

ORAL HISTORY

Revisiting the 1972 Expulsion of Asians from Uganda

Niranjan Desai, former High Commissioner to Uganda, former Ambassador to Venezuela, Switzerland and the Vatican, then, as a young Indian Foreign Service officer, was occupying the East Africa desk at the Ministry of External Affairs during the period when the then President of Uganda, Idi Amin, expelled all Asians, majority of whom were Indian nationals or Persons of Indian Origin. Ambassador Desai describes those hectic and painful moments when he was rushed to Kampala to assist the Indians.

Indian Foreign Affairs Journal (IFAJ): Thank you, Ambassador Desai for agreeing to share with the *Journal* your memories of an important event in the Diplomatic History of India. In 1972, the Ugandan Dictator, Idi Amin, based on his whims expelled all ‘Asians’ – that included Indian Nationals and people of Indian Origin. You were heading the East Africa Desk in the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) at the time and you were rushed to assess the situation and assist in the evacuation.

You have had and continue to have intimate links with East Africa. You spent your early years in Tanzania. After joining the Indian Foreign Service, your first posting was to Kenya. You continue to have family connections in East Africa. In 1987, fifteen years after the ‘72 expulsions’ you were back in Kampala as the Indian High Commissioner.

Before we talk about the evacuation proper, and to put things in perspective, can you describe East Africa in general and Uganda in particular, during these four phases – your early life, in Kenya as junior diplomat, the Idi Amin phase, and your stint as High Commissioner in Uganda?

Niranjan Desai (ND): It is indeed an honour for me to be a part of the Oral History project of the *Journal*.

I spent the first seventeen years of my life in Tanzania. My father was a small manufacturer, manufacturing washing soap and candles for a goldmine. Life in Tanzania those days was typical of a colonial society. Society was completely segregated. The whites lived outside the town, on the hillside; the Indians lived in the town itself; the Africans were on the outskirts. There were Indian schools, African schools, and the whites used to go to schools in Nairobi. Even sports were segregated. There were separate clubs for Indians

and whites. There was a particularly interesting case of a very rich Indian, one Mr Chopra, a famous lawyer and a partner in a diamond mine, who had married a French lady. He could not become a member of the white club, though his wife was a member of the British club.

We grew up without real contact with the Africans. Only towards the end of my schooldays we started playing cricket with the African students and came to know a few of them – but frankly, I had no contacts with Africans of my age. My father decided that I should go to India for university studies. On the advice of one of his friends in the Indian Civil Service (ICS) he also desired that I should try for the civil services examination in India. Accordingly, I obtained admission at St. Stephen's College. At Delhi University I found a lot of African students. I came to know many of them as a member of the Foreign Students Association. Then, as now, foreign students were looked after by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR). (Later in service, when I became the Director General of ICCR, I tried to focus on the issues relating to foreign students.)

IFAJ: So, some form of discrimination did exist in the East African society then. How about contacts with India?

ND: I think things have changed tremendously since then. There have been more contacts between all communities. Even marriages are taking place between Indians and Africans. Those days, Indians did not have very live contacts with India too. It was difficult to even get newspapers. The only contact with India was through All India Radio (AIR). It was a done thing that you listened to AIR, especially the Gujarati service, at 7.30 in the morning and 7.30 in the evening. Pakistan also had a Gujarati service for news from Pakistan. Indians formed their own closed community, with its own subdivisions. The Ismailis, the followers of the Aga Khan, kept to themselves – they even had their own schools. The Dawoodi Bohras formed a separate group, but since they were not large in numbers, they attended the Indian schools. The Sikhs were also part of the Indian schools. Among the Hindus there were also divisions like the Patels and Lohanas. These groups did not mix except on special occasions like Diwali. I remember that when India became independent, we had a huge combined procession, but basically each group there had its own way of doing the things.

IFAJ: Let us come to the main part of our discussion – Idi Amin's order expelling all Asians, meaning people from the Indian subcontinent. You were then the Desk Officer for East Africa in the MEA. Earlier, you had a stint in Kenya. You were also allotted Swahili as the Compulsory Foreign Language

(CFL). Please walk us through as to what happened when you came to know that Idi Amin had decided to “throw all Indians out”.

