



Proceedings of the Seminar  
on

# **ASEM DAY: CELEBRATING AND FOSTERING CONNECTIVITY**

01 March 2020  
BIISS Auditorium, Dhaka



Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS)





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# Introduction

Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS) organized a seminar on “ASEM Day: Celebrating and Fostering Connectivity” on 01 March 2020 at BIISS auditorium to commemorate the establishment of the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) forum. His Excellency Ambassador Masud Bin Momen, Foreign Secretary of the Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh was present at the seminar as the Chief Guest. His Excellency Mr Yan Hualong, Deputy Chief of Mission of the Embassy of the People’s Republic of China and Mr Bambang Prihartadi, Minister Counsellor of the Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia delivered special remarks at the seminar. The seminar was chaired by Ambassador M. Fazlul Karim, Chairman, BIISS, while Colonel Sheikh Masud Ahmed, SPP, psc, Acting Director General of BIISS delivered the opening remarks.

The seminar was followed by a lively open discussion where senior officials from the Bangladesh government including retired ambassadors, representatives from different foreign missions, businessmen, members of academia, researchers, teachers from various universities and media representatives took part and articulated their observations on the issue. The speakers and participants stressed on the need for a strong ASEM to collectively combat deadly diseases such as the novel coronavirus and enhanced connectivity among partner countries.



# Opening Remarks



**Colonel Sheikh Masud Ahmed, SPP, psc**

*Acting Director General, BISS*

Colonel Sheikh Masud Ahmed, SPP, psc, Acting Director General, BISS commenced his speech by greeting everyone. He said that in the age of globalization, connectivity, cooperation and economic development are the key concerns of all nations around the globe. In line with the economic growth of South Asia, the need for deeper economic engagement with Europe has been deeply felt by the people of this region. Strengthening connectivity has emerged as one of the preconditions for ensuring economic development. In this respect, the Asia–Europe Meeting (ASEM) has become a significant forum for strengthening and deepening the relationship between Asia and Europe.

Talking about ASEM, he informed the audience that it has completed 20 years of its existence and reached a new decade with commitments for a renewed and deepened engagement between Asia and Europe. The past 20 years had witnessed tremendous change in regional and global relations. New needs and avenues of engagement had emerged during this period. He suggested that ASEM can use this juncture for deepening integration between the two continents. A collective effort towards addressing the demands of greater connectivity between geography, economy and people of the two regions is the foundation of a responsive ASEM in its journey. He opined that a sustainable vision of ASEM connectivity is embedded in freer movement of people, trade, investment, energy, information, knowledge and ideas, and greater institutional linkages.

Focusing on regional cooperation, Colonel Masud said that Asia is the world's most economically dynamic region, while Europe is the world's frontier in innovation and integration. As the interdependence among economies in the two regions is increasingly intensified, the internal need to enhance Asia–Europe connectivity grows stronger. With the large size of the economies in the two continents, their enhanced connectivity will not only strengthen regional economic vitality, but also inject new impetus to global sustainable development. He orated that connectivity is the necessary condition for trans-regional economic cooperation, trade, investment and people exchanges. If the Eurasian continent is fully connected, he hoped that the region will become the world's biggest common market which will unleash



great external economic bonus for all regional countries. He further added that the promising new pattern of unified market, comprehensive industry and modern logistics will provide great opportunity for long-term common growth.

The Acting Director General said that Bangladesh formally joined the 52-nation ASEM in the 9<sup>th</sup> ASEM Summit held in 2012 devoted to building up cooperation between Asia and Europe on political, economic and social issues. Colonel Masud informed the house that speaking at the Plenary of 11<sup>th</sup> ASEM Summit, Honourable Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina focussed on connectivity saying "it is no longer a choice for any community; it is about seizing strategic opportunity". Bangladesh believes in development based on core values and principles like solidarity, friendship, mutual trust and equitable sharing of benefits. He also noted that Bangladesh is a strong proponent of regional connectivity and has participated in different connectivity initiatives among the countries in Asia-Pacific region like Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal (BBIN) initiative; Bangladesh, China, India, Myanmar - Economic Corridor (BCIM-EC).

