

Gamani Corea

It is both an honour and a privilege to participate and speak at this event to tribute and honour Gamani Corea, former Secretary-General of UNCTAD and former Chair of the South Centre, a world renowned political economist with a development vision, a humanist, and a friend.

I first met Corea either late in 1963 or early 1964 at the UN in New York. He was among a clutch of Second Committee delegates, sitting in a corner of the lounge on 2nd floor, conferring with the Under-Secretary General for Economic and Social Affairs, Philip de Seynes, and Dr. Raul Prebisch, named by U Thant to be the Secretary-General of the UN Conference on Trade and Development, convened to meet in Geneva in 1964. He was I think a delegate from Sri Lanka, but Prebisch had asked him to be a member of a group of experts to help prepare for the conference.

I really came to know Corea fairly well after I came to Geneva in 1978, to work at the International Foundation for Development Alternatives (IFDA) and with IPS Third World News Agency on an 'Alternative Information Project', to report from a Third World perspective on activities of UN agencies in Geneva in general, and in particular the trade and development scene - UNCTAD, GATT etc.

Soon after, in March 1978, we met at his office, and discovered that though from different backgrounds, born and growing up, our lives and thinking had been shaped by national freedom struggles in our countries of South Asia under British colonial rule - Corea in what was then Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) and I in then Madras (now Chennai) in India.

UNCTAD at that time was at the centre of North-South dialogue and negotiations on a range of issues and subjects, like commodities, and what is now known as services - shipping, technology etc - as well as core issues of world economy including trade, money and finance. There were a large number of meetings on variegated issues, with meetings often running late into the night, especially on Fridays.

Corea invariably was at his desk on the 9th floor of the secretariat, and sometimes in the coffee lounge (what is now called 'serpentine bar'), waiting for meetings to convene while regional groups conferred among themselves. As a journalist following these meetings I was there too, and soon we would spend time together - waiting around, in his office or at the lounge on the first floor - discussing UNCTAD matters and wider issues of international political economy but also touching on our own personal lives and background.

After coming out of high school in 1938, I spent two years at home, waiting to enter college: I was two years younger than the minimum entry age of 15 for University at that time. There were no distractions: no TV, no internet, and some short-wave radio. I had spent the two years at home - going through my father's library, haphazardly - law books, religious and philosophical literature in Sanskrit and some in Tamil and English, English classic novels, Adam Smith, Marx, Gandhi, Nehru among others. After joining the profession too I had done some haphazard reading of politics and economics.

When I met Corea in 1978, and came to know him well, he took on hand the task of guiding me in some detailed reading and re-reading of economics literature - classical, neo-classical, marxian and development economics, and trade, money and finance - an almost one-to-one economics crash course (without having to do term papers!)

During his tenure at UNCTAD, and later when he retired and was staying not too far my home in Geneva, we used to meet at least once a week. We were of the same age group, he was a few months younger. So when we used to meet, I used to tease him that as one younger to me, according to our South Asian culture (which at least in our younger days, transcended religion, language and national boundaries), he had to bow and pay obeisance to me, but that he could not do so as he was my teacher. I, as a student, had to pay obeisance to him, but could not do so since he was younger to me. He would laugh and say, but we can have a drink together!

Much of what I say now on Gamani, his life and outlook, is drawn from his own narration. A number of close associates of his in UNCTAD are due to speak, and I shall leave it to them to speak on this, but touch upon other aspects of his life and work.

Gamani Corea was born into a renowned and affluent political family of Sri Lanka (his mother's brother, Sir John Kotlewala, was a Prime Minister of Ceylon), while his grandfather, Victor Corea, was a freedom fighter. He was an only child and the family on his mother's side was so affluent that no one in the family ever thought of guiding him into any particular educational discipline or a professional career. Everyone, on both sides of his family, were in politics and belonged to prominent political families of Ceylon/Sri Lanka, but Gamani was thought to be too shy and reserved for the rough and tumble of political life.

However, by himself, Gamani began taking an interest in the national politics of Ceylon (but not to plunge into politics); till the end, he had good relations with both the main political parties of Sri Lanka, and in terms of even national polity, both sides listened to him, but did not always follow his wise counsel.

When he learnt that a meeting with Gandhi in 1945, and spending 10 days with him in camp, had changed my outlook and brought me first into politics briefly, and then to journalism, he told me that in his student and younger days, he had been very much influenced by the freedom struggle under Gandhi and Nehru in neighbouring Colonial India. "I would get hold as a young man of every writing of Jawaharlal Nehru and read him avidly," he told me. "It gave me a perspective and impelled me to take interest in politics and development, that carried over into my post-university career in the Central Bank, and then United Nations and the development aspects there," he said.

