



# 40th Anniversary of Diplomatic Relationship

## The Netherlands-Bangladesh



### Message



**GOVERNMENT OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF BANGLADESH  
DHAKA**

**বৈদেশিক মন্ত্রী  
FOREIGN MINISTER**


**Message**

We are pleased to celebrate our longstanding friendship and cooperation with the Netherlands. Netherlands was among the first few countries to recognize Bangladesh at the early stage of our independence. After that, we turned a new page in our relations with the opening of our Embassy in The Hague in 1996. Over the years, the Netherlands has emerged as a valued partner in the socioeconomic development of Bangladesh. It has supported Bangladesh in building infrastructure in a number of vital areas particularly water resources and irrigation. There is mutual recognition of the fact that both our countries, being densely populated deltaic lands, have much to learn from each other in terms of knowledge, skills, technology. In recent times, overall trade and economic engagement between the two countries has made substantial advancement, particularly with deepening contacts between the private sectors. Development cooperation is burgeoning with support to newer areas such as governance. At the same time, people-to-people interaction across various fields is drawing our peoples ever closer, deepening our relations and reaffirming our commitment to peace, freedom, democracy and the rule of law. I would hope that our friendship and cooperation, built over the past four decades, would be further strengthened in the years ahead.


*Dipu Moni*

**Dr. Dipu Moni, MP**

### Message



**Message from the ambassador Alphons Hennekens on the occasion of 40 years of diplomatic relations between Bangladesh and The Netherlands**



It is a great pleasure to write a message on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Bangladesh and The Netherlands. I am pleased to celebrate this festive day with our Bangladeshi friends. Relations between Bangladesh and the Netherlands have been excellent ever since our recognition of Bangladesh's independence in 1971. Since then we have been one of Bangladesh' long-standing Development Partners. Looking at the nature and character of both our countries it is only logical that there have been such strong bonds of friendship and mutual trust for so many years. Both Bangladesh and The Netherlands are low-lying green deltas facing a constant battle against floods, and both countries have resilient people who are used to living with water as their greatest friend and biggest enemy at the same time. Today our development program of Euro 60 mln (BDT 600 crores) focuses on three sectors: water management, water supply and sanitation; food security and gender equality and SRHR-issues. Together with the Government of Bangladesh and other development partners we are committed to the harmonization and alignment of development programs. For obvious reasons the cooperation in the water sector is important to both countries. Elsewhere in this Special Supplement we are focusing on the water sector in more detail. Special attention in our programs is also given to good governance, to the role and position of women and to private sector development. Our support to promoting the equal participation of women in all spheres of life is a longstanding effort. During the past years many positive changes in the lives of women in Bangladesh have occurred but many challenges remain.

Commercial relations are developing at a rapid pace and we look forward to, for our mutual benefit, further strengthening of the economic ties. The potential of Bangladesh lies in its huge human resources potential, which can produce low-cost and high quality products and services for the global market. And this is not limited to the garment sector only; Bangladesh has much to offer in many other sectors as well (shipbuilding, pharmaceuticals, ICT, etc). The increased awareness that we have witnessed over the past years within the various industrial sectors as regards to corporate social responsibility and environmental responsibility is encouraging and should be strengthened further. In my opinion, instead of only stressing low wages, socially and environmentally responsible production will provide Bangladesh with a real and long term niche in the international market. Like Bangladesh, the Netherlands is ready to play its role on the international stage. The involvement in peace-keeping missions in different places of the world to bring stability and foster development comes to my mind foremost. Bangladesh's substantial contributions to many UN peacekeeping operations, to stabilize countries and regions, have met with praise and appreciation over the years and I want to fully associate myself with that. Finally, let me assure you that the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands at Dhaka will continue to play our active part to further strengthen the relations and build bridges between our countries.

**Alphons Hennekens**  
Ambassador of the Netherlands in Bangladesh

# The Netherlands - Bangladesh: 40 years diplomatic relations

### INTRODUCTION

The relationship between Bangladesh and The Netherlands started at the time of the independence of Bangladesh in 1971. The Netherlands was among the first countries to recognize the newly born nation. Early 1972 the Netherlands Embassy in Dhaka was established.

Dutch presence in this part of the world, however, has been traced back to the 17th century when Dutch traders arrived in these lands to establish trading posts and factories. The first Dutchmen settled in 1663 at Tejgaon and later at the Mitford area on the bank of the Buriganga, at a site known as "KutiOllandaz". In 1666 NawabShaista Khan sought material assistance from the Dutch in his war against the Arakanese. The Dutch governor of Batavia in the East Indies reportedly offered ships of war to Bengal to facilitate the transport of the Mogol's troops to Chittagong. A century later Dutch silk traders were active in another part of East Bengal, Rajshahi, and today one can still find traces of their presence there.

