

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

# 'Hilary Clinton's visit has remarkable opportunities but challenges too'

*Professor Dilara Chowdhury of the Department of Governance and Politics, Jahangirnagar University, talks to A.B.M Shamsud Doza of The Daily Star on the recent three high-profile visits.*

The Daily Star (TDS): What is your assessment of the successive visits of Mrs. Hilary Clinton, Pranab Mukherjee and the deputy prime minister of Japan? Professor Dilara Chowdhury (DC): All these visits by the foreign dignitaries are very important for Bangladesh in the context that all these visitors are very influential in their respective countries.

Japan is the Bangladesh's largest bilateral donor and the deputy prime minister is the highest ranking dignitary from Japan in the recent past. We do not have any irritants with Japan. They are donors; they help us in our development. So from that point of view, it is significant that Japan will continue its support to Bangladesh.

Hilary Clinton's visit was not only important but also very significant. Bangladesh did not invite her, she sort of said: "I want to go to Bangladesh from China on my way to Kolkata." But this visit is the culmination of what has been happening in Washington. In Washington, Bangladesh's geostrategic importance has been recently recognized by Washington. The Congressional research report has recently highlighted this fact very poignantly. In the Congress, Bangladesh's geo-strategic importance has also been highlighted. Now, America has been paying renewed attention to Bangladesh as a partner because of its own interests, which are also beneficial for Bangladesh.

TDS: Please elaborate what those interests are. DC: Number one, Bangladesh is a Muslim country. And to have a Muslim country on its side is very important because it shows that America does not hate Islam. In the past, to keep this image in the Muslim world, America wanted Bangladesh's soldiers in Iraq's reconstruction and had Bangladesh agreed to send the soldiers, USA's image in the Muslim world would have enhanced.

Number two, Bangladesh has very enthusiastically joined in America's war on terror. When the 9/11 happened we gave them all facilities, air, land, everything, irrespective of BNP or Awami League. Also domestically, especially the present government, is cracking down on the radical Islamic elements or those who believe in political Islam. These actions serve USA's national interests.

Thirdly, America really wants to see a functional democracy in Bangladesh and we also want democracy. So they are mutually beneficial.

Lastly, through this visit our existing relationship

with the USA has been upgraded, in the sense that now we have a framework, and will have partnership dialogue with the US every year. That is very important because we can raise a lot of issues at this partnership dialogue with the top level, which we usually do when our foreign minister or ambassadors meet -- but those are random. This is an institutional arrangement. We can raise the issue of duty free access of garments to US market, we can raise the issue of Millennium Challenge Fund that will be very beneficial to Bangladesh and the return of self-confessed killer of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. These are all very good for Bangladesh. But I feel as a student of political science and international relations that this strategic partnership with the US poses very good opportunities for Bangladesh as well as big challenges. Security analysts foresee a crystallization of great power alignments in the Indian Ocean with regard to who is going to control the sea lanes. Russia and China have seemingly aligned in this regard, especially with regard to South China Sea. India and the US are also seemingly coming together. For Bangladesh, to join or not to join an alignment when it really emerges is going to be a big challenge. Are we going to get benefits from joining alignments or shall we benefit if we remain neutral? We have keep in mind that both India and China are our friends. We would not like to offend China nor do we want to offend India. And, of course, USA is our very good and supporting friend. Our development partner. That is where I think Bangladesh has to face a big challenge. Whether Bangladesh will be able to handle this kind of strategic dilemma is a big question. However, at this point, we are not sure about exactly will be USA's intentions are. Best to watch and then act keeping in mind that non-alignment is the corner stone of our foreign policy. Many countries have used their geo-strategic importance to further their national interests whereas many have faced tremendous difficulties. Bangladesh must also use its geo-strategic importance for enhancing our national security and interests.

