

Proceedings
Country Lecture
on

**STRENGTHENING TIES: A FORWARD LOOK
BETWEEN BANGLADESH AND ITALY**

10 November 2025

Jointly Organised by



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Country Lecture on

Strengthening Ties: A Forward Look between Bangladesh and Italy



Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS) organised a Country Lecture on “**Strengthening Ties: A Forward Look Between Bangladesh and Italy**” on Monday, 10 November 2025, at the BIIS Auditorium. **H E Antonio Alessandro**, Honourable Ambassador of Italy to Bangladesh, delivered the keynote remarks as the Distinguished Guest Speaker and shared his insights on the evolving dynamics of bilateral cooperation. **Major General Iftekhar Anis, BSP, awc, afwc, psc, PEng**, Director General of BIIS delivered the welcome address. This was followed by two presentations by **Dr Syeda Rozana Rashid**, Professor, Department of International Relations (IR), University of Dhaka (DU), and **Md Mosharaf Hossain**, Director General, East Europe & CIS and West Europe & EU, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA), who set the tone of the programme through their academic and practical observations. The programme proceeded with an open discussion in which distinguished participants shared their views and recommendations and discussed the future of the Bangladesh-Italy partnership. **Dr Kazi Maruful Islam**, Professor, Department of Development Studies, DU, moderated the programme. High officials from relevant Ministries, former diplomats, academics, researchers, representatives from various think tanks, and students from different universities attended the event. Their thoughtful interventions enriched the discussions and added substantive value to the programme.

Welcome Address



**Major General Iftekhhar Anis, BSP,
awc, afwc, psc, PEng**
Director General BIISS

Major General Iftekhhar Anis, BSP, awc, afwc, psc, PEng, in his welcome address, underscored the deep historical foundations of Bangladesh–Italy relations, recalling Italy’s early recognition of Bangladesh in February 1972 and its role as a co-sponsor of Bangladesh’s admission to the United Nations (UN) in 1974. He noted that this early diplomatic support set the tone for a partnership that has expanded steadily over five decades, evolving from initial economic and labour-related cooperation to a multifaceted relationship encompassing trade, investment, security collaboration, and educational exchange.

In highlighting migration as a central pillar of bilateral engagement, the Director General noted that Italy remains one of the most significant European destinations for Bangladeshi migrant workers. He emphasised that this long-standing migration corridor not only enhances economic ties but also strengthens social and cultural linkages. He appreciated Italy’s continued commitment to promoting safe, orderly, and regular migration, as well as the establishment of a joint task force between the two governments to combat irregular migration and human trafficking. Turning to economic relations, Major General Anis identified trade diversification, foreign investment, and sectoral cooperation as priority areas for future collaboration. He observed that Italian investment in Bangladesh—particularly in textiles, renewable energy, and engineering—reflects increased confidence in the country’s economic prospects. In view of Bangladesh’s upcoming graduation from the Least Developed Country (LDC) category, he emphasised the importance of expanding cooperation in areas such as technology transfer, waste-to-energy solutions, agro-processing, the automotive industry, and the information technology (IT) sector, facilitated by coordinated efforts between the public and private sectors.

The Director General also drew attention to deepening collaboration in security and intelligence. He stated that both countries recognise the urgency of addressing transnational threats, including human trafficking, terrorism, and financial crimes. He highlighted the growing importance of institutional frameworks for intelligence sharing, joint operations, and specialised training to enhance national, regional, and global security. Regarding people-to-people links, he noted the increasing interest of Bangladeshi youth in pursuing higher education

and professional development in Italy, given Italy's strong academic tradition and world-class institutions. He encouraged expanded academic partnerships, scholarship opportunities, research collaboration, and cultural exchanges to reinforce societal connections. Major General Anis emphasised the timeliness of the Lecture as Bangladesh prepares to welcome the Prime Minister of Italy, H E Giorgia Meloni, later this year—an event he described as historically significant, given that it would be the first visit by an Italian head of government in over two decades. He stated that this momentum creates a unique opportunity for strategic dialogue and policy reflection to recalibrate bilateral ties in a shifting global environment.

Major General Anis concluded by noting that the deliberations of the Country Lecture Series will strengthen institutional and academic linkages between the two countries and help shape practical, forward-looking policy recommendations. He expressed gratitude to the Ambassador of Italy to Bangladesh for his presence and insights, and to the panellists and discussants for their contributions. He reaffirmed Bangladesh's commitment to a partnership with Italy built on mutual respect, trust, and shared aspirations for peace, stability, and prosperity.



