

## **Speech on the occasion of Europe Day, 9 May 2012**

Your Excellency, Begum Matia Chowdhury, Honourable Minister for Agriculture,  
Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

Welcome to our Europe Day reception.

Sixty-two years ago today, Robert Schuman, the then French Foreign Minister, made the first move towards the creation of what we now know as the European Union.

Today, the European Union has 27 member states and a population of 500 million. We face many new challenges, but history shows that we do best when we remain, according to our motto, united in our diversity.

Tonight, here in Dhaka, we are celebrating not just Europe Day, but 40 years of partnership between the EU and Bangladesh. There are many strands to this partnership, but I will mention just some of the strongest.

As you came in, you will have noticed the jute exhibition. 40 years ago jute was Bangladesh's main export to Europe. Who would have then have foreseen the growth of Ready Made Garments sector? Who would have imagined the record exports last year, with a 28% increase in the EU Market, in spite of our economic difficulties? Today the Ready Made Garments sector dominates, but to me jute still symbolises the strong fibre of our trade cooperation, which has made the EU Single Market the top export market for Bangladesh, with more than half of its exports.

If our trade binds us, so too does our development cooperation. The EU, with its member states, remains the largest donor of grants to Bangladesh. We helped with the early development of jute, tea and cotton crops and, as you know, Minister, we continue to support food security.

We recognise the tremendous success of the country in improving production over the years, and providing security for the most vulnerable. 30 years ago I remember the EU

providing food aid, but today Bangladesh is in a position to export rice. What a turn around that is.

Over the years the biggest area of EU support has been for education. And recently we have approved new programmes of € 100 million, working with government and with NGOs together to give new opportunities for a brighter future to the children of this country.

I am delighted tonight to have with us a group of students from Bangladesh, many of whom were not even born 40 years ago, top students, who have had the privilege to be chosen in the past as ERASMUS scholars. Each of them has visited and studied in Europe, returning to Bangladesh to help develop this country. It is young people like our ERASMUS alumni who are the bright future of Bangladesh - they will provide the strong intellectual and moral fibre, which will lead this country to even greater heights in the future.

Trade, development cooperation: these are important, but to quote the EU's High Representative for foreign policy, Catherine Ashton, the silver thread running through our cooperation is our support for human rights and democracy. As in the EU's framework agreements with practically all other countries, our Cooperation Agreement with Bangladesh starts with reference to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

We recognise the valuable work of the National Human Rights Commission, and we remain committed to working with everyone, government, civil society to ensure that our future cooperation assists the people of Bangladesh - in all their diversity, especially women and children and disadvantaged minorities, to live better lives- lives free from hunger, free from deprivation and free from discrimination.

Minister, it is a great honour that you have come here this evening to join us for this celebration of the strong ties that have bound Bangladesh and the EU over the past 40 years. Tonight we give our pledge to do our part to make this partnership even stronger in the future.