

'The large young population here is an important asset for the future, I want my Swiss compatriots to know about it'

Swiss Ambassador Urs Herren, who has been in Bangladesh for nearly three years, in an exclusive interview with The Daily Star's Diplomatic Correspondent Rezaul Karim spoke about his experiences in Bangladesh, bilateral trade and investment, governance, human rights, Swiss foreign policy and political situation in Bangladesh.



The Daily Star (TDS): You have been ambassador of Switzerland in Bangladesh for almost three years now: what are your impressions about our country?

Urs Herren (UH): My impression about Bangladesh is in many ways positive. The social and economic achievements of this country over the last few years are really inspiring, with great advancements in improving important social indicators. Having said this, I would like to emphasise that there is still a lot more to accomplish; eradicating social and economic inequality remains, for instance, a big challenge.

Let me also point out how welcome I have always felt in Bangladesh. I have had the chance to visit almost all divisions of the country and have spent time in cities and villages talking to the people. It has always been an enormous pleasure! The strength, resilience and confidence shown by Bangladeshis always impress me, not to mention their friendliness and hospitality.

TDS: Bilateral trade between the two countries is expanding rapidly. How do you think trade between the two economies can be further boosted?

UH: Indeed, bilateral trade between the two countries is rapidly growing. It gives me great pleasure to tell you that bilateral trade between the two countries increased by 30% these last few years and recently crossed the \$300 million mark. However, the business potential between the countries is yet to be fully tapped. Both countries need to work more closely to expand existing trade variety and include new items to it.

TDS: What is your projection about future Swiss investment in Bangladesh? What are the major impediments to improving business and investments?

UH: Swiss investments have been present in Bangladesh for a long time; a number of big Swiss companies have been operating here since even before independence. They have been regularly expanding their investment and are willing to expand more. That said, I must admit that Swiss investments in Bangladesh are not very impressive compared with other countries in Asia and taking into consideration that Switzerland is a

major foreign investor worldwide (it currently ranks 7th worldwide as per stock of FDI abroad). There are a number of reasons for the low level of Swiss investment in Bangladesh, many of them related to the local business and investment climate. Although there has been clear improvement in many areas over the last years, serious challenges remain, especially for the many smaller companies that make up a large part of the Swiss economy.

As everyone agrees, infrastructural limitations, including energy shortages, are among the main impediments. Yet private companies also mention a series of challenges, including bureaucratic red-tape, insufficient legal security, corruption and instability as important factors which need to be improved in order to attract long-term important foreign investments.

Swiss companies are aware of the potential of Bangladesh and we are seeing more and more Swiss enterprises keen to set up business in Bangladesh. I think it is now important that the country go ahead with reforms to improve the business environment, so that investors are reassured and convinced to invest here.

TDS: What do you think are the potential sectors in Bangladesh where Swiss companies will be willing to make investments?

UH: Pharmaceuticals, chemicals, agro-food industry and construction are the sectors where Swiss investments are already present; more investments will flow into these sectors if policy and logistical supports are further strengthened. Potential Swiss investors are also interested in exploring new sectors as well, for example the energy and IT sectors. Already, a number of Swiss companies have set up joint ventures with Bangladeshi IT companies.

TDS: Switzerland and Bangladesh enjoy very warm bilateral relations. How do you foresee these relations developing further in the days ahead?

UH: I am very optimistic about the future course of cooperation between the two countries. With the rapid socio-economic growth of Bangladesh, I am confident that economic and business cooperation between the two countries will develop vastly. At the same time, Bangladesh remains one of the priority countries of Swiss development cooperation. The recent signing of a Memorandum of Understanding on political consultations will also broaden the space for regular exchanges. Finally, I want to seize every opportunity to promote people-to-people exchange, be it in the cultural domain, or through partnership between universities. The large population of Bangladesh is an asset and an important resource for the future: I want my fellow Swiss compatriots to know about it.

2012 being the 40th Anniversary of the establishment of bilateral relations, we took this opportunity to organise several events both in Bangladesh and in Switzerland. As we wanted the people of the two countries to be part of this celebration, a video, targeting mainly the young generation and posted via Youtube and Facebook, has been produced on this occasion.

TDS: Bilateral cooperation with a powerful neighbour (i. e. India) and cooperation with the region is also high on the agenda of the Bangladesh government.

What is your assessment of this cooperation?

UH: From our experience, I can say that cooperation with neighbours and regional countries is not only very important but essential in today's globalised world. I believe the Bangladesh government's endeavour to strengthen links with neighbouring and near neighbouring countries is to be commended. We believe this integration will contribute immensely to Bangladesh's socio-economic growth, provided the expectations are based on realistic assumption.

TDS: One of your country's priorities in Bangladesh for some years now is the promotion of good governance at local level; this includes bringing the government to people's doorstep and respecting their rights. What is your take on this?