Setting the Tone



Dr Syeda Rozana Rashid

Professor

Department of International Relations

University of Dhaka

Dr Syeda Rozana Rashid presented an overview of how Bangladesh and Italy could further strengthen their bilateral relations—an issue she described as both timely and topical for today’s Bangladesh. In her Presentation, she recalled that diplomatic relations between Bangladesh and Italy dated back to the period immediately after Bangladesh’s independence, when Italy was among the first countries to recognise the new state in 1971. She added that Italy had also supported Bangladesh’s bid for UN membership in 1974. According to her, the relationship, which began on a political footing, gradually evolved into an economic partnership as the global order shifted towards a neoliberal model. Both countries, she noted, came to regard one another as trusted economic allies.

Professor Rashid explained that Bangladesh had received Italian support in securing the Generalised System of Preferences (GSP) facilities. Since then, Bangladesh has become a reliable supplier of ready-made garments, leather goods, footwear, and other commodities to Italy. She mentioned that the bilateral relationship reached new heights with the migration of Bangladeshis to Italy, particularly in the agricultural sector. However, she observed that this positive development soon became clouded by issues of “irregularity and legality”. In this regard, she noted that since 2015, a significant number of Bangladeshis had been appearing in the lists of undocumented workers, which had placed Bangladesh in an awkward position at a time when it was aspiring to attain middle-income status. She further noted that although economic relations between the two countries did not decline drastically, they did fluctuate over time. In more recent years, she added, new areas of cooperation—particularly in security and military fields—had begun to emerge, creating opportunities for deeper engagement.

Within this historical context, Professor Rashid explained that the Country Lecture was an opportunity to adopt a forward-looking approach to reimagining a stronger, more resilient partnership between Bangladesh and Italy. She also remarked that, in general, Bangladesh and Italy enjoyed excellent relations. However, she added that it was essential to examine these relations beyond superficial evaluations by examining the specific areas of cooperation. She categorised bilateral relations into three major domains: political, economic, and social.

In the political sphere, Professor Rashid recalled that Bangladesh had undergone notable changes over the last one and a half years, particularly following the July 2024 Uprising.

Italy, she pointed out, had congratulated Bangladesh on the developments and reaffirmed its support for political reform and democratisation—gestures that Bangladesh regarded very positively. She also observed that this supportive stance reflected the historical spirit of friendship that had characterised Bangladesh–Italy relations since the 1970s. Turning to the economic dimension, the presenter shared data to illustrate the growing trade connectivity between the two nations. She noted that bilateral trade in 2024 exceeded € 3 billion. During the second quarter of 2025, Bangladesh’s exports to Italy totalled € 337 million, while imports from Italy amounted to € 95 million, resulting in a favourable trade balance for Bangladesh. The annualised trade growth over the past five years, which she mentioned, was approximately 17.5 per cent, which she described as very encouraging.

Despite this progress, Professor Rashid admitted that the economic relationship had not yet reached its full potential. She explained that while exports of machinery, appliances, and transport equipment had increased, exports of wood and chemicals had declined. She added that Italian Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in Bangladesh stood at around € 132 million in 2023—lower than expectations. Italy, she observed, had not been among Bangladesh’s top ten FDI source countries in that year, although she noted a gradual upward trend that she hoped would continue through enhanced cooperation and dialogue.

Addressing the issue of migration, Professor Rashid stated that Bangladesh maintained a strong and vibrant diaspora in Italy. In 2024, approximately 175,000 to 200,000 Bangladeshis were residing in Italy, contributing remittances worth about € 1.35 billion—over 5 per cent of Bangladesh’s total remittance inflow during that period. However, she expressed concern about the rising trend of irregular migration, particularly since 2015, when a growing number of Bangladeshis attempted to enter Italy through the Mediterranean routes. She observed that this had resulted in visa restrictions and deportations, outcomes that were disappointing for Bangladesh, especially given the otherwise friendly bilateral relationship.

Despite these challenges, Dr Rashid conveyed optimism that both nations were taking constructive steps to strengthen their ties. She mentioned that Italy had expressed interest in investing in emerging sectors, such as leather and green technology, and that discussions were ongoing to establish a bilateral trade and business forum. She also noted that during international meetings, the Chief Adviser of Bangladesh’s interim government, Dr Muhammad Yunus, and the Italian Premier had discussed prospects for technical cooperation, strategic partnership, and joint governance of irregular migration—signs which she described as highly encouraging.

To further assess the relationship, Dr Rashid presented a SWOT analysis highlighting the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats inherent in Bangladesh–Italy relations. She pointed out that the primary strength lay in the longstanding relationship between the two countries, built over several decades of diplomatic engagement. This relationship, she said, was supported by strong people-to-people connections through migration, economic collaboration, and mutual goodwill. She added that Bangladeshis in Italy were generally regarded as law-abiding, amicable, and efficient workers, while Italy had consistently demonstrated its role as a trusted friend of Bangladesh, particularly during times of crisis.