He emphasized on the fact that ASEM brings a greater platform to enhance connectivity between the two continents which is inevitable to reap greater advantages and improve peoples' livelihoods. Moreover, it brings opportunity to explore greater resources, further capabilities and newer partnerships.

Finally, Colonel Sheikh Masud Ahmed expressed his sincere thanks to the learned audience for their kind participation. He hoped that the fruitful discussions, valuable suggestions, comments, opinions and remarks by the distinguished speakers, participants and the audience would contribute significantly to further enhancing connectivity between Asia and Europe.



# Special Remarks



**Mr Yan Hualong**

*Deputy Chief of Mission*

*The Embassy of the People's Republic of China*

In his presentation, His Excellency **Mr Yan Hualong** discussed the recent development of the COVID-19 in China and explained China's effort to combat this worst epidemic. He stated that it is indeed a hard time for China, the Chinese government and people; but he is thankful to Hon'ble Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, the friendly Bangladeshi government, the Foreign Ministry and the Bangladeshi people for their gracious and valuable support to China and Chinese people in combating the epidemic. He mentioned that every day the embassy receives numerous letters and messages from all walks of life, mostly from students in and outside of Bangladesh and China saying Wuhan Jiayou and China Jiayou. The word Jiayou means to cheer up and gather strength. At this point, he shared the story of a young woman named Dr Syeda Zerin Imam, a medical student in China, who volunteered to go to China to the very front of Wuhan, the centre of the epidemic to help the infected people. In her opinion, she felt guilty staying at home. She considered China to be her second home and as the country has given her a lot, she wanted to be with the people and at the very front. This was a heartfelt and touching moment for the Chinese ambassador and the embassy officials in Bangladesh. Mr Yan Hualong thanked everyone for their sympathy and support.

Mr Yan Hualong then gave a brief overview of the epidemic development up to 29 February 2020. Until then, 31 provinces of Chinese mainland reported 573 new cases of confirmed infection. Of the 31 provinces, only Hubei, the heart of the epidemic centre and Wuhan metropolitan got most of these infections. Other cities and other 30 provinces reported only 3 new cases. 28 provinces had zero increase for many days, some even for 20 days. The previous day China had new cases of 35 fatalities of which 34 in Hubei provinces which is the epidemic centre. About 2,623 patients were released from the hospital after becoming fully cured. In total, 8,620 people who had close contact with the infected patients were freed from medical observation. The serious cases reduced in great number by almost 300.

In brief, after arduous efforts, epidemic control in China is in a scenario of steady improvement. He opined that China is in a turning point and this epidemic is controlled. He added that except Wuhan and Hubei, other provinces are almost fully controlled. Here a reference was made of the WHO Director-General Tedros



Adhanom Ghebreyesus's speech delivered on 27 February 2020 in Geneva where he said that it is what is happening in the rest of the world that is now the greatest concern. We are at a decisive point. While calling for rapid response by all countries, he also pointed out that COVID-19 is not influenza, and one of the key messages from China is that with the right measures, the epidemic can be contained. Mr Yan Hualong shared that this is the first message that the Chinese government has declared, i.e., this disease is preventable, controllable and curable.

Speaking of China's mitigation strategies, Mr Yan Hualong said that China is engaged in a national war or national campaign against COVID-19 outbreak. To support his statement, an info-graphic describing the initiatives of the Chinese government in addressing this serious challenge was shown to the audience. He reflected that this disease had developed all of a sudden late last December. When it originated in Wuhan, this new virus was unknown to people. In the first several days, even doctors were puzzled to see the situation. Initially, it could not be realized that the disease could be transmitted from people to people. Therefore, China lost the first time-window to contain this virus.

