



Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS)  
1/46, Old Elephant Road, Ramna, Dhaka – 1000, Bangladesh

**PANEL DISCUSSION**

on

**ALLIANCE OF CIVILIZATIONS: REFLECTIONS ON BANGLADESH  
PERSPECTIVES**

Sunday, 23 May 2010

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**SUMMARY OF THE PROCEEDINGS**

**1. Introduction**

The Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS) organized a ***Panel Discussion*** on **ALLIANCE OF CIVILIZATION: REFLECTIONS ON BANGLADESH PERSPECTIVES** at the BISS Auditorium on 23 May 2010. The ***Panel Discussion*** was designed to explore a wide range of complex issues pertaining to the Alliance of Civilization (AoC) with a view to making a dispassionate assessment of the current reality and envisioning prospective directions. In more concrete terms, attempts were made to identify the current challenges faced by the AoC and assess its prospects for the future. The Panel Discussion was chaired by **Major General Muhammed Firdaus Mian**, psc, Chairman, Board of Governors, BISS. The Address of Welcome was delivered by **Major General Golam Mohammad**, nwc, psc, Director General of BISS. **The Statement** by **Dr. Dipu Moni**, MP, Honourable Minister for Foreign Affairs, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh was read by **Mr. Mohamed Mijarul Quayes**, Foreign Secretary of Bangladesh.

Three presentations were made in the Panel Discussion. These are: i. **“Alliance of Civilization: Challenges and Prospects”** by **Ambassador (Retd) Ashfaqur Rahman**, Chairman, Center for Foreign Affairs Studies, Dhaka; ii. **“Shared Responsibility of State and Non-state Actors including Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) Towards the Alliance of Civilizations: Bangladesh Perspectives”** by **Dr. Abdur Rob Khan**, Associate Professor of International Relations, North South University, Dhaka and Former Research Director, BISS; and iii. **“Responsibility of Media to Promote Alliance of Civilizations”** by **Mr. S. M. Shameem Reza**, Assistant Professor, Department of Mass Communication and Journalism, University of Dhaka.

Following the presentations by the designated Panelists, **Open Discussion** took place wherein government officials, representatives from academia, media, business circles, civil society and a range of other relevant professionals actively participated.

## **2. Address of Welcome**

**Major General Golam Mohammad, nwc, psc**, Director General of BIISS in his Welcome Address mentioned that human civilization started its journey thousands of years ago. The long journey of mankind was not peaceful. The end of Cold War raised the hope of having a peaceful world. But it became short lived with the emergence of new sources of tensions and conflicts. The most alarming among them is the growing divide between the Muslim and Western societies. Today, all forms of anarchies have spread across the globe and the desire for peace is also under threat. In the last decade, considerable efforts have been taken by international organizations, groups, consortiums and others to bridge the rift between the Western and the Muslim societies. In 2005, initiatives were taken by the President of Spain and Prime Minister of Turkey at the 59<sup>th</sup> Session of the United Nations General Assembly to establish the Alliance of Civilizations under the auspices of the UN which seeks to improve the understanding and establish cooperative relations among nations and people across cultures and religions and to help in countering the forces which fuels polarization, exclusivism and extremism. The Alliance emphasizes on defusing tensions between the Western and Islamic world.

Major General Mohammad referred to the High Level Group (HLG) formed by the UN Secretary General that consisted of twenty eminent personalities of the world. The final report of the HLG prepared in 2006 emphasized on two points. Firstly, the key reasons for the growing divide between Muslim and Western societies are not religions, but political. As such, it suggested some political steps. Secondly, the tensions across cultures have spread beyond the political level into the hearts and minds of populations. To counter this trend, the HLG presented recommendations in four main fields – education, youth, migration and media.

Major General Mohammad pointed out that the 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Forum of the Alliance is scheduled to be held at Rio de Janeiro would discuss a wide range of issues like governance, democracy, development, world order, gender, education, media, cross-cultural interaction, human rights, poverty alleviation, conflict management and a host of other issues. The Director General also briefly focussed on the background and structure of the Panel Discussion.