Professor Rasid identified the main weaknesses as inconsistent maintenance of the relationship, the lack of institutional mechanisms for sustainability, and the absence of adequate

willingness on both sides to develop long-term engagement. She raised important questions about why some Bangladeshis continued to take perilous routes to reach Italy and why regular migration pathways were insufficient. She also questioned Italy's intentions regarding the recruitment of skilled Bangladeshi workers. Discussing opportunities, Dr Rashid stated that both countries had immense potential for collaboration in skill development, manufacturing, machinery, and trade. She emphasised that Bangladesh and Italy could jointly explore areas such as trade and investment promotion, vocational training, and manpower export for both domestic and overseas markets. She also cautioned about potential threats to bilateral cooperation, including political instability, an unfavourable investment ecosystem, exchange rate fluctuations, inflation, and weak infrastructure. She argued that such issues discouraged investors and hindered the expansion of economic ties.

Dr Rashid then outlined the key leverage that each country could bring to the relationship. For Bangladesh, she identified its demographic advantage, with over 30 per cent of the population comprising youth eager for employment and entrepreneurship. She added that Bangladesh's geostrategic location in the Indo-Pacific region gave it significant geopolitical relevance. She also highlighted the potential of the Bangladeshi diaspora as an investment source and as an integral part of global supply chains, especially in the ready-made garment sector, where Bangladesh already has strong connections with Italy. On Italy's part, she mentioned the country's European Union (EU) membership, strong Gross Domestic Product (GDP), capital investment potential, advanced machinery sector, developed labour market, and technological expertise as key assets that could complement Bangladesh's strengths.

Dr Rashid, in her deliberation, suggested that Bangladesh and Italy could explore a Comprehensive Partnership Agreement (CPA) in the near future, noting that discussions on the matter were already underway. She mentioned that a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the two countries had been signed the previous year regarding the governance of migration and expressed optimism that this year might see the signing of a CPA, similar to those Italy had established with countries such as Indonesia and Egypt. She then highlighted



several specific areas where Italy could play a more active role in supporting Bangladesh's progress. These included assistance in democratisation, political stability, and the promotion of human rights; exploring the possibility of establishing an Exclusive Economic Zone (EPZ) for Italian investors in Bangladesh, similar to those already established by South Korea and other countries; and collaboration in maritime affairs, where Italy's expertise could be valuable.

Dr Rashid further suggested expanding cooperation in academic and research fields, education, and student exchange programmes. Addressing the humanitarian dimension, she urged Italy to act as a friend and mediator in resolving the Rohingya crisis. She also proposed diversifying the areas of economic collaboration to include the information technology sector, healthcare, call centres, nursing, physiotherapy, and caregiving. In trade and business, she mentioned potential sectors such as footwear, garments, pharmaceuticals, and agricultural products. To facilitate these initiatives, she emphasised the need to simplify travel and visa procedures and to strengthen institutional mechanisms to sustain cooperation.

In conclusion, Dr Rashid expressed optimism that continued dialogue and collaboration would further consolidate the friendship and partnership between Bangladesh and Italy.



Md Mosharaf Hossain

Director General

East Europe & CIS and West Europe & EU

Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA)

Md Mosharaf Hossain, in his deliberation, stated that Bangladesh and Italy have historically enjoyed a strong and enduring partnership, further strengthened by the vibrant Bangladeshi community of around 250,000 people living in Italy, which continues to serve as a bridge between the two nations. He recalled the meaningful meeting between the leaders of both countries in New York last September on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), which, in his view, had infused new momentum into bilateral engagement

and reaffirmed both nations' commitment to sustained dialogue and deeper cooperation.

Mr Hossain highlighted that in recent years, bilateral trade had grown steadily, with Italy becoming one of Bangladesh's major trading partners and an important European destination for Bangladeshi exports, particularly in ready-made garments, leather goods, and frozen food. He mentioned that Italy has been Bangladesh's sixth-largest export market, with trade exceeding US\$ 3 billion. He suggested that both sides might consider establishing a Bangladesh-Italy Joint Economic Commission (JEC) to explore new avenues for collaboration, address trade barriers, and promote joint ventures. He also mentioned ongoing efforts to establish a Bangladesh-Italy Joint Chamber of Commerce. He encouraged Italian companies to explore investment opportunities in Bangladesh's economic zones and priority sectors, including apparel, footwear, information and communication technology (ICT), agro-processing, shipbuilding, and energy. Bangladesh's competitive workforce and strategic location offer strong prospects for manufacturing relocation, technology transfer, and long-term industrial partnerships. He further pointed out that improved connectivity, including enhanced shipping routes and the resumption of direct cargo services, could strengthen trade and commercial exchanges. He also expressed Bangladesh's expectation for Italy's support within the EU regarding the continuation of GSP Plus trade facilities beyond 2029.

