

Bangladesh at 50

From Resilience to Stability and Sustainability

Diplomatic World was honoured to attend the roundtable discussion organised at the Egmont Institute on occasion of the visit to Brussels of the Foreign Secretary of Bangladesh, Ambassador Masud Bin Momen.

This year Bangladesh celebrates 50 years of triumphs, which are showcased through the country's strength and perseverance. Bangladesh has made strides towards development with exceptional growth over the last several years in all facets.

Foreign Secretary Momen reminded the audience what Bangladesh has been through – facing challenges emerging from climate change, tackling COVID-19, and sheltering more than a million forcibly displaced nationals of Myanmar from the Rohingya community. It has not always been an easy road, but Bangladesh has come together as a nation to make necessary changes which have led to a quadrupling in their Gross Domestic Product; steady rises in the Human Development Index; rapid progress in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), etc.

With structural drivers such as favourable demographics, rising urbanisation, expeditious digitalisation, increasing financial inclusion and empowerment, we have every reason to be optimistic about the future prospects of Bangladesh.

Below we reproduce the speech delivered by the Foreign Secretary of Bangladesh, Ambassador Masud Bin Momen.

Bangladesh emerged on the world map 50 years ago in 1971. The new-born country started its journey with a war-ravaged economy with nearly 80 % of the population living below the poverty line and millions already perished due to a genocidal war, displacement and starvation. Our founding father Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman took up the Herculean task of rehabilitation and reconstruction along with securing international recognition for the new-born nation under the Cold War dispensation.

The immediate challenges before Bangladesh appeared so daunting and pervasive that a renowned US statesman rather infamously dismissed the country as a 'basket case'. The New York Times in 1974 dubbed Bangladesh as a 'Malthusian Nightmare' and development economists even questioned the possibility of Bangladesh's survival in the medium to long term. Frequent natural disasters, military coups, political assassinations and chronic food deficit with occasional famine-like situations perpetuated certain stereotypes about Bangladesh, that tend to persist till date.

The people of Bangladesh were, however, not prepared to concede to such dismal narratives or predictions. We earned our freedom after centuries of colonial subjugation and marginalization, and at a heavy price exacted through a cultural, economic and political struggle. There is no way we could squander away such hard-earned gains.

By dint of innate resilience, our people soldiered on and continued to defy all odds to restore democratic governance, build a solid base for the economy and manage the vagaries of nature. These are all still work in progress. But it is now evident that Bangladesh's forward trajectory is more or less secure and irreversible.

Despite having shrinking arable land, Bangladesh is now a surplus country in food grain production. It ranks among the top five to ten in the world in rice, potato, vegetables, onion, inland fisheries and certain varieties of tropical fruit production. In the backdrop of real climate change impacts, Bangladesh is now recognized as a role model in community-based disaster risk reduction and preparedness. With a population of nearly 165 million, Bangladesh has brought down the population growth rate to 0.98 % in 2021, entirely through non-coercive means. In a Muslim majority country, Bangladesh has been ranked higher compared to our South Asian neighbours in women's political and economic participation under the World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Index.

These and many such achievements were made possible due to a number of factors. From the outset, Bangladesh acknowledged the primacy of investing in its main asset, its human capital. The country became an incubator of home-grown social innovations like micro-finance, non-formal and mass primary education, community level healthcare and sanitation interventions, and broad-based social safety net programmes. The exemplary collaboration between the government and NGOs also contributed to improved and transparent service delivery at the grassroots.

The agency of women was unleashed to an extent that it became a game changer in reproductive health, in reducing child and maternal mortality, and in improving children's nutrition and school enrolment status. The entrepreneurial strength of the private sector was tapped into to give momentum to the export-led economic growth model adopted in the early 1990s. The contribution of our migrant workers in literally all parts of the globe became a mainstay of our economy with concomitant benefits at the household level.

The novel idea of a 'Digital Bangladesh' mooted by our Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina as part of her party's election pledge in 2008, set out the template for an inclusive, equitable and sustainable growth where no one should lag behind. This vision sparked the imagination of our young people in particular. With nearly 100 % power and digital connectivity now ensured across the country, the youth are venturing into many uncharted terrains as manifest by a vibrant start-up scene. We are keen to leverage the demographic and digital dividends and also to harness the

opportunities offered by the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), particularly for citizen empowerment, while remaining careful to mitigate the challenges accompanying 4IR. The strength of the country's digital architecture has experienced a test of time during the recent/ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. This, coupled with timely planning and appropriate policies, has helped us strike the fine balance between lives and livelihoods during the pandemic. It has proven yet again that any development initiative aimed at empowering people in general can yield dividends even beyond its original purpose and objectives.