In Dhaka a few eighteenth century graves of Dutchmen can be found at the Christian cemetery and in Wari in Old Dhaka. Evidence of these trading contacts between the Dutch and Bengal is also found in drawings of the Dutch painter Rembrandt who owned a collection of Mughal paintings and other artifacts from the east most likely carried to Europe by the Dutch East India Company.

Over the last 40 years the relations between Bangladesh and The Netherlands have developed with particular emphasis on the support to Bangladesh's efforts in social and economic development. The overall aim of the Netherlands cooperation with Bangladesh is: "Helping improve living conditions for the poor, with particular emphasis on women through a result based coordinated effort, in an effective and efficient manner. Special attention is given to addressing accountability and transparency".

The present Netherlands program in Bangladesh is fully aligned with the National Strategy to accelerate poverty reduction. By supporting this strategy, The Netherlands' cooperation with Bangladesh focuses on water, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) along with food security. Furthermore, within all areas of activity, special attention will be given to private sector development and improving and sustaining good governance, gender equality and the environment.

Bangladesh and the Netherlands have a lot to offer to each other, also in terms of economic cooperation. Economic growth in Bangladesh has led to increased export from successful sectors, such as shipbuilding and ready-made-garments, to Europe and the Netherlands. For example, between July and November Bangladesh exported goods worth \$287 million to the Netherlands. The Netherlands plays a crucial role in transit and logistics to EU countries, through the port of Rotterdam and Schiphol airport. Vice versa, Bangladesh imports high quality materials from the Netherlands, such as machinery and technology for the medical and maritime industry. The Netherlands currently is the fifth biggest investor in Bangladesh, last year alone nine Dutch companies started operating in Bangladesh. The Netherlands is keen on expanding and deepening its economic ties with Bangladesh and the Embassy actively promotes private sector cooperation between both countries.

### Water Management

Water is crucial for Bangladesh. It determines agriculture, health, safety, economic activities, and culture. Bangladesh is both blessed as well as cursed by water. The mighty rivers of Bangladesh feed agricultural lands during the rainy season. But too much water causes floods and destruction. On the other hand shortage of rain means no crops, and then



hunger. The devastating floods and famine which savaged Bangladesh in 1974 changed the history of water management in the country: drastic improvements had to be made in order to prevent such catastrophes from happening again.

The Netherlands and Bangladesh have been working together in the water sector since 1975. Our two low lying delta countries face similar problems and can learn from each other's solutions. In the early years the cooperation focused on rehabilitation and construction of infrastructure like embankments, bridges and polders. This was needed to reduce flooding risks and enhance agriculture. These interventions proved highly successful and Bangladesh became self-sufficient in food production. However, during the 90's it was realized that the thousands of kilometers of embankments and all the equipment could not be operated and maintained effectively by the authorities alone. The citizens help was also needed. By 2000 this led to a special government regulation making participatory water management through local communities the new way to go. Also it was realized that effective water management can only be realized if there are strong government institutions to design and implement the policies.

In close coordination with the key stakeholders in Bangladesh's water sector, The Netherlands water program today focuses on: (i) participatory water management in polders in the coastal zone, (ii) river management, (iii) drinking water and sanitation in rural and urban areas and (iv) strengthening of key water institutions (BWDB, WARPO, Ministry of Water Resources).

Bangladesh is one of the five delta countries included in the Dutch Water Mondial Program and there are high expectations for this intensified bilateral cooperation in which climate adaptation through sustainable climate resilient initiatives, innovation and support for a long term (50 to 100 years) vision on a sustainable Delta Plan framework are being elaborated. The Delta Plan is supposed to act as an umbrella for all present and future activities within the water management and directly related sectors to be undertaken in an holistic manner in order to bring water safety and improve the livelihood of all Bangladesh citizens. Similar approaches have been successfully applied in The Netherlands since 1953 and more recently in a Delta Plan cooperation between Vietnam (Mekong Delta) and The Netherlands.

Besides the above mentioned, The Netherlands funds activities on trans-boundary river management and cleaner production mechanism in the industrial sector.

The Netherlands leads the local donor group that deals with water management and tries to bring all partners in the water sector together. We work intensively with the Ministry of Water Resources and the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives. We also work with BRAC and associated NGO's and with the Asian Development Bank, Worldbank, United Nations and with other donors. Together with our partners we have a

stake in around 400 million US dollars' worth of investments in the water sector in Bangladesh. And every year we disburse some 40 million US dollars in grants in our water program for Bangladesh.

