

## FOCUS

## Bangladeshis Need to Project Themselves Positively to the Public in the USA

## Interview with Bangladesh Ambassador to USA, Humayun Kabir

by M Anwarul Haq

**The Daily Star (DS):** How would you assess the present state of US-Bangladesh relations? What are the particular areas of cooperation that are being stressed between the two countries?

Bangladesh and the United States have traditionally enjoyed excellent bilateral relations. Apart from the fact that people of USA gave tremendous support to our liberation struggle in 1971, United States has been one of our most important partners in development. The assistance received over the years from the people and government of the United States significantly contributed to our socio-economic development. Apart from economic cooperation, our two countries have worked very closely in matters of international peace and stability. Our position against the illegal occupation of Kuwait and our participation in the multinational forces during the Persian Gulf conflict, enhanced our esteem among the Americans and the US government.

As you know, support for democracy is an essential element in the US foreign policy. After a decade of autocratic rule, restoration of democracy in Bangladesh in 1991 ushered in a new dimension in our relations with the United States of America. US invitation to former Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia soon after her assumption of office to a meeting with the US President is an indication of the US government's recognition of the free and fair election held in Bangladesh. During her visit, the then Prime Minister had an opportunity to meet with top Congressional leaders and US businessmen where she discussed ways to further strengthen the existing friendly relations between our two countries.

Present administration of President Bill Clinton is keen to see that our relations become stronger with wider cooperation in all fields. Our participation in UN Peace Keeping Operations and our active participation in Operation Restore Democracy in Haiti have taken the state of our bilateral relations to new heights. During my presentation of credentials President Bill Clinton "saluted" Bangladesh for its contributions to UN peace-keeping efforts. He also paid tributes to the "giant strides" made by Bangladesh toward democracy and economic reforms and expressed his admiration for the courage and fortitude of Bangladeshi people for democratic reforms and respect for human rights. President Clinton gave his assurance that the US would continue to encourage American companies to invest in Bangladesh and "re-emphasised" his government's commitment to assist Bangladesh's economic development process.

I strongly believe that contacts at the political leadership level is an essential element in the development of bilateral relations. Such contacts help in better appreciation and understanding of each others' view points. I therefore took the initiative of arranging meetings for our visiting leaders including the Foreign Minister, Finance Minister and the Commerce Minister with the leaders of the US Administration and the Congress. Our former Foreign Minister was invited by the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Sub-committee for Asia and Pacific of the US House of

Representatives in 1993. This was the first time that a foreign minister of Bangladesh was invited by this powerful Congressional Committee. The occasion was an unprecedented opportunity for the Foreign Minister to present Bangladesh's view points to US Congressional leaders. His statement was appreciated by the members of the committee and widened their understanding of our country. The Foreign Minister also met with Mr. Anthony Lake, the National Security Adviser and one of the closest advisers to President Clinton on foreign policy matters. During this meeting, Mr. Lake reiterated his government's happiness at the very close relationship between our two countries and assured the American government's full support to further strengthen the relationship. The former Finance Minister during several of his visits to Washington in connection with the World Bank and the IMF meetings also had opportunities to meet the political leadership of the USA which have certainly contributed to the growth in our bilateral relations. Last year I arranged a meeting with the current Chairman of the Appropriations and International Committees of the US House of Representatives for him. These were the first political level contacts with the new Republican leadership of the US Congress when the Finance Minister was able to

the US Department of Energy held the first of its kind single gas for Bangladesh. The workshop which was attended by a very high level delegation from Bangladesh acted as a catalyst for making future cooperation in this field feasible. The workshop brought in contact our policy makers with both the private and public sector people in the US in the natural gas field.

Relations between two countries cannot develop fully if efforts are confined to formal channels only. The embassy has therefore been relentless in its efforts to cultivate the friendship and goodwill of the American people and government in a more meaningful manner. One such contact resulted in developing interest in the wildlife of Bangladesh by the world renowned New York-based Bronx Zoo. The Zoo has an extensive international programme in more than 54 countries for strengthening and capacity building in wildlife conservation. Dr. Alan Rabinowitz, Director for Asia Programme is now due to visit Bangladesh in the field of wildlife conservation and development of zoos.

I have toured the US as extensively as has been possible and endeavoured to make contacts with political leaders, academics, industrialists, businessmen, cultural centres, and the American people in general. I am happy to say that I have found a treasure of

successful once we have worked out in details our gas pricing policy, we shall see total US investment in the country jump up by several hundred million dollars.