On the 27 December 2019, an alarm was raised to the central government. China's government paid great attention and made the hard decision of locking down the city. Here, he shared the context of the decision. On the 21 January 2020, China celebrated the spring festival which is one of the most important events for family reunions and there are frequent movements among people. However, the virus was spreading at a very fast speed. China had not seen something like this since the founding of the People's Republic of China. Even when the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak occurred, such a degree of fast spreading was not observed. Hence, the President of China, Xi Jinping had to take very hard decisions. On Chinese Lunar New Year eve, a high-level meeting was called to take the decision of locking down the city of Wuhan. And then all national support from all other provinces from Wuhan to Hubei were mobilized. Many practical measures have been taken. Since this virus travels from human to human, after the lock down of the city, multifaceted measures to trace this virus were taken to identify those who were confirmed and those who were suspected and those who had close contact with those confirmed and suspected. This was very important because if the root of transmission is not touched, people are vulnerable to danger. Speaking about the treatment, he mentioned that Chinese traditional medicine and Western medicine were combined for the treatment of the patients, and so far, very good results have been achieved. He also added that the Chinese government has built two hospitals in 10 days. He discussed that since the virus was spreading very fast, there were not sufficient medical facilities. Even the medical team, doctor and nurses had a lack of masks and medical equipment which are much needed for combating the disease. However, China unified in national distribution for essential materials.



Mr Yan Hualong shared that through this incident, there is now an increased awareness about prevention among the regional governments. He recommended following Shanghai's approach of controlling the spread of the virus. Shanghai, one of China's largest cities with a population of nearly 22 million residents, only has 378 confirmed infection cases till March. Almost all were cured with very few fatalities. Their reaction was very swift, i.e., to control the movement by shutting down the major public places.

Towards the end of the presentation, Mr Yan Hualong added that the Chinese government has offered all medical expenses to those who are affected. He shared that China is making good progress in controlling this virus. China now has confidence and capability to win the war against this disease. He thanked the Chinese people for their effort and also thanked all the friendly countries for their valuable support. He mentioned that till March 2020 there was not a single case in Bangladesh and there was no confirmed case of any Bangladeshi citizen in China. He wished good luck to Bangladesh but also cautioned to monitor the situation closely. He shared that the Chinese embassy was working with their counterparts at the health and foreign ministry. He also mentioned that China, acts with transparency and through the WHO, as this virus is not only the enemy of China alone, but of the world too. Since this virus has no boundary, great caution needs to be taken. He concluded by thanking BISS for the opportunity and congratulated Bangladesh for doing great work in preventing this epidemic in the country.

# Special Remarks



**Mr Bambang Prihartadi**

*Minister Counsellor*

*Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia*

Mr Bambang Prihartadi, Minister Counsellor of the Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia, thanked BISS for providing the opportunity to share information. ASEM was founded on 01 March 1996. The function of ASEM is to deepen cooperation between Asia and Europe. It has three pillars of cooperation. First one is the political pillar that consists of anti-terrorism cooperation, maritime security, disaster management or other kinds of related global issues. The second one is the economic or financial pillar consisting of Asia and Europe business forums, which focuses on improving small and medium industries in Asia. The third pillar is the socio-cultural and educational pillar involving youth and people to people contact. ASEM is the congregation of 51 countries and two regional cooperation between Europe and Asia.

He then provided some examples of cooperation within ASEM. He mentioned that Indonesia and the United Kingdom (UK) initiated building interfaith harmony among international community in July 2005 which is also known as the First ASEM Interfaith Dialogue. The dialogue consisted of engaging officials, intellectuals, journalists and various religious leaders. It aimed to have an understanding between the believers of every religion. For instance, in Indonesia there are believers of Catholic Christians, Hindus, Muslims and so forth. The initiative was to assemble the religious leaders in order to provide an explanation to their followers on the importance of tolerance among the religions. Because lack of tolerance can become the source of extremism. The governments have an action plan to combat violent extremism and terrorism. Not only the religious leaders but also the government officers, specifically the national agency of combating terrorism have planned to help the university and high school students to understand different religions. This is not only a regional issue for containing violent extremism but also a global issue. He noted that ASEM is not only a political and economic forum, but also social and cultural. He concluded with the hope that in the next ASEM meeting at Phnom Penh in November 2020, there will be discussion on how to combat global pandemic diseases.