How best can we use these opportunities will depend on how we act as a nation. We must unite. Unless we have a united stand on the issues which are so significant that they may affect our sovereignty and our survival, we will not be able to handle them. And, of course, we must have a functional democracy, and good governance. For example, through duty free

access of our garments to American market (if it is granted) we will earn a lot of foreign exchange, which, to some extent we done through competition, but there is equitable distribution and because of this increasing discrimination the society will become more volatile. A society's fabric will be more affected if there good governance is absent. So, we must listen to US Foreign Minister Hillary Clinton when she said that we in Bangladesh must row our boat in the same direction because we all are in the same boat. BNP going in one direction and Awami League in the opposite direction will sink the boat. I hope, Bangladesh must face the challenges and make the best of the opportunities that have been presented to us during Mrs. Clinton's visit.

TDS: What about Pranab Mukherjee's visit?

DC: Although Pranab Mukherjee is a very influential member of Union Cabinet and a close friend of Bangladesh, I had little hope about directions to solve the irritants we with India, as speculated by the newspapers. My understanding had been that he would be in no position to deliver us anything, because the decision making in India has to go through a process. He was not here to deliver any message from the Government of India. He was basically here to attend the closing ceremony of Tagore's 150th Birth Anniversary. But he did try to allay Bangladesh's anxiety. About Teesta, he said that they were going to try to have a national consensus about sharing of Teesta water. In that case, my question is why a consensus about Teesta only? There should be a national consensus with regard to water sharing of all the common rivers. Bangladesh government could have asked for more detail about it. So, it seem that we really did not get anything concrete from Mr. Pranab Mukherjee's recent visit except that out of \$1 billion loan \$200 million would be an outright grant. But is it just peanuts? However, it was a friendly visit and we have welcomed him with open heart. But as a citizen of Bangladesh I am disappointed.

TDS: How do you evaluate India's view on river inter-linking project that they would link their national rivers only?

DC: Bangladesh government could have asked for more clarifications about what India exactly means by national rivers. Keep this mind that during the Pakistan period, while the negotiation was going on between the then Pakistan government and India with regard to Ganges water sharing, from 1952 till 1960, India claimed Ganges as its national river and did not recognize it as an international river. So what are these national rivers? How are they going to connect them? These questions could have been raised by Bangladesh.

TDS : Thank you

DC: Thank you too.

## The disappeared ones, when will they reappear?

REAZ AHMAD

THERE has been a growing concern over people disappearing in Bangladesh in recent months.

Such incidents of mysterious disappearances, gradually in higher frequencies, have cast a chill over the general citizenry.

Of course, these are the occasions when parties on both sides of Bangladesh's political divide are perennially known to have never missed out any opportunities to score over each other. The tirades of the blame games are very much on as general members of the public continue to wonder what happened to all those missing souls.

Statistics are staggering. Local rights group Ain-O-Salish Kendra (ASK) reckons that at least 22 people have disappeared this year while another rights body, Odhikar, says more than 50 people have disappeared since 2010. Odhikar and ASK in their reports largely blame police, Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) and intelligence agencies for the disappearances.

There may be debates over the "disappearance" and "missing" figures. Politicians have all the solace and justifications that they get by showing comparative statistics -- a typical tendency of proving one regime more tyrannical over the other and vice versa. But for us, the ordinary members of this republic, this has never been and nor is today a mere number game. Every life is precious and not to be wasted.

It does not really make much difference if the figure is 30 instead of 20 or 40 rather than 50. It's just a question of intensity. But the phenomenon of people disappearing remains as dreadful as ever for every family that lost someone from its midst.

In recent weeks, the concern over people disappearing also grabbed world attentions with different global rights bodies also raising the alarm bells for holding proper probes in each of these mysterious cases of disappearances.

The New York-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) and London-based Amnesty International (AI) expressed concerns both over the incidents of disappearances as well as the subsequent casualties caused during opposition-sponsored nationwide shutdowns to protest disappearance of a BNP leader and his driver recently.