The government has put in place a sound policy framework to attract foreign investment in Bangladesh. The Industrial policy has been significantly changed. The government announced the National Petroleum Policy in July 1993 intended to stimulate investment in exploration, production, refining, marketing, and pipeline infrastructure. These policies and recent macro-economic reforms as well as the government's commitment to democratic principles and rule of law have been well appreciated by prospective investors. The sound policies are however not always being implemented on the ground. As a result, potential investment interest often do not get translated into actual investment. Investors complain that although the government has adopted sound measures like "one stop" service, in practice potential investors are shuttled around different places and the processes involved are cumbersome. In the present world when all countries are competing with each other for foreign investment, this implementation bottleneck can prove very costly.

Bangladesh Embassy in Washington, DC is vigorously disseminating in the business community information on the wide-ranging macro-economic and sectoral reforms undertaken by the government of Bangladesh and the consequent investment opportunities that now prevail. The volume of business inquiries received and cleared by the embassy is steadily growing

portray the bold economic reforms of the government and the steps taken towards strengthening of democracy in Bangladesh.

The Congress in this country has a very important role in foreign policy matters. We, at the Embassy, have thus devoted ourselves to maintain a close relationship both with the leaders and their staff. We made it a point to establish contacts with as many Congressional leaders as possible and to project our interest to them. As a result of our sustained efforts, the House Foreign Affairs Committee arranged an exclusive hearing on what was called "The Other South Asia," meaning countries in South Asia other than India and Pakistan. This was the first time in many years that Bangladesh received some focussed attention in the US Congress and in which the issues, hopes and aspirations of the people of our country were highlighted. We have tried to maintain the momentum and I have been assured by the present leadership of the Congress of their continued support. Our then Foreign Minister has formally invited Congressman Richardson to visit Bangladesh. I have also been told by the current Chairman of the House International Relations Sub-committee for Asia of his keen interest to visit Bangladesh in the near future. Such visits will no doubt be a significant step forward in our existing relationship.

Our continuous efforts in expanding areas of cooperation yielded positive results when

DS: What is the volume and nature of US investment in Bangladesh and what policies do you think would encourage more US investors to come to Bangladesh?

The current rough estimate of \$ 25 million investment in Bangladesh from USA does not correctly capture US investment interest in the country. There are 11 US-owned manufacturing companies operating in Bangladesh. Furthermore, one US-owned life insurance company, two US commercial banks operate in Bangladesh. Added to this is investment in office and transport equipment of about 10 American service sector firms. During the first Bangladesh Petroleum Investment Roundtable (BPIR) held on September 14, 1993, in Houston, Texas, USA, five companies signed memorandum of understanding with Bangladesh for exploration of oil and gas. Second BPIR is expected to be held sometime this year. Meanwhile, Occidental Oil and Gas Corporation has concluded a production sharing contract with Bangladesh, and a PSC has been signed recently and exploration work has already begun. Various US companies have also proposed to invest in Bangladesh's power sector. If negotiations between these potential US investors and the Bangladesh authorities are

goodwill for our people and our country. People in this country are very supportive of our endeavours for bettering the socio-economic condition and institutionalising of democracy in our country.

DS: What is the volume and nature of US investment in Bangladesh and what policies do you think would encourage more US investors to come to Bangladesh?

Bangladesh's export to USA is gradually on the increase. Our main export items to USA are readymade garments, knit wear, frozen food, leather and leather goods, jute goods, etc. Out of the total export, the contribution of RMG is around 75 per cent.

Our export target to USA was \$950.48 million during FY 1994-95. Against this target, our actual export to USA during FY 1994-95 was \$1181.31 million.

In order to increase exports, the following measures may be helpful: a) development of marketability of our exports through quality improvement and product diversification; b) increased participation in trade fairs in USA by our exporters; c) strengthening institutional reforms in

following a number of economic reforms undertaken to open up the economy?

The restoration of democracy and radical reforms towards development of a free and healthy private sector in Bangladesh have dramatically changed the image of Bangladesh in the US. In a recent Congressional hearing, both the Chairmen of the House Foreign Affairs Committee for Asia and Pacific and the Assistant Secretary of State of the South Asian Bureau have lauded Bangladesh's transformation from an international basket case to a country that has attained self-sufficiency in food. President Clinton praising the economic reforms of Bangladesh has said, "I believe further economic reforms will foster a vibrant and robust private sector resulting in the economic growth necessary to meet the hopes of the Bangladeshi people for a better life for their children and grandchildren."