Mr Hossain noted that Bangladesh and Italy could expand cooperation in security, defence and renewable energy. He stated that both sides could work on frameworks for information sharing, capacity building and defence technology cooperation. He added that Italy's expertise in solar energy and waste-to-energy systems could support Bangladesh's transition towards sustainable, low-carbon development. He expressed an interest in strengthening collaborations in education, innovation, research exchange and scholarships, and proposed a joint future skills programme to prepare Bangladeshi youth for the digital economy. He also expressed hope for more Italian-language courses and partnerships in the fields of ICT and cybersecurity.

On the migration issue, the presenter emphasised the importance of migration and mobility in bilateral relations, acknowledging Italy's role in hosting one of the largest Bangladeshi diaspora communities in Europe. He expressed appreciation for Italy's provision of structured pathways for regular migration and hoped that quotas could expand in the future. He acknowledged Italy's interest in recruiting Bangladeshi nationals under the EU Talent Partnership Programme and stated that Bangladesh's continued commitment is to preventing irregular migration through enforcement, awareness campaigns, and international cooperation. He believed that the MoU on migration and mobility, signed during the Italian Interior Minister's visit to Dhaka in May, would support safe, orderly, and legal migration between the two countries.

Mr Hossain further expressed Bangladesh's appreciation for Italy's principled position on the Rohingya crisis, while noting that funding under the Joint Response Plan had been declining. He welcomed Italy's recent humanitarian assistance of € 2.5 million to Rohingya refugees and host communities and expressed Bangladesh's expectation of Italy's diplomatic support for repatriation and accountability efforts. He also stated that Bangladesh hopes to work with Italy to advance global commitments on climate finance, particularly by ensuring a fair balance between adaptation and mitigation efforts and facilitating the transfer of clean technologies to vulnerable nations.

Finally, the presenter stated that as Bangladesh reaffirmed its commitment to democracy, good governance and comprehensive reform, it looked forward to Italy's continued partnership in its pursuit of a resilient and prosperous future. He concluded by expressing confidence that both countries could continue to strengthen their bilateral ties and contribute positively to global peace, stability, and shared prosperity.

Remarks by the Distinguished Guest Speaker



H E Antonio Alessandro

Honourable Ambassador of Italy in Bangladesh

H E Antonio Alessandro began his address by expressing his great pleasure at being at BIIS. At the outset of his remarks, the Ambassador noted that he had been in Bangladesh for two years and three months and had witnessed many significant developments in the country's history.

H E Ambassador Alessandro mentioned that Italy and Bangladesh were indeed good partners that had supported each other throughout history. He said he was particularly proud that Italian small and medium-sized companies had made significant contributions to the strength of Bangladesh's textile and leather industries. He remarked that

it was a fascinating history that deserved to be documented someday, as many older-generation entrepreneurs from both countries had shared beautiful stories with him about how Bangladesh's textile success story had started. According to him, it began with Italian entrepreneurs, expertise, machinery, and brands. This was true not only for textiles but also for leather, and he said this made him proud because it was a remarkable contribution that Italy had made, perhaps even more important than Official Development Assistance (ODA).

H E Ambassador explained that Italy had also provided ODA to Bangladesh, mainly through international organisations and the EU rather than directly. However, he believed that the contribution of Italian companies to Bangladesh's domestic private sector was particularly significant and deserved recognition. The Ambassador pointed out that the two countries had also supported each other multilaterally, especially within the UN, in matters such as candidacies and peacekeeping operations. He reminded the audience that Bangladesh was a major troop contributor to UN peacekeeping missions, while Italy was one of the largest troop providers among Western countries, which created a natural area of cooperation.

H E Ambassador Alessandro then turned to the issue of migration, expressing gratitude to the Bangladeshi labour force for supporting Italy's labour market and noting that Bangladeshi workers in Italy remitted approximately € 1.3 billion per year. He emphasised that this substantial contribution was due to the hard work of the Bangladeshi people and deserved recognition. He also highlighted another important aspect of Italy's contribution to Bangladesh: the humanitarian and social work carried out by Italian Catholic priests and

sisters who served in the country, including health, education, and humanitarian aid. He cited the example of Father Marino Rigon, who was fluent in Bengali, translated Tagore's works into Italian and Italian works into Bengali, participated in Bangladesh's Liberation War, and was granted Bangladeshi citizenship, one of the few foreigners to receive that honour.

H E Ambassador then discussed the Bangladeshi diaspora in Italy. He said that although exact figures were difficult to determine, the community was estimated at around 250,000 people. He described it as a growing, well-established community comprising diverse groups, including newly arrived migrants struggling to make a living, such as those selling flowers in city centres, and second- or third-generation families who were successful entrepreneurs in sectors such as tourism, hospitality, and agriculture. He mentioned that some people of Bangladeshi origin had become local political leaders, and that there were even artists and filmmakers, including a famous movie director, Fahim, and female writers of Bangladeshi origin who wrote in Italian.