ND: During those days, we had the luxury of coming home for lunch, as we were staying close to the office. It was my habit to listen to BBC during that break. One day, I heard a brief announcement in the BBC news that Amin, while addressing the troops on 4 August 1972 at Tororo, a small town bordering Kenya, had announced that he had a “dream” in which God had asked him to expel the Asians from Uganda. Of course one would not normally take Amin’s statement too seriously as he was in the habit of making tall and sweeping statements. But I did record a note on the BBC broadcast and sent it to my Joint Secretary. I, like everybody else, thought that that was the end of the matter.

Five days later, Amin called a meeting of the High Commissioners of UK, India and Pakistan to say that his decision was final and that all Asians, meaning the people of the subcontinent, would have to leave Uganda within three months. Though it did come as a surprise, initially, hardly anyone took it seriously enough.

IFAJ: Did Delhi expect that Idi Amin would change his mind in any way? Or, was Delhi not clear about what was happening?

ND: We did start taking his ultimatum a bit more seriously. Additional Secretary Ishi Rehman was in charge of East Africa at that time. He did visit Uganda, basically to see whether the whole expulsion process could be eased off or extended. But the Ugandans were very firm. Apart from some objections from Julius Nyerere of Tanzania and Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia, there seemed to be a general endorsement from the rest of Africa that this was a good thing! I think Idi Amin was quite encouraged by it.

Initial reports from our High Commissioner indicated a confused state of affairs. There was no clear indication about what the implications would be and how it would play out. We needed to formulate a strategy for which basic information was lacking. Additional Secretary Rehman asked me to proceed to Uganda and assess the situation, find out the numbers involved, what kind of problems could crop up, etc. Our Mission there did not have proper statistics of the number of Indian citizens there – leave alone those of Indian origin with British/other passports.

IFAJ: What was the proposed length of the trip and did Delhi take any immediate steps?

ND: It was to be for a week. The first thing was to ensure that the British did not evade their responsibility to British nationals of Indian origin by diverting

them to India, especially since the new Immigration Act that they had enacted in 1968 restricted the entry of British passport holders to about 1500 heads of families. Hence, the first action that the Ministry took was to impose a visa regime for British passport holder residents in Uganda so that they did not rush to India in panic, and thus let the British off the hook. The second step that the Government took was to send me there to take stock of the situation.

IFAJ: We are aware that your arrival in Uganda itself involved some drama. What exactly happened?

ND: I, accompanied by one Mr Mukherjee, Under Secretary from the Consular Division, and two assistants landed at Kampala some time late in the evening by an Air India flight. Suddenly, a few immigration officials zeroed in on us, saying that they had no information about our arrival and hence could not let us into the country. I protested that we were diplomats and that the Ugandan High Commission in Delhi had been informed about the trip. Suddenly, I saw soldiers getting restive in the background. We decided that there was no point in arguing with the gun-toting crowd, especially when this seemed to have been pre-arranged. We were asked to re-board the aircraft and told that our baggage that had been offloaded would follow. I refused to re-board unless our baggage was re-loaded. They then had the baggage loaded back into the aircraft.

The Air India flight was to stop next at Nairobi – the place of my first posting as an IFS officer, and also the country to which my wife belonged and where she had many relatives. On arrival at Nairobi, I asked the Air India official whether I could speak to our High Commissioner in Nairobi and see if I could get off there and not fly back to India. Unfortunately, the High Commissioner was out of residence on a social engagement. I spoke to the First Secretary, who expressed his inability to do anything as it was too late in the evening. I took a chance and started searching for any of the immigration officers that were known to me from my earlier posting! Fortunately, there was one. He expressed his horror that I was not allowed to land with my red (diplomatic) passport in Kampala. He agreed to make an exception in our case, and we all four were admitted into Kenya. I called my brother-in-law in Nairobi to send us transport. We stayed for three to four days in Nairobi till things at Kampala were sorted out.

But again, when we landed in Kampala after getting due permissions, we were given visa for only one day! Next morning, the High Commissioner had to talk to the Foreign Office to get our stay regularized. This was our introduction to Idi Amin's Uganda.

IFAJ: When you started from Delhi, your visit was to be for a short period – just to assess the status and then fly back to Delhi. That was not to be. How long did you stay there?

ND: I stayed for four months; and my departure from there was also not a voluntary one. I was asked to leave – expelled – which I think Amin personally made sure of.

IFAJ: Describe to us how you went about collecting statistics, formulating plans, assisting the Indians, etc. Communications must have been very difficult at that time. How did you go about first getting information and then establishing communication and in assisting them to leave?