Bangladesh is also being praised by different sections of the society for its success in population growth control programmes, notable expansion of child immunization programme and in particular rapid increase of girls enrollment in schools through such innovative programmes as Food for Education. The government's effort together with programmes of other NGOs like Grameen Bank in alleviating poverty and rehabilitation of women has had a very positive impact on the image of Bangladesh. The successful experiment of collateral-free micro-credit management in Bangladesh has drawn widespread attention in this country and has been a great positive factor in projecting the innovative character of the people of Bangladesh to which a special reference was made by President Clinton while receiving my credentials.

As I mentioned earlier our close cooperation with the United States in international peace and security have earned us a place of respect among the US leadership. The American people respect the people of Bangladesh for their courage and resilience in meeting the various challenges it faces, including that of natural calamities, from within their limited resources. Of late, they are also applauding us for great strides we have made in upgrading our indigenous disaster management capacity. I believe that the US views us today as a nation looking for a partner in development rather than a nation with an outstretched hand for handouts.

DS: What further measure could be taken to increase trade between the US and Bangladesh?

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Bangladesh to fully achieve the target of an exports led growth; d) introducing new items of export to the US market, and e) maintenance of quality and delivery schedule by the exporters.

DS: Has there been a better perception in the media about Bangladesh after Hillary Clinton's '95 tour?

As I mentioned earlier, relations between two sovereign nations become stronger with face to face contact between the leadership of the two countries. Although many of our leaders visited the United States over the years, there have not been many high level visits from the USA to Bangladesh. We have therefore urged with the leadership of this country to come to Bangladesh and to see for themselves our endeavours in uplifting the quality of the lives of our people. Our former Foreign Minister during his meeting with Mr. Anthony Lake last year raised the matter of high level visits from the USA and said that Bangladesh would be very happy to receive the American President and the First Lady. Mr. Lake said that due to preoccupations, it might not be convenient for the President to visit but a visit by the First Lady could be considered. We were really happy that Mrs. Clinton did indeed decide to visit our country.

Mrs. Clinton's visit was, in many ways, a landmark in US-Bangladesh relations. The US

land and people. I am sure President Clinton has also learnt more about our country from the experiences of his wife and daughter.

DS: What is the current view about child labour, now that Bangladesh has eliminated almost all child labour, particularly in the field of all its garment exports to the US which carry certificates that the items have not been the product of child labour?

The number of child workers in the garments sector in Bangladesh is estimated at roughly five per cent of the workforce in that sector. As a result of various measures taken by government and the BGMEA, the incidence of child labour has significantly reduced and is now virtually non-existent.

A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on the elimination of child labour from the garment industry was signed on July 4, 1995 by BGMEA, UNICEF and ILO. By signing the MoU, Bangladesh has undertaken a noble task to eliminate child labour in the garment sector in a humane and socially responsible manner.

The Textile Importers Association in USA and the apparel importers are satisfied with our decision to eliminate all child labour from the garment factories. They have, however, emphatically told us that they did not support any 'Boycott' call of Bangladeshi garments.

Bureau of South Asian Affairs in the US State Department certainly speaks of greater importance laid by the American government toward South Asia. I believe the primary focus of the Bureau is India-Pakistan relations. Non-proliferation, the Kashmir Issue, the situation in Afghanistan and human rights, promotion of democracy and development of trade and commerce. But to diffuse their mono-syllabic approach, my strategy here in talking to officials as well as policy makers has been to emphasise that in long-term strategic interest of perpetuating in historic perspective US presence in South Asia, they should widen and diversify their focus in terms of greater involvement with their huge capital and technological inventory into private sector-led economic development of the whole region. With an enabling atmosphere in terms of policy reforms, this should now be possible to have much greater interaction in trade and business development than narrow focus on some historical regional political disputes only. I have found very positive and enthusiastic response to the new way of US looking at the region from a human and sub-continental approach where all countries will benefit.

DS: Would you tell something about the Bangladeshi in the US and how they are doing in different fields?

In the last decade or so, the number of Bangladeshis living in the United States has increased manifold. Among them many have come as immigrants. There is also a successful professional group of Bangladeshis across the US. There are a number of companies owned by expatriate Bangladeshis who are doing good business locally in consultancy, construction, computer technology etc.

DS: Has there been any perceptible change in the US policy and role towards our region, particularly Bangladesh?

The US administration has created a separate department for South Asia in the State Department. What has been its main focus?

