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Dhaka at a Crossroads: Foreign Minister Dipu Moni on Bangladesh's Uncertain Future

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Moderator:

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President,

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Speakers:

Dipu Moni,

Foreign Minister of Bangladesh

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JESSICA MATHEWS: Ladies and gentlemen, good afternoon. It's a great pleasure to welcome you. I'm Jessica Mathews, president of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and I have the honor and the pleasure of welcoming the foreign minister of Bangladesh to speak with us today to talk about the political situation there.

[00:00:28]

Bangladesh is a country that is too often overlooked in the West in our geopolitical calculations, despite being the 8th most populous country in the world and occupying an obviously strategic location in South Asia. Bangladesh has made significant progress in terms of growth and development over the last decade. It has grown at nearly 6 percent a year, an enviable rate for most of the countries in the world. And the United Nations Development Program has identified it as one of only 18 countries that achieved what it calls "rapid human development" during that period.

On the other hand, Bangladesh's historically difficult relations with its – with its neighbors persist, though they have been strengthened under Dr. Moni's leadership at the Foreign Ministry. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation adopted a charter for democracy that was proposed by Bangladesh at its summit in 2010. And in another example of Dr. Moni's active diplomacy, the regional Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral, Technical and Economic Cooperation agreed unanimously to establish its secretariat in Dhaka, the first step of its kind for that grouping.

[00:01:58]

So there are numerous achievements to be celebrated and also numerous tough issues still to address. The challenge of working conditions domestically, dealing with climate change, calming tensions ahead of the 2014 general election, all of these are very much on the front burner for the government. Bangladesh is of course located between two of the world's behemoths, China and India, both of whom regard it as critical to their own strategic interests. And so what happens in Bangladesh, as all of you know, I think, by your presence here, has implications for all of South Asia and far beyond.

We're honored to have Dr. Moni here – she is of course Bangladesh's foreign minister – to discuss with us the challenges her country faces and the implications for the broader region. Prior



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to becoming foreign minister, Dr. Moni served as secretary for Women's Affairs and a member of the Subcommittee on Foreign Affairs of the Bangladesh Awami League.

She is a qualified physician. And for those of you who saw me limp in, I may ask her for some advice on – (laughter.) And she represents Chandpur-3 as a member of the Bangladesh parliament. Dr. Moni is passionate about the inclusion of women in the political decision-making process and is one of two master trainers for women political activists of the Awami League.

[00:03:40]

So it's a pleasure to welcome you here today to Carnegie for what I hope will be one of the first of many visits, and we really look forward to hearing your remarks. Dr. Moni. (Applause.)

MINISTER DIPU MONI: Ms. Jessica Mathews, president, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace; Mr. Frederick Grare, director, South Asia Program; Mr. Akramul Qader, His Excellency, the ambassador of Bangladesh to the USA; friends, distinguished guests, thank you, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. I'm both privileged and delighted to be here. You are now located around the world. Your reputation matches any other for experience and insights into peace and inspiration. The erudition you present is a basis for effective global action. From Bangladesh I bring you our very best.

At birth, 42 years ago, Bangladesh made a statement to the world. It was to be a democracy, secular and inclusive, arriving at statehood from its ancient language, culture and distinct identity as a people of an ancient civilization. Bangladesh was born of a heroic struggle for national liberation, preceded by an era of claims to entitlements, to rights and polity. It quickly adopted a constitution which embodied its independence, sovereignty, republican character and a name with ancient origins. It committed itself to international law and principles of the U.N. Charter.

[00:05:34]

From before its birth, the Bengali people, led by the Awami League in its national liberation struggle, was wedded to a policy of friendship towards old nations and without a history of waging war against neighboring peoples or states. In the immediate wake of its birth it was faced with the ravages of war, its challenge to build and consolidate its statehood, address itself to reconstruct the economy, its social and physical infrastructure, reconcile inequities within society, enter the community of nations, and do so upon the expression of the will of its people. These challenges themselves were new to its soil and people. Bangladesh strove to meet and overcome these challenges in the midst of established nations in the neighborhood and a new global order, itself an after-effect of the Second World War.



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However, caught in the web as it was of these challenges, Bangladesh's identity was soon subverted; the way of life envisaged in its freedom struggle sought to be changed; its democratic, secular and republican character destroyed – instead, assassinations, military and quasi-military regimes, patronization of extremism, and the wholly untenable system based on the doctrine of necessity invoked by usurpers and condoned by what the supreme court has now acknowledged as successive delinquent predecessor courts, aberrated national focus on internal and international issues.

The people of Bangladesh are thus engaged in a second battle against encumbrances and roadblocks on its path to its declared objectives of democracy, the rule of law, a better quality of life and an inclusive society, especially conferring and sustaining the empowerment of women; the rights of children, who comprise 45 percent of the total population; religious and ethnic minorities and backward sections of the society.

