



Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies
1/46, Old Elephant Road, Eskaton, Dhaka-1000

Summary Proceedings

Country Lecture Series

on

‘The Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka’

Sunday, 03 October 2013

Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS) launched a new programme titled “Country Lecture Series” on 25 August 2013 at BISS auditorium, Dhaka. In that continuation, country lecture on **Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka** was held on **3 October 2013**. The aim of this event was to be informed in an extensive manner on the friendly nations of Bangladesh and thus enhance the understanding of the academics, civil society, bureaucrats, media and mass in general. **His Excellency W.A. Sarath K. Weragoda**, High Commissioner of Sri Lanka to Bangladesh was present as the Guest Lecturer and delivered his presentation. **Ambassador Munshi Faiz Ahmad**, Chairman, Board of Governors, Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS) chaired the Country Lecture Series. **Major General SM Shafiuddin Ahmed, ndu, psc** Director General of BISS delivered the address of welcome.

Address of Welcome

Major General SM Shafiuddin Ahmed, ndu, psc Director General, BISS in his address of welcome expressed gratitude to **H. E. W.A. Sarath K. Weragoda**, High Commissioner of Sri Lanka to Bangladesh for being the Guest Speaker on the occasion. Then he elaborated the background of Bangladesh-Sri Lanka bilateral relations, where he mentioned the cultural and religious affinity between the two nations. He pointed out the extensive bilateral cooperation that the two nations have in the sectors of trade and investment, tourism, culture and sports. He mentioned the close cooperation existing between both countries in international bodies to advance peace, stability, and development. In that regard, he mentioned Bangladesh’s support to Sri Lanka at international fora by supporting Sri Lanka in the UN Human Rights Council in 2009 regarding the war against the terrorist insurgent group Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

General Ahmed pointed out the early recognition extended by Sri Lanka just after the independence of Bangladesh in 1972, which instigated a warm diplomatic relation consolidated through numerous high level mutual visits. In that regard, he mentioned the visit of Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse’s to Bangladesh in April 2011 and described it as

of immense significance in terms of bilateral relations since both nations shared commonality on many issues.

He emphasised the enormous trade potential that both countries have and pointed out Bangladesh as the fourth largest trading partner of Sri Lanka in the SAARC region in terms of exports and imports. According to him, the trade potential has not been exploited to the fullest and there is space for stronger cooperation. In that context, General Ahmed mentioned some of the promising developments where Sri Lanka and Bangladesh reactivated the Joint Commission on Economic Cooperation in 2008 which was set up in 1985 to extend cooperation in trade, tourism, cottage industries and shipping. Then he went on to mention the measures that were taken by both the countries to reduce tariffs, remove non-tariff and para-tariff barriers, and rationalise sensitive lists under multilateral frameworks like SAFTA. He also pointed out the need for enhancing maritime connectivity between Bangladesh and Sri Lanka where Bangladesh could be benefitted by accessing the Hambantota sea port for transshipment to reduce time and export costs.

At the end of his speech General Ahmed expressed his sincere thanks to the learned audience, distinguished scholars, members of academia, government officials, media representatives present on the occasion and hoped the lecture series would help the policy makers identify and formulate conducive policies to further enhance bilateral relations and cooperation between the two friendly nations.

The Lecture Session

H. E. W.A. Sarath K. Weragoda, High Commissioner of Sri Lanka began his lecture by shedding some light on Sri Lankan history. The country came into being on 4th February 1948. In 1978, the first constitution of the country was approved and the nation came to be known as the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, an independent, unitary state with sovereignty vested in its people. Like many other nations, Sri Lanka's state apparatus is divided into—executive, legislative, judiciary. The president is the head of the executive, appoints the premier and the cabinet of ministers. The Lankan parliament has 225 seats; the country has nine provincial councils and provincial administration was enacted by the 13th amendment. The criminal law (mainly statutory) is of British origin. The law of Kandi (former royal capital of Sri Lanka) is unique. Muslim laws are applicable to Muslims alone. The common law has Roman and Dutch roots. Thesawalamai law is for Tamils. Sri Lanka is mainly an agrarian country but gradually moving towards the industrial mode. It has a high literacy rate (97 percent) with education being free from kindergarten to university levels. It is also a middle-income nation at present.