## **3. Paper Presentation**

**Ambassador (Retd.) Ashfaqur Rahman**, Chairman, Centre for Foreign Affairs Studies, in his presentation on “Alliance of Civilizations: Challenges and Prospects” explored Huntington’s theory of ‘Clash of Civilizations’. He then went through the history to find out the accuracy and practicability of the theory. He said that the ‘Alienation of Civilizations’ as could be seen through the history, began as the rejection of Muslims and Jews by the Christians in the medieval time, which was followed, in modern time, by the Jews and the Muslims going far away from each other. He emphasized that in the beginning, religion was the major cause of this alienation. In the present context, however, the major cause of alienation is a kind of ‘trust deficit’ among the three great civilizations.

According to him, the elements that made up this trust deficit were: i. Mutual prejudices; ii. Mutual misconceptions; iii. Mutual misperceptions; iv. Polarized

political views; v. Bitterness due to historical injustices (Jewish occupation of Muslim lands for instance); vi. Strains resulting from rapid Globalization; vii. Economic deprivation and desperate poverty; and viii. Double standard. He said that these elements concerned modern day policy makers and philosophers and many of them had called for a 'Dialogue among Civilizations'. He underscored that the crux of the issue was to open lines of communication and redefine the meaning of diversity. He added that many considered diversity of culture as a threat while others considered it as an opportunity and an important ingredient for growth. Such complexities would require 'a basic change in political ethics' around the world.

He identified the challenges that all civilizations had to face to achieve a modicum of an Alliance. These are: i. Overcoming prejudice and stereotypes, fed by ignorance, fear of change, over-simplification etc.; ii. Integrating diversity in public policies and citizens programs; iii. Living together as equal citizens and to respectfully dissent, without tearing the fabric of societies; and iv. Devising ways and means to accommodate the aspirations of a growing number of cultures.

He emphasized that the Alliance of Civilizations was not only an inter-governmental affair. It was a mobilizing force, a kind of global matchmaker, which connects political leaders and policy makers, business leaders and international organizations, human rights advocates, religious leaders, journalists and youth. He suggested that to promote the objectives of the Alliance, huge changes and reforms needed to be planned and executed in education. One of the ways could be revisiting history. He said that media could also play a role in promoting the objectives of the Alliance. He, however, emphasized that the political and religious leaders should take the lead in all these initiatives.

Regarding Bangladesh, he pointed out that the country is situated at the cross-road of three major civilizational fault lines and in close proximity to four major religions. Throughout history, it had been a conduit for one or more religions and civilizations. The people of Bangladeshi are proud inheritors of a diverse cultural heritage. He, thus, concludes that Bangladesh could be the fermentation pot of civilizations and suggested that the leaders and thinkers of the country must take up the task.

**Dr. Abdur Rob Khan**, Associate Professor, North South University, in his presentation on “**Shared Responsibility of State and Non-state Actors including Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) Towards the Alliance of Civilizations: Bangladesh Perspectives**” highlighted the core issues of Alliance of Civilizations and described how the UN mechanism is promoting the idea. In this context, he further elaborated how Bangladesh can play a more active role in international arena.

The Alliance of Civilizations is a platform that seeks to address tensions across cultural divides that threaten to inflame existing political conflicts or trigger new ones. The AoC aims at countering the perceived clash of civilizations. It works at grass-roots level, promoting projects on education, youth, media and migration aimed at building trust and respect among diverse cultures. The number of the members of AoC that includes governments and international organizations has come to 100, with the United States being the 100<sup>th</sup> member. Some of the countries like Rumania and Bulgaria have developed Country Strategy Papers. Similarly, some of the regions like

South East Europe have developed their Regional Strategy Papers. Hence, Dr. Rob Khan has suggested that Bangladesh also can promote a strategy paper.

He added that Bangladesh has already made significant progress in this regard during the first and second forum of the Alliances of Civilizations. Then, he proposed some fresh initiatives that Bangladesh can undertake during the next forum of the Alliance of Civilizations in Rio de Janeiro. Bangladesh has vibrant civil society organizations including NGOs. These organizations played pivotal role in eradicating poverty, social empowerment and inclusion of the marginalized groups in the development process. In this context, the Government and NGOs also can play a proactive role for promoting Alliance of Civilizations.

Beyond the contribution of Bangladeshi peace keeping forces under the UN peace keeping operations, Bangladesh has already set an example of the peaceful solution of intra-state conflict through the CHT Accord which can be an example of promoting conflict management and peace among people belonging to diverse cultures. The democratic performance of the country is also remarkable despite occasional setbacks. International Mother Languages Day and the International Mother Language Institute could be made instrumental in promoting, developing, and in some cases, rediscovering language, culture and traditions of different ethnic groups in Bangladesh and beyond. All these could contribute to attaining the goals of AoCs.

