



Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies

1/46, Old Elephant Road, Eskaton, Dhaka-1000

BIISS Country Lecture Series

Lecture

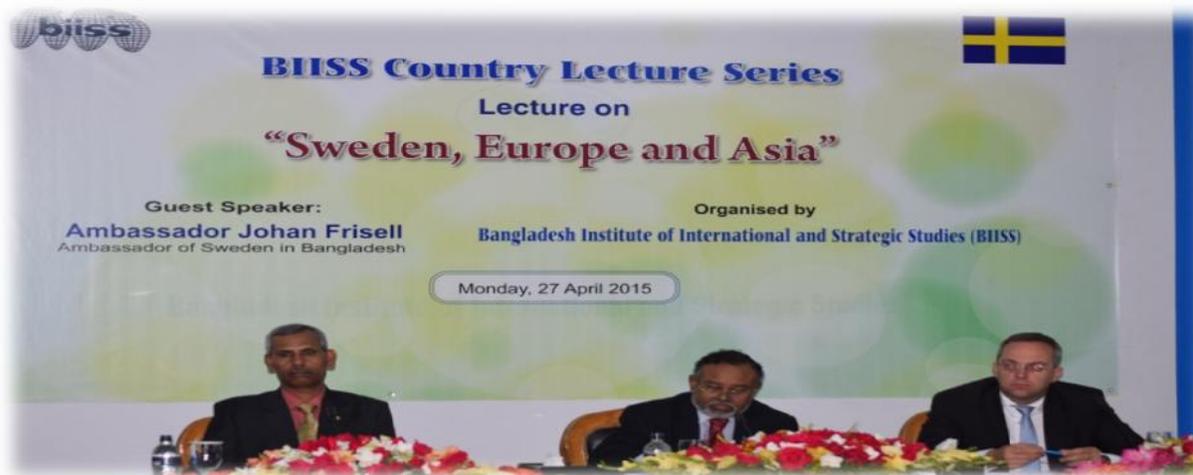
On

SWEDEN, EUROPE AND ASIA

Organised by BIISS on April 27, 2015

SUMMARY OF THE PROCEEDINGS

Introduction



The Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS) organised its 11th Country Lecture titled “**SWEDEN, EUROPE AND ASIA**” at BIISS Auditorium on Monday, 27 April 2015. The lecture was delivered by **H.E. Ambassador Johan Frisell**, Ambassador of Sweden in Bangladesh. **Major General A K M Abdur Rahman**, ndc, psc, Director General, BIISS delivered the address of welcome. **Ambassador Munshi Faiz Ahmad**, Chairman, Board of Governors, BIISS chaired the session.

Following the lecture, a lively open discussion took place where distinguished scholars, members of the academia, representatives of multi-disciplinary professional bodies, representatives from the foreign missions, government and non-government agencies and policy makers actively participated. **Ambassador Munshi Faiz Ahmad**, Chairman, Board of Governors, BIISS concluded the session.

Opening Address



Major General AKM Abdur Rahman, ndc, psc, Director General, BISS, welcomed all to the country lecture series of Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies and said that BISS has been regularly organising these lectures with a view to enriching people's understanding about countries with whom Bangladesh has significant bilateral relations. He rendered heartfelt gratitude to H. E. Mr. Johan Frisell, Ambassador of Sweden to Bangladesh for his presence and consent to deliver lecture on "Sweden, Europe and Asia". Talking about Sweden's role right after the

