

BOTTOM LINE

Clinton's visit to Bangladesh: A long-awaited one

New windows of opportunity?



BARRISTER HARUN UR RASHID

THE US Secretary of State, Hillary Rodham Clinton, is to visit three Asian countries—China, India and Bangladesh—from May 3 and is scheduled to reach Bangladesh May 5. The visit is a long-awaited one and

is to be welcomed. The Secretary of State is no stranger to Bangladesh as she visited the country in 1996 as being the First Lady at the invitation of the Grameen Bank. Upon her return she wrote moving descriptions of her visit and encounters with the rural women here. She is popular among the people of Bangladesh because of her continued support for the country.

The US Ambassador Dan Mozena in early 2012 reportedly said at his maiden press conference at the American Club in Dhaka that his country was considering reaching a strategic partnership with Bangladesh during Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's visit to Dhaka. "This is my goal, this is my dream," Washington considers Bangladesh 'a huge country' and an immensely important one, Mozena added, "Bangladesh is also a critical player for global security and food security."

Strategic partnership is based on long-term shared strategic vision, based on convergence of strategic interests, mutual trust, confidence in each other and respect for each others strategic sensitivities.

The relations reached its peak when President Clinton visited Bangladesh on March 20, 2000, for a day, the first ever visit by the US President and the visit re-energised bilateral relations on a new direction.

Bangladesh cannot remain outside the influence of the US. The presence of US multinationals in the country is visible. The Coca-Cola, KFC, Pizza Hut and McDonald's culture have reached us here and their television shows and Hollywood films have carried US values and aspirations into millions of homes.

Bangladesh-US relations are many-sided and cover almost all areas of bilateral relations. The regular contacts between the US administration and Bangladesh governments continue at various levels to grow in dimension and depth. Bilateral relationship is based on an understanding of each other's interests and benefits.

A centerpiece of the bilateral relationship is a US aid programme. However both the countries have recently given more emphasis on economic cooperation rather than on aid and assistance. The cooperation and assistance provided by US all these years and, in return; the support given by Bangladesh to the US, has greatly helped in cementing the bond between the two nations.

Last October, Bangladesh Foreign Minister Dr. Dipu Moni met the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and underscored the need of government's commitment to further strengthen bilateral relations.

This was the first foreign ministerial-level meeting since dissatisfaction was expressed by the US over removal of noble laureate Muhammad Yunus from the position of

Managing Director of the Grameen Bank. The US has already provided more than \$5.8 billion over the years to Bangladesh. On April 9, USAID committed \$40 million grant over the next five years to support the health sector development programme in Bangladesh.

On economic relations, the potentials are yet to be blossomed. The total investment by the US entrepreneurs is only \$1 billion by February 2012 and it could be much higher.

During 2010-11, Bangladesh export earning from the US stood at US\$ 4.59 billion constituting 25% of the total exports and imported from the US goods that was worth about \$1.09 billion.

It has been recently reported that after a long delay and negotiations, the two countries are to sign the Trade Investment Cooperation Framework Agreement (TICFA) which will be a forum between US and Bangladesh on trade and investment.

The US policy towards Bangladesh as reported in 2009 by the then US Ambassador is based on the 'Three D's' Democracy, Development and Denial of Space for Terrorism and continues to be so. Bangladesh agrees with the broad thrust of the policy as

Andrew J. Shapiro while Bangladesh delegation was led by Additional Foreign Secretary.

Bangladesh may raise, among others, the following issues with the US Secretary of State:

- Bangladesh may get duty-free and quota-free access for its garment products into the US market as a LDC and currently has to pay US tariff of 15-30%, although the US offers duty free facilities to the Caribbean and African LDCs,
- Bangladesh needs to get assistance from US Millennium Fund (Millennium Challenge Account) so as to help achieve Millennium Development Goals,
- The US may increase the Official Development Assistance to reach the UN target of 0.7% of GDP as it has been amongst the lowest (in 2010, only 0.20%) in terms of meeting the UN target,
- Bangladesh is the most vulnerable country due to global climate change and needs funds from the US for adaptation and mitigation programmes, and
- A convicted killer of Bangabandhu Lt. Col (ret'd) M. Rashed Chowdhury who has been living in the US is sent back to Bangladesh. The Bangladesh foreign minister sometime

ago reportedly sent a letter through diplomatic channel to the Secretary of State to seek help to deport the killer to Bangladesh to meet justice.