[00:07:51]

In other words, in the second battle the whole object has been to return to the fundamental principles of the constitution and the fundamental principles of state policy provided under the constitution adopted in 1972. So drastic was the departure from original constitution of 1972 that during the tenure of this government the judiciary and the legislature have had to revisit not just the provisions of the constitution affecting the fundamental principles of the constitution, but directly all of its interconnected 153 articles, which had changed the character of the republic.

Thus the legislature has had to undertake massive legislation, not only new legislation that covers the widest canvas of economic, political, social and cultural life, but also to address itself to unlawful legislation proclaimed by usurpers and unconstitutional occupiers of state power, which the apex court has now declared null and void.

Just as the judiciary has been embroiled with the task of making declarations on the constitutional bases of laws enacted during the unconstitutional regimes, the legislature has become engulfed with finding constitutional and valid solutions for invalid and void laws and showing continuity of state and government and returning the rights of people which were unenforceable during the period of usurper and quasi-military governments.

[00:09:36]

The correction of administrative action based on unconstitutional and unlawful legislation by usurper and quasi-military governments has become a major challenge for the state and persons



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aggrieved. Notwithstanding the enormity of challenges faced in the conduct of the business of the state, Bangladesh has made outstanding progress under the period of the present government.

Just as the 122 ordinances supporting – purporting to be law, made by executive orders during the immediately preceding unconstitutional and unlawful government between 2007 and 2009, as declared by the supreme court, were subjected to parliamentary scrutiny to so have the ordinances purporting to be law under the earlier military regimes between 1975 and '79, and the military regime between 1982 and 1986 been placed before parliament following judicial declarations of nullity and voidness to ensure continuity of state, government and people's rights consistent with the constitution.

Not only has the task been to address the unlawful legislation pronounced and proclaimed by unlawful usurper governments, it has taken the monumental human and judicial effort to strike down the infamous Indemnity Ordinance of 1975, which blocked the trial of the killers of the father of the nation. This infamous Indemnity Ordinance, which had blocked return to the rule of law and the constitution, became central to the culture of impunity which pervaded every action by the state and gave no redress to an aggrieved people.

[00:11:28]

What has followed in the wake of the judicial declaration of the voidness of the infamous Indemnity Ordinance has been initiation and completion of the Bangabandhu assassination case, and as part of the process for the rectification of the culture of impunity the beginning of the trial of the four national – trial of the assassination of four national leaders, the war crimes trials, and proceedings by an incalculable number of people who had been denied redress under the military, quasi-military and unconstitutional dispensation.

However, in spite of the great qualitative successes in this second battle, there are critics, objective and partisan, who would say real progress in the law-and-order situation and changes towards infrastructure has eluded the country. The Chittagong Hill Tracts Accord has yet to be fully implemented. There is new and unprecedented phenomenon of attacks against Buddhists. Labor rights in the garments factories need to be urgently addressed.

[00:12:38]

Economic justice seems to remain a far-away cry. In spite of the availability of small loans, women have entered and live in debt traps. The bureaucracy continues to remain insensitive to the needs of our people, the elected government or the imperatives of the constitution. The



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government has not done enough to bring the opposition to participate in parliamentary proceedings. There is a genuine case to speed up decentralization in local government.

[00:13:07]

Then there is the predicament with donors and multilateral funding agencies. Why do they promote projects of their choice, impose their methods, promote persons of their choice in disregard of our people and their expressed choices? How much truth is there in the historical argument that they travel too closely with the de facto, the extra-constitutional and the unauthorized? How much progress have we made in respect with the revived National Women's Development Policy of 1997 and the rights of the children?

Where lies the answer then? Bengalese have been advised that the answer lies in honest and competent people assuming the mantle of the state. They have been further advised that all politicians are corrupt and there lies no future in their hands. There are reminders that good work must not be questioned, even if they're undertaken in disregard or in violation of the law, for the law is an impediment. It's a stubborn creature, which stands in the way of development.

Prescriptions provided have included that Bengalese must rid themselves of corrupt politicians, their aids, abettors and beneficiaries. It matters not who are netted in and by what mechanism, including of a substitute or alternative system of justice to that of the supreme court itself, now infamous and struck down by the supreme court. It matters not what the constitution and the rule of law and due process contemplate and enshrine, but that corruption just be removed through quick and effective action. However, the answer really lies on a consideration of two quintessential issues: One, what do the people think? And two, how do we know what they think?

The government of Bangabandhu and now Sheikh Hasina has pledged to the people, in its second historic struggle, rule under the constitution; the primacy of the rule of law, democracy, good governance; the enforcement of human rights; a more functional system of political parties. She has urged that stock be taken and such reordering and restructuring take place as a fair and free new elective order commands. She and her government have made known that a better-governed Bangladesh is an imperative for a more just society than we have had. Concomitantly, there is no room for unconstitutional processes and claimants to undermine Bangladesh's democratic national order.