After an educational career in Colombo and then Oxford and Cambridge (1945-52), Corea came back to Colombo to enter government service in the economic departments of planning, as research director in the Central Bank, and in the government as Secretary of the Department of Planning, Governor of the Central Bank, and then in diplomatic service, as Ceylon's ambassador to the EEC in Brussels, and several UN positions, including as member of the UN Committee on Development Planning. Prebisch named him to a panel of experts preparing for UNCTAD-I, and later in the work of UNCTAD itself where, during the Prebisch era, he chaired a commodity conference on cocoa.

Prebisch too, in conversations with me in 1979 at UNCTAD-V, Manila, and again in 1983, at the G77 Ministerial meeting in Buenos Aires, thought very highly of Gamani.

Corea was appointed in 1973 as Secretary-General of UNCTAD for an initial three-year term, when the second S-G, Manuel Perez-Guerrero, resigned to become a Minister in Venezuela. He assumed the post in April 1974, and was reappointed thrice, his last term ending in December 1984. He continued in the post at the request of then UN Secretary-General Javier Perez de Cuellar, and then was told (indirectly) that he would not be continued. The OECD countries were by then dead set against Corea for his role in giving intellectual support for the Group of 77 efforts at restructuring the world economy and international economic system (money, finance and trade) for a more equitable and just order.

At the 1982 GATT Ministerial meeting in Geneva, when the US was trying to expand the role of GATT by including many unrelated areas into the 'trading system', merely by adding 'trade-related', Gamani spoke out very strongly and firmly in support of the position of the developing countries, who were united under the leadership of Brazil and India, and the informal group was insisting that the unfinished businesses of the Tokyo Round should first be taken up and accords reached, before any new issues like intellectual property, services or investment could be considered as issues for negotiations as trade issues. He also undertook and published studies at UNCTAD on 'services', 'technology', 'intellectual property' and others subjects sought to be brought on GATT agenda, in particular their wider role in development.

Sometime later, when he was on the South Commission, he told Branislav Gosovic in the Commission secretariat, that the main reason for annulling his third term in UNCTAD and giving him only one year was the fear by the US and the OECD group of countries that Corea "would spoil" their attempts to launch a new round of GATT multilateral trade negotiations with new issues and preparations for it at the GATT.

Prebisch, as head of UNCTAD, shaped international economic thinking in development economics and raised awareness within the UN system of the development problematic in the newly independent ex-colonies, and their need for special treatment and assistance for development, such as official development aid, generalized schemes of preferences in trade and the like.

Corea carried forward the Prebisch outlook, providing intellectual weight and economic arguments to the secretariat proposals, and with calls for restructuring the global economy and international economic relations and governance, and addressing problems of development and money, finance and trade in an interdependent manner.

He had an inner conviction and strength, and an outlook that was visionary, developmental and egalitarian. Within UNCTAD he developed several programmes to help development, and remained firm in his view that UNCTAD should remain a part of the UN, an organ of the UN General Assembly devoted to Trade and Development.

While not confrontational or using harsh language, he stood up throughout his tenure to pressures and bullying tactics of the United States or European Communities and their attempts to influence senior staff appointments by planting their own men. He also stood up

to the IMF and World Bank, whose leadership attempted sometimes to scoff at UNCTAD views, and alternative thinking differing from IMF/World Bank ideology and rulebook.

After retirement from UNCTAD, Corea continued in international public life, specially in the economic and development arena, and was a member of the South Commission. After the Commission wound up and the South Centre was set up in 1991, he played an important role in its work. He was trusted by South Centre Chair Julius Nyerere, and acted as the final authority and filter approving policies, documents and publications of the Centre. He was consulted on a daily basis, both while he was in Geneva (a lot of the time) and when he was in Colombo, and was one of the key persons to help put the Centre on its feet.

He became chairman of the Board of the South Centre, assuming the post about three years after Nyerere died. He resigned his chairmanship after a mild stroke which impacted on his writing abilities.

As an important member of the Centre, he participated in some of the civil society meetings in the preparations and run-up to the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio.

At the time of the 1991 second preparatory committee meeting in Geneva for UNCED, it was fashionable for officials of the secretariat, including the Secretary-General of that Conference, Mr. Maurice Strong, to advise developing countries not to adopt or follow a consumerist Northern style of development.

Speaking at the civil society meeting at that time, Corea scoffed at such efforts of the North to constrain the development of the South to maintain the North's own consumption and lifestyles. He told the NGO forum and the Group of 77, that if such an effort is made, even if governments of the South accept at Rio such instruments to curb their development, "long before global warming, the world will be engulfed in global disorder"

Corea was also present at Rio, as a member of the Sri Lanka delegation. At the end of that Summit, in an interview with Thalif Deen of the IPS for the Conference newspaper Terra Viva, Gamani famously summed up the outcome as: "We negotiated the size of the zero."

Thank you.