The strength of relationship between Bangladesh and the US relies on the capacity to adapt to changing circumstances during the last forty years.

Finally on Bangladesh-US relationship, in January, the US Ambassador Mozena reportedly said: "America's partnership with Bangladesh is multifaceted [...] I have come to Bangladesh to further broaden, deepen and strengthen this partnership, and I commit myself to do everything that I can to this end." We all hope the visit of the US Secretary of State will be productive in concrete terms for the people of this country.

The US delegation was led by Assistant Secretary of State for Political-Military Affairs

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M. SHOEB CHOWDHURY

BANGLADESH has been of little relevance in the past to the US. However the rapid changes in the global landscape and Bangladesh's geographical location is being considered to be of strategic interest to the pentagon and state department.

Given the geographical location of Bangladesh situated between South and South East Asia Bangladesh is in an advantaged position to serve as a launching pad from which America might like to checkmate the growing economic and military power of China.

Hillary's visit to Dhaka may be the first step in a series of transactions that will have significant bearing on future US activities in the continent of Asia. This visit could help American leadership to solve some of the global and local global problems -- the violent extremism, climate change, eradicating poverty and political instability -- that

Bangladesh faces. Dhaka needs an effective international cooperation to ensure its MDGs or achieve the visions of 2021. But the international cooperation to Bangladesh is not in the right track due to the incidence of corruption.

The conflict with the World Bank on the construction of Padma Bridge is an example which makes it harder for the ruling party's 'Vision 2021.' I believe US secretary of state Hillary Clinton

can play a vital role of mobilising action for the help of Bangladesh's international cooperation.

In this region, the politics of terror is a threat to its social order. The rise of internet at the turn of the millennium is creating new dimension, e-commerce or online dependability makes a socio-economic revolution in modern human lives. But the cyber attacks against government agencies and business in the world continue to rise, and cyber threats will one day surpass the danger of terrorism to the global intelligence community threat. It was very evident by a regular cyber attacks by the Chinese and Indian hackers. Bangladesh is not too behind in this regard.

Regarding terrorism, Hillary Clinton

rightly said "we recognise the threat that terrorism poses to people everywhere. We understand terrorism is not a new phenomenon, but, unfortunately, given advances in technology and communication and travel and so many other of the ways we live together today, terrorism has become truly global and, unfortunately, an ongoing threat to us all."

In this connection, Hillary is likely to discuss, with the political and military leadership in Bangladesh, ways to combat terrorism and extremism; particularly against the Islamic militants

groups. This visit may assist Bangladesh with the necessary support to continue its counterterrorism and counterinsurgency campaigns.

The US intends to see Bangladesh, a moderate Muslim country, continue its social and economic progress marginalising extremists' thoughts. So, political and economic stability in the country is the key to pursuit of the goal.

Trade might also be in the agenda. The US wants to sign a trade and commerce pact with Bangladesh, known as TIFA, to expedite trade flows between the two countries as well as protecting US business interest in Bangladesh.

However, there is little information on Dhaka's preparation to sign the proposed treaty.

The US secretary of state could also strongly emphasis on the peaceful democratic process to pacify the political instability in Bangladesh. Since the democratic transition in 1990s, the US rendered a strong support to consolidate the process and in the past the major political parties in Bangladesh sought its help when the country saw some occasional slips from the democratic process.

Finally, Hillary Clinton like many international personalities, is very much concerned about the recent incident concerning Nobel laureate professor Muhammad Yunus and the Grameen Bank. She is an effective supporter of microcredit and its pioneer Muhammad Yunus. This visit may help making a closer relation with the government of Bangladesh and Professor Yunus and the Grameen bank.

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Why midwives?

ARTHUR ERKEN

TODAY is the International Day of the Midwife! You might wonder, what is a "midwife?" And, why is there even a special international day celebrating them? I will explain, but before I do that, let me first talk about something totally different: airplane pilots!