The Chairman of Asian and Pacific Affairs Sub-Committee of the US House of Representatives last year described US interest toward South Asia as "the step child" in American Foreign Policy. It is not for me to comment on the views of a US Member of Congress but I can only state that we would like to see more focussed attention of the US to our region. With the end of Cold War and the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, there was some downscaling of American interest in South Asia.

Fortunately, in recent months we are experiencing a renewed interest of the US in our region. The prime ministers of India and Pakistan have come to Washington on official visits and as a result political and economic interaction with these two countries have been re-invigorated. I am very hopeful that similar US interest in the smaller nations of the region including Bangladesh will be forthcoming. The special Congressional hearing on the "Other South Asia" should vindicate my optimism. Americans today are attracted by India as it forms the tenth largest market for them. I tell them that South Asia together could form the seventh largest market and hence it would be unwise to ignore the smaller nations. The creation of a

newly engaged in various professions and have made a positive contribution to the society. But I feel, like other ethnic Asian communities, time has come for expatriate Bangladeshis, who have money and influence, to get into the mainstream of social and political life of this country.

DS: What would you suggest for increasing contact and cooperation between the two countries?

I think I have answered this question at length in reference to other questions. I may however add that in order to increase contact and cooperation between two countries we need to continue to project ourselves positively to the public in this country. We must be able to resolve our domestic problems in a positive and constructive manner in order to prevent scaring away prospective investors and the existing US business in Bangladesh. We must also make vigorous efforts to project the new image of Bangladesh in local media, particularly specialised journals on investment, tourism etc. Frankly, the better we do at home on all fronts the more we get a better image abroad.

Under unavoidable circumstances, INTERNET could not be published today.

## The Daily Star Entertainment Guide

**Wednesday 3rd July**  
(All programmes are in local time. We recommend programmes printed in bold. There may be changes in the programmes)

**CHANNEL V**

**3:00pm** Rewind VJ Sophie 8:00 Jump Start VJ Troy 9:00 Frame by Frame 12:00noon The Vibes VJ Luke 1:00 By Demand VJ Troy 2:00 Rewind VJ Sophie 3:00 Big Bang VJ Alessandra 4:30 By Demand VJ Troy 5:30 Rewind VJ Sophie 6:30 The Vibes VJ Luke 7:30 First Day Show 8:00 Big Bang VJ Alessandra 9:30 Sipsoo Manga Kai 10:00 Speak Easy 10:30 First Day Show 11:00 Top of the Pops 11:30 The Rude VJ Troy 12:00pm BPL Oye 1:00 Hayash 2:00 By Demand VJ Troy 3:00 Big Rung VJ Alessandra 5:00 Frame 6:30

**BTV**

**3:00pm** Opening Announcement Al Quran Programme Summary 2:10 Recitation from the Geeta 3:15 Re-broadcast of Selected Programme 4:00 News in Bangla 4:15 Sports Programme 4:45 Tagore Songs 5:00 News in Bangla 5:25 Agami 6:00pm News in Bangla 6:05 Lok-Lokaya 7:00 The News 7:05 Open University 7:25 Nitter Tale Tale 8:00 News in Bangla 8:30 Chhaya Chhando 9:00 Mini Series: Shin Totsukawa Story (III) 10:00 News in English 10:30 Shasthata: Health Programme Based on Child & Mother 10:35 Upohn: 11:30 News in Bangla 11:35 Thursday's programme 11:40 Close down

**BBC**

**6:00am** BBC Newsroom inc. World Business Report/Asia Today/24 Hours 9:00 BBC World Headlines 1:05 Horizon 2:00 BBC World News 2:30 Time Out: Summer Holiday 3:00 BBC World News 3:30 Time Out: Film '96 4:00 BBC Newsdesk 6:00pm BBC World News 6:15 Panorama 7:00 BBC World News 7:15 World Business Report 7:30 BBC News Show Asia & Pacific 8:30 Time Out: Auction 9:00 BBC World Headlines 9:05 Under the Blue Flag 10:00 BBC World News 10:30 Time Out: Top Gear 11:00 The World Today 1:00 BBC World Headlines 1:05 The Tourist 2:00

**BBC World News 2:30 Time Out: Mure Rhodes Around Britain 3:00 BBC World Report inc. World Business Report/24 Hours 5:00 BBC World News 5:10 Newsnight**

