

Bangladesh - Nepal Dialogue: Cooperation on Water



Report on Visit of Bangladesh Minister for Water Resources to Nepal

21 - 24 January 2004

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1.1 The Ministerial Visit:

At the invitation of Jalsrot Vikas Sanstha (JVS), a non-partisan, non-profit and non-governmental organization in Nepal, Mr. Hafiz Uddin Ahmad, BB (Vir Bikram), Minister for Water Resources of Bangladesh arrived in Kathmandu on 21 January evening on a three-day informal good will visit to Nepal. It was his second visit. His first visit to Nepal as a tourist was 20 years ago. The operational objective of the Minister's informal good will visit to Nepal was to hold neighborly dialogue and consultation on water at the widest possible level to firm up understanding and increase cooperation between and among the co-riparian countries in the common river basin.

He was received at the Tribhuvan International Airport by Dr. Upendra Gautam, Acting General Secretary of JVS and Mr. Humayun Kabir, Bangladesh Ambassador to Nepal. The Bangladesh Minister was accompanied by Mr. Muhammad Zamir, Bangladesh's former ambassador and newly nominated Member of Regional Council, GWP-South Asia, and Mr. Mostafa Kamal Majumder, Editor of the New Nation daily. Also accompanying the Minister was a group of eight Bangladeshi journalists including Mr. Quamrul Islam Chowdhury, Chairman, Asia-Pacific Forum of Environmental Journalists (APFEJ).

On 22 January, the visiting Minister held a meeting with the representatives of civil society, private sector, academia and professional water organizations. The meeting with the civil society groups was conducted by Mr. Som Nath Paudel, Executive Member, JVS. Minister Hafiz called upon Dr. Prakash Chandra Lohani, Finance Minister of Nepal.

In the afternoon, JVS organized a talk program on Bangladesh-Nepal Dialogue on Cooperation, which was chaired by Prof. Dr. Binayak Bhadra, Charmin of JVS. The program attended by various sections of the society was conducted by Ms. Madira Shrestha, Executive Member of JVS. Dr. Vijaya Shrestha, Executive Member, JVS introduced the visiting Minister and the Key Note paper presenter in the program. The Bangladesh Water Resources Minister and Finance Minister of Nepal addressed the talk program (text of their speeches appear in attachment 1a and 1b). In his speech the visiting Minister stressed on the need to study measure for mitigation of the incidence of floods in the future and exploitation of water resources of the region through multiple and optimal use. He referred to the 1989 Joint Study Report's number of recommendations for furthering Nepal-Bangladesh cooperation towards mitigation of floods and food damages and harnessing of water resources of the region.

Mr Zamir presented a key note paper (text of the paper appears in attachment 2). In the paper he explained the problems and potential relating to water resources development in the region. He highlighted Bangladesh belief that India's unilateral move to interlink the trans-boundary rivers contravenes existing Articles of the 1996 Treaty between Bangladesh and India with regard to the sharing of the Ganges Waters at Farakka . Such a scheme, he further explained, would be contrary to the body and spirit of Articles 2(2) and 9 of this Treaty and would affect providing of due share of common river's water to a

co-riparian. Bangladesh has always believed, he opined, in resolving water issues through talks and considers that augmenting and harvesting surplus water for greater good of the region should come only through collective understanding and not through unilateral decision-making.

Dr Lohani, in his speech dwelt with the core values associated with hydro resources in this region, and emphasized on the need to change them in the future. He opined, "This may not be as difficult as it seems today. Both Mr. Vajyapee and Mr. Musharaff have shown the courage to project a new vision for this region when they expressed their determination to solve their long-standing problems."

Dr. Upendra Gautam, Acting Secretary General, JVS delivered welcome and opening statement (text of the statement appears in attachment 3). In his statement he opined: In the context of the Millenium Development Goal's poverty reduction target, channelizing" fresh water to Bangladesh and receiving gas energy from Bangladesh can be the single most reliable as well as credible way for mutual cooperation between Nepal and Bangladesh. "In addition to dams and storages, the critical value of fresh water for living beings makes it a viable alternative to pass through narrow strip of the Indian Territory using the pipe technology. This alternative will be directly contributing to critical service delivery to the people." Dr. Binayak Bhadra, the program chair, presented a painting depicting the riches of the Himalayas to the visiting Minister. In the evening, the Minster met with the representatives of political organizations. The meeting was coordinated by Mr. I.R. Onta, Vice-chairman of JVS.

On 23 January morning, Minister Hafiz called upon Mr. Surya Bahadur Thapa, Prime Minister of Nepal, who is also Minister for Water Resources. He visited Bangladesh Embassy, and was the guest of honor at a dinner hosted by Mr. Humayun Kabir, Ambassador of Bangladesh to Nepal. Mr. Mahendra Nath Aryal, Secretary at the Prime Minister's Office, Dr. Kishor Babu Aryal, Water Resources Secretary, His Majesty's Government of Nepal other government personalities attended the dinner.

On 24 January morning, Minister Hafiz held a chat with the media representatives. JVS organized a farewell lunch in honor of the Minister and his entourage at the museum Café in Patan, one of the three cities in Kathmandu, which is very rich art and architecture. B.P. Daibagya, Secretary General of JVS, who recently returned from the United States after a long leave, spoke on the prospects of enhanced prospects of linkages and partnership between water resources institutions in Nepal and Bangladesh.