[00:16:02]

But our government is bound by limitations of time, and we have had only one term: five years of an elected government, five years within the four corners of constitutional rule and



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governance, five years then of parliamentary legislation, five years of judicial dispensation without visitations by agents and arms of the executive or offers of inducement or indemnities to those who hear and render justices – judgments, five years of the availability of bail and appeal, five years of clear and unimpeded pursuit of justice – no indemnities; no condemnations; no acceptance of conditions imposed by the unauthorized; no transactions to be passed and closed against those who have been aggrieved; no lawmaking by the judiciary; no black legislation, un-inclusive and discriminatory legislation; no administrative action in this regard of the law.

This erected National Human Rights Commission is new but visible and active. The Right to Information Act also new but available and generative of confidence and hope. The electronic and print media have never before enjoyed more freedom, nor were they so prolific. Civil society has proliferated in an environment conducive to promoting public causes with foreign donor money.

[00:17:40]

The Women's Development Policy, in stark contrast to any pursued by two previous governments, both the elected and the unlawful, and constrained in the hands of the Jamaat-e-Islami between 2001 and 2009, has regained life, momentum, and continues to be implemented with zest. Parliamentary committees have functioned with chairpersons belonging to the opposition or parties other than the Awami League, the first time.

The prime minister takes a weekly question hour – again, a first time – on television. Her replies are seen and heard all over the country. Unprecedented mechanisms of accountability are in place. The several successes of our foreign policy as an instrument of the exercise of the sovereign democratic republic have been historic and our foreign policy has delivered far more than we had pledged in our election manifesto.

It is the conviction of Sheikh Hasina's government that the critical difference is the continuance and retention of the trust of the people and the nexus that is built between electing people and their representatives to administer the fortunes of their life and times for five years. The trust nexus is tested every day by the response that people receive from their constituency representative and their trustees in parliament, their trustees in the administration and the delegates in the administration of justice in the courts.

[00:19:17]

There is discernment and evaluation of the laws enacted, policies formulated and actions administered, not in only response but as initiatives. There are comparisons with the performances



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of other lawful claimants to state authority in the past and through the plans and actions which they place before the people. There are reminders that the unelected and unauthorized would not sustain. Instead, such unelected and unauthorized would cost the people and the nation dearly. Their assumption of authority without the will, wish or prior consent of the people is neither tenable nor sustainable, however brilliantly they may be articulated. In addition to trust and nexus, their eligibility would be determined by public service and record.

An unfortunate history of the two years preceding the present elected government, or the five-year rule of denial between 2001 and 2006, would not rationalize our conduct as a nation. Our culture, classical and contemporary, and our inclinations for a knowledge-based future built on bedrock of the collective and individual would never be outweighed by the purely pragmatic over the principled and tested, nor should these be obviated by purported global or imposed paradigm.

[00:20:45]

Bangladesh's strength derives from her own experience, national and beyond. It is clear that a particular group of talents of the military and the bureaucracy has never delivered the answer. Indeed, our experience tells us that these groups precluded an expression of the will of the people. The mighty Pakistani military; bureaucratic, industrial and land-owning complex, acting in unison with international military pacts, precluded the people's view.

No unalloyed choice was ever made available to the people. When it was, in the elections of 1954 and 1970, Pakistan, as it was steered through the years beginning in 1947, dissipated and dismantled. How was that structure replaced? Everybody would know that it was by a choice that the people had made that our nation must function under a framework of rights and duties, of aspirations based on our own perception of history and our own calling of the future.

We embodied all of this in our constitution in the wake of an electoral choice of issues, priorities and leaders, and people took up arms to assert our life, liberty and option to choose. We made declaratory statements of our sovereignty, of the name by which we call ourselves, of the kind of state we are and would be: republican and democratic, secular and inclusive, safeguarded by an embodiment of the will of people expressed by their public representatives through a parliament constituted by an election.

[00:22:32]

When the first usurpation took place there was disembodiment of constitutional persons. There was a destruction of 59 of the 153 constitutional articles which supported the fountainhead of our state authority, namely the president. (Inaudible) – murder and assassination of individuals,



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group and family; a war waged against the republic and sustained by the undoable inner state structure of indemnities, of ratifications, condemnations; by untenable doctrinal support to this actions; and of cover-ups and deliberate creations of groups and classes of people to usher in and sustain a new historically, morally, ethically, culturally inconsistent order, incalculable in terms of its cost to the state.

There was even a judicial declaration that martial law was the supreme law, purporting to destroy and mutilate the sovereignty vested in the people and supremacy of the constitution. (Inaudible) – political parties and its people suffered – no less the common man. Their patience, desire and belief in the inevitability of justice was vindicated when the Bangabandhu murder case was finally determined and the nation was encouraged to believe in the return to the rule of law.

[00:24:00]

There was affirmation too that the judicial system would now rise to the occasion and the usurpation of 1975 was declared unlawful and of no legal effect. Political parties played their role over the years, and by the very definition of their existence would do so in future. Our future, the Awami League believes, lies in the repeated tests which our people may demand of the public representatives they choose. Our strength lies in the difficult and powerful questions that we would be required to answer every five years, or in less or more, but surely repeatedly.