Security agencies including the elite anti-crime force Rab have been blamed for many disappearances, but the agencies deny the allegations. Even weeks before the BNP Sylhet unit chief and ex-student leader Ilias Ali went missing, at least two other activists of the BNP-supported student body -- JCD -- from Sylhet region apparently disappeared from Dhaka as they came to the capital to seek bail in a case. Though the families concerned pointed fingers at law enforcers, the later categorically put out disclaimers.

HRW noted the rise in disappearances, particularly of opposition members and activists, required a credible and independent investigation and added that the government had taken no serious steps to ensure such an investigation of these disappearances, or to prevent them in the first place. It said it has long documented abductions and killings by Bangladeshi security forces, especially by the Rab, which has earned praise because of its fight against some radical Islamic groups in recent years.

Amnesty was particularly critical of the government's stance of ordering probe on one hand and passing remarks on the other that potentially jeopardise the prospect of a fair probe.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has called on police to investigate the disappearance of Ilias Ali and his driver. Paradoxically, she also stated that the two men chose to go into hiding to "create an issue." "Why did the prime minister order an inquiry, but then claim she knows what has happened? Any inquiry will be credible only if it is independent and free from police and political involvement -- otherwise it risks simply toeing the police line," an Amnesty official noted. What appears to be more mind-boggling is our law enforcers' poor success rate in tracking down the disappeared ones -- dead or alive. Had they been able to solve the "missing" riddles and get back at least a few of those who were missing, it would work as a confidence-booster. People would have at least understood that there was hope.

Except a couple of cases where the ones who had disappeared have got back to their people, the overwhelming majority (of disappeared persons) still remained untraced in recent weeks. This phenomenon has largely contributed in eroding public confidence on the ability, sincerity, and political will of the authorities concerned, on whom people generally tend to keep faith.

Newspaper reports have it all -- how every other day a mutilated body is being recovered from places like dustbins in Chittagong to the shores of Buriganga. In many of the cases such bodies of poor souls with missing limbs and in decomposed state are being buried without anyone knowing their identities.

This is really a very unfortunate situation, with families losing their dear ones on one hand, and bodies of unidentified people being recovered and buried traceless on the other. Here, what is missing is the capacity to act fast after every case of disappearance and tracking them down before they perish.

We don't want our state apparatus to fail in solving the current spate of "disappearance" and "enforced disappearance" riddles. If the state fails, we'll also fail collectively in preserving our rights to existence, not to speak of other basic human rights. Then we'll have only the almighty god to seek succor from for reappearance of the disappeared ones.

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BOTTOM LINE

## Bangladesh-South Korea friendship



BARRISTER HARUN UR RASHID

MAY 12 of this year marks the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of establishment of diplomatic relations between Bangladesh and the Republic of Korea (South Korea).

On this day in 1972, South Korea recognised Bangladesh and in March 1975 opened its diplomatic mission in Dhaka, and Bangladesh opened its

diplomatic mission in February 1987.

South Korea has been one of the "economic tigers" in the region. Its economic growth during the last two decades has been phenomenal. Per capital income of the population is about \$28,000 (2010).

In recent years, South Korea's profile in international field has been raised in many directions: First, it was the host of G-20 meeting in November, 2010. Second, it held a nuclear security summit on March 26-27 which was attended by US President Barack Obama and 50 other world leaders. Third, the current Secretary General of the UN is a South Korean national, and finally the World Bank president-elect is a South Korean born American, Dr. Jim Yong Kim.

Relations between Bangladesh and South Korea have been characterised by mutual trust, confidence and support. South Korea is a significant development partner of Bangladesh and many infrastructures are being built by South Korean contractors.

Perhaps the most encouraging development in bilateral relations is the growing relationship between the private sectors of the two countries. South Korea's investment and business opportunities in Bangladesh are on the increase.

Since 1973, Bangladesh and South Korea have concluded agreements on trade and economic cooperation, cultural exchanges, promotion and protection of investments, and scientific and technological cooperation.

South Korea's prime minister visited Bangladesh in September, 1994 and in November 2002 to strengthen economic co-operation between the two countries.