The Minister who had arrived in Kathmandu amidst light winter drizzle departed from the city with full of sunshine and radiant mountains in the afternoon. He was bid good bye by Dr. Upendra Gautam and Mr. Humayun Kabir.

1.2 Way Forward

Minister Hafiz dialogue and consultation in Kathmandu clearly hinted at the forward

looking strategy that his informal good will visit to Nepal has helped give a shape to, and the increased level of understanding, which is essential to consistently sustain such a strategy. On the basis of the results of the meetings that Minister Hafiz had with the Nepali Prime Minister and the Finance Minister, his statements delivered during the JVS talk program, the meeting with the representatives of the civil society, political, professional and media organizations, what can perhaps be safely gleaned at this stage is that the day may not be far in the future when the top political executives of the three countries in the Ganga river basin-Nepal, India and Bangladesh- will meet to provide a visionary direction to their respective governments to harness water for rightfully just and mutually beneficial causes. To gain this day in the near future, concrete actions should be undertaken. The list of concrete actions may include formalization of bilateral notes based on the understanding reached at the political level, formulation of the agenda on the basis of the formalized notes, sharing the agenda with India, and finalizing it for the tri-lateral meeting at the political level.

It is heartening to note that the mainstream Bangladesh and Nepali media was incisively supportive of Minister Hafiz's forward looking good will mission. For example, Dhaka's New Nation daily in its 24 January on-line report entitled "Nepal keen for regional approach to water development" wrote: "With Nepal showing eagerness to take initiatives for sharing of river flow data and information for flood forecasting disaster management and water sharing among the countries of the region, civil society groups in the Himalayan Kingdom now look for concretizing the wish into action through activities at different levels in the two countries."

The Kathmandu Post in its 26 January leader captioned "Act Now' appropriately responded to the Bangladeshi view when it stated: " Nepal has always been ready for cooperation in water resources development for the whole region but it has to be vigilant and necessary steps must be immediately initiated to protect its own interests."

1.3 Synergy

Bangladesh and Nepal can build up on the contextually renewed and increased understanding to firm up cooperation on water in the common river. Added value of this cooperation to the health of the water will assume increasing significance in the days ahead as the role of climate change is adequately recognized on the Himalayan ecosystem, the main stay of fresh water in this region. This will require China, the top most riparian in the Ganga river basin, to cooperate with the fellow riparian countries. In view of supply of real time data on Brahmaputra or Yaluzangbu river by China to India, and willingness of the Chinese Academy of Sciences to conduct joint studies by China, Nepal and India on impact of climate change on the Himalayan ecology, the day may not be far in future when the value of fresh water is more realistically assessed, rightfully preserved and fairly shared between and among the countries in the common river basin.

PROGRAM

Informal goodwill visit to Nepal of Mr. Hafiz Uddin Ahmad, BB, Hon. Minister for Water Resources, Government of Bangladesh¹

21-24 January², 2004 (07-10 Magh 2060)

Wednesday 21 January

6:40 p.m.

Arrive Tribhuvan International Airport, Kathmandu
Kathmandu by Biman 703
Received at the airport by Dr. Upendra Gautam, Acting
Secretary General of Jalsrot Vikas Sanstha (JVS)

Check-in at the Radisson Hotel, Lazimpat

7:15 p.m.

Informal Welcome Cocktail Dinner at the Gosaikund
Hall, Hotel Radisson jointly organized by Bangladesh
Embassy and JVS with key government representatives

Thursday 22 January

8 a.m.

Quiet Breakfast at the hotel

Courtesy call on Dr. Prakash Chandra Lohani, Minister
of Finance (to be finalized)

12:00 p.m.

Lunch at Olive Garden, Hotel Radisson (with
representatives of civil society, NGO, private sector)

5 p.m.

Address JVS talk program attended by representatives of
the government, diplomatic missions, civil society,
political organizations, media, and NGO at Kailash Hall,
Hotel Shanker, Lazimpat.

7 p.m.

Dinner at Gosaikund Hall, Radisson Hotel with political
organization representatives

Friday 23 January

8 a.m.

Quiet Breakfast at the hotel

9:30 a.m.

Courtesy call on Rt. Hon. Prime Minister, Prime
Minister's Residence, Baluwatar

11:30-12:45

Private Lunch with Mr. Kamal Thapa, Minister for
Information and Communication (to be confirmed)

¹ This program has been prepared in close consultation with the Bangladesh Embassy in Kathmandu. H.E. Mr. Humayun Kabir, Ambassador of Bangladesh to Nepal will accompany the visiting Minister in his official engagements.

² Bangladesh Biman flight Dhaka-Kathmandu-Dhaka does not operate on Sunday and Tuesday. All the Biman flights operated are in the afternoon.

1 p.m.

Private time

Audience by His Majesty the King (to be confirmed)

Saturday 24 January

8 a.m.

Informal breakfast chat with media persons at
Splash Grill Bar, Radisson Hotel

10 a.m.

Visit Bangladesh Embassy

11-1 p.m.

Sight Seeing

1 p.m.

Farewell lunch at Patan Durbar Square Museum Café

Departure by Biman ...; JVS functionaries bid good bye