**Islamic states unite**

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Pakistan is set to host the 48th session of the Organisation of Islamic Conference’s (OIC) Council of Foreign Ministers in Islamabad from March 22 to 23, 2022. The occasion also marks the 75th year of Pakistan’s independence. Since the OIC’s inception on September 25, 1969 Pakistan has hosted several high profile OIC events that includes two summits and four meetings of the foreign ministers of the OIC.

In the backdrop of this upcoming meeting, when I get to rewind all these years, it stops at the Second OIC Summit that was held in Lahore in February 1974. As a fresh entrant in Pakistan’s foreign office this was my first real exposure to the world of multilateral diplomacy.

Forty-eight years have not dampened the sense of excitement I felt when we were entrusted with a high-profile public task of providing protocol and other administrative support to 45 plus heads of state/government who were expected in Lahore. That Lahore had very limited hotel rooms (barely better now) made our task daunting.

Several affluent Lahoris opened up their homes where these heads of state/government were lodged. Hats off to the Zinda dilaaney Lahore (Large-hearted Lahoris).

Many more details should better be left for another time but one of memorable tasks given to me (by the Chief of Protocol Commodore Anwar Saeed) on which I had great sense of elation and authority (mistakenly) was to prepare the arrival timings and detailed note on the ceremony for each head of state/government.

After I had prepared the schedules that meant that the whole day of receiving the distinguished guests, I was told to send telegrams and then call each country’s foreign office and tell them the arrival time and details of the airport ceremonies.

In 1974, there was no international dialling. Each call had to be booked awaiting connection. The voice quality was subject to the vagaries of weather. Several calls had to be repeated. I started early morning moving from east of Pakistan to the west and I remember when I finished with about 45 calls it was dark.

I was left with a bad throat after speaking loudly most of the day. Each head of delegation was to be personally received by then President Fazal Elahi Chaudhary and Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Each one was given a guard of honour. Then the usual line-up handshakes, and by the time the VIP left the airport, our dignitaries would be ready to receive the next head of state, after a short bathroom break.

I have a tremendous yearning to watch history unfold. Since Bangladesh had made its participation conditional upon its recognition by Pakistan, I was at the airport to see the OIC delegation led by the Secretary General Hassan al Tohamy leave for Dhaka in the evening to persuade Sheikh Mujib-ur-Rehman to participate. And I was at the airport when they returned after an overnight trip the following morning.

The security was far more relaxed compared to today. On the day when almost all heads of state/government were to arrive, my hunger for history compelled me to ask a colleague to man my post and I came to the airport to watch history unfold in front of my eyes. The whole scene runs in front of me even now—watching from a close distance, the giants of the Islamic world like King Faisal, Hafez al Assad, Anwar Saadat, Houari Boumediene, Sheikh Zayed, the Emir of Bahrain, Yasser Arafat, Idi Amin Dada, Mokhtar Dada of Mauritania, Sheikh Sabah of Kuwait, Muammar Gadhafi, Hamani Diori of Niger (one of the top uranium producers, imagine Bhutto’s foresight) and many more arrive in Lahore and received by our own Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who had put Pakistan back on the map as a self-respecting nation.

This was the first time when PLO President Yasser Arafat was accorded the status of head of state and PLO recognised as the sole legitimate representative of the people of Palestine.

The following morning when Sheikh Mujeeb was to arrive, I was at the airport standing about 2 meters away from the aircraft’s stairs within the earshot of our President and the Prime Minister. I watched how they met and meeting Mujeeb, who hugged with tears in his eyes. What a moment.

I watched it all and the emotions through the conference. And then I was in the hall when Mr Bhutto addressed the closing session of the summit and once he finished speaking, how the Islamic heads of delegations walked up and embraced him and each other in a show of unity. This is where Yasser Arafat presented a replica of the Dome of the Rock to Mr. Bhutto. That replica adorns the lobby of our Ministry of Foreign Affairs. I freeze when I see that scene in front of me even today and wish that if the Islamic nations unite in purpose there is nothing beyond us. Our unity should be our strength.

It is in the spirit of justice and strength in unity, Pakistan is once again stepping forward as one of the leading members of the OIC, to perform its historic role, in calling this conference during the 75th year of Pakistan’s independence.

The Islamic world faces multiple challenges in this troubled world. It is under attack, beginning with the partition of Palestine, leading to the gross injustice to the Palestinian people.

The people of Jammu and Kashmir suffer under the most militarised illegal occupations under India. Islamic states like Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen are living through military campaigns against them. Rohingya Muslims face a genocide. Muslims in India face increasing discrimination in their daily lives. And yet, it is the Islamic states that divide the ‘ummah’ from within for short term advantages which the Western powers throw at them.

The West’s reprehensible standards are evident when they continue to supply billions of dollars of military equipment to Ukraine and have seized billions of dollars of Afghans who are dying without food and shelter. The Islamic world suffers from lack of education, opportunities. It lags behind others despite its potential.

Islamic countries need to unite in pursuit of knowledge, in pursuit of elimination of poverty, in development of their technological skills and in pursuit of all fields of human endeavour. In the spirit of Islam, the privileged amongst the Islamic states need to come forward in helping the less privileged to raise their standards out of poverty.

This should be the collective ambition of the ‘ummah.’ Through this meeting Pakistan hopes to provide the catalyst for change for the better amongst the Islamic world.

Only then the dreams of our leaders like King Faisal and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, that I witnessed with my own eyes in 1974, will be realised.

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