

The Bangladesh Times

REVAMP UNESCO

The history of the United Nations in the spheres of peace-making and peace-keeping is replete with instances of frustration and set-backs. The world has, however, been spared of the repetition of holocausts of the dimension of the world wars. That single achievement is enough justification for the organisation. The credit for this is not though due entirely to the organs designated specifically to maintenance of international peace and security. The contribution of agencies entrusted with the responsibility of increasing collaboration among nations for promotion of trade, commerce, industry, health, education, science, culture and communication are substantial.

One of the leading agencies working in these fields is the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). The major activity of the organisation which came into being on November 4, 1946 is in the education sector where it combines literacy programmes with a drive to make primary education universal and eliminate illiteracy's root causes. It promotes studies on such serious subjects like tension leading to war, racism, the socio-economic factors of development and the relationship between man and his environment. The role played by the UNESCO in stimulating artistic activities, conservation of work of art and monument and reducing the imbalance in the flow of news is appreciated on all hands.

But the organisation found itself in quicksands during the mid 80s when it had been concentrating efforts on promotion of a new world order in the information and communication sector. It was accused by some of the developed countries of poor management, anti-western bias and yielding to political pressure.

The United Nations General Assembly of course expressed firm support to the proposed information sector programme by overwhelming votes and the UNESCO itself undertook programmes of management and budgetary reforms. But a few countries, particularly the United States and the United Kingdom who together contributed nearly 30 per cent of the organisation's fund chose to withdraw.

The then Ghanaian Chairman of the Executive Board of the UNESCO remarked "the pull-out would render meaningless the continued profession of faith by some members in the ideals of the organisation and deal a further blow to the principle of universality that UN agencies should represent all countries in the world."

The current Director General of the organisation Federico Mayor who spearheaded an organisational and political shake-up told the French daily Le Figaro that the world was at an historic threshold towards freedom and democracy, and UNESCO, with a responsibility for education, should be the first to react.

The three-week biennial general conference of UNESCO composed of representatives of all member countries which decides the policy, programme and budget of the organisation, is currently on in Paris. The occasion used to be marked in the past by intellectual fireworks over East-West and North-South issues. But the limited scopes of planned programmes that the present reduced budget admits leave little room for controversy.

President Francois Mitterrand who inaugurated the session urged the United States and Britain to rejoin the organisation. He said that UNESCO had a major role as a world forum in defining a new relationship between the wealthy north and the poor south. "More than ever, humanity is seeking landmarks, and you are here to provide them," he reminded the delegates.

The remarks of both Mitterrand and Mayor reflect the urgency of the time and we hope these will not fail to impress upon the concerned quarters the need to revamp UNESCO.

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