

40th Anniversary of Bangladesh-Australia Diplomatic Relations

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Australia is the first Western country (Denmark, the second) to recognize Bangladesh on 31st January, 1972 and on that date of this year, 40th anniversary of Bangladesh-Australia Diplomatic Relations will be observed. A large reception is being held by H.E. Dr. Justin Lance Lee, Australia's High Commissioner to Bangladesh and Foreign Minister Dr. Dipu Moni M.P. has consented to grace the occasion as the Chief Guest.

Australia has been a friendly country to Bangladesh from its very beginning. During the Liberation War in 1971, the Australian Government, people and media have supported the people of Bangladesh in their just struggle to liberate the country from the occupation of Pakistani armed forces which perpetrated heinous crimes on the civilians during the nine-month war from March to December of that year.

An Australian citizen, William Ouderland who was the chief of Bata Shoe Company in 1971 in Gazi pur, near Dhaka, made a magnificent contribution to our Liberation War. It was a rare example for a foreigner living in Dhaka to support actively Bengalis at a time when we needed most assistance from any quarter. He was the only foreigner who was awarded the gallantry award Bir Pratik by the Bangladesh Government.

The relations with Australia started with a very positive note. The first Australian Ambassador/ High Commissioner to Bangladesh, James Allen could speak Bengali and Bangladesh sent its senior most diplomat Hossain Ali as High Commissioner to Australia in 1972. The gestures demonstrated deep friendly relations between the two countries.

Australia assisted diplomatically for the admission of Bangladesh to the UN in 1974. High-level visits took place from Australia to Bangladesh. Labour Prime Minister of Australia Gough Whitlam visited Bangladesh on 19th January, 1975. During his discussions with Prime Minister Sheikh Mujib he offered his good offices to normalise the relations between Bangladesh and Pakistan. Bangladesh Prime Minister readily accepted the offer.

Australian Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister visited Bangladesh in 1997 and 1998. Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina visited Australia in October, 1999 accompanied by business leaders. The visit injected a fresh momentum in bilateral relations. Again in 2002 Prime Minister Khaleda Zia of Bangladesh visited Australia and consolidated bilateral relations. Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina visited Australia in October last year to attend the Commonwealth Summit and on sidelines discussed bilateral issues with Australian leaders.

Australia has been a regular source of aid to Bangladesh and in the 70s donated jeeps for rural projects. Australia sent livestock to Bangladesh for its breeding soon after independence. In the 70s, Australia provided training in aero-nautical engineering for

Bangladeshi nationals. A few Bangladeshi naval officers came to Australia for training as well in the 80s.

Since independence Australia has provided \$1 billion of development assistance and gives \$92 million per year. Australia provides about 60 scholarships every year to Bangladeshi nationals for higher studies in Australia. Australia has committed its aid to the establishment of Human Rights Commission. Australia was a strong supporter of Bangladesh receiving Test status in 2000.

Australia is a member of the Bangladesh Aid Group and contributes monetary aid as a global program with other donors in Bangladesh. Aid is focused on health (in particular women and children), education, water and sanitation. It provided \$7 million to the Bangladesh Climate Change Resilience Fund.

Contributing, with other donor countries, to a program working with extremely poor women in Bangladesh aimed at assisting them to build their own livelihoods, 40,000 women received a productive asset (such as a cow, goats, poultry or vegetable seeds for planting) and relevant training, such as livestock and poultry rearing or gardening to be able to run their own business.

During 2007-08, Australia provided over \$10 million to assist people affected by Cyclone Sidr, which devastated the southern coast of Bangladesh in November 2007. This support included delivery of immediate food relief supplies to 800,000 people, provision of nutrition supplements to women and nursing mothers and rebuilding around 2000 destroyed and damaged BRAC schools.

Other Australian aid program in 2007-08 included delivery of in-service training to over 16,500 members of School Management Committees and over 120,000 primary school teachers; provision of core subject training to over 7,000 teacher trainers and instructors in disciplines such as English, mathematics, science and Bangla language, assisting over 40,000 women from the impoverished north-west region to help themselves and their families by providing access to credit and savings services.

Initially Australia considered Bangladesh only an aid-recipient country but within last 10 years found the country attractive for business and investment opportunities. During 2010-11 the two-way trade figures stood at \$823 million, heavily in favour of Australia although it has provided duty-free and quota-free benefits to Bangladesh as being the Least-Developed Country. Santos, Australian gas provider is investing \$125 million in Bangladesh this financial year to explore gas in shallow water areas off Chittagong.

People-to people links between the two countries are also expanding. Bangladeshi-Australian community estimated to be around 16,100 (census 2006) constitutes an important component of multi-cultural fabric of Australia. The New South Wales State (capital city of the state is Sydney) has incorporated Bangla as a curriculum for the secondary and higher secondary school studies as recognition of a large number Bangla-speaking population in that state.

Although overall economic relationships between the two countries have great potentials, lack of knowledge on both sides on each other's market potential has been the impediment. Joint ventures between private sectors on energy, telecommunications and infrastructure in Bangladesh may be explored and Bangladesh apex business body may establish cooperative relations with its counterpart in Australia for enhancing trade and investment opportunities.

Australia and Bangladesh are members of the Commonwealth, the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC) and the UN and share their views at the multilateral forums, in particular at the UN Global Climate Change Conferences.

Bangladesh relations with Australia are on a strong foundation and on a steady course to expand and deepen in future. Australia High Commissioner H.E. Dr. Justin Lee said to media: "Australia and Bangladesh have much in common....On the occasion of 40th anniversary of our diplomatic relations, I look forward to our two countries building on this foundation of warmth and friendship into the future."