Dr. Rob Khan emphasized on the raising awareness about the AoC. In this respect, he proposed partnership between state and CSOs to extend the awareness among the mass people. He suggested that the PRSP 2 and MDG projects may be repackaged and included in the national strategy for AoC. The ongoing UNDP projects in the CHT may be replicated throughout the country for other ethnic and religious groups and this may be a successful project for AoC. At the end, he focused on the necessity for the regional strategy for promoting AoC. As an example, he said that the water security in the region may be a specific one. Beyond water, there are a large number of issues where the regional countries can develop areas of cooperation within the framework of Alliance of Civilizations.

**Mr. S. M. Shameem Reza**, Assistant Professor, Department of Mass Communication and Journalism, University of Dhaka in his paper entitled “**Responsibility of Media to Promote Alliance of Civilizations**” mentioned that media can play a very important role to develop, support and promote understanding and reconciliation among diverse cultures and civilizations globally, particularly between the Muslim and Western societies. Media can play its role as the bridge builder and convener in carrying forward the mission of AoC. It can transmit values, portray true images, and focus on the contribution to civilizations and programs to combat the stereotyping of the images of particular religion. It can also serve as a catalyst and facilitator by reinforcing positive beliefs, promoting positive forces, conducting dialogues and giving voices to communities and organizations fighting polarization and extremism. The basic functions of media in carrying forward the AoC mission can be done through advocacy and through providing space, time and platforms, amplifying voices of moderation and reconciliation, holding and facilitating cross-cultural dialogues. There are some limitations of media in carrying forward its activities. Media is more focused in events instead of process. There are also dominations of Western media. Media can contribute as public sphere to provide spaces for individuals and groups to

debate and exchange views on understanding and cooperation between diverse communities. Media can encourage the participation of stakeholders, demystify the myths behind mistrust and contribute to the creation of favourable environment for cross-community, inter-state and inter-civilization dialogues.

Media as national, regional and international platform can facilitate interaction on issues of mutual benefits and partnership. It can work in partnership with government, non-government, regional and international organizations, civil society, private sector, cultural and religious organizations in addressing major issues of misrepresentation. Joint media initiatives can be taken to hold cross-cultural discussions through production, exchange and disseminations of media outputs. Media should inform and shape perceptions of the Diaspora living in different civilizations particularly in the West and act as the source of information. Mr. Reza recommended that common standard for media practices in reporting issues which have implications for the AoC should be developed. Freedom of expressions both in the Muslim societies and Western public spheres should be promoted. Media policies in the Muslim nations should be less regulatory. Media should also be used as a forum for public education, particularly for the youth.

#### **4. Open Discussion Session**

During the open discussion, **Mr. Zaglul Haider Chowdhury** emphasized the need for an ‘Internal Alliance of Civilizations’ in Bangladesh and appropriate government policies in this regard. He also raised the question on whether the UN can propose a ‘code of conduct’ for media and, if so, how it will be implemented?

**Mr. Sohel Ahmed Chowdhury**, former Secretary, Ministry of Commerce, suggested that the Muslims should not overreact in response to provocations by isolated and eccentric individuals.

**Ambassador Kazi Anwarul Masud** questioned whether an interfaith dialogue could be fruitful in the present context. Regarding South Asia, he said that having two competing civilizations, it would be difficult to have a regional approach.

**Professor Shahiduzzaman**, Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka raised concern about the Euro-centric interpretation of History. He also emphasized that among South Asians there are divergent interpretations of historical events and developments. He said that the understanding of history has ramifications for foreign policy.

**Mr. Shamim Md. Afzal** expressed his concern whether the intellectuals of the country could reflect the views of the people at the grassroots. He commented that people from other religions should be informed about the contributions of the Muslims. He emphasized on inter-faith dialogue.

**Ms. Fatima Huq** questioned whether Bangladesh government had taken any initiative for inter-faith dialogue?

**Mr. Mohamed Mijarul Quayes**, Foreign Secretary of Bangladesh stated that if we looked at the history as well as the contemporary world, Huntington’s ‘clash of

civilization' could be viewed from different perspectives. We may even do not take into account the analytical framework of Huntington and have our own way of understanding the relations among the civilizations. In this regard, he suggested that we may highlight Bengali civilization with its emphasize on ethnicity, language and culture. He further said that instead of tolerance we can emphasize more on celebrating diversity. He also expressed concerns that in the process of mainstreaming, marginal culture becomes more marginalized. Hence, he recommended for developing a mechanism where the marginalized would be able to be a part of the mainstream.

