending anyone.

Although the Indian High Commission came up with a clarification that top diplomat's remarks on visa seekers were "misreported" in the news media, "leading to misunderstanding and unwarranted controversy", the damage has been done. The very fact that clarification is issued proves that some thing has gone amiss in his initial statement.

In all these cases, the Indian High Commissioner has been able to hurt the sentiments of most people and provoke, a major party in Bangladesh, that has twice formed the government in the past, leaving it with little choice for the top party leaders to react sharply

The major opposition party in the country has made an issue that asks the government to request Indian government to withdraw the top diplomat.

His avoidable remarks have placed the Sheikh Hasina's government into an embarrassing position at a time when her government and the Congress-led government in New Delhi are thought to work well together in developing a range and pattern of bilateral political and economic relationships.
