

Economist Dr Mahabub passes away



Dr Mahabub Hossain, one of the best known agricultural and development economists in Bangladesh and South Asia, passed away at a US hospital on Sunday after a battle with heart disease. He was 71.

He went to the US on December 15 last year for treatment. He breathed his last on the operating table at the Cleveland Clinic, Ohio, at 3:45pm US time on Sunday (2:45am Monday Bangladesh time), according to his long-time employer Brac.

Mahabub had been suffering from heart disease for the last two years. He is survived by his wife, two daughters and a son.

Before his death, Mahabub was an adviser to the executive director of Brac, the world's largest non-governmental organisation, and a distinguished professor and chairperson of economics and social science department at Brac University.

The eminent economist served as the head of social science division of the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI), executive director of Brac, and director general of Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS).

He spent 15 years (1992-2007) at the IRRI with a dual role as both researcher and administrative head.

Mahabub made substantial contributions to research on development economics and agricultural policy in South and Southeast Asia. Throughout his long career as an active researcher and research manager, he contributed to the advancement of knowledge in many fields such as agrarian structure and land reforms; rural non-farm activities; technology, credit and infrastructure policies; income distribution and poverty; and Asian rice economy.

His research based on detailed analysis of primary data collected from household level sample surveys has been instrumental in developing a deeper understanding of the operation of rural economy in general and the rice sector in particular.

Brac said it deeply mourns the sad demise of Dr Hossain.

Brac Founder and Chairperson Sir Fazle Hasan Abed said very few people globally had the depth of understanding of development issues like Dr Mahabub Hossain.

“His life was a story of success against all odds, and during his time at Brac, he had a persistent focus on creating opportunities for the poor.”

Mahabub's research over many decades on proliferation of innovation in agriculture and livelihood improvement of marginalised farmers has been path breaking, said Abed.

“We, his Brac family, mourn today this irreparable loss with his friends, family and many people he touched during his life dedicated to public service.”

In a condolence message, Nobel Laureate Prof Muhammad Yunus said, “I am deeply shocked and sad to learn about the untimely death of Dr Mahabub Hossain.”

He said, “Dr Mahabub Hossain was a brilliant scholar. His contributions in the field of economics and agricultural research were groundbreaking and far-reaching.”

Mahabub was the first scholar to study Grameen Bank and produce a highly demanded research paper on the impact of Grameen Bank, Yunus said.

“His insights in that paper were tremendously valuable to Grameen Bank as it expanded and grew. Above all, his deep commitment to social justice, his empathy for marginalised people, and his humility made him stand out as an extraordinary human being. His death is an irreplaceable loss for the country, and the global community of agricultural researchers,” said Prof Yunus.

In a statement, Bangladesh Bank Governor Atiur Rahman said Dr Mahabub was second to none in agricultural research.

He was actively involved in devising credit support and its implementation for sharecroppers in the country, said the central bank chief.

After completing his masters in economics from Dhaka University, Dr Mahabub obtained his PhD from the University of Cambridge in the UK.

He had published many research articles in international journals. Some of his seminal books are: Asian Rice Bowls A Returning Crisis, Rice Research in Asia: Progress and Prospects, Impact of Rice Research in Asia, Strategy of Development in Bangladesh, and Rural Economy and Livelihoods Insights from Bangladesh.

Mahabub was awarded the first gold medal from the Agricultural Economist Association in 1984 for contributing to the understanding of the operation of rural economy.

The Foreign Policy, an international magazine on politics and economics, featured him in its list of 500 most prominent individuals in the international arena. He was the first Bangladeshi to have achieved the fame.

Tributes also poured in on social media following the news of his death, which came just a day after his 71st birthday on January 2.

Gene Hettel, senior science editor and historian at the IRRI, wrote on his Facebook page: “Upon the passing of Mahabub Hossain, we have lost a great friend and a colleague in the realm of agricultural research.

“It was a privilege and great pleasure to know and work with him at the IRRI.”

Prof Abdul Bayes, former vice-chancellor of Jahangirnagar University, wrote: “It is very sad to convey that my most favourite Dr Mahabub Hossain died.”

Muhammad A (Rume) Ali, a noted banker, wrote: “One of the sharpest minds I have come across in my life. It is sad that we are now deprived of this intellect that could have done so much more for Bangladesh. His contribution to Brac was phenomenal.”

Alice Laborte, a scientist at the IRRI, wrote: “I learned a lot from him [Mahabub] starting in the early 1990s when I was his research assistant and as his PhD thesis student 10 years later.”

“He mentored so many researchers like me and showed fatherly compassion to everyone in the Social Sciences Division at the IRRI which he led for 15 glorious years. I will remember our visits to farmers' fields, his advice about my career and not forgetting my personal life, and his genuine interest in the welfare of rice farmers and the plight of the poor.”

Dr Mahabub was an inspiring figure who will always be remembered for his contribution to innovative, path breaking research in agricultural economics and rural development, said BIDS.

In a press release, Centre for Policy Dialogue said, "... he will be forever remembered for his brilliance in articulation of economic analysis, his path breaking research works, his leadership in agricultural innovation and above all his deep empathy for the marginalised people. This loss is irreplaceable."