The public representatives case would lie not perhaps in the immediate solutions they are unable to provide, but in the effort they would make; the effort in the eye of a perceiving people, in the eye of a demanding and needy people, a people granted locus standi through an electoral tool to do and undo, and not contrarily – (inaudible) – groups merely with intellectual or financial or networking resources inconsistent with fundamental and human rights or their locus standi under the rule of law and the rule under the constitution.

[00:25:15]

Ladies and gentlemen, on the domestic front, the government led by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is fully aware that people's empowerment does not solely depend on the protection of their right to vote. It also depends on the quality of their lives. The security of a state also depends on the human security of its citizens. Bangladesh is a country with more than 160 million people amid very scarce resources.

Any compromise or shortcomings in human security may have spillover effect in the region. We are therefore investing heavily in our people. The prime minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina, has said that peace prevails when justice prevails, within the state as well as in state-to-state relations.



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Only justice ensures peace vital for development, and justice is possible only through democracy, which empowers people.

The absence of democracy means social injustice, poverty, inequality, deprivation and marginalization, encouraging extremism and terrorism. The present government has therefore dedicated itself to strengthening democracy and justice by empowering people through eradicating poverty, hunger, inequality and deprivation with social safety nets, job creation, inclusiveness, sustained growth and human development, and through countering terrorism.

[00:26:49]

Our efforts at empowering people in our current tenure have so far helped in reducing poverty by 10 percent; attaining GDP growth rate of 6.5 percent; enhancing per capita income by 65 percent; reducing overall inflation from double digits to 4.97 percent; assisting employment of 7.5 million in the private and .5 million in the public sectors; increasing exports annually by 19 percent from 2009 to U.S. dollar 24.3 billion in 2011-2012; arranging overseas jobs for nearly 2 million nationals; enrolling almost a hundred percent children in primary schools; achieving gender parity in primary and secondary education; establishing nearly 15,000 community clinics to ensure nutrition and health care to rural people, especially mother and child; setting up a climate change trust fund to implement adaptation mitigation programs. All of these have helped in achieving MDG 3, MDG 4 and MDG 5 on gender parity, infant and maternal mortality ahead of 2015.

There are more statistics. The statistics do not say it all. The important message is that our government and our political party see the security of the region, security of our state through a human perspective. Allow me to quote from Gautama Buddha, who said, “Peace comes from within. Do not seek it without” – end of quote. If there is peace in my homestead, there is peace everywhere. If the people are secure, if the people are empowered, if the people are free to express their opinion, to express their choices and options, if there is democracy, liberal and inclusive, the world will be a safe place.

[00:28:48]

Let me set out the key elements of our foreign policy, which makes possible peace, security and the continuance of democracy in Bangladesh. The basis for the foreign policy is the constitution of Bangladesh, due regard being paid to other core documents such as the Declaration of Independence and the Provisional Constitution, which preceded the adoption of the constitution itself in November 1972. Importance is given to the first days of Bangladesh under the first government, the founding principles and the true identity of the state, and the foreign policy



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adopted by the Awami League in its manifesto prepared for the elections held on 29 December, 2008.

Important also is the course which Bangladesh's foreign policy has followed over the 42 years of our existence, where it has not deviated from the country's founding principles, especially in this year, underpinning Bangladesh's statehood and long-term national interests. Such national interests would be distinct from interests imposed or borrowed – (inaudible) – commitment to human rights – (inaudible) – disadvantaged people, refugees; relations established through invitations and contracts relating to foreign investments, environment and climate; rights of our citizens abroad, either as visitors, employees or residents, and other persons resident in a foreign regime; sharing of global and other common science and technology; and participation and contribution to decision making in international fora.

[00:30:26]

It has been a fundamental tenet of our government that the foreign policy must reflect the will of the people, its identity at birth. By definition, it must embody and outward or external expression of the inner being of the state. Thus, our commitment to the U.N. Charter and the many multilateral submissions to international law is a principle basis for external expression, as indeed our foreign policy is an instrument to participate and contribute to the progressive development and codification of international law.

The will of the people and our identity at birth, which we profess secures Bangladesh statehood, the republican character of her statehood, the territorial integrity of the state and the sovereignty of her people, have permanent sovereignty over her resources, wealth and economic activities and enables the exploration and exploitation of such resources and wealth and the augmentation of economic activities.

[00:31:30]

It includes our claim to the remedial process of historical denial and injustice through the principle of preferential treatment without reciprocity in relationships with states which have enjoyed unjust enrichment or today have a higher level of economic development or are more endowed with natural resource; accords due recognition and importance to special relationships based on the principle of best neighborliness and others sharing a common interest with Bangladesh, the entering into and sustainability of relationships with nonstates' parties and multilateral institutions in the pursuance of the welfare of our people and improvement of their quality of life.



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Our foreign policy shares in the objectives of real peace, security and development, and places the utmost importance to peaceful methods of achieving real peace, security and development. Most of all, our foreign policy that shows the way forward and addresses itself in its entirety to the 21st century based on the democratic character of the state.