In the last twelve years or so, the government and people of Bangladesh have proven their resilience again and again in the face of many unforeseen challenges. In the aftermath of the Rana Plaza disaster in 2013, Bangladesh has made significant strides in building and fire safety in the ready-made garments industry. The country is home to the highest number of green garment factories in the world, with 39 out of the top 100 factories being in Bangladesh. In the wake of the Andaman Sea crisis in 2015, we intensified our cooperation with the regional countries to combat the transnational human trafficking networks - an experience that can prove to be useful to curb the flow of irregular migrants in the Mediterranean Sea.

In a rude awakening from the terrorist attacks in the Holey Artisan Bakery in 2016, Bangladesh took decisive steps to disrupt the capacity of local operatives to launch any major onslaughts. With a 'zero tolerance' avowed by our Prime Minister, we lived up to our commitment not to allow our territory to be used for hostile activities against our neighbouring countries or others. Likewise, in response to the Bangladesh Bank cyber heist in 2016, we invested in building effective firewalls and gatekeepers that enabled us to top the South Asian countries in the Estonian e-Governance Academy Foundation's National Cybersecurity Index. During the three subsequent waves of COVID-19 pandemic in the last couple of years, we managed to defy most dire projections by minimizing fatalities with an average death rate of 1.76 % against the global average of 2.04 %, while sustaining one of the high performing economic growth rates to the tune of 5.2 %.

Indeed, Bangladesh's proven ability to learn from its lessons and experiences and to take necessary corrective or remedial measures has set us on course towards lasting stability and sustainability.

In a rather volatile Indo-Pacific context, Bangladesh now stands out as a relatively stable country both within and outside its national borders. As a proponent of regional connectivity and cooperation, we have offered our geo- strategic location on the northern apex of Bay of Bengal as a potential hub in South Asia. Bangladesh's economic growth momentum is creating a positive impact in our neighbourhood that has remained one of the underperforming parts of the world so far.

We are currently working on restoring road, rail and energy connectivity with India, Nepal and Bhutan, while also activating coastal shipping with India, Sri Lanka and Thailand in our bid to create a connecting point between South and South East Asia.

In recent years, we witness growing involvement of China, Japan and Republic of Korea in our much-needed investment and infrastructure development. We remain attuned to our national interest and sustainable development imperatives while calibrating our engagement with China's Belt and Road Initiative and Japan's Big B Initiative around the Bay of Bengal. Bangladesh has so far managed its partnerships with the various regional actors in a way to avoid being associated with any particular sphere of influence or economic arrangement. Our strong macro-economic fundamentals attest to our ability to avert any unwitting 'debt trap', where a critical balancing act in our diplomatic overtures also play a role.

Bangladesh has traditionally remained true to its principled position of seeking pacific or amicable settlement of disputes, including with our neighbours. We have settled our land and maritime boundary demarcation with India and Myanmar in a peaceful manner, including through recourse to international law. In a similar vein, we remain engaged in dialogue and diplomacy to address long pending water sharing issues with India. In the late 1990s, we had resolved a two-decade long insurgency waged by members of a major ethnic minority group, again through dialogue and understanding with the neighbouring India. In a comparable gesture, our present government extended unequivocal support to India in securing its Northeastern States.

Bangladesh's contribution as a regional stability provider is best exemplified by our offer of temporary shelter to the Rohingyas fleeing from atrocities and persecution from Myanmar's Rakhine State in subsequent phases. Bangladesh has prevented the overwhelming crisis in August 2017 from having an immediate spill-over effect in the wider region. We have, however, been sounding the warning bells for its possible security ramifications beyond our national borders. Our Western partners appear to have adopted so far a cautious approach to addressing the crisis, without being sufficiently engaged to leverage their contacts with the Myanmar civilian and military authorities.

Bangladesh holds that the Rohingya crisis has its root in Myanmar, and the solution must be found with and within Myanmar. Unless there is some forward movement soon on the question of the Rohingyas' voluntary repatriation to Rakhine State, the gang fighting, drug trafficking and targeted killings that we witness in the Cox's Bazar Rohingya camps in recent times will perhaps continue to aggravate despite the best possible preventive efforts by our law enforcement agencies. The humanitarian activities in the camps also need to be streamlined further since the situation has moved past its emergency stage. As it happens in such cases, the host communities in Cox's Bazar that were on frontline of the crisis in 2017 are getting increasingly

impatient with the prolonged situation without a definitive prospect for repatriation in sight.