H E Ambassador Alessandro explained that Italy's migration system allowed migrants to bring their families after a certain period and under specific conditions, which meant migration to Italy was typically a long-term project rather than a temporary endeavour. He compared this to Italy's own historical experience, reminding the audience that until the 1970s, Italy had been a major labour-sending country, with millions of Italians migrating to Argentina, Brazil, Australia, the United States, and Canada. He said that Italians understood well the emotions and challenges associated with migration, leaving one's homeland, adapting to a new country, maintaining cultural identity, and balancing between two worlds. He observed that this process had to lead to a "successful mix", but it also involved challenges, as differences in habits, customs, religion, and language often created tension.

H E Ambassador Alessandro mentioned that in some Italian towns, particularly in the north, the percentage of people of Bangladeshi origin was higher than that of Italians, for example, in the town of Monfalcone, home to Italy's main shipyard, where thousands of Bangladeshi workers and their families lived. He said that to make migration successful, both the migrants and the host community must feel comfortable and happy, invoking the English saying, "it takes two to tango". He then referred to education and academic exchange, noting that hundreds of Bangladeshi students go to Italy each year for higher studies. He was happy to share that this year, 530 study visas had already been issued, the highest number so far. He noted that most of these students returned to Bangladesh to contribute with their expertise, while some stayed in Italy to strengthen its economy, calling it a meaningful "people-to-people" achievement. Moving to the future, the Ambassador stated that the partnership could go even further and asked rhetorically what prevented the two countries from becoming true strategic partners, adding that conditions were favourable for that.

Speaking about the economy, H E Ambassador emphasised the importance of maintaining smooth trade relations after Bangladesh's graduation from LDC status. He mentioned the Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus (GSP+) and said that perhaps a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between Europe and Bangladesh could be considered. He stated that Italy would favour such an agreement, as its trade relationship with Bangladesh was genuinely two-way: Italy imported garments from Bangladesh and supplied textile machinery and other industrial equipment in return.

The honourable Ambassador contrasted this with other Western countries that mainly acted as buyers and brands, noting that Italy had a greater stake in free trade because of its mutual exchange. He also said that as Bangladesh's middle class was growing, there was increasing potential for Italian products such as furniture and design goods, which were world-renowned but still had a limited market share in Bangladesh due to high tariffs. He cautioned Bangladesh against remaining in a "comfort zone" of high protectionism that discouraged domestic industries from improving productivity. Using Vietnam as an example, he explained how the country had benefited from a free trade agreement with the EU, which boosted efficiency and exports. He argued that opening to free trade would help Bangladesh become more competitive globally. He spoke about the growing interest of Italian Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Bangladesh and announced that a bilateral Chamber of Commerce would be launched by the end of the year. He clarified that since Italy's economy was largely based on SMEs, investments were usually small in volume but high in quality, characterised by innovation and adaptability.

H E Alessandro also gave examples of recent Italian investments, including a startup producing pet food from food waste, a company investing in chemical products for the textile sector, and another producing zippers and buttons. These were small but meaningful investments that introduced innovation and diversification. He said that Italian companies were also interested in other sectors such as aviation, satellite technology, food processing, leather, infrastructure, and defence.



H E clarified that defence cooperation between Italy and Bangladesh was not new; Italy had long supplied defence equipment, including offshore patrol vessels for the Bangladesh Coast Guard and other assets for the Air Force and Navy. He emphasised that Italy did not pressure countries to buy its products but relied on the quality and efficiency of its goods. He explained that Italy's approach to trade was based on merit rather than geopolitical influence, and that its products were sought globally for their innovation and sustainability. He also

noted that some large Bangladeshi corporations had begun investing in Italy, showing that globalisation worked both ways.

Turning to investment conditions, the honourable Ambassador said that Bangladesh needed to ensure a conducive environment for foreign investors and praised the transition government for taking positive steps in that direction. He hoped that these reforms would continue after the elections, regardless of which government came to power. He stressed that investors needed confidence in the reliability of public documents. He observed that in Bangladesh, it was still too easy to obtain false or manipulated certificates by paying intermediaries, which deterred investors. He praised Bangladesh for joining the Hague Apostille Convention in 2025, noting that it would greatly simplify mutual recognition of documents between the two countries, provided that Bangladesh ensured their authenticity. He warned that even if documents were officially issued, they often contained false information, citing examples such as falsified birth dates or marriage dates, and stressed that such practices seriously undermined credibility. He urged the government to make its public documentation system more serious and reliable, as this was essential for attracting investment.

Moving from economic to political matters, the Ambassador said that Italy and Bangladesh shared long-term interests and values, including free trade, safe maritime routes, and effective multilateralism. He explained that both countries benefited greatly from global trade and therefore supported the principles of free and open seas, cooperation within the International Maritime Organization (IMO), and strengthening the UN system. He also expressed concern about the situation in Myanmar and sympathy for Bangladesh in dealing with the Rohingya refugee crisis. He said that Italy provided funding and supported Bangladesh's long-term goal of repatriating the refugees once conditions allowed. He emphasised that Italy cared deeply about stability and prosperity in Bangladesh, not only out of friendship but also due to its direct interest. He mentioned that more than 18,000 Bangladeshis had arrived on Italian shores in 2025, the largest national group among migrants that year. Many of them, he said, applied for asylum even though they did not qualify, which was a major concern.

