The President's News Conference With Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina of Bangladesh in Dhaka, Bangladesh

March 20, 2000

Prime Minister Hasina. Distinguished members of the press, on behalf of the Government and the people of Bangladesh, I would like to extend a very warm and special welcome to the President of the United States of America, His Excellency Mr. Bill Clinton, and distinguished members of his delegation. This is the first-ever visit of a U.S. President to Bangladesh, and it reflects the warm and friendly ties between our two countries, as well as the qualitative formation that has been taking place in our relationship.

Let me also thank President Clinton for his decision to begin his tour of South Asia from the soil of Bangladesh. We are truly honored, Mr. President.

At this moment, I recall with gratitude the warm hospitality that was extended to me by the President and the First Lady during my brief visit to the White House in 1997. I'm proud to say that the father of the nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, imbued by deep and abiding values of freedom, democracy, and equality, achieved for us this nation. He laid the foundation of Bangladesh-U.S. relationship.

We value the relationship. It is a matter of satisfaction that these ties have grown substantially. It was, therefore, a singular honor for me today to meet President Clinton. He's an outstanding leader and statesman of our times. We discussed our bilateral relations and issues of common concern, and I am happy to say that our meeting was fruitful and productive.

We reiterated to the President that the Government of Bangladesh shares the U.S. commitment to democracy, rule of law, human rights, and free-market policy. Like the U.S., Bangladesh also believes in peace, security, and in proactive efforts to defuse tension everywhere.

We appreciate the President's efforts and initiative to bring the Middle East closer to a lasting peace and realize the important role played by the U.S. in achieving peace in Bosnia, Kosovo, and other regions.

We also discussed our bilateral trade with the U.S., which is our number one export market. Nearly $2 billion worth of goods were exported to the U.S. in 1998 and '99. In this context, we explained to President Clinton the liberal economic policies and programs of the Government, and also discussed our proposal for increase of Bangladesh's quota of Government exports, as well as duty-free and quota-free access of Bangladeshi products to U.S.

Regarding cooperation in energy, both our countries acknowledge the immense potential in this sector and have decided to intensify our cooperation. We have initialed two production-sharing agreements with Unocal and Pangea. Bangladesh and the U.S. also signed a strategic objective agreement, under which the U.S. would provide an amount of U.S. dollar, $30 million grant to achieve increased institutional capacity to make decisions in clean energy development, improve environment, and increase public support for energy sector reform.

In addition, we thank the President for the agreement signed between our two countries for reduction of debt and use of interest for local development activities under the Tropical Forest Conservation Act of 1998. This is a good beginning, and we requested the President for further action for cancellation of our debt under P.L. 480. A number of other agreements have also been finalized where U.S. aid would be funding for this in Bangladesh.

On the question of export of gas, our position remains that after fully meeting our domestic requirements and ensuring gas for 50 years for use of future generations, the remaining surplus gas will be available for export. Similarly, on the question of export of power, we maintain that with new gas fields being discovered and developed, we must find good use for the gas. We will, therefore, welcome proposals that are commercially viable for the export of power, based on our natural gas.

We also apprised President Clinton that Bangladesh could emerge as an important center of IT industry in South Asia. Bangladeshi programmers, computer engineers, and IT professionals could provide IT product services, taking advantages of the

time difference between Bangladesh and the U.S. The U.S. could also provide necessary technical assistance and institutional support to Bangladesh for development of IT industry. This could help create employment opportunities for the educated youth of the country.

We requested the President to expedite the deportation of the killers of the father of the nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. We stressed that the killers have terrorist links and that they should not be given refuge in the greatest democracy of the world, a country that upholds the rule of law. I am touched by President Clinton's sympathetic response.

We requested President Clinton to take steps to regulate the status of Bangladeshi nationals living in the U.S. without proper documents. I'd like to thank President Clinton for the deep personal interest he has taken in the welfare and well-being of the people of Bangladesh. I am sure that the President's visit will be a milestone in our relationship and serve to highlight the many achievements of Bangladesh and enhance its stature and standing in the world community.

President Clinton extended an invitation to me to visit his great country, which I gladly accepted. A date in October this year will be worked out for this visit.

May I now request His Excellency William Jefferson, President of the U.S.A., to say a few words now.

Thank you, and the floor is yours.