ND: The only mode of communication then was the telephone. The telex had just come in. Within Uganda, we used the network of Indian communities there. With the help of the Indian communities in Kampala we produced a template of information on the number of people in the family, their profession, when and how they would like to leave – by air or sea, etc. We dictated this on telephone to every leader of the Indian community in the major towns. We got excellent cooperation from them. We also used AIR. During those critical three months, AIR indeed played a stellar role in disseminating information among the Indian community. Through it we were able to reach across to all the Indians far and wide. Within five days, I had the necessary statistics ready. On that basis, we were able to prepare a possible projection of travel arrangements.

IFAJ: What was the exact number of people to be evacuated?

ND: I think the total number of Indian citizens was around 10,000. The total number of Asians was about 52,000. Majority of them were British passport holders. Some were citizens. A large number of them were “stateless” – they had applied for citizenship but many were deliberately denied citizenship.

Our mission was of course to help the Indian citizens first, but there were a lot of people of Indian origin who also needed help with documentation, etc. For example, the British High Commission needed all kinds of documentation for their own nationals – birth certificate, marriage certificate, parents’ marriage certificates, etc. The vast majority of them had come to Uganda a long time earlier and they did not have proper birth and marriage certificates. This was becoming a big hurdle for them.

I rang up my counterpart at the British High Commission, John Heddings, a very decent man. He used to be the Counsellor in the British High Commission in Delhi. I told him that his Home Office required all this documentation but we had a very “wretched” government “those days” which didn’t issue these

certificates. He understood the humour and asked what I would suggest. I said that we would issue the certificates and suggested that they should accept them. He agreed. So, anybody who came for any certificates to us, we just issued them on the High Commission letterhead, with no reference number but just the date of issue. No copies were kept for record. We must have issued thousands of these certificates.

IFAJ: As the situation unfolded, you were also worried about the Indians with British passports being denied entry into the UK.

ND: We had seen this problem earlier, in 1967, in Kenya. The Kenyans had then passed two pieces of legislation: one was the Immigration Act, and the other was the Trade Licensing Act which affected a lot of Indians who were non-citizens of Kenya. So there was panic, both among the Indian community and the British-Asian community in Kenya. In Britain, there was a scare that Britain would be flooded with these East African Indians. There was a lot of pressure to “restrict/regulate” the influx and consequently the British government brought in the infamous Immigration Act of 1968, which restricted the entry into UK of British passport holders, who did not have patriarchal links with UK, to 1500 families a year, which meant that there would be a long queue because the total number of British Asians (at that time) in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania was something like 120,000 or so.

Many Indians from Kenya had left and arrived in UK before this bill became effective. That time also, the Government of India had stipulated that British Asians from Kenya would require a visa to come to India, to make sure that the British did not pass off their responsibility. Subsequently, we had an agreement with the British government that those British passport holders who wanted to go to India would be given a visa provided the British government endorsed on their passports that in case they wished to go to UK later, they would have unimpeded entry.

IFAJ: Let us get back to the evacuation proper. Once you compiled this list and had done your planning to evacuate the people, it must have been an uphill task to organize the exodus, as the local government did not cooperate with you at all, and was in fact hindering the smooth implementation of the plan. How did you go about it? What were the problems you faced?

ND: We worked out through Air India, the Shipping Corporation of India, and the East African Railways. We organized three sailings from Mombasa in Kenya and for that purpose three special trains from Kampala to Mombasa (for those who could not afford to fly), which required also the assistance and cooperation from the government of Kenya. Air India also arranged several

special flights. They were all done through our Missions there. We also arranged that they went through their customs at Kampala itself so that they did not have to face uncertainties at the border. All these issues were worked out with the Government of Uganda when Additional Secretary Rehman visited Uganda to discuss the entire issue with the government there.

After we received information that the passengers of the first special train were robbed of some of their belongings at the Uganda-Kenya border, instructions were issued by the MEA that somebody from the High Commission should accompany the second and third special trains. I and two assistants, who had come from India to assist the process, were deputed for this purpose. We boarded the second train and no untoward incident happened till we reached the border.