The ambassador then reiterated Italy's support for Bangladesh's ongoing transition, modernisation, and reforms, and expressed confidence that the upcoming elections in February would be free and fair. He said that Italy supported Dr Muhammad Yunus and his government hoped that Bangladesh would continue its path of progress and democratisation. He then returned to the topic of migration, saying that it was a central area of bilateral relations. He recalled that an MoU on migration and labour cooperation had been signed in May 2025 during the visit of Italy's Minister of the Interior. This indicates that Italy was the only European country to send political-level delegations to Bangladesh during the transition period. Then, the Ambassador explained Italy's new approach to promoting legal migration and curbing irregular migration through pre-departure training programmes. Unlike countries with national quotas, Italy used a general quota for all eligible countries, including Bangladesh, based on labour demand and supply. The pre-departure training model, he said, ensured that selected workers had proper contracts and skills before departure, reducing exploitation and fraud.

H E Ambassador referred to recent articles in the Bangladeshi press discussing the country's low passport ranking and explained that this was linked to the lack of trust caused

by the misuse of the asylum system. He said that many Bangladeshis who migrated irregularly applied for asylum even when they were not persecuted, merely to obtain residence permits, which ultimately harmed Bangladesh's international reputation. He emphasised that misuse of asylum laws penalised genuine refugees and that Italy was determined to increase repatriations to deter irregular migration. He added that potential migrants should realise that paying large sums, sometimes up to € 15,000 for illegal passage to Italy, was a waste of money, as it often led to deportation. Instead, he urged them to invest that money in entrepreneurship or productive activities within Bangladesh, where it could make a meaningful difference.

H E Ambassador Alessandro also said that while many irregular migrants eventually became victims due to torture or death during the journey, they were initially co-responsible for choosing illegal routes. He suggested that the public should understand this reality rather than frame all such cases purely as cases of victimhood. The Ambassador also addressed the issue of underage marriage, citing official statistics that 51 per cent of Bangladeshi women were married before the legal age. He linked this issue to migration, explaining that Italy's family reunification laws sometimes led to very young brides being brought to Italy, often based on unreliable documents. He expressed concern for these young women, who often had little awareness of what awaited them and were left vulnerable in a foreign land. He pointed out that in Bangladesh, a young bride could rely on family and community support, but in Italy, such networks were absent. Therefore, he said, traditional practices could not simply be transplanted abroad without adjustment. He urged greater awareness and stronger safeguards for the female component of migration.

The Ambassador concluded by stating that migration was a complex field with many challenges, but that Italy and Bangladesh were working closely together through the relevant ministries, Foreign Affairs, Expatriates' Welfare, and Home Affairs, to improve both legal and irregular migration management. He mentioned that around 9,000 Bangladeshis had received work visas to Italy that year under safer and more transparent arrangements introduced in late 2024. While the backlog from 2023–2024 was still being resolved due to previous scams in work permits, progress was evident. He acknowledged, however, that irregular migration continued to rise and that both sides must work harder to curb it, emphasising again the importance of public awareness and discouraging people from paying traffickers. The Ambassador ended his address by expressing gratitude for the opportunity to speak at this type of academic gathering.

Open Discussion



Shariful Islam Hasan

Head of Migration Programme

Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC)

Shariful Islam Hasan began by noting that the migration situation described was indeed distressing and painful. He shared that, under EU-funded projects, BRAC had successfully reintegrated 970 returnees. However, he stressed that Bangladesh's law enforcement agencies, government bodies, and individuals involved in irregular migration bore shared responsibility for the ongoing crisis. He emphasised that the trafficking networks operating from Libya, Dubai, and Egypt were key actors controlling this illicit movement. While people

from conflict-affected regions such as Syria and Afghanistan migrated out of desperation, Bangladeshi nationals were being exploited for profit. He described how numerous camps in Libya, particularly near Benghazi and Tripoli, detained and tortured Bangladeshi migrants. Mr Hasan argued that without political stability in Libya and neighbouring regions, it would be difficult to curb irregular migration effectively. He urged stronger multilateral collaboration to combat trafficking networks, stating that the problem was global in nature and could only be resolved through coordinated international efforts.

Professor Ishrat Shamim

President

Centre for Women and Children's Studies

Professor Ishrat Shamim noted that the ongoing Mediterranean crisis predominantly involved young men, who, according to European studies, often migrated not solely for employment but also for adventure. She pointed out that most of these migrants did not belong to extremely poor families, as they were capable of paying substantial amounts to smugglers. She remarked that such cases constituted migrant smuggling, which did not fall within the scope of regular migration. Professor Shamim expressed her interest in examining irregular migration by Bangladeshi women moving



to Italy as wives. She mentioned that many of these women were not reflected in government statistics and questioned how they were obtaining visas—whether through official embassy channels or irregular routes. She suggested that most of them were likely travelling by air since their husbands were already residing in Italy.