President Clinton. Thank you very much. Prime Minister, ladies and gentlemen, I am proud today to be the first American President to visit Bangladesh. But I am quite sure I will not be the last. Though far apart geographically, our nations grow closer every day, through expanding trade, through the Internet revolution, and through our shared interest in building a world more peaceful, more tolerant, more prosperous, and more free.

Twenty-nine years ago this month, against extraordinary obstacles, Bangladesh began a lonely fight for existence that did not receive the support it deserved from many countries around the world. That struggle was led by the Prime Minister's father, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, whose passion and commitment united a people.

Despite many challenges since then, you have come together to build a nation that has won the respect of the world. The United States admires Bangladesh as a nation proud of its Islamic heritage, proud of its unique culture, proud of its commitment to tolerance and democracy, and proud of its participation in the world community. We are grateful for your leadership in the United States and your courageous example in sending peacekeepers to end the conflict in Bosnia and Kosovo. We particularly honor Bangladesh as the first nation in South Asia to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. Finally, we are grateful for the Bangladeshi-Americans who are doing so much to enrich and to enliven both our nations.

Today is only the beginning of a stronger partnership. The Prime Minister and I discussed ways to strengthen our economic ties, while ensuring that future prosperity is built upon respect for decent labor practices, the magnificent natural environment of Bangladesh, and a sense of responsibility toward the children who will inherit the future.

Today I am pleased to announce that our Agency for International Development will provide $50 million to Bangladesh and other nations in South Asia to harness clean energy resources, reduce air pollution, and fight climate change. Bangladesh also will be the very first nation to receive funding under a United States program that converts old debt to new funding to protect tropical forests.

I'm also happy to announce that our Agency for International Development and Department of Agriculture will provide $97 million in food assistance here. And today I'm sending to our Congress the renewal of our agreement for peaceful nuclear cooperation with Bangladesh.

Anyone who looks at the map can see that this is a nation of great rivers from many sources merging together as they approach the Bay of Bengal. Today, from many sources of our different national traditions, we meet in Dhaka to build our common future.

Thank you very much, Prime Minister.

Prime Minister Hasina. Thank you.

President Clinton. Would you like to call on a journalist, and then I will? Should we

go to the Americans first or the Bangladeshis first? It's your call.

Visit to Bangladesh

Q. Mr. President, what political and economic factors have convinced you to undertake your first visit to Bangladesh? And would the United States consider favored nation to Bangladesh as a favored nation, when India, Pakistan, and South Asia are engaged in nuclear arms threats?

President Clinton. Well, first of all, you ask what political and economic factors encouraged me to come here. I think this is a nation with a very big future. This is a nation that chose to sign and to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty; a nation that has used its soldiers to go around the world to help others make peace; a nation that, I believe, is committed to democracy, with a vigorous level of political debate inside this country, as nearly as I can see, and a real commitment to the long-term welfare of its children, and one in which we feel a great deal of common interest. So to me, this was an easy decision to come here. I wanted to come here. And I look forward to a longer and richer future between the United States and Bangladesh.

Terry [Terence Hunt, Associated Press].

Syrian President Hafiz al-Asad

Q. Mr. President, there has been a lot of speculation that you'll conclude this trip by going to Geneva to meet with President Asad of Syria. What is the likelihood of that? And would it be your expectation, if that happens, that your meeting would lead to a resumption of the Syrian-Israeli talks that were suspended in January?

President Clinton. Well, I do intend to do that. When I leave, when I conclude my visits in Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan, I do intend to go to Switzerland to meet with President Asad. And we'll just have to see what comes out of the talks.

But we have, now, we've worked very hard with the parties to get the Palestinian and Israeli track back going, and they're doing very, very well indeed. And I think they have a lot of energy and a real plan for the future. And I think this is the next logical step. I don't want to unduly raise expectations, but I think that this is an appropriate thing for me to do, to try to get this back on track, so that our objectives of having a comprehensive peace can go forward.

Q. My question is, how do you look at the Bangladesh politics? Thank you.

Bangladesh Politics/Bangladeshis in America

Q. Mr. President, do you think that—this is your first visit to Bangladesh, where people are hard-working and sincere. Do you want to make your visit memorable by declaring a general amnesty for undocumented citizens of Bangladesh who are living in your country?