liberation war, Mr. Rahman informed that Sweden was one of the first European countries to recognize the independence of Bangladesh. He added that, Sweden and Bangladesh started to develop friendly and mutually beneficial ties since Bangladesh's birth. Sweden also provided considerable assistance to health and education sectors of Bangladesh. Focusing on good trade relations with Sweden, Mr. Rahman noted that there are more than 50 Swedish or Swedish-related companies represented in Bangladesh either by themselves or by their agents and total trade including export and import between Bangladesh and Sweden is amounts over 500 million US dollars. According to him, there is a huge potential for attracting Swedish investment in the sectors like renewable energy, paper pulp, jute, leather-products, textile and readymade garments etc. Mr. Rahman depicted Sweden a trustworthy friend of Bangladesh and said that Swedish development cooperation with Bangladesh began soon after the country's independence in 1971 and has exceeded 1.7 billion US dollars since then. The cooperation emphasises on the areas of health, inclusive economic growth, skills development, human rights and good governance. Besides, primary education, water and sanitation, climate change adaptation and disaster risk management are also significant areas of cooperation. Discussing about aid and assistance, Mr Rahman informed that, Sweden pledged to give Bangladesh 1.6 billion Swedish Krona, or 1,659 Crore Taka for development assistance purpose in the next seven years. This is a part of Sweden's development strategy for Bangladesh for 2014-2020. According to Mr. Rahman, people to people contact are equally or in some cases more important in case of any state to state relation and he thanked Swedish government for providing generous scholarships to Bangladeshi students. He concluded his speech by rendering heartfelt gratitude to the learned audience and hoped that the lecture delivered by H.E. Johan Frisell would further enhance bilateral relations and bolster cooperation between the two friendly nations.

Lecture by Ambassador Johan Frisell, Ambassador of Sweden in Bangladesh



Ambassador Johan Frisell, Ambassador of Sweden in Bangladesh, in his keynote address, said that he was honoured to be part of the distinguished venue that provides the intersection of diplomacy and research think tank on international and strategic affairs. He focused on showing the continuity of the Swedish foreign policy since the end of the Second World War. He mentioned that Swedish foreign policy is based on few principles.

The Ambassador noted that the first principle of Swedish foreign policy is solidarity and Sweden has shown a lot of solidarity with the third world. The country was a strong proponent of decolonization. It joined the non aligned movement for showing solidarity with the countries who were about to free themselves from colonial rule. He noted that Sweden is a large recipient of refugees and it is well proved that Swedish culture is open to this kind of migration. The principle of solidarity is visible in Sweden's relations with Bangladesh as well.

He identified values as the second starting point of Swedish foreign policy. He outlined that, Sweden believes in respecting human rights, gender equality and democratic systems. Development assistance of Sweden is value oriented. He mentioned that Sweden promotes sexual and reproductive rights and supports measures against corruption in Bangladesh. Sweden pursues these values also in their political dialogue.

According to Mr. Frisell, the third area of Swedish foreign policy is the openness to the world. Sweden has been a country of open trade with hardly any trade barriers for last 150 years. The experience of letting go all quotas and custom tariffs has been truly a rewarding experience for Sweden, he noted. The openness is also shown in their policies of migration. He mentioned that Sweden and Bangladesh has a very tight cooperation on these issues. Encouraging global trade to be liberal is also a sign of openness, he mentioned. Sweden encourages Bangladesh to liberalise their trade. He identified customs, quotas and bureaucracy around import as the barriers. Openness also means promoting a lot of Swedish exports to Bangladesh and Bangladeshi export to Sweden. The Ambassador identified RMG sector as the strength of Bangladesh economy. The other sectors are leather, ceramics and pharmaceuticals. He emphasised that no serious Swedish government company can ignore Bangladesh as a production hub.

The Ambassador informed that the fourth principle of Swedish foreign policy is the international cooperation. Sweden has been very faithful member of the United Nations. Over 80,000 Swedish have served in UN peacekeeping missions so far. Sweden is an active actor in conflict prevention and disarmament. He noted that Sweden hosted the first global UN Conference on environment

in 1972 which was the first ever attempt to address the issue on a global platform. The country also supports international law.

The Ambassador identified neutrality as the fifth principle of Swedish foreign policy. Sweden has been a neutral country basically for past 200 years. He mentioned that since 1840 Sweden has never been in war. The policy of neutrality was successful during the First World War and the Second World War as well.

