

Address of Chief Guest for the Inaugural Session
Air Vice-Marshal (Retd.) A K Khandker, BU, MP
Hon'ble Minister, Ministry of Planning, Government of the People's Republic of
Bangladesh

Bismillahir Rahmanir Rahim

Mr Chair of the Session
Special Guest, Dr Ralf Reusch, Charge d'Affaires
Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany to Bangladesh
Excellencies
Learned Speakers from home and abroad
Distinguished Participants
Ladies and Gentleman

Assalamu Alaikum and Good Morning

I am very happy to remain present today morning as Chief Guest in the Inaugural Session of two-day conference on “**Development and Management of River Basins: The Case of the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna (GBM)**” organized by the Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS) in collaboration with Regional Programme SAARC of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS). I thank BISS and KAS for jointly organizing such an important and well-timed conference. I also express my due thanks to the learned Speakers from home and abroad who will greatly contribute to enrich our knowledge on the subject-matter of the conference. Also I would like to thank the audience who will contribute during the two-day deliberation of the conference.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Development and management of river basin in the case of GBM presupposes regional cooperation. Water is a strategic resource for states. It needs hardly mention that the life and living of the people of the GBM region and its eco-system are dependent on water. The entire life-support system of Bangladesh is built around the GBM river basins. As many as 54 rivers of the GBM river basins flow over Bangladesh from the upper riparian India before emptying into the Bay of Bengal. All the lower riparian countries of the GBM river basins have security concerns stemming from the upper riparian countries' course of action to manage common waters of the GBM basins. There is no alternative to cooperation about sharing the vast water resources in the GBM river basins. Cooperation among Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Bhutan and China are imperative for water sharing in the GBM region because socio-economic development of these countries is dependent upon the equitable sharing of water and management of water resources in the GBM region.

It is claimed that technically the GBM river system is one basin. But there are also river experts who would like to view it as three separate basins that have a common terminus. Despite differences of perception, the GBM river basins system constitutes South Asia's, what came to be known as, “poverty square”. Proper management of water resources

holds one key to address this poverty square. The GBM is considered the world's largest and the most populous river basins. Here, like other regions of the world, challenges include first converting the flowing water into a productive resource using suitable technological know-how. Countries of the GBM region need devising a mechanism to share the benefits, removing potential flash points of conflicts related to water sharing in the GBM region.

Distinguished Participants,

The Ganges is the largest trans-boundary river flowing through the South Asian region, with its basin spreading over China, Nepal, India and Bangladesh. The flows of the Ganges are highly seasonal. Floods during the monsoon and scarcity of water during the dry season are the two extreme features of the Ganges river. Mention can be made here that the Ganges basin in Bangladesh is home to about one-third of Bangladesh's population. The inhabitants of the Gangetic plains in Bangladesh are dependent on this river for agriculture, domestic uses of water, fisheries, industries, forestry, and navigation. The Ganges also provides for bio-diversity in the environment and maintenance of the delicate balance in the ecosystem of the south-western region of the country where the Sunderbans, the largest mangrove forests of the world, are located. Therefore, Bangladesh cannot but put emphasis on regional cooperation to manage common waters and its ecosystem for the prosperity of its people.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Benefits of regional cooperation such as flow of augmentation, flood management and flood forecasting, harnessing hydropower, navigation, etc can be enjoyed when countries concerned sign treaties. The Ganges Water Sharing Treaty of 1996 between Bangladesh and India is based on the principle of reasonable and equitable sharing of water and the river basin approach. According to the Treaty, the total availability of water will be measured and shared at Farakka on the basis of the previous 40 years of historical 10-day average flows. Under the Treaty it is possible to review the actual flow of water.

Distinguished Audience,

We also need to underline the fact that relatively smaller rivers such as the Dharla, Dudhkumar, Monu, Khowai, Gumti, Muhuri, etc. provide resources to the people living in the river basins. To address the water sharing issue comprehensively, each of 54 rivers common rivers between Bangladesh and India should be studied, paying attention to problems of each river. We believe that negotiations on water sharing between the riparian countries should not only deal with the quantity of water but also with the quality of water, the behaviour of rivers, and most important, the water resource management of the rivers, etc. An integrated water resources management (IWRM) is contingent upon an integrated water resources management plan (IWRMP). Countries of the GBM region should work jointly for both IWRM and IWRMP sharing information and data, thereby setting up an effective communication network system essential for an enhanced bilateral, multilateral and regional cooperation. It should be emphasized that average annual per capita water availability should not be the sole consideration because water has a temporal and spatial variation. Owing to changes in climate, water availability is going to be changed significantly. Water availability should be considered location-wise, season-wise and availability-wise. As we do not have the capacity to adjust the flow situation, we need bilateral, multilateral and regional cooperation among us, meaning the countries of GBM region.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In Bangladesh, we feel that water is life as other states of the world do. We must have adequate resources of water. Without adequate water availability our development process would be affected. Bangladesh and India are deeply linked as they have 54 rivers in common, including the massive GBM river basins. If states artificially stop the flow of the common rivers, it will cause a major ecological imbalance for the region. To resolve the pending issue on water sharing in the GBM region, negotiations at the multi-track levels need to be intensely carried out. Because water is such a scarce resource on which states cannot fight over. The cost of noncooperation will outweigh the cost of conflict. Therefore, all countries of the GBM region should aim at fostering a climate of positive-sum-game, in which an equal reciprocity on water sharing among the GBM countries will be possible. These in turn may help to work out acceptable modalities of cooperation on a win-win basis.

Distinguished Audience,

I believe that the conference will be able to bring out diverse ideas into a lively and meaningful academic discourse. These in turn will be useful and helpful to formulate some policy recommendations. I wish the conference a success.

I thank you all.