**STAR PLUS**

**7:00am** Wimbledon Lawn Tennis Championships Highlights 7:30 GI Joe 8:00 Saber Rider and The Star Sheriff 8:30 The Adventures Of Black Beauty 9:00 Aerobics Oz Style 9:30 Nanny and The Professor 10:00 Mr Belvedere 10:30 Graham Kerr's Kitchen 11:00 E! Extreme Close Up Lily Tomlin 11:30 Gabrielle 12:30 Santa Barbara 1:30 The Bold & The Beautiful 2:00 The Oprah Winfrey Show 3:00 Remington Steele 4:00 Graham Kerr's Kitchen 4:30 E! Extreme Close Up Lily Tomlin 5:00 Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles 7:30 GI Joe 8:00 Saber Rider and The Star Sheriff 8:30 The Adventures Of Black Beauty 9:00 Aerobics Oz Style 9:30 Nanny and The Professor 10:00 Mr Belvedere 10:30 Graham Kerr's Kitchen 11:00 E! Extreme Close Up Lily Tomlin 11:30 Gabrielle 12:30 Santa Barbara 1:30 The Bold & The Beautiful 2:00 The Oprah Winfrey Show 3:00 Remington Steele 4:00 Graham Kerr's Kitchen 4:30 E! Extreme Close Up Lily Tomlin 5:00 Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles 7:30 GI Joe 8:00 Saber Rider and The Star Sheriff 8:30 The Adventures Of Black Beauty 9:00 Aerobics Oz Style 9:30 Nanny and The Professor 10:00 Mr Belvedere 10:30 Graham Kerr's Kitchen 11:00 E! Extreme Close Up Lily Tomlin 11:30 Gabrielle 12:30 Santa Barbara 1:30 The Bold & The Beautiful 2:00 The Oprah Winfrey Show 3:00 Remington Steele 4:00 Graham Kerr's Kitchen 4:30 E! Extreme Close Up Lily Tomlin 5:00 Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles 7:30 GI Joe 8:00 Saber Rider and The Star Sheriff 8:30 The Adventures Of Black Beauty 9:00 Aerobics Oz Style 9:30 Nanny and The Professor 10:00 Mr Belvedere 10:30 Graham Kerr's Kitchen 11:00 E! Extreme Close Up Lily Tomlin 11:30 Gabrielle 12:30 Santa Barbara 1:30 The Bold & The Beautiful 2:00 The Oprah Winfrey Show 3:00 Remington Steele 4:00 Graham Kerr's Kitchen 4:30 E! Extreme Close Up Lily Tomlin 5:00 Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles 7:30 GI Joe 8:00 Saber Rider and The Star Sheriff 8:30 The Adventures Of Black Beauty 9:00 Aerobics Oz Style 9:30 Nanny and The Professor 10:00 Mr Belvedere 10:30 Graham Kerr's Kitchen 11:00 E! Extreme Close Up Lily Tomlin 11:30 Gabrielle 12:30 Santa Barbara 1:30 The Bold & The Beautiful 2:00 The Oprah Winfrey Show 3:00 Remington Steele 4:00 Graham Kerr's Kitchen 4:30 E! Extreme Close Up Lily Tomlin 5:00 Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles 7:30 GI Joe 8:00 Saber Rider and The Star Sheriff 8:30 The Adventures Of Black Beauty 9:00 Aerobics Oz Style 9:30 Nanny and The Professor 10:00 Mr Belvedere 10:30 Graham Kerr's Kitchen 11:00 E! Extreme Close Up Lily Tomlin 11:30 Gabrielle 12:30 Santa Barbara 1:30 The Bold & The Beautiful 2:00 The Oprah Winfrey Show 3:00 Remington Steele 4:00 Graham Kerr's Kitchen 4:30 E! Extreme Close Up Lily Tomlin 5:00 Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles 7:30 GI Joe 8:00 Saber Rider and The Star Sheriff 8:30 The Adventures Of Black Beauty 9:00 Aerobics Oz Style 9:30 Nanny and The Professor 10:00 Mr Belvedere 10:30 Graham Kerr's Kitchen 11:00 E! Extreme Close Up Lily Tomlin 11:30 Gabrielle 12:30 Santa Barbara 1:30 The Bold & The Beautiful 2:00 The Oprah Winfrey Show 3:00 Remington Steele 4:00 Graham Kerr's Kitchen 4:30 E! Extreme Close Up Lily Tomlin 5:00 Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles 7:30 GI Joe 8:00 Saber Rider and The Star Sheriff 8:30 The Adventures Of Black Beauty 9:00 Aerobics Oz Style 9:30 Nanny and The Professor 10:00 Mr Belvedere 10:30 Graham Kerr's Kitchen 11:00 E! Extreme Close Up Lily Tomlin 11:30 Gabrielle 12:30