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**A tribute to Dr. Gamani Corea**  
**By Ken Khaw, Special Assistant to the SG of UNCTAD, 1979-1984**

Born on 4 November 1925 into a distinguished Sri Lankan family, Dr Gamani Corea obtained BA and MA degrees from universities in Sri Lanka and the UK (Oxford and Cambridge) before receiving a DPhil in Economics from Oxford University. He served his country with great distinction as an economist and Ambassador to the EEC and the Benelux countries (1973).

But it was his international career over a period of nearly 40 years, notably his work with the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) before and after it was established in 1964, and his role as the Secretary-General of UNCTAD from 1974 to 1984, that established him as a leader of great intellect, conviction and political courage, as well as an ardent advocate of change in the international economic order. In fact, the theme that marked his international service and career was the need for change. This was the subject of his book «Need for Change : Towards the New Economic Order », published in 1980, in which he set out the intellectual and substantive arguments for change.

In October 1973, before Dr. Gamani Corea had joined UNCTAD, members of the Organisation of Oil Exporting Countries imposed an oil embargo, sending shock waves in Western countries, which suddenly felt vulnerable. This prompted a call for more effective international cooperation, which led to intense rounds of negotiations both outside the United Nations, at the Paris Conference on International Economic Cooperation, and in UNCTAD and the United Nations. This provided a real opportunity for Dr. Gamani Corea and for the developing countries to push for a transformation of the international economic order.

It was in this context that UNCTAD IV, held in May 1976, mandated UNCTAD to negotiate an Integrated Programme for Commodities with a Common Fund for Commodities. The objective of these initiatives was to transform the functioning of international commodity markets in order to make them more stable and equitable. Dr. Gamani Corea later wrote extensively on the subject in his book «Taming Commodity Markets : The Integrated Programme and the Common Fund, published in 1992. UNCTAD IV also adopted a programme of work on various other topics, including restrictive business practices and debt relief for developing countries

With these mandates, UNCTAD embarked on an ambitious round of negotiations, creating a period of excitement and fervent activity. At its peak, there were 4 simultaneous intergovernmental meetings per week, making a total of about 200 such meetings per year. Many of these meetings ran into the early hours (at times until three or four in the morning) so much so that the wives of delegates reacted in disbelief and kept the phones ringing or came themselves to the meetings. (The strain was so great that eventually the governments decided to limit the number of meetings in UNCTAD.) With so many meetings to organize, the developing countries often had to cope with opposing views on whether they should bring their Ministers to Geneva to settle important questions. At one meeting, after a prolonged debate without any clear outcome, Ambassador Brillantes of the Philippines proposed that a ministerial meeting be held, « preferably at the Ambassadorial level ». It cleared the air, and an agreement was reached.

However, despite the intensive efforts, the results did not match the aspirations and objectives of the initiatives. A scaled-down Common Fund for Commodities, based in the Netherlands, was established in 1989 to finance commodity projects in developing countries and has been doing so for over two decades.

The international efforts to establish a new international economic order (NIEO) did not gain much traction. The developing countries failed to present a solid front, and whatever leverage they had was not fully mobilized. As one disappointed African diplomat said: "What muscles do we have to flex ?". The developed countries adopted a minimalist approach. Further, the international efforts were dissipated among several forums.

The quest for a better-functioning international economic order continues. Prompted by the financial crisis of 2008, the 5th International Cooperation Summit, met in Changchun, China in August-September 2009, on the theme of "Promoting the Establishment of a New International Economic Order". The meeting brought together CEOs, Governors, Mayors & Political Figures from all over the world and was addressed by Mr. Dominique de Villepin, the French Prime Minister then as the principal keynote speaker. Meanwhile, the transformation of the world economy is already happening with the emergence of BRICS and the G20 as major actors in the world economy and in international economic diplomacy. However, much remains to be done to bring about a more stable and equitable international economic order.

Dr. Gamani Corea also played a pioneering role and provided intellectual leadership in many other areas. He chaired the preparatory group of experts for

the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, held in 1971, and acted as Special Representative of the Secretary-General of the Conference, helping to conceptualize the relationship between the environment and development. He presided over the work of the UNCTAD expert group on monetary problems in 1965 and 1969 and chaired the negotiations for the elaboration of the first international cocoa agreement in 1972. He served as the Secretary-General of the first United Nations Conference on Least Developed Countries, held in Paris in 1981.

The various disappointments faced by Dr. Gamani Corea did not detract from his outstanding leadership qualities. He showed great political courage when, in 1980, he appointed Mr. Jan Pronk, former Minister for Development Cooperation of the Netherlands, as the Deputy Secretary-General of UNCTAD in the face of strong political opposition from the developed countries. By tradition, the post was filled by a national of developed countries. But the developed countries objected to the appointment of Mr. Pronk because they saw him as being too close politically to the developing countries. Dr. Gamani Corea showed much wisdom when he resisted strong political pressure to turn UNCTAD into a specialized agency.

His independence, political courage and articulateness in defense of the interests of developing countries did not make him very popular among the developed countries, and he was even attacked personally by one of their political pressure groups. But Dr. Gamani Corea stood firm and confronted the pressure group. Ultimately, he paid a high political price in terms of the extension of his appointment in UNCTAD.

After his departure from UNCTAD, Dr. Gamani Corea continued to work on development and environment issues, first as a member of the South Commission, then as a member of the Board of the South Centre and subsequently as its President in 2002-2003. He played an important role in the founding of the South Centre, helping in programme design and implementation and providing substantial intellectual inputs.

Back in Sri Lanka, he served as founder and Chairman of the Institute of Policy Studies, as well as founder and Chairman of the Sri Lanka Economic Association from 1985 to 1991.

Dr. Gamani Corea was a towering intellectual. He was so gifted that he could make a lucid, well-structured and forceful speech, with a full mastery of the facts, without any notes. His former colleagues remember him very fondly for his great wit, warmth and kindness. He was a true gentleman. His sharp perception and wit was famously captured in his observation regarding the

outcome of the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 : « We negotiated the size of the zero ».

His death in Sri Lanka on 3 November 2013 was a great loss not only to Sri Lanka but also to the international community which he had served so brilliantly. The developing countries have lost a good friend and his « lifelong dedication to the cause of development » (Jan Pronk)