# Open Discussion

**Ambassador Munshi Faiz Ahmad**, former Chairman of BISS, thanked BISS for organizing the seminar on this occasion. With regard to coronavirus, he said that China is containing the outbreak of the disease very successfully despite the first spread of it. Chinese successes make other countries feel that it will be possible for them to bring it under control. If China could bring it under control after such a huge outburst of the epidemic, then other countries also may hope that they should also be able to contain it. In this respect, he also recommended that countries must not lower their vigilance in spite of the progress that had been made in China. He then added that in Bangladesh, people do not know much about ASEM. In the ASEM, European countries are represented through the European Union (EU) as a single quantity. On the contrary, the Asian part is represented by the individual countries. In this context, he wanted to know whether this representation creates any difficulties and differences in taking the programs of ASEM forward and whether the issues of cultural exchange, people to people contact and terrorism in ASEM are getting adequate attention. In discussing people to people contact, he added that the movement of people is important. But it is restricted always. If one looks at history, he finds that less than a hundred years ago, people started to use visas and passports. Before that, people moved very easily. Raising this issue, he wanted to know whether ASEM has any plan to foster an easier movement of people between the countries of Europe and Asia.



**Mr Hussain Jamil**, Secretary General, the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI), stated that his heart goes out to the situation in China. He added that the President of FBCCI has already sent condolences to the Chinese counterpart chamber China Council for the Promotion of International Trade (CCPIT) and have promised that they will stand beside the people of China if needed. He also resonated with the ideas and sentiment of the former Ambassador Munshi Faiz Ahmad regarding this topic. Speaking of ASEM, he mentioned that since Bangladesh is graduating from LDC to a middle-income country by 2024 and has some relaxation up to 2027, some issues in Europe as far as Bangladesh is concerned lies, with GSP plus. GSP plus is some stringent regulations that the business sector will be facing. He inquired how far this platform could be of use to



Bangladesh and other LDC countries as in the next decade 12 countries will be graduating from LDC to middle-income countries including Bangladesh.



**Major General (Retd.) A.M.S.A. Amin**, former Ambassador and Chair of the Centre for Strategic and Development Studies, thanked Mr Hualong for his informative brief. He also expressed his heartfelt sympathy to China's present condition on behalf of the people of Bangladesh. He said that people have not heard much about ASEM. It came into being in 1996 and Bangladesh joined in 2012. It is the forum for Asian-European Cooperation and basically has three pillars -political, economic and socio-

cultural. As politics and economics include everything, he inquired about the reasons behind the creation of ASEM. Furthermore, he wanted to know why it was unable to play a positive role in international relations and economic development. Since number of summits have been held so far, he also queried about its challenges and the role of Bangladesh in ASEM.



# Response by the Speaker



**Mr. Yan Hualong**

*Deputy Chief of Mission*

*The Embassy of the People's Republic of China*

His Excellency **Mr Yan Hualong** thanked everybody, especially His Excellency Dr A K Abdul Momen, Foreign Minister of Bangladesh, for his condolences to Chinese State Minister at the time of the COVID-19 outbreak. He stated that the Honourable Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina also talked with President Xi Jinping and very generously donated a large quantity of medical services to China which helped China to meet the demands to battle the epidemic. China will always cherish the sympathy and support of Bangladesh. At present, China is at the turning point of the outbreak, when in Wuhan and Hubei the confirmed and new cases have greatly reduced. In other provinces, these case rates are almost zero. The Embassy of China, on behalf of the Chinese government, has donated 500 most advanced test-kits, which could test influenza, COVID-19 or similar epidemics within three hours. He wished of not having any affected cases in Bangladesh but these initiatives are the precautionary measures which will continue in future. He ended with the assurance that China is always ready to help its friend Bangladesh, its government and people.