Ambassador Golam Mohammad

Former Ambassador of Bangladesh

Ambassador Golam Mohammad noted that discussions had been held regarding the repatriation of irregular migrants. He mentioned that the Italian side had expressed the intention to return undocumented Bangladeshis, after which regular migration channels would be established to allow legal entry for employment purposes. Ambassador Mohammad, however, observed that many Bangladeshis living in Italy believed such arrangements might not be fully viable, given the large number of undocumented residents already present there. He argued that granting documentation to these individuals could enable them to contribute more effectively to Italy's agricultural and other sectors. Referring to the recently signed MoU between the two governments, he requested clarification on its conditions and the mechanisms for transforming irregular migration into a lawful, structured process.

Tanvir Mohammad Dipu

Member

Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI)

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Salahud Din Ahmed

Former Member

Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission

Salahud Din Ahmed shared a personal reflection, stating that the name “Italy” evoked pleasant memories of elevators symbolically “lifting” the lives of millions of Bangladeshis. He also paid tribute to Father Marino, who supported Bangladesh during the Liberation War of 1971, and commended Italy's humanitarian support in recent years. He reiterated his appreciation for the upcoming initiatives discussed during the seminar, particularly the pre-departure training project and the planned Bilateral Chamber of Commerce. Mr Ahmed asked when the Chamber was expected to become operational and how effective it would be in

strengthening bilateral trade relations. He emphasised the importance of ensuring that the new Chamber operates as a strong, responsible, and coordinated platform in partnership with the embassy and relevant ministries.

Md Emdadul Haque

Adviser (Student Welfare)

European University of Bangladesh

Md Emdadul Haque stated that he was encouraged by the Director General's remarks on the potential for educational cooperation between Bangladesh and Italy, as well as by Dr Rozana's reference to academic partnerships in her “Seven-Point Agenda”. Mr Haque inquired about the procedures for a private university in Bangladesh to initiate collaborative programmes or partnerships with Italian universities.



Sabeeha Saleque

*Senior Lecturer and Member
Center for Migration Studies (CMS)
South Asian Institute of Policy and Governance
(SIPG)
North South University*

Sabeeha Saleque expressed a desire to shift from hard topics to softer, cultural themes. She raised the question of potential collaboration, reflecting on the historical Silk Route mentioned by Marco Polo. She proposed considering a new Silk Route —an idea discussed around 2012 —that could reopen markets for fabrics and textiles from the region known as East Bengal. She highlighted its relevance in the context of official development aid and other collaborative efforts, noting valuable market opportunities that could support indigenous hand-woven textiles.



Reazul Mustafa

*Research Intern
BIISS*

Reazul Mustafa observed that, unlike countries such as the United Kingdom, France, and Germany, Italy's cultural presence in Bangladesh appeared limited. He asked why this was the case and whether the Government of Italy had any initiatives to enhance cultural diplomacy in Bangladesh, particularly in the fields of arts and other cultural aspects.

Ophelia Jamila Bupasha

*Student, Department of International Relations
University of Dhaka*

Ophelia Jamila Bupasha, referring to Bangladesh's large number of semi-skilled and labour workers, sought to know how Italy could maximise the overall labour performance of Bangladeshi workers.



Response from the Panellists



H E Antonio Alessandro

Honourable Ambassador of Italy in Bangladesh

H E Antonio Alessandro expressed his appreciation for the interest shown and the quality of the questions posed. Regarding illegal migrant crossings from Libya to Italy, he explained that Italy's policy focuses on supporting the establishment of good governance institutions in Libya to reintegrate it as a reliable member of the international community. He acknowledged the complexity of the situation, with a weak internationally recognised government. Strengthening Libyan institutions is essential to creating a reliable partner for dialogue and agreements.

To reduce irregular migration, the Ambassador emphasised the importance of discouraging people from undertaking dangerous journeys. He reiterated the need to communicate clearly that such migration is perilous, often leading to deportation, financial loss, and severe suffering. He noted that while some migrants are adventurous or influenced by isolated success stories promoted on social media, this method of migration is fundamentally flawed. He mentioned that the embassy has engaged with communities in districts such as Shariatpur, where migration to Italy is common, to challenge the normalisation of these journeys and shift the narrative. He stressed that migrants must share responsibility for the risks they take, moving beyond being seen solely as victims.