High Commissioner Weragoda then spoke about his country's foreign policy. Sri Lanka followed the path of nonaligned foreign policy and is a founding member of the Non-aligned Movement (NAM). Besides, it is a member of the British Commonwealth, South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and the Colombo Plan etc. From 1989-93, it had chaired SAARC. The presidency of Ms. Chandrika Kumaratunga shaped Sri Lankan foreign policy substantially and the country got a new image in the world arena. The current president Mahinda Rajapakse continues to follow the policy of his predecessors yet introducing a new concept, "Mahinda Chintana" which implies the country will follow the nonalignment policy sincerely; it will respect others'

territorial sovereignty, not interfere into their internal affairs and in return, expects the similar from them as well.

Reflecting on Sri Lankan politics, the High Commissioner said that Julius Richard Jayewardene, former president of the country was the author of its present constitution; both Jayewardene and Premadasa were in touch with India for solving the Tamil separatist crisis. This problem albeit political initially, arose in the 1970s and aggravated into a military one. High Commissioner Weeragoda himself faced several assassination attempts. Even people not residing in the Jaffna area were killed. He informed that Sri Lanka denies any violation of human rights while dealing the Tamil separatism; here he mentioned one example saying that Tamil terrorists reached a small lagoon area where security forces were trying to save civilian homes but Tamils had taken civilians as hostages and were using them as human shields. He then lauded the current president of Sri Lanka, Mahinda Rajapakse, for his strong stance against the Liberation Tigers of the Tamil Eelam (LTTE), and concrete military actions on them. The government has initiated post-war reconstruction. Among internally displaced people, 4,00,00 were provided with education, other basic needs and about the same number of people was liberated from LTTE's clutches. The government attempted and successfully rehabilitated many former LTTE members, providing them with vocational training at public institutions; many child soldiers had lost their parents. The government's rehabilitation schemes helped three such students enter medical colleges.

But the envoy lamented that there were numerous instances of biased reporting about the war in Sri Lanka. He cited an example: some weeks ago, a landmine explosion killed a man and injured two of his family in Sri Lanka. This incident was grossly exaggerated in a Bangladeshi newspaper indicating Sri Lankan Army's involvement. Rich countries were withdrawing GSP facility for Sri Lanka accusing it of violating human rights which he blamed on propaganda by Tamil diasporas, although there had been no death in Jaffna since 19 May 2013 that could be attributed to conflict. Nevertheless, the High Commissioner praised his government who had been able to provide substantial amount of assistance despite the bloody war in the country.

Open Discussion Session

The open discussion session was lively and interactive. Journalist **Jaglal A. Chowdhury** commended the Sri Lankan government for solving the Tamil insurgency but he expressed his concern by saying that the current government was indulging in too much nepotism and repressive of the media. He also cited the dismissal of the first female chief justice of the country.

Dr Mustafizur Rahman, of Institute of Water Modeling (IWM), said that Sri Lanka had a literacy rate of 92 percent. He wanted to know the ways to finance so much expense to achieve this high rate.

Former ambassador **Afsarul Qadir** pointed out a contradiction, that the emperor Asoka sent his children to Sri Lanka on peace mission as Buddhists yet many Sri Lankan prominent families had warrior like names. He asked why during the Liberation War of Bangladesh, Sri Lanka acted as a transit for West Pakistani troops.

Sohel Chowdhury, former secretary of Bangladesh Government, asked how much Sri Lanka had benefited from its Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with India and what were the prospects for a similar one with Bangladesh.

Dr. **Abul Kalam Azad**, Professor and Head of the Department, International Relations, Jahangirnagar University, asked if any international body was monitoring the Sri Lankan reintegration process.

Ambassador (retired) **Shahed Akhtar** inquired regarding the possibility of Bangladeshis working in Sri Lanka since numbers of efficient Sri Lankans were working in Bangladesh.