In more practical terms, as will be evident from all our actions on the international and regional planes, Bangladesh actively pursues a foreign policy that builds friendship and cooperation and yields dividends for all. Bangladesh engages effectively in seeking international peace and shared responsibility in the materialization of regional security through its adherence to law and the democratic character it presents to its friends and partners.

[00:33:10]

During the earlier tenure, the Awami League government successfully negotiated and inked the historic Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord with an armed tribal group. It effectively ended the 20-year-old conflict which was originated and persisted during successive military regimes and costing over 20,000 lives. The peace accord successfully brought an insurgent group to the mainstream of the society.

The then-government also brought the leaders of both India and Pakistan on the same platform in Dhaka for building confidence and ease tension in the region. It was immediately after the 1998 nuclear explosions by both India and Pakistan that escalated tensions among the two regional rivals. It then appeared that both India and Pakistan were in a competition to beat the other; the nuclear explosion in a desert in India was responded through another even stronger one in a valley in Pakistan. These escalated enormous tension in the region.

As Mahatma Ghandi said, and I quote, an eye for an eye will only make the whole world blind, end of quote. The honorable prime minister approached both the leaders of India and Pakistan, and when political will was missing in them, she convened a trilateral business summit in Dhaka to lay the foundation of confidence-building. Likewise, during the coming tenure, due to the wisdom of the honorable prime minister, the country could peacefully settle the volatile border guards' mutiny in February, 2009, thus averting a precarious crisis.

[00:34:49]

Bangladesh continued its role of advocating global and regional peace. The honorable prime minister visited Bhutan twice; the Bhutanese king visited Bangladesh once; the Bhutanese prime minister also visited Dhaka; Sri Lankan president visited Bangladesh; honorable prime minister took



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official visits to India and also to Myanmar; both the Indian president and the prime minister visited Bangladesh on two separate occasions; Myanmar president is due to visit Dhaka.

As we had resolved the 25-year-old issue with India on water-sharing of the River Ganges through the Ganges Water Sharing Treaty in 1996, we also resolved the 64-year-old border demarcation issue in 2011 through a protocol to the 1974 Land Boundary Agreement. We're also addressing concerns over a dam proposed by India across a common river.

With Myanmar, our other neighbor, we have peacefully settled a 41-year-old maritime boundary dispute at ITLOS. A number of bilateral and regional agreements on coastal shipping (link ?), land and railway transit, counterterrorism cooperation have actually strengthened further peace-building efforts in the region.

Bangladesh proposed a soft charter of democracy, which was eventually adopted by all South Asian states. Bangladesh continues to remain the topmost troop contributing country of the U.N. peace-keeping operations. Bangladesh became chair of the United Nations Peace-Building Commission.

[00:36:20]

The honorable prime minister time and again reiterated that Bangladesh will not allow its soil to any insurgent or terrorist groups for launching offensive against any other state. Bangladesh demonstrated that democracies do not attack each other; democracies do not interfere in each other's territory. As Professor Rudolph J. Rummel said, and I quote, "democracy is a general cure for political or collective violence of any kind," end of quote.

Further, given the fact that Bangladesh is situated between two emerging economic regional powers, that is, China in the east and India in the west, between the two subregional groups, SAARC and BIMSTEC, it is also important that it avails regional, political and economic opportunities, such as there never was before, to ensure its own security and contribute to the security of the region.

[00:37:18]

The Indian Ocean has become the major trading sea route, connecting the emerging Asian economy with Africa and the West. The Central Asia, on the other hand, has proved to be a major potential source of energy for Asian countries. Bay of Bengal appears to be a hub for Chinese and Asian trading links through a number of deep sea ports along its shores. Asian highways and Asian railways are now seen as near-future realities.



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Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar, BCIM, basically a track two initiative, is now getting considerable government attention, as Indo-Pacific economic corridor or new Silk Road initiatives are now not only academic gimmicks; people are seeing these as potential development opportunities, investment prospects.

[00:38:12]

When there are transit, trade, people's movement, migration, cross-border trafficking, terrorism, environmental pollution, water, deadly diseases, many issues, we can envisage resolution of all of these only within a democratic environment. Regional connectivity can only be flourished if transparency, predictability and confidence are greater. Regional connectivity can only be materialized if the people of the region are connected. Bangladesh encourages greater regional connectivity, as it may bring benefit to all.

However, regional connectivity is a huge undertaking. It requires mutual respect and understanding between states and its peoples. It requires people's participation and greater opportunities for interaction. Better the rule of law, greater is the transparency, better it is for greater external interaction.

And now, of course, to the issue which seems paramount for the present. The country is preparing itself to elect representative to its 10th Parliament. The election commission is entrusted, under the constitution, to conduct the election of public representatives. In a marked distinction with the past, the election commission has been empowered to function independently from the executive branch of government, having been given its own budget, its own secretariat and formed through a process of appointments made by the president rather than the government.

