

HON'BLE FOREIGN MINISTR'S SPEECH AT THE STATESMAN'S  
FORUM AT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL  
STUDIES, WASHINGTON, DC ON MAY 23, 2002

Distinguished Chairperson  
Excellencies  
Ladies and Gentlemen

1. I am delighted to be in Washington. I bring with me the warmest greetings of our Prime Minister, Begum Khaleda Zia. I thank you all for your valued presence here.
2. Bangladesh and the United States enjoy excellent relations. Since our independence in 1971 these relations have grown in depth and dimension. They are based on shared values of democracy, human rights and a free market economy. Both our countries work together for the cause of international peace. They have extended supportive hands to each other in their hour of need. Our relationship is time-tested, it is one of mutual respect, understanding and partnership.
3. The United States is a key development partner. It continues to make significant contribution to our socio-economic development and process of democratization. Intense interaction exists between our two countries in trade and commerce, education and cultural exchanges, defense and security, people-to-people contact and on issues relating to regional and international peace and prosperity. We work very closely in various international forums including the United Nations. Bangladesh's significant role in the UN peacekeeping operations has benefited from continued US support and cooperation. In turn, Bangladesh has been supportive of the US role in maintaining global peace and security. Bangladesh was the first Muslim country outside the region to have joined the US-led coalition in the Gulf War in 1991.
4. The 11 September attack literally changed the world. Yet it brought our two countries together in larger understanding. In response to the US call for a War against Terror Bangladesh joined the International Coalition. It had no qualms identifying with the US because of its principled position rejecting terrorism in all its forms and manifestations. The identity became more potent as several members of the Bangladesh-American community were among the victims of the World Trade Center.
5. At the time of the heinous attack, Bangladesh, administered by a non-party caretaker government, was busy preparing for our general election in

October. The interim government acted swiftly. It consulted with all major political parties in the country and responded to the request for operational facilities. Use of our air space, seaport, and refueling facilities were guaranteed. Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, then Leader of the Opposition strongly supported the decision. Indeed, she personally wrote to President Bush expressing her Party's solidarity and support for the US people. On forming the government on 10 October she firmly stood by the commitment made and her telephonic discussion with President Bush reflected close understanding between Dhaka and Washington.

6. Ties were further cemented through high level visits to Washington by the former Foreign Minister now President of Bangladesh, followed by the Commerce Minister. From the US side a congressional delegation led by Rep. Joseph Crowley and Rep. Jim McDermott visited Bangladesh in January 2002. Ms. Christina Rocca, Assistant Secretary of State also had an important familiarization visit to Bangladesh in April 2002.
7. What is perhaps important to underscore here is that US interest in South Asia in the past focussed almost exclusively on India and Pakistan. It is now being borne out that Bangladesh should no longer be ignored. Its credentials are being recognized as a stable functioning democracy and moderate state, which can act as a role model among third world countries. While shoring up responsibility at home, Bangladesh has painstakingly contributed in keeping and building peace abroad. Joining the anti-terror coalition was not an act of new found faith.
8. Bangladesh, like the United States, is committed to the process leading to the establishment of a broad-based multi-ethnic, representative government in Afghanistan that will function under a written Constitution approved by the Loya Jirga two years from now. We have expressed our willingness to contribute in whatever way we can within our limitations, especially in the reconstruction and rehabilitation phase where our abundant manpower resources can be effectively utilized. Our role and technical expertise will be particularly useful in the social and humanitarian fields including, especially, non-formal primary education, primary health care, immunization, poverty alleviation and micro-credit schemes, gender mainstreaming and empowerment of women. BRAC, one of Bangladesh's largest NGOs, is already working in Afghanistan. We are also ready to assist in training and strengthening the Afghan army and police units. Bangladesh has limited capacity to participate in peace-enforcement action but we are fully prepared to participate in a non-combatant role under Chapter VI and under the aegis of UN Peace Keeping.

