

Introductory press conference

*Lakeshore Hotel, Dhaka
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Enhancing the Bangladesh-European Partnership

**Speech by Ambassador Mr William Hanna
Head of the European Union Delegation to Bangladesh**

Ladies and Gentlemen of the Press,

Good morning and welcome to this press conference. I would like to say first of all how happy I am to be here in Bangladesh, as the Ambassador of the European Union. And I would like to say a few words about the Partnership between Bangladesh and the European Union.

What does this partnership mean for Bangladesh?

When you talk of European Union in Bangladesh, most of you may think of a group of European countries importing goods from Bangladesh and not imposing any duty. Some of you also think of the large development assistance Bangladesh receives from the EU. A few, surely, remember that the EU has, for a long time, supported Bangladesh in its journey towards building democratic institutions and ensuring fundamental rights for its citizens. Well, all of these are definitely the markers of our presence in Bangladesh, and none of these is less important than the other.

The European Union is a relatively young Union. It started up after the Second World War. And it has always been about achieving peace and prosperity through working closely together.

Bangladesh is a relatively young country. And Europe has been working with Bangladesh since the beginning.

After the liberation, when Bangladesh needed food aid most, the then EEC came forward with that much needed support. Since then, the EU has tailored its cooperation to cater to Bangladesh's needs. When jute was the main export item of Bangladesh, the EU supported the sector.

Today, the entire export sector receives various EU supports to stay competitive internationally. Besides, the EU has become the best market for Bangladesh exports. The country also gets huge funds from the EU to improve its health, education and social development sectors. The EU has thus become a tried and tested partner of Bangladesh.

So I would say today that our partnership is a reliable one, and we would like it to become even stronger. My hope is that during my time here that we can strengthen this partnership and make it even more reliable. How can we do this?

We need to work on the three strong pillars of our cooperation – trade, cooperation, and support for democracy. What do we mean by these fine words?

First, we mean create more opportunities for Bangladesh citizens to achieve prosperity through trade and the jobs this creates.

The EU is committed to improving the trading scenario of Bangladesh. The total trade volume of trade between EU and Bangladesh last year was €8billion including for the first time more

than €6 billion exports from Bangladesh to EU. With the EU's relaxation of its rules of origin from January this year, Bangladesh's exports to the EU are expected to grow even faster. The BGMEA estimates that this should help double the country's export earnings from ready-made garments within three years, creating up to 10 lakh (1 million) new jobs. We also use cooperation funds to support the country to develop the capacity for developing trade policies and negotiation capacity, improving business climate and quality infrastructure, implementing decent work agenda as well as supporting businesses to compete in the world market with a pro-poor focus.

Second, we mean creating better opportunities for the poorest in Bangladesh to benefit from rapid growth and participate fully in the development of this young nation.

Opportunities will also come from our continued support for education. We along with other partners are about to renew our support for primary education in a new coordinated approach where we all work together to achieve tangible results: more children completing primary education and less disparity between the regions. Opportunities will also come from our support for health, where recent surveys have shown that more and more people are getting access to health facilities and lives of mothers are being saved. And we will also continue to provide opportunities for the very poorest people in Bangladesh, those who have nothing. We will continue to support the most vulnerable groups of society through many projects to improving their incomes and access to housing, water and sanitation, food, education, and health.

We support many projects in this area, often working with NGOs. Here I would like to cite just one example. Under the "Rural Employment Opportunity for Public Assets (REOPA)" project more than 24 thousand rural destitute women have been employed. The REOPA reduces poverty through 'cash for work' (road maintenance), ensuring mandatory savings along with income-generating training. The project started in 2008 at a cost of €28.5 million (285 crore takas) with the financial support of the EU, as well as the Government and UNDP.

Third, we will continue to support democracy, human rights and good governance. Respect for human rights and democratic principles as laid down in the Universal declaration on Human rights underpins the domestic and international policies of both Bangladesh and the EU and is an essential element of our basic agreement. We should never forget this. But we do more than just make declarations. We match this with actions. You know about our support for voter registration, which helped support the country's return to democracy. You know about our support for the Government's implementation of the peace accord in CHT. We are also supporting the development of village courts, as well as the implementation of the next census.

Bangladesh today still faces many challenges. The EU is an important political ally of Bangladesh:

We're ready to work hand in hand with the government, civil society and the private sector to create new opportunities for trade and jobs. We're ready to fight poverty and give the poorest a chance to participate in the country's development. We're ready to continue to promote democracy, rule of law, good governance. And we're ready to form a global alliance to address the problems whose solution goes beyond national boundaries.

Thank you all for your attention!

William Hanna