As much as the government is committed to safeguard people's right to vote and protect the country from any unelected aspirant which an unelected caretaker government would constitute, the major opposition party, namely the BNP, together with its allies, has declared their demand for an unelected caretaker government, thereby creating an uncertain and unconstitutional pre-election environment. To add to their demand is a section of the so-called civil society comprising failed and ambitious politicians, former advisers of the various unlawful caretaker governments, unelectable aspirants to state power, self-proclaimed guardians of the people who wish to exercise authority without electability.

[00:40:42]

It is the present government's conviction that Bangladesh truly stands at a moment of opportunity. A democratic process underpinned by the rule of law must be preserved by people's



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representatives. Further, given the fact that Bangladesh is situated between two emerging economic regional power – that is, China in the east and India in the west – it is also important that it avails regional political and economic opportunities such as there never was before to ensure its own security and contribute to the security of the region.

The people who comprise the heart and soul of the nation are its greatest strength, consistent with folklore and aspirations – they dream they dream of Shonar Bangla, or golden Bengal. The great delta, Ganges from – (inaudible) – in its far reaches – (inaudible) – their agrarian mode of life and other occupations borne of it. The processes the Bengali nation knows, deliberative and a consensual one, in political terms is naturally democratic. Combined with modern technology and ever-growing knowledge-based society, it has a population base and mass which is not at crossroads in national life.

[00:42:06]

Bangladesh stands firm on the choices it has made. It stands on a threshold of immense opportunity, aspiration and achievement. Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, thank you. Thank you from me, the government led by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and from the people of Bangladesh. (In Bengali.) (Applause.)

MS. MATHEWS: We have some time for questions. Please wait for the microphone; we'll start right here.

Q: Thank you very much. I am Howard Schaffer; at Georgetown University, I was Ambassador in Dhaka – a great pleasure for me – from '84 to '87. It's good to see you here.

[00:43:04]

I wonder – I wonder if you might talk a little bit further about Bangladesh- India relations. Many of us were very excited about the prospects for improved relationships following Sheikh Hasina's bold, courageous move to improve (them?). We were disappointed with the limited success of the Indian prime minister's visit, and I wonder where you see things going now, especially with the Indian parliament being quite balky about moving forward on the land agreement.

MIN. MONI: Thank you, Ambassador Schaffer. Well, I think you missed one point when you introduced yourself. You're a great friend of Bangladesh.

India-Bangladesh relationship has progressed significantly, and you are right in saying that because of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's fabled and very courageous steps – decisions, it has



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happened. Yes, we are also a bit disappointed about the land boundary agreement and – land boundary agreement not being passed yet, but I hear that there positive signs in the Indian parliament today.

But in any case, I think we have reached a stage with these two major issues. One is land boundary agreement, and another is the water sharing of the Teesta that both governments have reached an agreement, and I feel confident that these will be done. Whether they are done today or six months from now or a year from now, these will be done.

[00:45:11]

So I don't feel frustrated as such. While I would have loved it if we could have had it by now or within the next two or three months, but on other issue, on other fronts, we have made significant progress, whether it's the – our Tin Bigha corridor, as you know, to the enclaves in Dahagram and Angorporta – it's now open 24 hours for our citizens. We were able to do the electrification – do the electricity lines there, and so now people there are – they have electricity available to them.

When we talk about our trade, now it has gone up by, I think, a number of times – our – now we have duty-free, quota-free access for our – most of our products – almost all of our products into the Indian market, which is huge. So – and there are – we are also in the process of settling our maritime issues. So I think we have made tremendous progress, and the – I think the trust deficit that was already cited – that is not a major issue now. So I think that's a great achievement, and we are doing a lot of things together.

Now, it's not only sharing of waters of common rivers; now we have gone beyond that. We are now talking about joint management – basin-wide management of common rivers. I think that's a great progress. And then we're actively working on harnessing the potential of hydroelectricity in the region with Nepal and Bhutan. So I see great prospects, and we have come a long way in the last four and a half years, which was not – I mean, even people are not thinking so big. Thank you.

[00:47:30]

MS. MATHEWS: Gentleman in the back.

Q: My name is John Sifton at Human Rights Watch. We've met before, and we appreciate – my colleagues and I – that you've made yourself available before, as well as Prime Minister Hasina.



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When your party was in opposition, you and the prime minister and other leaders rightly and correctly criticized the BNP and the military caretaker government for persecuting and prosecuting and arresting people for expressing themselves and criticizing those governments, and your own members were among the victims of that approach.

How would your government now justify the fact that your government has, in fact, arrested and prosecuted people for saying critical things about the government? The head of Odhikar has now been charged with inciting public sentiment against the government, and my organization, as you know, has been – your government has petitioned to have held in contempt of the tribunal, and if we are held in contempt, our leaders, you know, will be put in jail if we set foot in Bangladesh. So how would you justify this apparent change in the Awami League's approach?