UH: Switzerland believes, from its own experience, that ensuring good governance at local level is an important element to make a real difference in the everyday life of people at local level. Promoting local governance is a priority area of the Swiss Development Cooperation in Bangladesh, where it works with the government, NGOs and civil society organisations in order to strengthen local government institutions in Bangladesh. I am convinced that providing services at the lowest possible level ensures transparency, accountability and better quality.

TDS: Another domain that Swiss cooperation is addressing is Skills Development and Access to Markets. What is your view on these?

UH: Skills development and access to markets are very important for Bangladesh's socio-economic development. Every year, a huge number of Bangladeshis enter the job market, with a majority of them being unskilled or semi-skilled and/or without access to markets. If these people are provided with the necessary skills and market access support, they will get better access to jobs, will be more productive or may even become self-employed. Without a broad-based push for better skills, the objectives of the 6th Five Year Plan will be very hard to achieve. At present, half of the total Swiss annual development cooperation of about \$30 million goes to promoting skills development and strengthening market access in Bangladesh.

TDS: Along with hosting in Geneva the vast majority of organisations and institutions related with human rights and humanitarian law, promotion of human rights seems to be a priority of Switzerland. What are you currently doing in this field in Bangladesh and what is your opinion of the current situation?

UH: Promotion of peace and security and strengthening the respect of human rights is indeed one of the five main pillars of the Swiss foreign policy enshrined in our Constitution.

Human rights are a crucial part of democratic development and I commend the fact that the government is giving them a high priority. The establishment of the National Human Rights Commission, which we support together with other development partners, is a positive step. I believe that such an institution can play an important role in upholding human rights, being the crucial and independent interface between the government and civil society.

At the same time, there are problematic issues which we feel still need to be addressed properly. For instance, we are concerned about cases of apparently excessive use of force by law enforcement agencies and the cases of enforced disappearances reported recently.

TDS: Would you like to comment on politics as it happens to be in Bangladesh, particularly over the modus operandi of the holding of the next general elections?

UH: I would generally say that I have observed a positive trend since 2008, and impressive participation in the latest elections at both national and local levels. Not only have these elections been organised efficiently, but in most cases have also been held in a free and fair manner. The people of Bangladesh have fully contributed to this development and I am impressed with their strong desire to continue on this democratic path. I would like to conclude by expressing my hope that all parties will contribute to holding free and fair elections in early 2014. Certainly, political stability and the deepening of democracy will be an essential ingredient to achieving middle income country status over the next ten years.

TDS: Switzerland is very much appreciated in Bangladesh for its scenic beauty and famous products like chocolate, watches and cheese, not to mention the well known Swiss banks. Is this the essence of Switzerland?

UH: Of course these elements are part of the "Swiss identity." However, there are other important faces of Switzerland. Our political system, a combination of direct democracy, decentralisation and strong local governance, with four national languages, is quite unique. Interestingly, it is also quite well known and appreciated by many of our Bangladeshi partners. The backbone of the Swiss economy, apart from some large and well known multinationals, is largely constituted by a myriad of small and medium enterprises, providing more than three-quarter of all jobs. These SME's are often family-based, highly innovative and hi-tech. This makes for a very diversified economy, which is highly export-oriented: two-third of the Swiss GDP is earned abroad! Switzerland is also well known for its neutrality, a value consistently appreciated by more than 90% of the Swiss people. At the same time, that doesn't keep my country away from the universal and joint efforts to find solution to global problems. Switzerland is, therefore, very much present in the fight against poverty, social injustice and climate change.

TDS: Switzerland is a relatively small country in the heart of Europe, yet is not a member of the European Union; how is your country interacting with the EU surrounding you?

UH: The European Union and its 27 member states are by far Switzerland's most important partners. This is due not only to the EU's political and economic weight (more than two-third of our bilateral trade is done with the EU!), but also to Switzerland's close geographical and cultural proximity to the countries of the EU. As a non-member of the EU, Switzerland conducts its relations with it on the basis of bilateral agreements, a series of treaties in clearly defined policy areas such as research, free movement of persons, asylum, environment, cultural affairs; these agreements, negotiated during two successive rounds as "packages," also provide both parties with extensive market access.

Given our central geographical position in Europe, and therefore the interest of EU member countries to be allowed heavy goods transit by road and rail through Switzerland, the issue of overland transport (transit) has been one of the first to be negotiated. Our country committed itself to the construction of two main railway connections, which will cut into half the north-south transit time through the Alps. The financing of these huge infrastructures is mainly Swiss, yet a heavy goods vehicle tax applied to transiting vehicles, and introduced by the agreement, also helps in financing the construction and future maintenance.

BITTER TRUTH

Poisoning water bodies portends eco disaster



Md. ASADULLAH KHAN

RECENT reports of poisoning of lakes, rivers and wetlands are forcing people and industries to take a look at what DCC, Rajuk and Wasa have wrought. Liquid and toxic waste is being drained into cesspools that empty into the rivers Buriganga, Shitalakhya, Balu and Turag. Fish culture and harvesting are going on

in the toxic water of such lakes and lagoons, and the stark fact is that we are consuming these fish that pose serious threat to our health without our knowledge.