# Response by the Speaker



**Bambang Prihartadi**

*Minister Counsellor*

*Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia*

In response to the questions, he stated that cooperation in ASEM is based on three pillars. The basic point of cooperation in ASEM is the common understanding of certain issues and non-interference in the domestic affairs of other countries. For example, a country of Europe can not interfere in the domestic, political, economic and other affairs of Indonesia. In response to the question of people to people contact, he added that concerning the youth, there are profound scholarships and student exchange programs for European students to Asian universities and vice versa extending from one to two years. He added that through this kind of engagement, Asian and European Countries can cope with the issues pertaining to politics, economics and culture.

# Response by the Speaker



**Ambassador M. Fazlul Karim**  
*Chairman, BISS*

In response to the comments and questions made by the audience, **Ambassador M. Fazlul Karim**, Chairman, BISS, thanked Ambassador (Retd.) Munshi Faiz Ahmad for reminding all not to lower guards in face of the COVID-19 outbreak. Regarding his queries on the real worth of ASEM, he said that on one hand, there is united Europe and, on the other, there is a much divided Asia. But within the united Europe, there are fractures; and with Brexit, everything has fallen apart now. For the ease of travel, particularly human mobility—the entire concept of Europe has changed. This is one of the main reasons why Britain went out of the EU and huge labour forces coming from Europe made the people dissatisfied. All these issues should be reflected upon to understand the possible achievements from this regional cooperation. He added that limits should not be crossed in this regard, so that in future, there could be a united world with Europe and Asia. Within ASEM, there are regular informal dialogues and exchanges. During that time, terrorism was the only important issue, particularly among the European countries. But now it is a transformed world, as it has moved from a Eurocentric world to an Asia centric one. The value of cooperation between the two continents is huge. A Eurasian framework can really be built, and that will be a new world order. These things should be worked out by the researchers, he suggested.

In response to the question of Mr Hussain Jamil, he said that ASEM should definitely offer some benefits to the LDC's and particularly those who are graduating from the 'low income' category, in terms of easing entry of their goods to the European markets. Moreover, it also depends on the process of negotiation and projection of their concerns and demands.

On the question of Major General (Retd.) A.M.S.A. Amin, he agreed that much has not been heard about ASEM, as there are many other important organizations like the EU, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Shanghai Corporation, Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI) and other initiatives. Therefore, ASEM has really taken a backseat to some degree. But he hoped that the partner states would utilize this platform for mutual benefit.

# Address by the Chief Guest



**Ambassador Masud Bin Momen**

*Foreign Secretary, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh*

Mr Masud Bin Momen, Foreign Secretary of the Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, paid his tribute to the memory of the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on this month of his centenary birthday and to all the freedom fighters who made their supreme sacrifices in 1971. He added that March is a month that gave Bangladesh two prestigious gifts — Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as well as, for him and his efforts, Bangladesh got its glorious Independence Day.

He started off his remarks by commenting on the coronavirus endemic. He stated that unfortunately, this is no longer confined to mainland China. Until March, 53 countries had been affected. Bangladesh was not affected, but five or six Bangladeshis were detected in Singapore and another one was detected in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). In Singapore, they were well taken care of. Only one patient was in critical condition there, but his condition had improved gradually. The patient also had some pre-existing infections in the respiratory system. He added that many students from Bangladesh were locked down in Wuhan and Hubei provinces of China. There are some students who would like to return, but the Bangladesh government has been assured by the Chinese authorities that they are well taken care of and safe as long as they are in China.

