

British High Commissioner Robert Chatterton Dickson's speech to Dhaka Reporters' Unity

Shubho oporannho. (Good afternoon.) Ami ekhane ashte pere anondito. (I am very happy to be here.)

I am delighted to address the Dhaka Reporters' Unity this afternoon, the last day of Bengali winter – my favourite season.

A free media is the cornerstone of a free society. The press role in holding the powerful to account – including in uncomfortable ways – is a key counter to corruption and vested interests.

As George Orwell said, 'Freedom of the Press, if it means anything at all, means the freedom to criticise and oppose'.

So I am constantly impressed by the courage and commitment of journalists in Bangladesh despite the many challenges I know you face, and I am delighted that we are able to support you through training and programmes.

With other Likeminded partners we are leading the Media Freedom Coalition and this will continue to be a key element of the High Commission's work in Bangladesh.

This is an excellent time to be British High Commissioner in Dhaka.

This month marks the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the UK and Bangladesh, following Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's historic press conference at Claridges' Hotel, his meeting with PM Edward Heath and his return to a newly liberated Bangladesh by the Royal Air Force.

In the intervening half century the relationship has been transformed.

In the 50th year of Brit Bangla Bondhon, we are building on all the links that exist between Bangladesh and the UK, including the diaspora, the 600,000 people living in the UK with Bangladeshi heritage, and the much wider range of links that exist between us on security, defence, climate, COVID-19, trade, and a whole range of issues on which we work very closely with friends and partners in and beyond government in Bangladesh.

We do this in line with our global strategy. Last year we published an Integrated Review of our foreign policy after leaving the European Union. A key element is what we call an Indo Pacific Tilt, a rebalancing of our policy, in which Bangladesh plays an important role.

The Indo-Pacific is the fastest-growing economic region in the world, a crucial transit point for global trade.

The UK has Europe's broadest, most integrated regional presence, in support of stronger trading links, shared security priorities and shared values.

We are engaging more deeply in the region on many of the most pressing global challenges – from climate and biodiversity to maritime security and geopolitical competition linked to rules and norms.

And those norms have never looked more important, or more threatened, than they do today. Unprovoked Russian aggression against Ukraine would be a disaster for everyone, including Russia.

UK ministers have been at the forefront of international efforts to find a diplomatic solution, and the UK has been providing Ukraine with the weapons and training it needs for self-defence.

Here, we are working with British businesses in building a trade and development relationship as Bangladesh graduates this decade from a Least Developed to a Middle Income Country.

This is an extraordinary national achievement, based on decades of good policy making. I'm delighted that the Hon Prime Minister and other senior people promoted the opportunities at a Roadshow in London and Manchester last year.

Graduation is a milestone not a finishing line and we are supporting Bangladesh achieve a smooth and successful graduation and continue its export-led growth by providing duty-free, quota free access to the UK market until 2029.

We are Bangladesh's second largest investor, and we will continue to work with Bangladesh to deliver free and fair trade by improving the functioning of the WTO and modernising global trade rules.

The last year has been significant for UK-Bangladesh trade relations as the inauguration of the UK-Bangladesh Trade & Investment Dialogue.

This addressed tackling market access barriers and improvements to the business environment to promote free and fair trade between the UK and Bangladesh, and help UK companies realise the potential of Bangladesh's impressive economic growth, to the benefit of both countries' prosperity.

As Bangladesh prospers we hope to see the market becoming more open to international investment, especially for the high value financial, education and health services in which the UK leads the world.

I see a particular opportunity for universities if the Cross Border Higher Education Rules can be implemented. UK universities are interested in the opportunity in Bangladesh, and would like to establish the sort of presence they have in Sri Lanka or Malaysia.

This would give young Bangladeshis access to a world class education at a competitive price. And it would give Bangladesh the skills which will be needed to thrive as a middle income country.

More broadly, our view is that long term stability and economic growth flourish best in open and democratic societies with strong institutions, public accountability and competitive elections.

So with international partners, we support the plural and transparent democracy in Bangladesh provided in the Constitution, including urging a fair and credible process for the elections due at the end of 2023.

This means first, allowing all parties to organise and be heard in advance of the election so that there is a real debate about the future of the country. Second, it means everyone can cast their vote freely. Third, it means the votes being counted reliably and transparently. And finally, it means credible results being accepted by all parties, including those who did not win.

Milestones such as the Election Commission formation process send a signal on the trajectory of this administration. Strong commitments from all parties on a free and fair process would help set the tone, including inclusive and non-partisan Election Commission oversight for the contest due next year.

The strongest, safest and most prosperous societies are those in which everyone can live freely, without fear of violence or discrimination, and where all citizens can play a full and active part. This year, the UK will host a global equality conference to promote the fundamental human rights we all share. This includes empowering women and girls, and standing with those who support tolerance and religious freedom, as set out in Bangladesh's Constitution, which enshrines freedom of expression and religion.

We stand with those who support tolerance and religious freedom, as set out in Bangladesh's Constitution, which enshrine freedom of expression and religion.

We're also working together on regional security, including the Rohingya crisis. Our shared aim is to see voluntary, safe and dignified repatriation for the Rohingya as soon as conditions in Myanmar allow.

Bangladesh continues to be extraordinarily generous in its response. The refugees have access to healthcare, food, shelter and water and sanitation.

We have seen generosity in the roll-out of COVID-19 vaccines for refugees. However, despite progress, the situation remains challenging both for the Rohingyas, especially for women, and for their hosts in Bangladesh.

We are leading donor to the international response to the Rohingya refugee crisis having contributed over £320 million since 2017 to support both refugees in the camps and host communities including in building resilience against COVID-19.

At the same time, the Rohingya crisis is a tragedy for all involved. No one chooses to live in a refugee camp, or to host a large influx of displaced people. As with so many other refugees worldwide, the great majority of the Rohingya population say they want to return home.

We are ensuring the Rohingyas and Bangladesh are not forgotten. We raise the plight of the Rohingya on the international stage, including in the UN Security Council. As a new Dialogue Partner of ASEAN we support the efforts of the ASEAN Special Envoy.

We are supporting the COVID-19 pandemic response in Bangladesh. We have been supporting the Bangladesh Ministry of Health to develop a well-coordinated national response plan, resourced by all the development partners and the Government of Bangladesh.

Last December we provided 4.1 million vaccines under COVAX facility. We hope to provide more soon.

And 2021 was a good year for UK-Bangladesh defence relations, as a Royal Navy ship sailed to Chattogram after 13 years as part of our Carrier Strike Group (CSG21) deployment to the Indo Pacific region.

The visit highlighted our bilateral defence connections, taken forward again this week by strategic level training being provided by the UK to the Bangladesh National Defence College.

I am looking forward to talks soon to put this relationship on a more strategic basis.

The UK-Bangladesh Climate Partnership launched in January 2020 is strengthening cooperation across all COP26 priority themes: adaptation, clean energy, nature finance, and clean transport.

We will continue to exchange expertise, share technology, facilitate partnerships, and identify practical solutions to common climate challenges, with the shared aim of producing the real change we need to keep the rise in global temperatures below 1.5 degrees.

I think we can do more in this field as well.

So this is an exciting time for the UK here, as we work with an increasingly confident and outward looking Bangladesh, tackling shared challenges and grasping shared opportunities as we head into the next 50 years together.

I am delighted to be here as High Commissioner leading the effort in Dhaka.

Apnader jonno shubho kamona roilo (Best wishes) Sobaike onek dhonnobad.
(Thank you, everyone.)

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