



NEWS

Martin Khor: 1951 - 2020

Gurdial Singh Nijar

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OBITUARY | Martin Khor passed away in the early hours of April 1, 2020, in Penang after a five-year formidable struggle with cancer.

Martin, you will be remembered for your commitment to things that matter most in life. From the preservation of the local environment to the global attenuation of the hazards of climate change.

Hence your crucial leadership of the Consumers Association of Penang (CAP) - which waged struggles to preserve the treasures and bounty of Penang - fighting against plans to "develop" Penang Hill, against hill slope construction, the reclamation of lands from the sea and mega- projects.

From ensuring not only the national sovereign interest but more significantly the collective integrity of developing countries. Marked by what must easily be your greatest admirable feat - inspiring the creation of developing country blocs to face developed countries in international negotiations starting from the 1992 Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit until the more recent 2010 Climate Change Agreement.

With loads of other treaty negotiations in-between. Primarily through the internationally renowned Third World Network (TWN) which you founded in 1984 together with your mentor the late SM Mohamed Idris and other international luminaries.

Martin cut a familiar figure with diplomats at the World Trade Organisation (WTO). I recall in the early 1990s he would drag me to the WTO building, overlooking the picturesque Lake Geneva, where we would sit patiently outside the negotiation room and rush to diplomats as they emerged.

To hand them sheaves of Martin's well-prepared policy arguments on each issue of fundamental concern to developing countries such as the need to limit the deleterious effects of intellectual property for medicines and the like.

Thus did his reputation grow as an indefatigable aide to developing countries, earning him welcome access to the inner caucuses of Third World governments. Aptly culminating in his appointment in 2009 as the chief of the South Centre - an intergovernmental policy research and analysis institution of developing countries head-quartered in Geneva. His term ended in 2015.

He was a constant at our ministries and agencies, reaching to the very top to push for national policy positions. I recall being invited together with Martin by the previous Pakatan Harapan government to address members of the cabinet and the attorney-general on issues relating to the ratification of the CPTPP, a trans-Pacific trade agreement.

Where he lucidly recounted the downside of the dispute settlement mechanism which could impoverish developing countries in suits brought against the government if they carried out reforms in the national interest but which corporations claimed affected their economic interests.

There are many facets and shades of Martin's life to fully grasp. Self-effacing, he pushed others to the forefront while providing intellectual research and boost. Industrious, working overnight wherever he was to ensure key materials were in the hands of decision-makers timeously.

Intellectual giant, with so many books, articles and a *Star* column to his name. Caring, always lending a helping hand or ear to those around him. Truly, a legend in his lifetime and well after.

On a personal note, just last week when his passing became imminent, I made a final request to his good wife Meena. The WhatsApp message read: "I feel you must let Martin know how inspirational he was to me and others in pursuing indefatigably his commitment to causes. He pushed buttons that no one even thought of. He brought change in ways that people in the know truly admire him for. I would tell him this myself personally but for this lockdown."

All this re-echoed in the overwhelming outpouring of grief from friends and collaborators the world over. From renowned British author Ann Pettifor, "(Martin) a powerful, brilliant and effective fighter for poorest nations' rights in global fora [...] amplifying the voice of the poor' to Finland's foreign ministry, "You leave when we need you most, but we will use your example to work even harder for a just global economy."

Martin, rest in peace.

GURDIAL SINGH NIJAR is president of the National Human Rights Society (Hakam) and a former law professor.

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