Bangladesh's humanitarian diplomacy has been scaled up during the COVID-19 pandemic in response to call for support from friendly countries like India, the Maldives, Nepal, Indonesia, Lebanon and Haiti, among others. We have signalled our readiness to join hands with the UN or EU in providing humanitarian support to the Afghan people. Bangladesh's long experience and expertise in UN peacekeeping operations as the current lead contributor of troops and police have been in consonance with our Constitutional obligation to proactively contribute to international peace and security. Bangladesh maintains a sound record in disarmament and non-proliferation, lending further credence to our recent forays into nuclear power generation and outer space for peaceful purposes.

On the question of sustainability, in our own transformative manner, Bangladesh has decided to move the narrative from climate vulnerability to resilience and prosperity. Our government set up a Climate Change Trust Fund with our own resources back in 2009, without waiting for the commitments for international climate financing to be realized. Bangladesh is now widely recognized as an exemplar in climate change adaptation for many of our indigenous innovations and practices. We now host the regional hub of the Global Centre for Adaptation (GCA) which may act as a conduit for sharing our good practices in climate adaptation with other countries in a comparable situation.

During the lead up to COP26 in Glasgow next month, Bangladesh has been actively engaged - as the President of the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF) - in mobilizing international public opinion in favour of enhanced ambitions under the Paris Agreement for cumulative emission reduction towards containing the rise of global temperature by 1.5°C. We have also been advocating for securing the international climate financing commitment of USD 100 billion per year, with 50:50 distributions between adaptation and mitigation, as well as for loss and damage and protecting the lives and livelihoods of climate induced migrants.

On the domestic front, we have decided in principle to pursue a low- carbon development pathway despite our minuscule share in global carbon emission. In a widely noted move, our government has recently shelved an earlier plan to build 10 new coal-fired power plants. We have launched the Mujib Climate Prosperity Decade this year in our effort to lead by example as a climate vulnerable country. In tandem, we have started implementing the long-term Bangladesh Delta Plan 2100 aimed at building a resilient, sustainable and prosperous Delta by the end of the century.

Bangladesh is also positioning itself as a responsible actor in the global supply chain to make the "Made in Bangladesh" label a badge of honour. Following the lead of our RMG industry, we look forward to advancing on a greener industrial development trajectory and further diversifying our exports to include agro-based, electronics or

pharmaceutical products along with IT- enabled services. We have signalled our readiness to work with the European Union Member States towards a greener transition featuring, among others, climate-resilient infrastructure and climate-smart energy transmission systems. We have started making headway in collaborating with EU Member States on different aspects of circular economy, including in circular fashion.

To this effect, we are in need of enabling technologies. On this we wish to develop and expand our cooperation with the EU in the coming decades. Bangladesh's achievements in the areas of agriculture, public health and water management through the application of life-saving as well as life-enhancing technologies make a good case for value-added research and development partnerships with European institutes and experts. We feel encouraged to hear about initial efforts to commence collaboration in medical research with premiere Belgian institutions. We do believe that the European Commission's proposed talent partnerships with third countries can be conducive to enhancing such joint efforts. Bangladesh stands ready to share our development and research outcomes with other developing and least developed countries through South-South and Triangular Cooperation.

In the post-COVID-19 scenario, Bangladesh remains committed to do its part in our collective efforts to 'build back better' by forging ahead with our resolve to attain the sustainable development goals, including through building a peaceful, just, rights-based, secular and inclusive society at the national level. Our government is steadfast in combating the scourges of inequality and corruption through investment in efficient public service delivery and accountability.

Bangladesh at 50 is not just yet another milestone. It is also a mirror for what meaningful international partnerships can achieve for a nation stepping onto the realm of a brave new future. At this critical juncture, while people in Bangladesh rejoice in the strides we have made as a nation, we also remain sobered by the thoughts of the numerous hurdles we would still need to overcome. We would, however, wish to savour this moment to draw strength from the fact that we can overcome any obstacles coming our way towards realizing the vision of our political leadership to build a knowledge- driven, inclusive and prosperous economy captured by the notion of 'Sonar Bangla' – A Golden Bengal.