

Diplomatic Correspondents Association Bangladesh (DCAB) Talk 2020: British High Commissioner emphasised on continued commitment of the UK Government to Bangladesh

British High Commissioner Robert Chatterton Dickson addressed the Diplomatic Correspondents Association Bangladesh (DCAB) at a very significant point of time when the UN was holding its 75th General Assembly (UNGA) virtually for the first time.

The High Commissioner conveyed the UK contributors to the UN, particularly on the UK's call for countries to put differences aside, reach across borders and work together to fight COVID-19. At this year's UNGA, the UK demonstrated its global leadership by outlining its support for the World Health Organisation (support of £340 million over the next four years) and COVAX (support up to £571 million), to develop safe, effective and affordable vaccines that can be produced quickly and made available for all. Moreover, the High Commissioner emphasised the UK's call on world leaders to announce genuinely transformational net zero targets and bold climate finance pledges. He familiarised the DCAB members with the UK's effort at UNGA to bring together political, financial and technical leaders in the global power sector to accelerate the transition to clean energy by launching the COP26 Energy Transition Council.

The High Commissioner stressed on the collective effort to tackle COVID-19 and search for a vaccine. He highlighted the virtual vaccines event at UNGA, co-hosted by Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab. This event built on the success of the GAVI Summit, which was hosted in June 2020, where \$8.8 billion was raised to ensure globally equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines, treatments, and testing.

This UNGA showed that the fundamental of the UK-Bangladesh relationship lies in working together on shared challenges. In this context, the High Commissioner mentioned the UK's support to Bangladesh through UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) to assess the capacity and preparedness of Bangladesh's cold-chain framework – creating a roadmap and model for global COVID-19 vaccination. He further added that– beyond the efforts of the UK government, the UK are playing a leading role on developing COVID-19 vaccination.

In order to take urgent action for a better world, the UK is playing a leading role with the presidency of the 26th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP26). The British High Commissioner outlined the close link in climate action policy terms between Bangladesh and the UK. He shared some major engagements of the UK with Bangladesh, especially with key climate experts, the Government of

Bangladesh and the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF). He also reiterated that tackling the climate and environment issues will be a major focus of the UK's development cooperation programmes with Bangladesh.

While discussing the UK's support to Bangladesh to respond humanitarian crisis, the High Commissioner talked about his recent visit to the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar with the representatives of the US, UN, EU, Canada and the World Bank. He reiterated the UK's continued commitment to work with the Government of Bangladesh and international partners to respond to the Rohingya crisis. He shared his view on the remarkable efforts to contain the primary effects of COVID-19 in the Rohingya refugee camps and local communities in Cox's Bazar.

The British High Commissioner Robert Chatterton Dickson said

"Though the primary impact of COVID-19 is not high at the Rohingya refugee camps in Cox's Bazar, there clearly have been some very significant secondary impacts because it's been hard to provide services to the refugees during the pandemic. We encouraged— with any additional and necessary measures, full humanitarian access be maintained to the camps and that consultations with affected communities continue to take place."

The UK is the second largest donor to the international response to the Rohingya refugee crisis having contributed more than £256m since 2017 to support both refugees in the camps and host communities including in building resilience against COVID-19. At the same time, the UK is conscious that the key to a long term solutions is for the Rohingya refugees to be able to make a safe, dignified and voluntary return to their homes in Rakhine state in Myanmar.

The High Commissioner reminded the DCAB members about the UK continues to play an international leadership role to keep the situation in Myanmar and the plight of the Rohingya at the agenda of multilateral diplomacy. As an ally of Bangladesh, the UK wants to see accountability for atrocities committed in Myanmar, and will monitor closely the ICC investigation in Bangladesh.

Further on the context of UK and Bangladesh working together on shared challenges since the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, the British High Commissioner outlined programmes that will demonstrate the depth and significance UK-Bangla ties next year when Bangladesh celebrates 50 years of independence.

The High Commissioner said

"The UK has been a part of Bangladesh throughout that journey and we're really looking forward in the High Commission to 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 who are a very important people to people link, but the much wider range of links that exist between us on security, defense, 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.”

The UK is already Bangladesh’s second largest investor with total bilateral trade of around £4 billion a year. Export Credit Agency UK Export Finance (UKEF) has recently more than tripled its capacity for Bangladesh to £2.5 billion, which expect to make it easier for British companies to sell high quality goods and services into Bangladesh. At the same time, UK government’s private sector development organisation the Commonwealth Development Corporation (CDC) has invested more than £250 million in Bangladesh over the last ten years. CDC has now established a country presence here for the first time. So we are seeing a lot of interest among British businesses and the UK government in really building this trade and development relationship as Bangladesh continues to go through the process of graduating from a Least Developed to a Middle Income Country.

While talking to DCAB, the British High termed UK-Bangladesh ties as “an exciting and interesting relationship.” He looks forward to 2021 as we intend to bring together all the different aspects of the relationships as Bangladesh is about to become a middle income country. He emphasised that the UK considers Bangladesh a valuable partner as the UK recalibrate its international relations following the exit from the EU.

The British High Commissioner concluded the discussion by stating the vision for newly formed Foreign, Development and Commonwealth Office (FCDO). In Bangladesh, the integrated FCDO offers the opportunity to build on the successes that the DFID presence and partnerships have offered over decades, and to continue the UK commitment to support long term sustainable development, stability, and prosperity for Bangladesh, drawing on the strengths of both former departments, FCO and DFID.

The High Commissioner also admired the work of Bangladeshi journalists in support of the cause of media freedom which is crucial to the function of democracy.