The Foreign Secretary informed that the Bangladesh government had already brought 318 students back home and some other students had been brought by the Indian Air Force. When the Indian Air Force was there to evacuate their students, they also evacuated some Bangladeshi students. He stated that the main concern is that some countries have not been able to detect the source of the virus. The previously-assumed incubation period was 15 days. Based on this assumption, Bangladesh released the evacuated students after 14-15 days though they were being monitored. Later, it was found that the incubation period could be 21 days or more. He also mentioned another assumption that this virus thrives in cold conditions. But this is also not right because warmer countries like the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have also been affected. So far,

Bangladesh has taken all the preparation and its vigilance is also high. Anyone who entered into Bangladesh either through land routes or airports have been tested. Especially people who came from China have been screened. With respect to tackling coronavirus, Foreign Secretary of Bangladesh also thanked the People's Republic of China, its government and caregivers who are taking care of Bangladeshi students.

Regarding connectivity, ASEM and ASEM day, Foreign Secretary Momen added that many people are not well aware of the forum's activities. He expressed his pleasure to have come to BISS for the first time to commemorate the ASEM day and interacting with the intellectuals and practitioners who are in prominent positions in their concerned areas of their professions. He added that Bangladesh did not hesitate to celebrate the day on 01 March 2020. He informed that the first ASEM summit was held on 01 March 1996 in Bangkok. But the ASEM day was first celebrated on 01 March 2017. Thus, the whole concept of celebrating ASEM day is very new. The idea behind celebrating the day is to have more awareness about ASEM, its potential and activities.

ASEM, with its informal structure and the cross-continent platform, provides a unique scope for the 51 countries across Asia and Europe to interact and exchange ideas to jointly work based on effective multilateralism and rules-based international order. Bangladesh under the visionary leadership of the Hon'ble Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina participated in the 9<sup>th</sup> ASEM summit in Vientiane of Laos for the first time in November 2012. Bangladesh joined the ASEM following the guiding principles of its foreign policy as pronounced by the Father of the Nation: "friendship with all and malice towards none". Bangladesh has been maintaining close relationships in the region and with countries in the East. In 2014, the Prime Minister emboldened the foreign affairs of Bangladesh with her signature policy "broader and deeper engagement with Europe".

Bangladesh is a proud member of ASEM and contributes in a substantive manner for making ASEM a truly productive forum. He pointed out that this platform of 51 countries covers 55 per cent of global trade amongst themselves, 60 per cent of global population and 60 per cent of global GDP. The three pillars, e.g., political, economic and financial as well as social and cultural, cover all areas that are believed to strengthen inter- and intra-regional relations.

Highlighting the position of Bangladesh in these pillars, Ambassador Masud Bin Momen added that Bangladesh is a development model that can contribute to the greater success of ASEM. The statement adopted by the ASEM foreign ministers in December 2019 in Madrid focussed in areas like gender equality, connectivity, marine resources and climate change, etc. Bangladesh has established its position as a responsible state in all these areas. Under the dynamic leadership of the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, Bangladesh is recognized as one of the fastest-growing economies of the world with 8.1 per cent GDP growth in the last financial year. He hoped that the country would reach a double-digit GDP growth rate soon. Its growth has been inclusive for all classes and gender. Both in terms of inclusiveness and women empowerment, Bangladesh is the best performer in South Asia.

Foreign Secretary Masud Bin Momen added that connectivity is a special area for both ASEM and Bangladesh. Since the 12<sup>th</sup> ASEM summit in Brussels in October 2018, nine initiatives or meetings of ASEM had been held in different member states on the issue of connectivity to fill the gap in connectivity cooperation. In terms of connectivity, the Bangladesh government has shown the boldness of implementing 10 megaprojects at the same time, mostly funded by domestic resources. Almost half of those are directly related to the physical connectivity part with infrastructure projects like the Karnaphuli tunnels or Pyra deep sea port. He stressed that the vision of ASEM is to create a seamless transportation network that will become a reality even faster with these initiatives.



In terms of ICT, he stated that more than 90 million people of Bangladesh are now using the internet and 5800 digital centres are delivering 600 e-public services to people's doorsteps. Right now, Bangladesh is the second-largest country in terms of the freelancers in the ICT domain. Thus, Bangladesh is already connected with the rest of the world both formally and informally.