Around midnight when we reached the border, the local military officer told me that they would have to conduct a currency check, as the departing passengers were not allowed to take out their currency, to which I agreed. They checked every compartment and there was no problem except in one compartment where the people were deprived of their personal belongings. A Goan lady was very agitated as they had snatched her chain that had a crucifix pendant. I told the young Captain in charge that they were supposed to carry out only the currency check as the customs check had already been done. I told him to restore the confiscated belongings and until this was done, the train would not move and there would be a major protest at Kampala the next day. Fortunately, the young Captain had been to India – on training under ITEC (Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation Programme) – and he was genuinely embarrassed and sympathetic. He went to his soldiers and found that some customs officers had indeed taken away some of the belongings of the passengers. He immediately ordered and helped in returning the seized items. When I gave back the chain to the lady, she just embraced me and blessed me. That was a high point of my diplomatic career that I could bring a smile on someone's face.

Once the train passed, I had to stay back for the night, before returning to Kampala. I was slightly worried because I had to stay in a hotel very near the military barracks. There were not many guests in that hotel and I was scared that any one of the persons I had embarrassed earlier could harm me. So I invited the military officer who had helped me earlier to join me over a drink in the hotel. He was reluctant, but finally did come. We kept drinking till morning. In the morning, I drove back to the High Commission.

The third train faced no problems at all.

IFAJ: For the Indians who were deported, it must have been nerve-wrecking, as they were uprooted. How did they take the initial days and how did they reconcile later on?

ND: I think initially everyone was in shock. A lot of them had never been out of Uganda. They had spent many years there and had not even gone to the bordering countries like Kenya or Tanzania. Of course, the rich had no problem as they had already established many connections abroad.

The poor faced severe problems. They could not take their assets with them out of the country, but gradually they got reconciled to it. There were big parties everywhere. The general feeling was that since they could not carry the money with them why not blow it up in grand style! Many people gambled away their savings. They knew that they had to leave but they wanted to leave with dignity.

This also affected the attitude of the Africans toward them. Initially, they used to laugh and look down on the Asians who were being forced to leave. But when they saw that the Indians had taken it stoically, there was a new respect for the kind of quiet dignity they maintained – no panic, no lament. It was quite instructive to see this sudden change in attitude.

IFAJ: Did the local government assist you in the smooth execution of all these operations as, according to their belief, the exodus was in their interest?

ND: I would say, generally, when we asked for some help, they agreed to it.

I would like to narrate one incident, concerning the Canadians. The Canadians had agreed, after considerable lobbying by the Aga Khan, to take in about 5000 Ugandan Asians. They had arranged special flights for them at drastically reduced fares, to mitigate the unexpected hardship. Fearing that this would undercut the East African Airways, the Ugandans objected to the special fares arrangement and withheld permission. The Canadians did not take kindly to this and upstaged the Ugandans by waiving the charges entirely and took all of them free! This was not directly connected to us but I am mentioning it to describe the general mood.

IFAJ: What about the assets that the Indian community left behind – both movable and immovable?

ND: There was a secret circular issued by the Government of Uganda – which we did not know about earlier but I did get hold of a copy later – that each departing Ugandan Asian family was allowed to carry Pound Sterling 50, accompanied baggage only up to free allowance allowed by

the airlines and railways, unaccompanied baggage limited to 200 kg and personal gold jewellery per person restricted to one ring, two bangles, one necklace and a pair of earrings not exceeding 15 carats. Despite that, many departing Asians were robbed of personal effects, cash and jewellery by the soldiers manning the five roadblocks between Kampala and the airport at Entebbe, a distance of about 21 km. In some cases, the military personnel even gave receipts detailing confiscated items!

Quite a few of the departing Indians used ingenious means to get their money/assets out of the country. Those who had liquid money, booked round-the-world airfares – in the highest possible class, booked hotel accommodation through MCOs (Miscellaneous Charge Orders), etc. which they could cancel later and get back a sizable portion of the “investment”! Quite a few sent their furniture out of the country. The furniture had been modified to hold gold, cash and other valuables. Many of them also sent out their cars by road to Kenya, and some of the vehicles also, I was told, carried cash and valuables. Many sent out simple postal parcels containing valuables, hoping that they would turn up at the other end. My own sister made a parcel of her gold jewellery and posted it to London, which reached safely. Many kept their jewellery in their lockers at the Bank of Baroda branch in Kampala. The bank, which saw almost twenty years of civil wars, kept the lockers locked. Many of the Asians came back after many years and reclaimed their assets! Even during my term as High Commissioner at Kampala, fifteen years later, many came to claim their lockers. The Bank of Baroda did stellar service in this regard. I was told that some believed that this was going to be a temporary affair and buried their valuables in holes in their garden. Of course, these were lost forever.