Have we seen results? Take this example, the story of Rahima Begum: during a flood, Rahima lost her house and all her belongings in the Meghna River. She moved to Boyer Char near Noakhali, an area where the Dutch-Bangla Char Development and Settlement Project (CDSP) is operating. With help of CDSP Rahima was trained as a ShasthaShebika (community health worker). She earns now a small salary. But more importantly, Rahima has become the proud owner of a piece of land providing extra income, with a title deed on her own name. Her family can now grow the traditional crops to feed themselves, and receives training on new crops and how to sell these for a profit! In this way, and in other manners, The Netherlands and Bangladesh will continue to fight the fight of improving the life of the people of Bangladesh through better water management.

Other important areas supported by the Netherlands in Bangladesh include:

### Sexual and reproductive health and rights

The Netherlands' development cooperation with Bangladesh in the area of sexual and reproductive health and rights focuses on increasing awareness, demand and utilisation of services and the improvement of service delivery to meet the unmet need for contraception. Emphasis is given to advocacy about family planning that will influence



policy and improve ties between the government and the private sector.

The political dialogue focuses on supporting the Bangladesh Ministry of Health and Family Welfare to strengthen sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) within the health policy and the health system. The Netherlands contribution aims to improve and increase awareness of topics such as menstrual regulation (MR), violence against women (VAW) and youth sexuality. The program looks for ways to promote new strategies for effective implementation by sharing Dutch knowledge and expertise.

In all our activities the role and position of women and girls receive special attention aiming to ensure their basic human rights as citizens of this country. This means among others that we try to make sure that women are sufficiently participating in Water Management Groups and School Management Committees; that the latter have an eye for the specific problems girls face when going to school and that health systems are not neglecting the specific needs of women and girls. International evidence shows that sustainable economic growth and good governance is strongly promoted when women are allowed to play an active part in economic, social and political life and to enjoy equal rights as men.

### Food security

The Netherlands program on food security aligns with the national food security plan of Bangladesh. The overarching goals are improving access to healthy food and fostering sustainable production.

The Netherlands uses two entry points for its food security program: i) connecting food security interventions to the water sector, an area in which we have a strong recognition and deep experience in Bangladesh and ii) food security in relation to trade (import and export). In line with Bangladesh's country investment plan which acts as a road map towards investment in agriculture, food security and nutrition, four areas of cooperation have been established: i) improved water resource management and infrastructure for irrigation purposes, ii) fisheries and aquaculture development, iii) livestock development and iv) food safety and quality improvement.

The program adds value by sharing Dutch knowledge and expertise, and concentrates on identifying investment and trade opportunities, for example in logistics (cold and dry chains, food storage and preservation). The main goals are strengthening producers, integrating smallholders in the value chains and helping provide farmers access to rural infrastructure.

### Governance

At the sectoral level (education, health and water), enhancing participation, accountability and transparency is a key objective: communities have a better voice in water management through Water Management Organisations; parents are active in School Management Committees and Women Support Groups are set up to act as watchdogs to ensure maternal and neonatal care.

At the central level, Bangladesh is facing many challenges including upholding the rule of law, protecting human rights and human security and promoting a democratic system of governance within which elected representatives of the people work in transparent and accountable ways. Dealing with these challenges requires a concerted effort and a commitment by all.

Meeting basic needs and improving livelihoods of vulnerable and poor people require interventions that have sustainable outcomes. The Netherlands is working together with the Government, civil society and the private sector to ensure stronger governance and more effective democratic structures.

### Private sector

Private sector development (PSD) is a crucial element in achieving sustainable poverty reduction. A strong and vibrant private sector is the engine for economic growth. Economic growth alone, however, is not enough. What is needed is pro-poor growth. Pro-poor growth is a high growth rate in combination with a pattern of growth that enables the poor to increase their income and to take advantage of these opportunities. The conditions for PSD and pro-poor growth are influenced by five factors: economic governance and reform, access to markets, access to finance, quality of infrastructure and human capacities.

Together, these five factors make up for the business enabling environment in a country. We already support a number of activities which contribute towards improving this enabling environment. For instance, the Netherlands provides financial support to the Katalyst Market Development Program, which focuses on strengthening small and medium businesses, activities to enhance CSR awareness and behaviour and female entrepreneurship, and activities that tackle critical constraints that need to be addressed to create an enabling environment.



## Dutch-Bangla Chamber of Commerce & Industry (DBCCI)

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