Dr. **Narayan Chandra Rai**, Senior Research Fellow, Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS) asked if Sri Lanka would reduce its military spending and focus on development instead; he also wanted to know how the country was addressing its fiscal deficits.

General (retired) **Nuruddin Khan**, former chief of staff, Bangladesh Army asked how long the 15th Amendment of Sri Lankan constitution would last and how Sri Lanka could sustain its high literacy.

Ambassador **Munshi Faiz Ahmad**, Chairman, BISS wanted to know what Sri Lankan did to assure the welfare of their migrant workers in abroad.

In his response, **High Commissioner Weragoda** informed the audience that when 1978 constitution was passed, written by former Sri Lankan finance minister, he lost the election of 1977. He had written a book as well claiming that presidential powers were excessive but none listened to him. Julius Richard Jayewardene changed the constitution 15 times. Regarding the Rajapakse family, the High Commissioner said that the current president Mahinda Rajapakse was working within the constitution. Julius Richard Jayewardene found a way to impeach judges. About the female chief justice's removal, the High Commissioner informed that she had bought a house from the accused party in her own court. Regarding education, he informed that Sri Lanka spent about 15 percent of its national income on education and 10 percent on health. He believed that educated people would behave in disciplined way; in Sri Lanka, people would prefer selling their houses for providing education to their children.

Regarding the Pak-Lanka case of 1971, he said that both countries were friends and Sri Lanka supported Pakistan during the early phases of the war but when the Sri Lankan government came to know about the atrocities on Bangladeshi people, they extended their support to Bangladesh government. On press freedom, he said Sri Lanka did have press freedom. He talked about a report that cited former General Sarath Fonseka claiming even under white flag incident of killing took place. The journalist who prepared this report was eventually ousted for false reporting. He criticised the role of some international media for being highly biased towards Tamil insurgents and as a result, they could barely be trusted. Many NGOs were even supplying bunker making equipment to Tamils. Accordingly, the accusations raised by Navi Pillay, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, of human rights violation against the Sri Lankan government during the war, were totally unfounded.

About free trade, he informed that Sri Lanka had FTAs with Pakistan; with them, it worked well. But with Bangladesh, trading items were often found to be common. If Sri Lanka and Bangladesh could have FTA, those items might become diversified. Regarding any reduction in military spending, he said his country could not reduce those right now. On addressing

fiscal deficit, he said Sri Lanka was inviting and expecting more foreign direct investments (FDIs); the country had improved its qualitative capacities for dealing with the GSP withdrawal issue. Replying to General Nuruddin Khan's query, the High Commissioner said that since 1942, Sri Lanka had been providing free education to its people. Then he talked about the welfare of migrant Sri Lankan workers; the government equipped them with necessary skills which resulted in workers performing well abroad.

Summing up of the Session by the Chair

Ambassador Munshi Faiz Ahmad, Chairman, Board of Governors, BIISS chaired the Country Lecture on Sri Lanka. He mentioned the warm relationship between Bangladesh and Sri Lanka as based on mutual friendship and trust which was strengthened by mutual cooperation in the fields of trade, investment, education, manpower and tourism. He also mentioned both nations shared strong, historic ties and there were many complementarities to be thought about in their bilateral relations. They also shared some common challenges. Commenting on bilateral trade, he said the Indo-Lanka relation had taken Sri Lanka far ahead of Bangladesh. Therefore, Bangladesh should work more closely with Sri Lanka. Some measures could be undertaken to enhance relations, e.g. increased exchange of students and scholars, develop closer cooperation regarding the Colombo Plan, in the area assuring welfare of migrant workers etc. These could help develop greater partnerships in future between the two friendly nations.

The Chairman offered his sincere thanks to His Excellency High Commissioner W.A. Sarath K. Weragoda for agreeing to be the Guest Speaker of the Country Lecture Series. Then, he thanked all distinguished guests including government officials, businessmen, members of diplomatic corps, academia, civil society and the media.