There was another serious problem faced by rich Asian families. The government sponsored official thugs, members of the notorious State Research Bureau. They used to pick up rich Indians, beat them up and torture them for extortion and then release them on payment of hefty sums of money. A family friend of mine (he had lent me a transistor radio to listen to the news) was picked up the very afternoon after we had lunch together in a restaurant and disappeared, after which I lost all contact with him. Months later, after returning to India, I learnt that he had been picked up by these goons and was beaten up so badly that he still limps. He had to part with a sizable part of his assets before he was released.

IFAJ: Were you there till the end of the three-month deadline imposed by Amin?

ND: Yes, I oversaw the deadline, which was 8 November 1972. I had originally come for a week, but had gone through a traumatic three months. When I was preparing to leave, I got a communication from Additional Secretary Rehman that I should stay on and start work on preparing a compilation of the assets left behind by Indian citizens, so that we could make our case for compensation. At the time of departure, we had given all our nationals forms to fill, giving details of what they had left behind, like bank balance, properties, assets, etc. We had collected considerable data. It was while compiling the data that I fell foul of the Ugandan authorities.

Some of the Indian nationals had managed to get export permits to send out their personal cars from Uganda to India. They had given the task of exporting them to a forwarding company owned by the Government of Uganda. Some cars had left Uganda and were awaiting shipment from Mombasa to India. During that time, two Ugandan ministers visited Mombasa, stopped the shipment and got the cars sent back to Uganda. So the owners of the cars wrote to us requesting us that we should inquire into the matter.

When I was pursuing these cases with the forwarding company, one evening, the High Commissioner frantically called me and said that the Defence Minister wanted to see me. I was not accredited to the Mission and was purely on a temporary assignment. I told the High Commissioner that he being the Head of the Mission should see the Minister, and expressed my apprehension that I might be asked to leave Uganda. He tried to allay my fears. Next morning we both presented ourselves in the Defence Minister's office. The Minister said that he did not want to see the High Commissioner but only me. If the High Commissioner wanted to see him, he should ask for an appointment through his Secretary. I suggested to the High Commissioner to insist on being present at the meeting, otherwise he should withdraw me from the meeting. He said, "Don't worry, I'll wait for you outside."

There were a number of officials present, including the Foreign Secretary. The Minister asked rudely, "Who is this man Desai?" I said, Excellency, that's me. He showed me a letter and asked rudely, "Is that your signature?" (The letter I had written to the forwarding company regarding the car shipment issue.) By this time I was in a flippant and angry mood and replied, "Yes, it looks like mine." He said, "We have decided to ask you to leave this country because your activities are not compatible with your diplomatic status. The Foreign Office will get in touch with you. Since you are a diplomat we will give you forty-eight hours." I replied, "Excellency, I would like to know what precisely have been my activities that you object to." He asked one of his men to read out from a file brief details of them. I told him that I agreed with this

list but that these activities were done in my capacity as Consular Officer under the Vienna Convention.

He also alleged that I was abetting illegal export of cars. Denying this, I said that the Indian nationals concerned had permission from the Bank of Uganda and the case was handled by a government-owned clearing agency. Further, I was pursuing their case as per their request as a Consular Officer, mandated to look after the interests of my nationals. The Minister said abruptly, "That's enough ... you think you run the Uganda government? You are behaving like the British. You have to leave. The Foreign Office will get in touch with you." I said, fine, and walked out. At the door, I turned and said, "By the way Excellency, I wish you a Merry Christmas." (Christmas was four days away.)

I told the High Commissioner that I was going straight to the Air India office to book my flight out of Uganda. He advised me to seek clearance from the Ministry before deciding anything. I suggested to him that he could do this while I got my flight booked as I no longer felt safe in Kampala. There could be a staged accident, a frequent occurrence in the Uganda of those days. I booked my ticket. Meanwhile the High Commissioner spoke to Additional Secretary Rehman. He also advised that I shouldn't leave until there was a formal communication from the Ugandan Foreign Office. This arrived in the afternoon itself. That night I didn't go back to the hotel and spent the night with a colleague from the High Commission and next morning quietly flew to Nairobi.

IFAJ: Regarding the assets left behind, have we managed to recover some of them?