President Clinton. I think you asked about the Bangladeshis living in the United States. And I think one of you asked about what I thought about your local politics. I think that the less I say about it, the better, except it certainly seems to be vigorous. And I hope it will be peaceful, because—you may know that I have a few opponents back in the United States. We have vigorous political systems; that's what democracies are about. But in the end you have to find constructive ways to resolve your differences and go on.

Now, on the Bangladeshis in America, I have done what I could to make sure that none were unfairly treated. We have laws that govern this. And it is true that we have allowed significant populations from places where there were virulent civil wars, and they were driven into our country because they could not safely remain at home. And then they stayed in our country and began to establish families and earn a living. And there were—the Congress passed blanket provisions to allow them to stay.

Other people who come to our country in large numbers are basically governed by our more general immigration laws. And there's a limit to what I can do. I have already taken some steps there. But I said in my opening statement, and I will say again, I think our country has been greatly enriched by the presence of Bangladeshis, and we have many Bangladeshi-American citizens. One of them is here with me today, Osman Siddique, who's our Ambassador to Fiji. And so I feel very good about the presence of Bangladeshis within the United States. But I have to observe the laws that we have.

Lori [Lori Santos, United Press International].

Cancellation of Joypura Visit

Q. Sir, can you tell us what security concerns prompted you to cancel your trip to the village today? And are you confident it will not happen again on this trip, particularly in Pakistan?

President Clinton. The answer to the first part of your question is, no I won't, because I don't think I can. I should. But let me—that I thought it was very, very important for me to come here. And I think it's important for the United States to see its friends and to work for a future. I regret that I could not go to the village. And I'm delighted that the villagers are coming to see me because it will give me a chance to highlight something the American press has heard me talk about many times, which is that the whole microcredit movement in the world basically began here in Bangladesh with the Grameen Bank nearly 20 years ago—maybe more than that now. And the Prime Minister and I talked about this.

I am honored that I will have a chance to see Muhammad Yunus again, to see some of the villagers, and to try to highlight the important role that, I believe, microcredit should have not only here in Bangladesh but throughout all developing countries in the world. The United States, through AID, supports about 2 million microcredit loans a year in other places. So I'm delighted I'm going to be able to see the people from the village and to support this very, very important initiative in which Bangladesh is truly the world's leader.

Q. Sir, and about the security on the rest of the trip?

Prime Minister Hasina. I think we can—we can stop here. Four questions already have been asked. And thank you very much. Thank you very much. And, President, thank you very much.

President Clinton. Thank you.

NOTE: The President's 187th news conference began at 1:40 p.m. on the front steps outside the Prime Minister's Office. In his remarks, the President referred to Muhammad Yunus, founder and managing director, Grameen Bank. A tape was not available for verification of the content of this news conference.

Remarks to Visitors From Joypura in Dhaka

March 20, 2000

Thank you very much. First let me say to the Prime Minister how delighted I am to be here in Bangladesh, and how much I have enjoyed meeting today with all the people from Joypura. I thank you, Asia, for your teaching. I thank Hasan Abed and the other people who are involved in the BRAC movement. I thank my longtime friend Muhammad Yunus for bringing his people here today who are associated with the Grameen Bank. And I'd also like to thank the people who came with the Asrayon project that the Prime Minister has founded. Thank you all for making me feel welcome today.

Bangladesh is a country that, by traditional economic measurement, is still poor. But as I saw today, in terms of the spirit and the ability of the people, it is full of riches. And the challenge we all face is how to unlock the ability—the brains, the heart, the spirit of the people of Bangladesh—beginning with the wonderful children that I have seen, but also including the people that I met with the Asrayon project and the people who have participated in the Grameen Bank.

I want my fellow Americans and people throughout the world to know that the people of Bangladesh are a good investment in the future. If you look only at the Grameen Bank, it has 2.4 million borrowers in 39,000 villages. Ninety-four percent of the borrowers are women; 98 percent of the loans are repaid. And now, with loans for people to buy cell phones, entire villages are being brought into the information age. I want people throughout the world to know this story.

I want to thank the Prime Minister and the people involved in the Asrayon movement for setting a goal that no person in this country should be homeless. That should be every nation's goal. And I want to thank the teachers and the supporters of the BRAC School for showing us that all our children can learn, and they all deserve the chance to learn.