Anyone who enters an airplane knows there is a pilot in the cockpit; someone who has been thoroughly trained in how to fly an airplane, who can manoeuvre the plane, who knows how to deal with emergencies, in short, someone who is responsible for our well-being and lives during the flight. We feel confident that the pilot in our plane has undertaken the right education, received the right supervision and training, and now possess the experience and skills to take us safely from one airport to the other. We also know that the pilot will have conducted regular (refresher) trainings and quality assessments according to international standards to be able to continue his or her work. So, a pilot is a professional, with the right education and training. None of us would ever consider entering a plane if we weren't assured of this.

What has that to do with midwives? In Bangladesh, the maternal mortality ratio dropped by a whopping 40% in the last 10 years, the risk of a maternal death is now down to 1 in 500 births, and thus a rare event! By any standards, this is a remarkable achievement! But still, more than 20 women

lose their lives each day when giving birth! Approximately 15% of all deliveries may develop complications. However, our ability to predict which woman may experience potentially fatal obstetric complications is poor, and that is why all women should deliver with the assistance of a skilled birth attendant to identify and manage complications and/or refer her to a better equipped health facility. Still, out of every three pregnant women, two are delivering at home; many of them assisted by an untrained, unsupervised "provider," often a traditional birth attendant, locally known as "dai." Many maternal deaths occur to young women lacking the access to a skilled provider at birth. Isn't it strange then that when it comes to flying, we expect a trained pilot in the cockpit, but when it comes to delivering our babies, we let our women be assisted by an unskilled, untrained "provider?"

You may ask, if maternal mortality decreased by 40% over the last 10 years, why do we still need midwives? Quite simple: to go the last mile in order to achieve the Millennium Development Goals 4 and 5, global evidence suggests that investment in midwives is the only sure way of further decreasing maternal mortality. A midwife

has many similarities to a pilot. A midwife is a highly skilled professional who is responsible for women and children's health and well-being when providing reproductive and maternal health care. She has to know how to communicate with expecting mothers, their families, and other health care providers to provide quality care.

Communities trust her with the lives of wives, mothers and children, relying on

standards. This is a significant and highly commendable step in the right direction towards achieving MDGs 4 and 5 by 2015. So far, 180 midwives have graduated, out of a target of 3,000 by 2015. Still a small number, but this represents an important milestone towards improving maternal and neonatal health care in Bangladesh. This initiative followed Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's Commitment to Maternal and Child Health that she presented during the 2010 MDG Summit in New York. The initiative to educate midwives in accordance with international standards illustrates a strong national commitment to save the lives of our mothers. But beyond that, the other real significance of this commitment lies in the fact that the standards and quality of midwives are not negotiable!

By providing a trained and strengthened faculty for the midwifery programme and developing a curriculum according to the standards set by the International Confederation of Midwives (ICM) for the education of midwives, Bangladeshi midwives will be as professional as those in other countries. The government has also taken the lead in strengthening the regulatory body for midwives. Regulation is not only needed for the practice of midwives, it

is also to assure society of the quality of care that midwives provide. This regulation is important, as it will mean that anybody who is not trained/educated in accordance with these standards cannot use the title of "midwife," or practice as a "midwife." In the same way a pilot cannot take shortcuts in his or her training without putting the lives of others at risk, no shortcuts can be taken when training midwives. Should we confuse the capacity of someone to provide midwifery services as being a "certified midwife," we would be committing the same error as calling someone a "doctor" only because he or she has doctor-related skills. So, in future, when a woman seeks health care services from a midwife, she is guaranteed a high quality care.

Today, countries all over the world are observing and learning from Bangladesh and its approach to midwifery development. This gives it a golden opportunity to set the standard of what constitutes good maternal health care for women in the region. But most importantly, by investing in midwives, the country is developing the most sustainable solution for battling maternal mortality and morbidity for many generations to come. We salute Bangladesh for taking this bold and courageous step towards investing in midwives. Congratulations and Happy International Day of the Midwife!

The writer is UNFPA Representative.

Regarding terrorism, Hillary Clinton