



INDIA MOURNS THE DEMISE OF HIS MAJESTY ZAHIR SHAH

Minister of Water Resources Saifudin Soz (second from left) with President Karzai and other dignitaries at the funeral ceremony of Zahir Shah.

The occasion was solemn. The atmosphere was sombre. Representatives of governments from all over the world, senior officials of Government of Afghanistan and members of diplomatic corps of Kabul stood in mourning and paid homage to the departed soul at the Presidential Palace in Kabul. It was the funeral ceremony of His Majesty Zahir Shah, who passed away in the early hours of July 23, 2007 at the ripe age of 92 years.

His Majesty Zahir Shah had left his own mark in promoting the ties between the Governments as well as people of India and Afghanistan and had close association with India. He was a friend of India who enjoyed a personal rapport and close contacts with Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi. The Indira Gandhi Child Hospital in Kabul was India's gift to the Afghan people — made at Zahir Shah's request. His Majesty Zahir Shah, defying his failing health, made his presence felt, when he laid the foundation stone on August 29, 2005 in the presence of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and President Karzai for the new Parliament complex in Darul Aman, which is being built with the assistance of India.

To reflect this special relationship and respect for His Majesty Zahir Shah, India sent a high-powered team to attend the official mourning ceremony in Kabul. Led by senior Cabinet Minister Saifuddin Soz, the high-powered team included the Deputy Chairman

of Rajya Sabha (Upper House of Indian Parliament) K. Rahman Khan and Joint Secretary in the Ministry of External Affairs TCA Raghavan. Conveying his condolences on behalf of people and government of India, Minister Soz recalled the association of His Majesty Zahir Shah with India. He said "Baba-E-Millat worked for modernising of Afghanistan and India has lost a dear friend in his death. He worked for the peace and development of the region during his forty years tenure and India with the same spirit wants to stand by Afghanistan and its reconstruction."

In their special messages of condolences, President A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee recalled the contribution of Zahir Shah to building better relations between India and Afghanistan. President Kalam, in his message, said that the demise of His Majesty was an "end of era" and hoped that "his vision of friendship and cooperation" will continue to guide the relations between India and Afghanistan. Prime Minister Singh sent his profound condolences and called His Majesty Zahir Shah as "a great Afghan patriot, who always stood for peace and modernisation of Afghanistan". External Affairs Minister Mukherjee stated that Baba-e-Millat will be always remembered by people of India with great fondness and respect.

In a special gesture reserved for select few foreign dignitaries, Government of India

declared one day mourning and ordered its national flag to be lowered to half mast on all government buildings in Delhi and in all its diplomatic missions abroad on July 24.

His Majesty Zahir Shah strove continuously for Afghanistan's progress and to bring the country closer to rest of the world. It is to his credit that the 1964 Constitution was brought into effect and elections to parliament and at lower levels were held. During his time, freedom of radio and print media took roots. With his modern and progressive disposition, he did not hesitate to inject social reforms — education for women, an end to 'purdah' — despite stiff opposition from conservative elements. He also channeled the foreign assistance to develop the country's infrastructure, realising its need for long term economic growth of the country. It was during his reign, Afghans enjoyed a period of peace and stability in recent history.

Recognising his role and vision, the 2004 Constitution bestowed him with the title of "Baba-e-Millat-e-Afghanistan" (Father of the Nation of Afghanistan), a true reflection of his position in the history of Afghanistan and a deserving tribute to his contribution. With his demise, an era in the history of Afghanistan has come to an end, but his dreams for modern and strong Afghanistan will continue to influence the ongoing efforts for rebuilding Afghanistan. His memories will be cherished by many both in and outside of Afghanistan. ■