Responding to a question about women migrants, the Ambassador clarified that irregular flows are predominantly male. However, once migrants regularise their status, they can bring family members to Italy through legal channels. He described the process by which a migrant in Italy applies for family reunification, leading to a visa being issued after verification by the embassy. While many families are successfully reunited, he expressed concern over cases where women may not fully understand the circumstances of their marriage or relocation, such as in marriages conducted by telephone, and highlighted the need for sensitivity to prevent difficult situations for these women.

Regarding Dr Yunus's recent visit to Italy, the Ambassador noted that although Dr Yunus attended a multilateral event. He met with the Bangladeshi diaspora in Rome to discuss migration, bilateral agreements signed in May, and repatriation. The Ambassador clarified that repatriation efforts focus on those who have recently arrived illegally, rather than established residents, aiming to send a clear message that irregular migration will not be tolerated. He added that discussions are underway to link repatriation with opportunities for legal migration, rewarding cooperation with lawful pathways.

On economic cooperation, the Ambassador recognised pharmaceuticals as a significant Bangladeshi export to Italy, alongside fruit juices and processed foods. He acknowledged challenges in meeting European safety standards but expressed confidence that these could be overcome. He also mentioned the forthcoming establishment of a Chamber of Commerce comprising SMEs from both countries, expected to be formalised by the end of the year.

In response to a question about support for Bangladesh's youth, the Ambassador highlighted the importance of study visas and scholarships, noting that approximately 20 Bangladeshi students travel to Italy annually under government- or EU-funded programmes. He suggested that engaging the diaspora in Italy could help develop projects for young people in Bangladesh.

In response to another query, H E Ambassador acknowledged that, unlike France and Germany, Italy did not have a cultural institute in Bangladesh. He explained that the Embassy had always been extremely busy with both cultural and visa affairs, and the resources for cultural activities had been limited. However, he emphasised that Italy was now undertaking more cultural initiatives, recognising the importance of cultural promotion and bilateral cultural relations. He mentioned that a contemporary dance performance from Italy had recently been brought to Bangladesh. Although the media unfortunately did not cover it, the event—held at the Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy and attended by the Cultural Adviser to the Ministry—was very well received. He added that the visiting Italian dance company had also conducted a masterclass with three Bangladeshi dance schools, fostering creative exchanges among the performers. The Ambassador conveyed his intention to pursue more such cultural initiatives in the future.

Addressing the question of labour and skill development, the Ambassador stated that Italy aims to raise the skills of Bangladeshi workers through pre-departure training projects. He further noted that there was an EU-funded project called the Talent Partnership, which Italy strongly supported. This initiative, he said, was designed to enhance the skills and performance of migrant workers, enabling them to secure better employment opportunities and higher wages, ultimately contributing more effectively to the Italian economy.



Md Mosharaf Hossain

Director General

East Europe & CIS and West Europe & EU

Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA)

Md Mosharaf Hossain supplemented the Ambassador's remarks regarding skills development. He explained that, in addition to Italy's initiatives and the Pre-Departure Training Programme (PDTP), the EU Talent Partnership had also been introduced. This EU-funded pilot project, running from 01 July 2024 for three years, was implemented by the Ministry of Expatriates Welfare and Overseas Employment. Under this programme, 3,000 workers would receive training, and upon completion, they would be issued a European Qualifications Framework Certificate, enabling them to legally migrate to Italy for work in response to demand. He noted that Italy was the only EU partner country in this initiative, while several others participated as observers.

Mr Hossain also referred to the Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) signed between Bangladesh and the EU in 2017, which governs repatriation matters under an agreed framework. He mentioned that a recent repatriation from Italy took place on 24 September 2025 as referenced by the Ambassador earlier. He further elaborated on discussions held during a recent visit to Italy involving the Bangladeshi expatriate community. During those discussions, the issue of rewarding cooperation on irregular migration was raised. It was proposed that if Bangladesh effectively facilitated the return of irregular migrants, the country could be offered an additional labour quota beyond the regular allocation determined under Italy's "flows decree". He clarified that the regular quota would continue as per the usual criteria, while the additional quota was still under negotiation and yet to be finalised.

Summing up by the Moderator



Dr Kazi Maruful Islam

Professor

Department of Development Studies

University of Dhaka

In his closing remarks, **Dr Kazi Maruful Islam** emphasised that the discussion reaffirmed the deep-rooted friendship between Bangladesh and Italy, founded on mutual respect, shared prosperity, and strong people-to-people connections. He outlined five broad areas of potential cooperation identified during the session—Investment, trade, and sustainable economic relations; Migration governance and skill mobility, including repatriation and pre-departure training programmes; Green economic partnership, where Italian technology and expertise could support Bangladesh’s growth in green sectors; Education and vocational training; and Intelligence and law enforcement cooperation, both bilaterally and multilaterally. He further noted that although not extensively discussed, cultural diplomacy and community engagement remained important elements of bilateral relations.

Dr Islam expressed his belief that the programme had deepened mutual understanding and offered new directions for policy and partnership between Bangladesh and Italy.

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