Bangladesh is a substantive member of ASEM not only in the areas of economic and social areas but it is also playing an important role in strengthening the political component as well. Bangladesh is one of the top contributors in terms of peacekeeping and peacebuilding. Bangladesh's position and actions in ensuring and promoting regional and global stability are appreciated in the international arena. Thus, ASEM will benefit from Bangladesh's experiences in this regard.



The Agenda 2030 for sustainable development is all-encompassing. Bangladesh has already started to work on different targets and goals of SDGs and set relevant targets accordingly in its national development plan. He added that discussion and sharing of best practices in different platforms within ASEM will always be helpful for implementing the targets of SDGs in a more comprehensive and efficient way.

Another area where Bangladesh contributes actively to the ASEM process is the area of climate change. Bangladesh has already engaged in the process of the 15<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP 15) to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) that will be held in Kunming in October 2020. It is a process where ASEM members will have an active interest. On the issue of mitigation, Bangladesh is taking a leadership role in addressing the challenges emanating from climate change. It has created an adaptation fund from its own resources. As a chair of the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF), it has been working to adapt to the impact of climate change. In this respect, he suggested that it is important for ASEM to play a more active role in implementing the Paris agreement, not merely expressing profound concerns about the issues of global warming.

He also said that Bangladesh has started to put more and more emphasis on the 'blue economy' in line with ASEM's priority areas. The country is engaging in discussions with several bilateral and multilateral partners for exploiting the marine resources in a sustainable manner. He suggested that ASEM might take more

in-depth programs in areas that will be beneficial for all ASEM members. In this respect, he also echoed with the Foreign Minister's statement given during the 14<sup>th</sup> Foreign Ministers meeting on the fact that the UN ocean conference in Lisbon June 2020 is likely to bring benefits for all the countries.

He stated that cultural exchange is a component where ASEM is engaging strongly. However, this can further strengthen people-to-people contact. Bangladesh with its rich culture and history is ready to contribute actively to different cultural events of ASEM in the coming days.

Foreign Secretary Ambassador Masud Bin Momen added that Bangladesh seeks support from ASEM's active members on issues that are important for everyone. Bangladesh has been providing shelter to more than 1.1 million Rohingyas who have fled prosecution in their homeland in the Rakhine state of Myanmar. ASEM has been and should be continuing to support the cause of the Rohingya people. Myanmar is also a member of ASEM. Hence, it is extremely important that ASEM member states create more pressure on Myanmar to create a more conducive environment so that the Rohingyas can return to Myanmar in a safe, voluntary, dignified and sustainable manner. He mentioned that ASEM members have always been sympathetic to the Rohingyas but it is time to take concrete actions to help them. It is even more important now on the backdrop of the decision by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on 23 January 2020 to monitor and ensure that Myanmar follows the decisions and fulfils the conditions put forward by the ICJ. ASEM can play an important role in these issues.

Regarding the threat of novel coronavirus, he reiterated that there is a need to step up efforts to control the spread. Asia and Europe Foundation (ASEF) offered stockpiles equipment to China. Moreover, there is also a need to work together to fight this menace.

His Excellency Foreign Secretary Ambassador Masud Bin Momen noted that Bangladesh believes that ASEM would be able to generate a common platform for cohesive and constructive cooperation among partner countries to address the ongoing challenges, strengthen cultural and socio-economic ties, improve connectivity, foster greater dialogue by bringing people and nations together. Bangladesh also believes that ASEM should complement, rather than duplicate or substitute. The informal nature of ASEM is its strength as it provides ASEM with the flexibility required to ensure that all 51 member states with their different economic situations, cultural background and social values can have a common bond of humanity to work together for a safe, prosperous and sustainable planet. He concluded his speech by wishing ASEM member states a successful future which will leave no one behind.