[00:48:50]

MIN. MONI: Thank you. I mean, I don't see any change. You see, it's very consistent. Let me start with where you ended, with the Human Rights Watch being held in contempt by the tribunal. I mean, that has got nothing to do with the government; that's tribunal. It's completely independent.

When we talk about our government – you talked about Adilur Rahman Khan of Odhikar. I think everyone, whether they are public representatives, whether I'm a common citizen, whether I'm a human rights defender – If I violate the law of the land, I must be held accountable, and Mr. Adilur Rahman Khan has been accused of violating the law. His organization propagated false information that thousands were killed on the night of the fifth – early morning of the sixth of May in Dhaka while not a single person was killed, because no lethal weapon was used.

And the whole operation happened in front of cameras, in front of journalists, and then the government had asked for information from Mr. Adilur Rahman Khan, which they failed to provide, and not only that, they put up photoshopped images and created an environment where more violence could happen. So I think when there is a violation, any government – and especially an elected government – must do what it is required to do under the law of the land, and that is precisely what has happened. And the investigations are on; the case will start, probably, and if he is proved innocent, he will be free – so because he has violated specific laws.

[00:51:11]

With regard to our accusations about the previous governments, if you know Bangladesh's history, you would surely know that Awami League, in its 64 years of existence, have always been at the receiving end of all kinds of human rights violations. We lost our leaders during every



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successive military or quasi-military governments, or even at the hands of elected governments. When BNP was in office, you know our MPs were killed; the leader of the – then-leader of the opposition, now prime minister, she was attacked; there was a grenade attack where 22 of our people, including senior leaders, were killed. So we have been at the receiving end.

So human rights matter to us. We take it seriously. And we will not do anything that would undermine either rule of law or human rights or democracy because that is the best chance for our people, and we have led – and history gives evidence that we have led our people to freedom, to democracy, and we are now leading our people to their economic empowerment and political empowerment, and we will continue to do our work. But if there are criticisms, we will take that, we will – if we make mistakes, we will rectify them. But there should not be undue criticisms. Thank you.

[00:52:55]

MS. MATHEWS: Right here in the pink shirt. No, sorry, lady right next to you.

Q: Oh, sorry.

MS. MATHEWS: She was first, yeah.

Q: (Inaudible) – from CNA. Thank you, Dr. Moni, for your comments today.

I wanted to follow up on your discussion about regional connectivity and Bangladesh's project to promote that. Has there been any forward movement on projects such as building the port in Sonadia or the Chittagong-Kunming road? Has there been any progress that you can discuss? Thank you.

[00:53:29]

MIN. MONI: Well, you see, transit, it's not a new issue to us. Previously, it was an explosive issue. Nobody talked about – it was a taboo. Nobody talked about transit and nobody talked about connectivity. Bangladesh became almost redundant in the region until the Awami League government came into office with a huge mandate of our people.

Now we have undertaken this huge initiative. And since we haven't done any – we didn't do any exercise before, so we formed a core committee. And they sort of looked at all the other such regimes around the globe, and they have come up with their set of recommendations. We are now



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looking at them, and we're looking at all the prospects. I think it's very much in the – in the process, so we will have it sooner than later.

And with regard to the deep sea port, we are now engaged with discussions with different companies, international companies. And definitely, we'll make a decision hopefully soon.

And on the other one, talked about Kunming initiative, we are actually very hopeful about that. China is interested. Myanmar, since they are now progressing with their democratic changes, we see the prospects to be very, very bright. So that would actually connect us to the – all of – not just China but Southeast Asia, one of the fastest-growing regions in the world. So we are very excited.

MS. MATHEWS: So am I.

We will – if it's all right with you, I'll take two at a time so that we can maybe try – but let's take the – right here on the end and then Ambassador Schaffer (ph).

Go ahead.

[00:55:55]

Q: Hi, Dr. Moni. My name is Kristi Ellis. I'm with Women's Wear Daily, a reporter with Women's Wear Daily. It's been four months since the tragic Rana Plaza building collapse, which claimed over 1,100 lives. And the U.S. suspended Bangladesh's GSP benefits and released an action plan for Bangladesh to meet. So my first question is how close are you to meeting some of the requirements of the action plan? What is your timeframe for that? Secondly, has – have you seen improvements on the ground in terms of building and fire safety standards? A number of retailers and brands have launched some initiatives there. Are workers any safer now than they were four months ago? And then lastly, have – has there been any action on efforts to raise the minimum wage, and do you expect that to happen this year? Thank you.

MS. MATHEWS: Thank you.

Tazi (ph).

[00:56:53]

Q: Thank you. Tazi Schaffer (ph), from Brookings and McLarty Associates. And it's lovely to see you again, Madam Minister. I also have a business-related question. Oh, we all know the



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success of Bangladesh's garment industry. We were in Bangladesh when it got its start. My question has to do with other exports that Bangladesh is developing or might develop. Are there – is this a priority with the government? And what do you think are the most important things the government could do to encourage the development of other export industries side by side with garments?

