

Note for Record

By:- Shoaib Sultan Khan

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Subject:- Meeting His Highness

I always had the privilege of receiving and seeing off His Highness the Aga Khan (HH), whenever he visited Islamabad. For the last nearly fifteen years either HH did not visit Islamabad or I was not in Pakistan that I did not get the opportunity to meet him. I was, therefore, extremely excited when I read in the newspaper that HH was arriving in Islamabad on December 8th.

When I rang up CEO AKDN to find out HH's time of arrival, he informed me that since this was Diamond Jubilee visit and exclusively for "Deedar" all arrangements are being made by the council and despite his best efforts he was not able to get in touch with the chairman of the council. As I had always been facilitated by the foreign office protocol officials to receive and see off HH at the airport, I rang up one of my friends, a retired Ambassador, to get me the necessary permission to enter Nur Khan Base, adjoining the airport, where HH's plane used to land. After a few hours he informed me that the protocol is not involved and it is all being done by the council and I should contact Hafiz Sher Ali. If CEO AKDN was not able to contact him, there was no way I could do it. So I gave up the idea of receiving HH at the airport because Serena Hotel people told me that HH was due around 8 pm and my friend Aziz Bolani was also travelling outside Islamabad.

From the news item I knew that HH was calling on the President and Prime Minister, before going to Chitral and Gilgit. In desperation I rang up my friend the Principal Secretary to the President to let me come to the Presidency, just to receive HH when he comes there. He regretted that it may not be possible because the President will receive HH and then a guard of honor has been arranged for HH, but he promised that he will ensure that I meet HH. True to his words he later rang me up to inform me that an invitation to a dinner, being held

in honor of HH, is on my way. Soon after this call I received a call from Hafiz Noor Ali that I was invited to a dinner being hosted by PM and the invitation will be sent to me through CEO AKDN. I rang up the CEO, he had no knowledge but promised to find out. Finally, the invitation did arrive at 4 pm and the dinner was at 6:45 pm for 7 o'clock.

Before dinner HH and PM came in the hall where all the invitees had assembled waiting for them. HH greeted me warmly, as always and after offering my felicitations for Diamond Jubilee when I said I am deeply indebted and grateful for the opportunity of a life time your Highness gave me, HH graciously replied "we learnt a lot from you". I was tongue tied what to say and mumbled some words and took leave.

At dinner I was seated on the table between Principal Secretary to the PM and Chief of Protocol. The latter apologized for not being able to arrange my visit to the airport to receive HH. I said to him that during my civil service along with Akram Zaki who retired as Secretary General Foreign Office, I trained over 80 Pakistan Foreign Service officers, many of whom became foreign secretaries and Ambassadors and are now retired. Don't I have even this much right on the Foreign Office to arrange my entrance to the airport to receive HH and see him off on departure. He assured me this will be done. Late at night I got a call from Deputy Protocol Officer, if I would like to see off HH when he was going to Chitral. I thanked him and requested him to arrange for me to see off HH when he is leaving Islamabad.

On December 14th foreign office protocol made all the arrangements for me and my daughter Shelley to enter the Nur Khan Base VIP lounge where I found half a dozen Ismaili couples sitting there. I did not know any of them. While we were waiting for HH, the Federal Minister arrived and sat next to me. In the meanwhile, the Ismaili guests were escorted to the tarmac.

I started conversation with the Minister, whom I had met for the first time. He was In-charge of the newly created Capital Development Ministry. When it was announced HH's motorcade was due anytime, the Minister took me along with him to receive HH. When I shook hands with HH he turned to the Minister

and said “the inspirer of AKRSP”. HH also shook hands with Shelley and promised to convey her best regards to Princess Zahra, whom Shelley had met at Gilgit on her visit.

The Minister escorted HH to the VIP lounge and foreign office protocol allowed me and Shelley also to enter there. When HH had conversed with the Minister and the HH’s personal aircraft was ready to leave I showed HH the latest newsletter of Rural Support Programme Network (RSPN) Outreach with Pakistan’s map showing how AKRSP has been replicated by eight RSPs having a presence in 137 districts and Agencies out of 148 in the whole of Pakistan, reaching over 7 million households comprising 46 million population. I also showed the World Bank evaluation of Andhra Pradesh project covering 10 million households inspired by AKRSP through South Asia Poverty Alleviation Programme. The Andhra programme resulted in 2011 Union Govt. of India launching, according to the World Bank, the largest poverty reduction programme of the world called National Rural Livelihoods Mission aimed to cover 70 million households reaching 350 million rural poor of India.

Finally, I showed HH the title page of the website of Rajiv Gandhi Memorial Charitable Trust project RGMVP whose trustees are Sonia Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi and below their names amongst advisers was my name with the following:

“A world renowned expert in rural development and winner of Ramon Magsaysay Award. His pioneering work in India with the World Bank aided Andhra Pradesh Poverty Reduction Project inspired the setting up of India’s National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM)”

After seeing these documents, HH quipped “if it is not top secret, may I have these” what more would I have asked. These were already in RSPN indigo coloured file cover. I handed over the file to HH’s staff, who was with him.

Along with the Federal Minister we waved goodbye to HH when he boarded the plane.