In June 2007, Bangladesh signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with South Korea on recruitment of workforce under a new arrangement styled Employment Permit System (EPS). Under the EPS, South Korea will recruit about 50,000 skilled workers from 14 countries, including Bangladesh. The estimated 10,000 skilled workers of Bangladesh would be drawn from four categories -- construction, manufacture, services,

and agriculture, fisheries and livestock.

South Korea invested substantially in Bangladesh in ready-made garments, textiles, tanning and shoe factories. Many joint ventures in Bangladesh's Export Processing Zones (EPZ) have been set up by the Koreans and an EPZ will be earmarked for South Korea in future.

In 2008, 75% of total tariffs were opened for Bangladesh. In 2009, the coverage was expanded to 80% with the addition of 253 products. In 2010, additional 5% was added.

Bangladesh's exports during 2009-10 to South Korea amounted to \$148.2 million, and include raw jute, jute products, jute yarn, newsprint, tea, leather goods, tobacco and fertilizer. South Korea's exports to Bangladesh stood at \$836.36 million and included chemical elements, dyeing, colouring materials, tanning, medical and pharmaceutical products, iron and steel, electrical goods and motor vehicle machinery.

Light electronics industry and computers from South

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Korea are making inroads in Bangladeshi markets. South Korean cars are also making their presence felt in Bangladesh.

South Korean private investment as of 2010 stood at over \$698 million. It is reported that the investment would gradually increase to \$1 billion in the zone earmarked for South Korea. It is reported that until August of 2010, 328 companies from South Korea were registered in the Board of Investment, Bangladesh.

Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina paid an official visit to Seoul from May 16 to 18, 2010. That was the first visit by a Bangladeshi prime minister to South Korea after 15 years.

During the visit, both countries signed four MoUs: (a) Framework arrangement concerning loans from Korea's Economic Development and Cooperation Fund (ECDF) to Bangladesh for next three years, (b) cooperation in energy sector, (c) cooperation in environmental protection and (d) cultural exchange

programme for the next four years.

President of South Korea Lee Myung-bak pledged to share its growth experience and cooperate in transfer of shipbuilding, construction and IT technologies to Bangladesh. The two countries designated 2013 as the Year of Korea-Bangladesh.

In October 2011, South Korea's Hyundai Engineering Company and Daewoo International Corporation signed an agreement with Ashuganj Power Station Company to build a 225-megawatt power plant in Ashuganj.

In February 2012, Korean International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) pledged the funding of \$3.5 million dollars for the integrated development project in Comilla and it would be implemented by both KOICA and Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development (BARD). The project would provide income generating support to 65,000 farmers.

On February 15, 2012, the handover ceremony of KOICA assisted "ICT Development in the Ministry of Public Administration (MoPA)" project was held at Bangladesh Secretariat. This was the first ever E-file management system operational in MoPA, which was implemented from 2010- 2012 with the Korean government's grant assistance of \$1.3 million.

Under this project, KOICA provided e-file management system software, 24 desktops and 6 laptops computers and necessary accessories of IT equipments for ICT training room. Interior renovation of Data Center was also completed under the project. Earlier, KOICA also conducted training for the officials of government of Bangladesh.

The cultural bond between the two countries is strong. The Bangladesh Embassy and Korean Foundation had jointly organised an exhibition of around 100 paintings by eleven Bangladeshi painters at the Korea Foundation Cultural Centre in May 2009.

A South Korean dance team visits Bangladesh almost every year. In February 2012, the South Korean Embassy organised a concert titled "Night Jazzy Flare" in Dhaka.

South Korean Ambassador H.E. Tai -young Cho reportedly said that a Korean and an American company had formed a consortium with Petrobangla and started exploration for gas in the Bay of Bengal. "They are optimistic that they will find something," he said.

The basic course of Bangladesh's relationship with South Korea has been firmly set and will continue for further expansion for mutual benefit of the people of both countries.

The writer is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.