ND: There is an interesting story. Idi Amin sought an appointment with Mrs Indira Gandhi during the Non-Aligned Movement Summit in 1973 in Algiers. Amin repeatedly said that he wanted to develop good ties with India and needed India's assistance in development. Mrs Gandhi politely raised the issue of compensation for the assets left behind by the Indian citizens. Amin suggested to her to send a delegation to Uganda to sort this out. Mr Jagat Mehta, who was Additional Secretary at that time, was soon deputed to Uganda for this purpose. After very long and arduous negotiations an amount of approximately nine million dollars was agreed to as compensation. Amin was ready to give a cheque right away. Since Jagat Mehta did not have plenipotentiary powers he was not authorized to receive the cheque on behalf of the Government of India. He could not explain this technical issue to General Amin at that point, as he feared that Amin might take offence and withdraw the offer. He somehow managed to talk his way through this tricky situation

and later Mr Samarendra Kundu, then Minister of State, went to Uganda to receive the cheque. The stateless Ugandans were also similarly compensated because of UN efforts. I am not sure whether the British citizens were compensated at all. I don't think the British pursued the matter!

IFAJ: Did any of the expelled people land in India? What was the public reaction in India?

ND: The Indian nationals had no choice but to return to India. We received many complaints from them that they were treated rather badly by the customs officials although they were allowed to bring in their belongings. Surprisingly, there was no public outcry in India at this second-largest expulsion of Indians, after Burma, in independent India's history! To its eternal shame, the Indian press did not send reporters to Uganda to cover this story. Most of the reporters were from Western countries who braved a difficult situation. I particularly remember one incident involving a BBC correspondent, John Osman. One day he had gone out of Kampala to report a certain event. While returning, he was detained at a military check-post, where the soldiers actually debated how to kill him. Fortunately, a senior officer happened to pass by and intervened, and Osman was let off. I met him that afternoon in the hotel. He was trembling while recounting his ordeal to me. A few Indian commentators gratuitously wrote that the Ugandan Indians deserved their fate because, in their view, they were basically exploiters. This is patently wrong because in actual practice the white colonizers were the real exploiters.

IFAJ: How many of the big Asian families, who migrated, managed to come back? Were there many who settled in India or UK?

ND: The two big families at that time were the Madhwanis and Mehtas, who initially started sugar factories and gradually diversified into various things. At one stage, the Madhwanis accounted for about 10 per cent of Uganda's GNP. They are all back now. Many new families have gone there and a lot of Indian companies are now operating in Uganda.

IFAJ: You assisted thousands of Indians who were in distress. Thereafter did you come across any of them, during postings elsewhere or in India?

ND: Yes. To give an example: When I was posted in New York, I once visited Montreal and checked into a motel. It was owned by a Ugandan Asian who was part of the exodus. He gave us a special discount when he learnt that I had been in Uganda during those horrible days.

IFAJ: That brings us to the third phase of your association with Uganda. You were appointed High Commissioner to Uganda fifteen years later, in 1987,

when Idi Amin was no more around. However, he had been succeeded by another person who was only a shade better. Any reflections on that period?

ND: After Amin was driven out by the Tanzanians, Milton Obote came to power. During that time, some Indians did return. But Obote's second regime was also corrupt. During that time, some Indians acquired a bad reputation for making money through devious ways. Obote was overthrown by Museveni, who invited Indians back to Uganda. Many heeded this call and did return. Some of them were quite "adventurous". I know of a person who left Uganda as a small boy and worked as a mini-cab driver in UK. He returned to Uganda and started a small shop selling soft drinks and knick-knacks. But his other (main) business was converting Ugandan shillings into dollars illegally. He made a fortune from this activity: he now owns a bank in Uganda. There were a number of Sindhi boys who came around that time and traded mostly in textiles. They used to import goods from Dubai and sell and overnight convert the earnings into dollars to send their earnings out of the country. I guess, since goods were scarce at that time in Uganda, the government ignored the illegality. When I returned as High Commissioner, there were no regular shops or trading houses. One had to go to Nairobi to buy many essential needs. Twenty years of civil wars had resulted in recession: Uganda resembled the East Africa of the 1950s. Infrastructure had crumbled. I had the potholed road leading to the High Commission residence done up, using money from the High Commission. Soon after, our neighbour the Italians got their stretch done. Other Embassies followed suit. That was the state of things at that time in Kampala. Gradually, Museveni stabilized the situation and international aid agencies helped him out. Uganda is now prosperous. Uganda has struck oil!

IFAJ: Thank you once again for recollecting your eventful experiences. You did yeomen service especially during those four months in Uganda, assisting those in distress.

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