

Welcome Address,

First International Conference on Climate Change and Energy Development in Bangladesh (ICCEB 2011), held at the University of Bonn, Germany, on 21-23 July 2011.

Spectabilis, Respected Mayor, Your Excellency, Ladies and Gentlemen, Friends,

It is exactly forty years ago that we became aware of the genocide in Bangla Desh: The worst cyclone of the century had struck the country in 1970, just when the first elections after 23 years of Independence had been started during the last days of united Pakistan. The lack of attention and support of the Central Military Government was the ultimate reason for an overwhelming victory for the political party that had demanded regional autonomy. The movement for autonomy had started shortly after independence from colonial power with the quest for Bangla as a national language; it had gained strength from economic deprivation and neglect. It culminated in civil war and ended with Bangladesh's independence.

The emergence of the new state showed how natural hazards, cultural, political, social and economic factors can be intertwined in the most unexpected ways. As we shall be discussing climate change and energy problems over the next three days, we, thus, have to be aware of the far reaching consequences across all spheres of life.

I am happy to see that we have participants from a range of disciplines. Quite fittingly the venue of this Bangladesh Conference in Germany is the lecture hall of the Institute of Animal Sciences. Once Germany's first major aid project in the new state was on animal husbandry. After World War II, when many countries of the then emerging Third World were released into independence, population started to outgrow food production; a protein gap was considered to be the worst form of under-nutrition and the dairy industry all over the world became the object of massive aid. The old military farm in Savar was used for breeding and feeding experiments. As emphasis moved away later from animal based proteins and dairy farms to plant based proteins, cereals and pulses, the project became the object of heavy criticism in Germany and was later stopped. It is an irony of history that today animal production has become one of the fastest growing parts of agriculture in Bangladesh.

According to FAO meat production increased from 178,000 tons in 1961-63 to 536,000 tons in 2007-09; poultry meat alone from 23,000 tons to 152,000 tons; eggs from 34,000 tons to 172,000 tons; milk production increased from 1.0 million tons in 1969-71 to 3.0 million tons in 2007-09; goat milk alone from 0.26 million tons to 2.14 million tons.

I am telling this story to emphasize the fact that problems and solutions tend to change over time. When we are talking about climate change, we think of global warming, rising sea levels, melting glaciers, and more frequent and ferocious cyclones. But political and economic climates also change, and that much faster than we generally assume. Fortunately, this also applies to our coping capacity. To give just a few examples:

- Bangladesh has lost over a million hectares over the last 35 years due to river erosion, but it has gained even more; the net gain is 59,000 hectares.
- The census 2011 came out with a much smaller population than predicted: According to first results, Bangladesh's population is 142 million, rather than 164 million, as expected by UNPA. The average growth rate of population has been 1.34 per cent over the last decade. This means

that the fertility, i.e. the number of birth a woman gives in her life, has been halved in only one generation.

- Food production has exceeded all hopes. With a smaller population than assumed, per capita availability must increase. At consumption levels of the early years after independence Bangladesh today would be self-sufficient in food grains.

- Bangladesh no longer depends only on jute and aid. Earnings from the export of ready made garments and knitwear and home remittances of millions of Bangladeshi working abroad have yielded foreign exchange reserves of billions of Dollars.

- After thirty years of struggle the standard of living in the country finally surpassed the level of the years before independence. Since the late 1990s, a marked improvement has been registered.

- There is such a great demand for education that private universities now teach more students than public ones.

Most importantly, the number of academics is growing, not only in humanities and social sciences, but also in natural sciences. We are very happy, indeed, to note that quite a number of them decided to study in Germany. It is from among them that the initiative for this conference arose. The Bangladesh Study and Development Centre, a German-Bangladeshi NGO, provided organisational and financial support. But without the spontaneous support of Professor Schellander, Director of the Institute, host, and presently the Dean of the Faculty of Agriculture, it would not have been possible.

I just had joined the South Asia Institute of Heidelberg University as a member of a team of economists programming German aid to Pakistan when civil war broke out in the eastern “wing”. We wrote a report on the causes and consequences of the secession of Bangladesh and I have been concerned with Bangladesh ever since. Unfortunately there was little interest in this beautiful country besides development aid. None of the political foundations ever had an office there; Bangladeshi friends kept complaining how difficult German scholarships and fellowships were to come by. It was only in 2006 that the German Research Foundation decided to make Dhaka the focus of their new Megacities programme. Since then more than a dozen German and Bangladeshi PhD students have been working on that project; the Germans have spent many months of field work in the city, Bangladeshi have come to study in Germany; they all have learnt Bangla or German respectively. Scholars from 16 academic disciplines, including natural sciences, medicine and engineering, work in this programme. I do hope that this group of scholars will be enough critical mass to sustain academic exchange once the programme is over.

Our conference goes a step farther: This endeavour has been initiated by natural scientists from Bangladesh who want to define their research agenda themselves. And I do think, that this is the way to deal with the many problems of the country.

Not being a natural scientist myself, I believe that environments always change, natural as well as political, economic and social. As an economist I am used to think in terms of scarcity and opportunities. Under conditions of Bangladesh, energy is especially scarce. Dealing with such scarcity and looking for solutions is also a chance to become a market leader.

A few years ago Abu Zakaria asked me to write about Sonar Bangla and about the chances of that mythical Golden Bengal of the past to re-emerge. There are examples enough, how countries achieved high levels of development despite a scarcity of land and resources. I do hope that this conference can serve as a stage and forum to discuss novel ways for development.

While closing let me thank our host and Dr. Mazharul Mohammed “Rana” Islam, the man who’s initiative and effort made the conference happen.