## **5. Final Responses by the Panelists**

**Ambassador Ashfaqur Rahman** emphasized that an alliance is possible and practicable even in the competing atmosphere as it is an Alliance of Civilizations, not of states. He further stated that the Muslims were much concerned about the cartoon of the Prophet as it reflected the ignorance of the West about Islam.

**Dr. Abdur Rob Khan** said that the West took 300 years to develop a democratic system. Hence, Bangladesh also needs more time in this respect. He said that he is not aware about any government initiative on inter-faith dialogue but there are some non-government initiatives.

**Mr. S M Shameem Reza** clarified his statement regarding the dual role of media by citing examples of certain segments of international media that talk about peace, while remains insensitive to developments and phenomena that destroy peace. About a UN-sponsored code of conduct for the media, he clarified that it can be a guideline instead of a binding rule.

## **6. Address by the Chief Guest**

**Dr. Dipu Moni**, MP, Hon'ble Minister for Foreign Affairs, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh has not been able to attend the panel discussion as the **Chief Guest**. In her absence, **Mr. Mohamed Mijarul Quayes**, Foreign Secretary of Bangladesh, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh has kindly attended in the panel discussion and read the **Statement** by the Hon'ble Minister for Foreign Affairs.

Dr. Dipu Moni, MP, Hon'ble Minister for Foreign Affairs, in her address as the Chief Guest, stated that the diversity in our civilizations, cultures and faiths should be a force that binds us together rather than dividing the humanity. Therefore, dialogues to build trust amongst the descendants of different civilizations and amongst the followers of different faiths and cultures are essential. She expressed concerns that proliferation of extremism, radicalization and racism has assumed a disquieting dimension. Mistrust and prejudice of the 'other' continue to persist. Furthermore, newer manifestations of intolerance towards vulnerable groups such as migrant workers and immigrants are also in the rise. She stated that defamation of religions, religious stereotyping, linking terrorism to certain religion and incitement of religious hatred are disrupting social harmony. Furthermore, she emphasized that in the backdrop of fresh waves of intolerance and violence based on distorted interpretation

of religion and culture the need for a dialogue between civilizations has emerged with a renewed urgency.

Dr. Dipu Moni stated that the last two forums of the Alliance of Civilizations were successful in bringing religious leaders and statesmen as well as representatives from private and public sectors to exchange their views and to identify the challenges faced in the way of forging an Alliance of Civilizations. She also believes that the forthcoming Forum will be equally successful. She suggested that our approach should be to work on the common denominators that unite us. She stated that Bangladesh is now an inclusive, pluralistic, and multi-cultural democracy and the present government is committed to bring peace and prosperity for all the citizens of Bangladesh, irrespective of their creed or faith, and to guarantee them a life of dignity. She also stated that at the international level, Bangladesh is widely regarded as a constructive global actor in the pursuit of global peace and harmony and plying a significant role in the forums of the Alliance of Civilizations, particularly in terms of building bridges between countries, cultures, religions and diverse civilizational entities.

She stated that we achieved a common understanding of old and new threats, and to face those threats through a common unified front. Alliance of Civilizations can effectively contribute to creating such a level of understanding, and bringing peace and security for all of us. She suggested that to ensure sustainable peace, it is imperative to create the right conditions for our peoples to live in dignity, live in freedom from want and live in freedom from fear.

She mentioned that Bangladesh remains an example of a country where communities, regardless of religion and ethnicity, can live in harmony. She also mentioned that in Bangladesh, media enjoys full freedom to express their views without fear. Growing empowerment of women is visible in Bangladesh even in remote areas of the country. In such a background, the Chief Guest mentioned that the Alliance of Civilizations provides a forum for Bangladesh to highlight its experiences and good practices as a secular country.

Finally, Dr Dipu Moni, congratulated the organizers, the participants and everybody involved in the Panel Discussion.

## **6. Summing Up by the Chair**

**Major General Muhammed Firdaus Mian, psc**, Chair of the Panel Discussion, thanked all Panellists and distinguished participants for their presentations.