The lecture also focused on the dilemma that Sweden faced in 1960s and 1970s. Solidarity and



values cannot be promoted being neutral, because philosophically, there are contradictions. The Ambassador said that the biggest riddle for him was to explain why the Swedish prime Minister engaged so heavily against the American aggression in Vietnam while there was not a single statement from him during 1971. Sweden maintained solidarity and values in case of Vietnam but in case of Bangladesh they maintained neutrality. He noted that from the end of the war 16 December 1971 it took lot of time to regain the distance that was not covered.

The Ambassador informed the audience that all the principles except neutrality are valid in today's context. Sweden subscribes to the motto that large countries have to be more careful than small countries. He gave an example when an elephant moves in the room it might hurt the small mice but when the mice move it won't hurt the elephant.

Focusing on Bangladesh-Sweden future relations Mr. Frisell mentioned that Sweden will keep on driving development cooperation which is an expression of solidarity. Sweden will continue driving bilateral trade relations which is necessary for both Bangladesh and Sweden. He further added that Sweden will keep on driving all the areas of international cooperation where Sweden and Bangladesh are already partners whether peacekeeping, global migration and climate negotiations. Bangladesh is a close partner in this regards, he added.

Open Discussion



Dr. Mohammad Mahfuz Kabir, Senior Research Fellow, BISS, asked a question regarding ISIS emergence in Asia, Middle East and North Africa and wanted to know what the role of Sweden is in this particular regard.

Response: In reply to the question regarding emergence of ISIS, Mr. Frisell said that, it is extremely difficult to handle the situation. He informed that, almost two

hundred young people have travelled to join ISIS from Sweden who are mostly second generation immigrants from Muslim countries like Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, and Lebanon. He also added that, among all European countries, Sweden receives largest number of Syrian refugees after Germany and this is a burden Sweden would like to facilitate. Swedish government has decided to provide military trainers to Iraqi Kurdish guards to petrol and resist attacks of ISIS. So, in many different forms Sweden is trying to contribute to counter ISIS.

Dr. Mustafizur Rahman, Chairman, Bangladesh Institute of Development Strategy, wanted to know about two different systems of Sweden i.e. Ombudsman and direct democracy and raised a question whether these sorts of things can be effective in Bangladesh.

Response: Talking about Ombudsman, Mr. Frisell said that, it is a function within the government to receive complains of citizens against authority. This ombudsman shall have such a high status within the government system as he/she can take forward such complains to responsible authority. The Ombudsman is employed by the government or by the state. So he/she is also part of government, he added. He remarked that, it is necessary to have firewall between the ombudsman and rest of the authority for its proper operation. Discussing about the situation of this model in different countries, Mr. Frisell said that, in many countries, either the Ombudsman is too tightly net into the administration and is not independent and have no courage to criticize high officials of government or the ombudsman is put too far out from the government and works more like a NGO where his/her work carries no weight. He noted that, the challenge for any other country which is interested in this model is making a way to provide independence for ombudsman and make sure he/she is well anchored within the government system. In reply to the query regarding direct democracy and referendum, Mr. Frisell informed that, Swedish constitution has provision for referendum and it has been used five times in last seventy years. He remarked that, most politicians do not like referendum as this hampers the comprehensiveness of the government. If the result of the referendum going against the government it means that this will have impact on the rest of the budget. For the success of any government to run the entire government program, it is disturbing to have referendum. Mr.

Frisell expressed his unwillingness to comment on which system will be appropriate for Bangladesh and said that this must be analysed in the context of Bangladesh's government and democratic system.

Mr. Nazmul Arifeen, Research Officer, BIISS, raised a question regarding incoming population and wanted to know about the popular perception of Swedish people regarding incoming population.

Response: In reply to Mr. Arifeen's question, Mr. Frisell said that, Swedish people's view of immigrants is overall welcoming. Sweden has received different waves of immigrants in last sixty/seventy years and practically all migrant groups are very well integrated in the society without losing their own national identity. He informed that, around ten to twelve thousand Bangladeshi people are living in Sweden and they are very well integrated. He expressed his satisfaction over large popular movements to protect and support Swedish immigrants and said that this is a kind of social mobilisation to protect Swedish multicultural pluralistic society. He also emphasised immigrants' role in Swedish economy. He said that, Sweden does not have labour force and Swedish women give birth to few kids. As a result, to sustain economic activities Sweden needs immigrants.