# Remarks by the Chair



**Ambassador M. Fazlul Karim**  
*Chairman, BISS*

Ambassador M. Fazlul Karim, Chairman of BISS extended his warm welcome to the distinguished guests who took part in the seminar commemorating ASEM Day. He acknowledged and expressed his gratitude to the Foreign Secretary of the Government of Bangladesh Ambassador Masud Bin Momen. He also thanked Mr Yan Hualong, Deputy Chief of Mission of the Embassy of the People's Republic of China and Mr Bambang Prihartadi, Minister Counsellor of the Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia for their presence.

He noted that it marks the 24<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) which was founded on 01 March 1996 with a view to fostering political dialogue, reinforcing economic cooperation and promoting engagements in social and cultural areas. In the course of almost two-and-a-half decades, despite being an informal dialogue in essence, ASEM has deliberated on an evolving breadth of issues and has endeavoured to bring to the table wide-ranging global priorities. Together, ASEM partner countries account for 60 per cent of the global population, 55 per cent of global trade and 60 per cent of global GDP. Its unique way of addressing the most pressing aspects of global governance has been termed "ASEM Way", which is marked by a focus on informality, consensus and dialogue.

He added that it would be worthwhile to recollect that Bangladesh joined ASEM on the occasion of its 9<sup>th</sup> summit in 2012 and the country has since then committed itself to ASEM interactions. On the occasion of its joining, Hon'ble Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina reiterated Bangladesh's commitment to the forum and noted that ASEM would further augment the country's position at the global stage. For Bangladesh, joining ASEM also bears testimony to the phenomenal growth of its economy which is expected to grow further in the years ahead. ASEM also provides an opportunity to interact with European and Asian economies on an equal footing.

As the distinguished guests have underscored, ASEM has proved its worth over the years. He expected ASEM to focus more on a few issues that affect us all. Firstly, along with physical connectivity (including hard infrastructure; institutional connectivity and soft infrastructure such as customs integration, liberalization of trade and services), the members of the partner countries should also focus on soft connectivity, most importantly, people-to-people connectivity through tourism, education, and cultural exchanges. Tangible Areas of Connectivity Cooperation (TACC), agreed at the last ASEM 12 Summit in Brussels in 2018, was the right step in that direction. He hoped these decisions would be translated into effective cooperation.

In the second place, a number of non-traditional security threats bedevil many regions. These include forced displacement of people which might threaten peace and stability of the regions. These countries also have common security concerns related to piracy and trafficking in humans and narcotics. The most pressing and alarming non-traditional security concern of today happens to be the epidemic of COVID-19 that can potentially have disrupting economic and financial impacts across Asia and Europe. He emphasized on the urgency to join hands to overcome this challenge together. On the other hand, many partner countries are exposed to unforeseen levels of environmental problems brought forth by global warming and climate change. ASEM is expected to provide the partner nations with an effective platform to raise voice regarding the existential threats emanating from climate change and also forge solid partnerships to deal with them.

In summing up the deliberations of the seminar, he also stressed on numerous potential areas of cooperation among the countries of Asia and Europe which needs to be accentuated in ASEM discourse. The strongest trait of ASEM is its non-binding and informal nature. The rapid economic growth and development which Bangladesh is undergoing will necessitate greater engagement with the world. Bangladesh's progress has been recognized as an economic miracle that placed it ahead of many other emerging economies. The country aspires to become a middle-income country by 2021 and a developed country by 2041. This would require building stronger partnerships with countries around the globe, especially with the countries of Asia and Europe. And ASEM could be an important platform to embellish such cooperation and partnership. Bangladesh seeks to engage in mutually-beneficial cooperation, in trade and investment, in security and connectivity related areas. He hoped that ASEM Finance Ministers' Meeting scheduled to be held in Dhaka this year will further deliberate on these areas.

He concluded the seminar by once again expressing his deep gratitude to the Foreign Secretary for his presence. He also thanked Mr Yan Hualong and Mr Bambang Prihartadi for their valuable insights and time. He extended his special thanks to the distinguished guests, members of the diplomatic corps, academia, civil society, government officials, senior military officials, businessmen, and representatives from the media for actively participating in the seminar and thereby making it a success.

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