MIN. MONI: Thank you. It's something that we are deeply involved in at the moment. The – since the Rana Plaza incident, we have been working with our friends abroad, also friends here in the U.S. But our efforts to make our readymade garments industry safer started much before that. You probably remember that about three years ago, at the insistence of the present prime minister, the minimum wage was raised, and then – and she almost interfered and then made it possible that the minimum wage was fixed higher than what the workers and the employers had settled for. So we always have been giving a lot of attention to this sector. And as a result, and also because of our efforts in producing more electricity, creating more business-conducive environment, our exports have grown up tremendously.

[00:58:56]

Last year you'd remember that there was a fire incident in one of the factories, Tazreen, and we had lost more than a hundred people. Since then we started to work on – in a major way on the safety of the working place – workplace safety for garments workers. And we were – from the very beginning of our tenure, we were working on the labor law. When the labor law of 2006 was enacted, our members had given more than 56 amendments, but all of them were rejected by the parliament in 2006. As a result, we even walked out from the parliament. Then when we started our tenure this time, we started working with those amendments. We tried to bring in all sides together and bring the changes.

So after the Tazreen incident, the prime minister formed an 11-member Cabinet committee, and then we finalized – or the Cabinet approved the labor law amendment and we formed committees to coordinate all these efforts. All these were done before Rana Plaza incident. And then, unfortunately, on the day we submitted our last written submission, following the oral hearing for the GSP in the U.S., precisely on that day, that building collapsed.

[01:00:47]

I must also mention here that it's not just the collapse of a building. It's related to a much larger issue that I partly talked about in my speech today. For the people in the country, when they saw that killers of 1971, who collaborated with the Pakistani army and 3 million lives were lost, nearly 400,000 women were violated, when these people were not put under trial, when these people



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enjoyed impunity, when these people became politically powerful and they even became ministers, when they saw that killers, self-confessed killers of the father of the nation and 18 members of his family, they were rewarded by military governments and they enjoyed impunity for decades, why would people give importance to something like – so mundane like a building code? So people obviously ignored them.

[01:02:17]

And as a result, we have now ended up with probably a lot of buildings which do not conform to our building codes and, as a result, are unsafe. So this is a much larger issue, a much larger problem than just a few factories. So we have undertaken this huge activity now to – with the industry, to identify each and every unsafe building. And so that is going on now. At the same time, we have undertaken to increase the number of inspectors – building inspector, factory inspectors, fire inspectors. We have also enhanced capacity of our fire brigade and all that. So it's a multi-pronged effort that we are now going through. And the minimum wage – the wage board has been formed, and I believe that they will come back soon, very soon, with their recommendations. And we are already discussing with the labor leaders and with the employers as well.

So it's – and we have done the instruments to – we have a road map of our own, with the industry, with the labor organizations, with the government on board. It's a tripartite agreement. And that is the road map for us. And also now there's alliance, there is accord, there is the compact that – the compact is between EU and Bangladesh. And I'm happy that America is also – the U.S. is also joining that.

So we have – and also after the suspension of GSP, we're very happy that the U.S. government has come up with a road map saying that let's work together so that the suspensions can be withdrawn as soon as possible and we can have the GSP facility back. Though the GSP in the U.S. covers only 0.05 percent or less of our exports to the U.S. market, but – well, it's – we think it's important.

And it's also important that we get duty-free, quota-free access to the U.S. market. That would mean that we would not – for an export figure of about 4 billion, our products would not have to be levied about 700 million U.S. dollars in taxes. So if that is not levied, then at least a part of it can go to benefit the workers, who are largely women, poor women in Bangladesh. And this industry has done wonders for our empowerment of women. It has – also what it has done is it has proved to the world that Bangladesh can deliver world-class products at an affordable cost to the world consumers.

[01:05:56]



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What we need now, to ensure that the working conditions are safe, that our workers enjoy their rights fully. And we are working on that fairly diligently with all the stakeholders. And we have made considerable progress, but it's not going to happen overnight. There are many thousands of factories, and doing painful inspection of all these buildings to make sure that they're safe is not a task that can be achieved overnight. So we would urge your understanding also in this respect.

MS. MATHEWS: Did you want to say else anything about export –

MIN. MONI: About other export industries. Yes, we're not forgetting other export industries. When it comes to the shrimp culture, when it comes to our shipbuilding as well as ship recycling industries, we are trying to implement the same standards. Our labor law amendment that has been done, that covers all sectors. And not just labor law. With all other initiatives, we are focusing on all the sectors, not just exportable, I would say, because workers' rights do matter and we are giving a lot of emphasis on that. So we're looking at all sectors now.

[01:07:33]

MS. MATHEWS: I know that there are a great many questions still in the room, but we have trespassed on your schedule and on yours. So please join me in thanking the foreign minister for her – (applause).

And I do apologize to all of you whom I couldn't call on. Sorry.

MIN. MONI: Thank you. It's been a great privilege and honor. Thank you.

(END)