

Conference “Development and Management of River Basins: The  
Case of the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna (GBM)

5 September 2012, Bangladesh Institute of International  
and Strategic Studies

Honourable Chief Guest, Minister Khandker  
Honourable Director General of BIISS, General Quayes,  
Dear Tomislav Delinic, Representative of Konrad-Adenauer  
Foundation,  
Honourable Foreign Secretary Quayes,  
Excellencies,  
Honourable participants,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

it is a great pleasure for me to participate in the inaugural session of  
this conference that has been jointly organised by BIISS and Konrad-  
Adenauer Foundation.

The German Embassy appreciates the activities of the Konrad  
Adenauer Foundation in Bangladesh very much and it will continue to  
lend its support to Foundation where ever needed.

I would also like to congratulate the Konrad Adenauer Foundation  
and BIISS for selecting this subject for the conference, because I  
believe that water management is indeed one of the most important  
issues in Bangladesh and it will even grow in its importance in the  
future.

*General Context*

Water does not stop at national borders. Some 40% of the world's  
population live along more than 260 transboundary rivers and lakes.

In a total of 145 nations there are regions located within international

river basins. Water is becoming an increasingly scarce resource in many of these regions. Challenges include shortages and the pollution of transboundary water resources as well as their often uncoordinated utilization by riparian states.

Promoting transboundary water cooperation thus aims at reducing poverty, protecting natural resources and preventing crises and conflicts. Joint management of transboundary water resources can also encourage deepened cooperation amongst riparian states that goes beyond the water sector.

Water is a natural resource of immense importance in Bangladesh. Rivers, wetlands and the seasonal floods are the lifeblood of the country. The population of Bangladesh is forecast to increase from about 160 million to more than 220 million by 2050. This population growth combined with economic growth will increasingly stress water resources and has the potential to be the predominant environmental and most important development issue facing Bangladesh in the coming years.

Bangladesh has at least 58 major rivers that enter the country, most of them from India, a few from Myanmar. Beside the hydrological effects of these transboundary rivers, the security aspect should not be underestimated. The former United Nations Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali observed that the “next war will be fought over water, not politics”. His successor Kofi Anan highlighted this

concern by pointing out: “Fierce competition over fresh water may well become a source of conflict and wars in the future.” The current UN secretary general Ban Ki-Moon reinforced the concern. In January 2008, addressing the World Economic Forum he cautioned: “a shortage of water resources could spell increased conflicts in the future”.

In order to avoid such conflicts, international cooperation in the management of water and rivers must be enhanced.

#### *Water management in Germany*

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Successful basin-wide approaches can be found in all parts of the world, let it be the Nile Basin Initiative, Mekong River Commission, the Amazon Cooperation Treaty or the Danube Commission.

For Germany transboundary cooperation is also of utmost importance. Several rivers flowing through the country originate in and touch borders of neighbouring countries.

One example of a successful cooperation is the **International Commission for the Protection of the Rhine**, established 1950 and consisting of the Rhine neighbouring countries the Netherlands, Switzerland, France, Luxemburg and Germany. A convention under international law, the so-called *Bern Convention*, was signed in 1963 as a legal framework for their cooperation.

The International Commission for the Protection of the Rhine closely cooperates with the nine states and regions in the Rhine watershed in order to harmonize the many interests of use and protection in the Rhine area. Focal points of work are sustainable development of the Rhine, its alluvial areas and the good state of all waters in the watershed.

Within the Commission, representatives of the governments of the states concerned jointly draft recommendations for programmes of measures which are implemented and financed by the individual countries. The voluntary decisions are regarded as crucial for creating appropriate conditions for sustained international cooperation.

The efforts of the Commission have positively contributed to a great number of work areas:

The **water quality** has significantly improved for the last 30 years (pollution has been reduced, oxygen content increased); in the 1970s the Rhine was considered to be the sewer of Europe but nowadays it ranges among the cleanest rivers on the continent.

**Migratory fishes** – for example Salmon – which had in the 1940s nearly disappeared from the Rhine have returned and in general the number of species has increased.

**Pollution** of the Rhine has been decreased during the last years by the cooperation of Rhine Commission's member states and in particular the Rhine Action Programme. [The *Rhine Action Programme (1987-2000)* was a reaction to a warehouse fire at the Sandoz chemical industries near Basel in 1986 which resulted in fire water mixed with 10-30 tons of pesticides flowing into the Rhine and thereby destroying fish and other aquatic organisms]

Risk of **flooding** could be decreased by for instance reactivating floodplains and creating additional flood retention areas.

### *Conclusion*

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am aware that the Government of Bangladesh has placed high importance on the topic of water management. Both, the Sixth Five Year Plan 2011-15 and the Perspective Plan 2010-21 highlight the major importance of an effective system on water management. Several policies, strategies, plans and programs address this issue, focussing mainly on the generation of employment, alleviation of poverty and food security, the protection of the environment and flood control.

These activities are very much appreciated by the international community.

Due to the high relevance of the transboundary rivers, Bangladesh and India established the “Joint River Commission” in 1972 to work on the common interests and sharing of water resources, irrigation, floods and cyclone control. Although the work of the commission contributed to resolve the dispute over the sharing of Ganges Waters, long-lasting problems like the sharing of the Teesta river, still remain unsolved.

For Bangladesh there is no alternative but to work on water sharing and water use through regional cooperation with the neighbouring riparian countries, especially India. But also SAARC can play an important role in reducing vulnerability of future water related disasters through regional cooperation and the exchange of best practices and knowledge.

I wish the participants of this conference fruitful discussions and many new insights. And I wish the people of Bangladesh that these insights and results can soon be put into practice, for the benefit of the country.

Thank you for your attention.