Md. Mukammel Hossain, Former Secretary, Planning Commission, expressed his view on West and East European conflict. He sought comment from Mr. Frisell on Dr. Younus's statement that we shall put poverty by 2030 for display in museum.

Response: Ambassador Johan Frisell did not provide any straight forward answer regarding West and East European conflict. He said that, for NATO Russia is not a threat but for Russia NATO is a threat. He remarked that there is an asymmetrical relationship between Russia and NATO. Talking about Dr. Younus's remark on poverty, he hoped that, poverty will be eradicated from Bangladesh by 2030. But he expressed his concern about pockets of poverty. He said that the general trend is looking good but there may be some portion of society like indigenous people of Chittagong Hill Tracts, Urdu speaking group or newly arrived people of Dhaka or Chittagong living in slums could be affected by the poverty. It is very important for donors, NGOs, system of the government not to exclude these small groups.

Ambassador Munshi Faiz Ahmed, Chairman, Board of Governors, BIISS, also asked a question on the East-West Conflict in Europe. As Ambassador Johan Frisell said that, the European Countries feel threat from Russia, Ambassador Munshi Faiz Ahmed proposed to see the scenario in a different way that Russia feels threatened and is there any way of accommodating the threat that could bring peace in that region.

Response: In reply to Mr. Ahmed's query, Mr. Frisell said that, Russia do not wants to see NATO on their borders. Russia sees NATO as antagonist and as a threat. It is their way of seeing NATO. Still there is cooperation between Russia and NATO. They still have joint exercises, there is Russian military representation in NATO. He remarked that Russia is very well aware of NATO's Doctrine. Mr. Frisell doesn't think that Russia could be a part of NATO right now.

Brig. General M. Mofizor Rahman, ISO Consultant, remarked that, Sweden and Japan are the countries which are top on innovation. He opined that innovation is a thing which does not come by hard work only; it is something which is built in. He wanted to know from Mr. Frisell about the education system and other factors which make the whole nation so innovative.

Response: In reply to Mr. Rahman's query, Mr. Frisell said that, Sweden has a very strong policy regarding ethical business and expect their companies to follow international norms as well as social and ecological responsibilities. Swedish citizens are very conscious about environmental safety and labour rights. Talking about Swedish education system Mr. Frisell said that, though it not perfect but it allows freedom, imagination and stimulation. Swedish government provides free education to students up to university which allows every student to take the opportunity to continue their studies up to Masters level. Exclusion from school is very rare which facilitates innovators to come up with some brightest ideas. This unhindered education system has facilitated Sweden to produce a large number of innovators. He further added that, in Sweden, students are expected to raise questions and argue with their teachers about what they are taught. This allows Swedish students to think differently, come up with new hypothesis which as a result make them innovative and different from others.

Ambassador (ret'd) Shahed Akhtar asked about Swedish migration policy towards Bangladesh and also commented that, Sweden being well known as a pioneer of disarmament, yet selling arms to whole world which is contradictory. Mr. Akhtar wanted to know Mr Frisell's view in this regard also.

Response: Focusing on the issue of migration, Mr. Frisell said that, Bangladesh is a country which likes to facilitate its citizens to go abroad for work and then return back to Bangladesh. As Sweden is importing labour it is important for Sweden to have a good relation with the host country. That's why Sweden is cooperating in labour migration. In response to the contradiction between disarmament and selling arms, the Ambassador said that Sweden has quite vigorous system of selling arms to those countries which have reached a certain level of democracy, respect human rights and have peaceful relations with its neighbours. Mr. Frisell thinks that it is legitimate to use arms for self defence. Sweden has no problem selling arms to those countries which have good relations with their neighbours and are buying those arms only for self defence or United Nations Peace Keeping. Once Sweden was a large producer of anti-personnel mines, but considering its inhumane nature, they have stopped producing those mines.