Rotten vegetables and animal residue, hazardous chemicals, solid and liquid waste in large quantities are scattered, piled and spread all over the area around such water bodies in the city. It is not a pretty sight: poisoned lakes, fouled river, murky air and denuded land. Thwarted by successive apathetic governments, people in the posh areas of the city now have to pay for the carelessness of the city administrators.

As Dhaka city grows apace, its trash, mainly hazardous wastes including plastics, metals and packaging is growing exponentially. Dhaka city generates about 5,000 tonnes of garbage daily. About 70% of the city's population has no access to sanitation services. Result: this large population sends its wastes including human excreta into the rivers Buriganga and Shitalakhya, small lakes and other water bodies in the periphery of the city.

breeding grounds for diseases. It is small wonder that people who live amidst this rotting garbage fall victim to dysentery, jaundice, diarrhoea and a raft of other diseases. In such a situation, the city's crumbling sewer network with piles of waste accumulating in the open drains portends an ecological disaster.

Behind the blinding glitter of new millionaires, the city is failing the bulk of its citizens. Even the basic rudiments of civic life and civil behaviour seem to be evaporating from the city. In recent time the monitoring and enforcement unit of the environment directorate has launched vigorous drives throughout the country to force industries to abide by the pollution norms. A report published in the Prothom Alo on May 9 revealed that the director enforcement wing after a visit to three paper mills situated on the bank of Shitalakhya in Narayanganj on May 8 realized a fine of Tk.88 lakh from the owners for violating environmental regulations and causing serious pollution to the Shitalakhya, river with orders to keep the mills closed until they have been able to install ETP in their mills. Shockingly, the poisoned water from these lakes and rivers now symbolise not life but death.

Shockingly, till now we don't have any scientifically built dumping grounds. Besides, hundreds of tons of toxic materials are imported from abroad every year but hardly there is any control on the disposal of toxins. With no such curbs, recycling industries are using these wastes causing serious health hazards. Clearly, this hazardous waste problem has been ignored for too long. More so, these still water bodies without having any connection with any big river could hardly handle this enormous pollution load and now it has gone com-

pletely out of hand. As industrialisation grows and as inflow of people continues to the city unabated, so too has grown all types of its pollution load, including human excreta. Experts believe toxic waste flowing into the lake has wrought havoc on the fish population by reducing biochemical oxygen demand (BOD) in this water. The alarming reduction of BOD in Uttara lake water as revealed by the enforcement wing of the directorate of environment through laboratory test in recent time has caused the death of fish in the Uttara lake.

What makes our cities so dirty? It is a combination of slothful utility organisations that are reluctant to change outdated disposal practices that can no longer keep pace with population growth, new kinds of trash like plastics and polythene and a near total apathy of citizens. Protest and rallies must hammer out the problems of inaction on such issues that pose a direct threat to citizen's lives. The utility organisation authorities must be made to realise that the sewer lines lead to drains, which take the sewage all of it untreated directly into the rivers, lakes or other water bodies, killing virtually all aquatic life. As it appears, all these lakes in the Dhaka city have turned into giant sewers. True, rivers in Bangladesh had long had the capacity of self-purification -- pollutants are diluted and slowly absorbed -- but with the rivers drying up and waste water discharges increasing by the day, the death of their waters is the only possibility.

Encouragingly, sewage treatment can generate green electricity and help the city dwellers get rid of the pollution problem and save our precious water bodies. In Delhi's Okhla works, which treats nearly half of Delhi's sewage and domestic wastes, the waste gases generate

over 16 MW of green electricity by utilising about 2,050 tonnes of municipal wastes. The Ghazipur project in Delhi would also process 1,300 tonnes per day of municipal waste generated in the Trans-Yamuna area to produce 12 MW of green electricity. With a third of our country's population slated to live in urban areas by 2020, the sewage and garbage crisis threatens to go out of hand.

The government must launch a vigorous effort against encroachment of water bodies by land grabbers or any other agencies. The process of cleaning and recharging may undoubtedly be long drawn one. But with political will and commitment it can be done. It is worth mentioning that under the Indian government's national Lake Conservation Project, the LDA (Lake Development Authority) has cleaned up 12 lakes in just one year. One of Bangalore's biggest lakes -- the 50 hectare Lake Ulsoor -- has been drained out, and sewage lines have been blocked. With funds from the donor agencies other than the government itself, Bangalore water supply and sewerage board undertook the construction of pipes leading to the treatment plants. Catch water drains have been built to collect water run off.

On the occasion of the observance of the World Water Day in the recent past, we heard some high-ups in the administration speaking glibly about conserving surface water to reduce too much strain on ground water that is getting exhausted fast. But until now, we have not seen any such plans being translated into action. The looming question is: where are these sources to be found if we are willfully destroying and polluting it?

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