9. The new government of Bangladesh has taken important institutional steps to shore up democracy, consistent with its election pledges. A National Human Rights Commission is being set up. An Ombudsman is being appointed soon under a revived Ombudsman Act (1980). More powers have been delegated to the Bureau of Anti-Corruption en-route to the establishment of an Independent Anti-Corruption Commission. Measures are being taken to ensure separation of the Judiciary from the Executive. Auditing and accounting functions of the government are also being separated. The government has created a central procurement unit to ensure transparency of contracts. It has also moved to repeal all “Black” Laws that curb fundamental rights including the Public Safety Act (2000) and Special Powers Act (1974).
10. The government is thus consciously seeking to bolster responsibility and good governance through upholding the rule of law, people’s participation, freedom of the press and transparency and accountability. It is also emphasizing respect for human rights, transparent public management of resources, quick dispensation of justice, access to resources and facilities, prompt delivery of public utility service and checks against corruption. Having been in the Opposition, a cardinal charge remains to actively encourage the opposition to join the Parliament. We are committed to this purpose.
11. September 11, 2001 underscored a key lesson, the need to advance democracy, development and human rights around the world. This is so, because poverty, deprivation and bad governance breed and foster extremism. It is in this context that the government’s pre-eminent objective is poverty reduction. The priorities are to promote economic growth in which the poor can participate and improve governance. Our strategy is four-fold – a viable reform package, stimulating the private sector, enhancing the quality of development and promoting human resources development.
12. Obviously, reducing poverty requires a sustained growth rate of 7% or more to make any dent on the poverty level. A crucial thrust is to raise rural productivity because this is still the predominant sector contributing to productivity and job creation. There is however, growing consensus that development is not possible without accelerated manufacturing, service sector and export led growth. As is well known, industrial productivity in Bangladesh depends largely on knitwear and the RMG sector. Attempts are underway to diversify our export industry. To boost the economy and reach 7% growth, investment is vital. This depends on our ability to create an enabling climate and to allow competition.

13. Important steps have been taken to identify and address remedial solutions to problems in each of these sectors. Overall performance initiated by the BNP government in the last 10 years has paved the way for vital transformation in Bangladesh. There has been a real breakthrough in agricultural production, achieving food grain self-sufficiency, diversification and growth of agricultural exports. Another vital achievement is the garment miracle, which is the preserve of the private sector. There have been reasonable growth rates, drastic reduction of inflation and significant advances in the social sector that constitutes a revolution of sorts. Micro-credit, gender issues, family planning that has seen reduction of population growth below 2%, immunization, curbs on child labour, female enrollment in education underscore small but cumulative success stories. The resilience of the people have helped them overcome natural disasters. This has been accompanied by a system of predisaster planning and preparedness as well as post-disaster rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts.
14. Bangladesh's credentials for moderation and as a practical functioning democracy are highlighted by several factors. Micro-credit and women's employment is a model that can be replicated worldwide beyond the fact that the two top leaders of the country are women. Participation of women in the political process is broadening and deepening in all spheres. 14000 women were elected, for instance, to hold office in the Union Councils, the lowest tier of local government. It is significant among many other aspects that the government has undertaken a project to train 250,000 Imams (religious leaders) of rural mosques on gender sensitivity. Bangladesh's progressive outlook and example for the rest of the Muslim world could promote US objectives in the war against terrorism. This is a war that has to be sustained through painstaking economic and social change.
15. As a responsible member of the South Asian region Bangladesh believes that the peace and prosperity of the South Asian region can best be harnessed through regional cooperation among the countries of the region. President Ziaur Rahman, the founder of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, played a pioneering role in carrying forward the message of South Asian Regional Cooperation setting aside mutual suspicion and bickering left by the colonial legacy. Bangladesh has, from the inception of SAARC, persevered to promote goodwill among the member states and inspired them to rise above historical mindset and past mistrust. Bangladesh has always sought to act as a catalyst and harmonizing force.
16. The United States has enhanced its focus on South Asia to strengthen opportunities in the more open economic climate. It is our hope that Bangladesh will benefit not least because of its sustained solidarity with

the US. The combined impact of the global recession, the US TDA 2000 Act and 11<sup>th</sup> September has been devastating. 30% of our Ready Made Garment production units have closed down and 400,000 women have lost jobs. It is a fact that the failure of the RMG sector determines progress in empowering women. They have come out of their kitchen in millions and no longer are ready to go back.

17. Bangladesh is pulling itself up by its own boot-straps but it needs some help. In the final analysis, we have moved from being mere recipients of aid to becoming partners in development. We encourage the US businessmen to export more to Bangladesh. Import tariffs have been drastically reduced in line with rapid liberalization policy of the government. Bangladesh imports \$ 79 million (in 2001) worth of US cotton and fabrics making it the largest destination of these goods in South Asia. We also welcome investment for which an extensive package of incentives exists including enabling action to tackle governance problem.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

18. Bangladesh is on the march to strengthen democracy, human rights, peace and stability. It is determined to lift its image to that of a responsible and contributing member of the world community and its own region. Today, it is indeed the most stable and progressive state in our trammled region. We have held three recognizably free and fair elections. Democracy has strengthened our hands to find solutions to the problems of development. This is the most compelling security challenge facing us. Today, Bangladesh is among the few countries in South Asia that adheres to the recognition that security goes beyond the weapons a nation possesses. It extends to raising living standards and building stable and healthy democracies.

Thank you.