Mr. Mahbubur Rashid Bhuyian, Research Fellow, BIISS, wanted to know how Sweden makes it possible to become a developed country from an underdeveloped situation.

Response: Replying to the question, the Ambassador said that there is an illusion that Sweden was rich. He mentioned that only 5% of the total population were rich and rest were poor. Poverty was still there and was eradicated only on the first decade of the 20th century.

Ms. Razia Sultana, Research Fellow, BIISS, focused on Rohingya refugee problem of Bangladesh and asked whether Sweden could cooperate with Bangladesh in this regard. She also raised another question regarding higher studies in Sweden and mentioned that earlier there was a scheme that welcomed foreign students without tuition fees in Sweden. But now Sweden has imposed tuition fees which have made higher studies more challenging for Bangladeshi students. She asked how Sweden could cooperate with Bangladesh in this area. She also wanted to know about gender equality and declares Sweden as a role model in this field. She wanted Mr. Frisell's suggestion to improve Bangladesh's situation on gender equality.

Response: Replying to the question of the situation for undocumented nationals from Myanmar, the Ambassador noted that this is truly one of the tragic and unresolved problems. He remarked that, the best solution for the Government of Myanmar is to create condition for this group to live peacefully in their own country. He mentioned that the global resettlement scheme is too small to accommodate the large number of Myanmar nationals. It is necessary to recognize the Rohingyas as refugees for repatriation to the third country. Currently only small part of Myanmar nationals are recognized as refugee. Vast majority is recognized as informal migrants as such they do not fall under the definition of refugee as per Geneva Convention. Addressing the question on free tuitions for foreign students, he informed that Swedish Universities had free tuitions for foreign students for many years. But depletion of university resources and falling of the quality of education were two reasons for imposing tuition fees, he mentioned. Not only that because of free tuition, Sweden received many students in different universities who were not motivated for study. Reintroduction of tuition fees helps Sweden to find sincere student who are really motivated for study. Talking about gender equality, Mr. Frisell said that, to ensure gender equality, Sweden analyses gender aspects of all projects and try to evaluate how those projects reach women. According to him, there is no simple way to ensure gender equality but he expressed his satisfaction that it is happening in Bangladesh.

Mr. Shaikh Maqsood Ali, retired member of planning commission, asked about Sweden's situation in respect of inequity of income.

Response: Talking about social democracy, Mr. Frisell said that, Sweden is a truly social democratic country. Here social democracy means giving support to weak groups in society with

proper health care, education, paying rent etc. But he mentioned that, Sweden is not as equal as it used to be. But compared to many other countries the difference between the rich and poor is quite low. He said that there is a social cohesion in Sweden. There are no people in Sweden who are extremely rich or very poor.

Summing up by the Chair

Ambassador Munshi Faiz Ahmed, Chairman, Board of Governors, BIISS, summed up the session stating that Bangladesh and Sweden have enjoyed warm and excellent relations, since the recognition of the newly independent Bangladesh by Sweden on 4th February 1972. Development cooperation began soon after and has exceeded \$1.7 billion since then. Talking about financial relation between Sweden, Mr. Ahmed noted that Bangladesh has growing trade relations with Sweden, largely due to increasing export of apparel items. According to him, there is a huge potential for enhancing bilateral trade and investment relations between the two countries further. He also opined that, Bangladesh and Sweden enjoy increasing cultural and educational exchanges as well. Bangladeshi Diaspora and student community in Sweden is growing, particularly with the rising number of Swedish Institute Study Scholarships. Various other initiatives like Young Connectors of the Future Programme are also facilitating intercultural dialogue and knowledge sharing. He hoped that there will be stronger cooperation in terms of development cooperation and trade and investment, particularly reaping the full benefit of Swedish government's new cooperation strategy.



At the end, he extended his special thanks to the Ambassador Johan Frisell and his colleagues from the Swedish Embassy and rendered his heartfelt gratitude to the members of academia, businessmen, representatives of think-tanks, media and officials for their participation.