

# Cross-Party Group on Bangladesh

CPG Meeting & AGM – 19 December 2023, 18:00-19:30, CR3

## In Attendance

### MSPs

Foysol Choudhury MSP

Miles Briggs MSP

Sarah Boyack MSP

Evelyn Tweed MSP

### Non- MSP CPG Members

Saida Muna Tasneem, High Commissioner of Bangladesh to the UK

Kazi Ziaul Hasan, Assistant High Commissioner of Bangladesh (Manchester)

Bangladeshi Students association of Scotland

Bangladesh Catering Association Scotland

ELREC

### Invited Guests (Check signed forms)

Prof. Mozammel Huq – Department of Economics, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow  
CP

Bangla Scot Trust

Scottish Youth Parliament

Department of Economics, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow

Charity Education International (CEI)

UN World Food Programme (London)

Milan

Aberdeen City Council

Greater Sylhet Development and Welfare Council in Scotland

JMN Scotland Ltd

And other Individual Members of the Scotland's Bangladeshi Community

### Apologies

Ivan McKee MSP

Lord Provost of Edinburgh City

Consul General of Pakistan

### Agenda item 1: Welcome

Foysol Choudhury MSP welcomed the High Commissioner of Bangladesh to the UK, MSPs, CPG Members and guests at AGM and meeting. He reiterated the aims of the CPG to strengthen the relationship between Scotland and Bangladesh. The CPG noted their first delegation trip to Bangladesh visiting Dhaka, Cox Bazar, Sylhet and Nabiganj to meet with government officials, organisations and various stakeholders to discuss issues of joint importance such as climate change, refugees' crisis, education and more as will be debrief by MSP colleagues on Agenda item 4. Foysol thanked the

Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Workers Permit Cloyd Ltd and Sylhet City Corporation for covering all costs of the trip.

*(Individual MSP Members of the group received financial support for flights, accommodation, food and transport during a delegation visit to Bangladesh in November 2023. This can be viewed on each Members' individual Register of Interests. The group MSP Members that received such financial support are: Foysol Choudhury MSP, Miles Briggs MSP and Evelyn Tweed MSP)*

## **Agenda item 2: AGM**

- Approval of minutes from AGM 2022
- The Convenor invited the Group to proceed to re-appoint the Office Bearers and Secretary
- The group re-appointed Foysol Choudhury MSP as Convenor and Miles Briggs MSP as co-convenor of the CPG on Bangladesh.
- High Commission of Bangladesh in London was nominated to continue as Secretariat of the CPG.
- The Convenor noted that a few MSP colleagues have expressed their wish to join the CPG and affirmed membership will be discussed at next meeting.

## **Agenda item 3: Overall Update from the Bangladeshi High Commissioner, Mrs Saida Muna Tasneem**

- The Bangladeshi High Commissioner (BHC) congratulated MSPs for their re-election to the CPG.
- The BHC expressed gratitude on behalf of the Government of Bangladesh and High Commission for CPG Members on their first official trip to Bangladesh.
- The BHC thanked the CPG to provide support in strengthening friendship and cooperation between Bangladesh and Scotland and further noted efforts of Foysol Choudhury MSP in taking every opportunity to organise events at the Scottish Parliament to promote Bangladesh's cultural heritage, Bangladeshi Diaspora contributions and promoting hospitality sector and efforts in getting young people from the diaspora involved and networking with other diaspora.
- BHC highlighted that December month is dedicated to Victory Day, celebrating Victory in 1971 when occupation forces signed an instrument to surrender – leading to the Independence of Bangladesh led by the Father of the Nation, Sheikh Mujibar Rahman and reaffirmed Bangladesh friendship with India and the UK who came to support their war of Liberation.

### **Bangladesh in 2023 Update**

#### **Economy:**

- The BHC stated an exponential growth rate of Bangladesh's economy making it the fastest growing economies in Asia with an average of 6.5% over the past 14 years, despite cost-of-living crisis and energy bills. With Centre of Economics Research UK classifying it as the second largest economy in South Asia. At this growth rate, Bangladesh is projected to become the 26<sup>th</sup> largest economy by 2036.
  - ➔ BHC noted Bangladesh wants to attract Scotland to invest more and to take notice of their economic growth and consumer market potential to sell anything that is branded Scottish, whilst noting

Bangladesh's investment and trading partners will continue to remain in Western countries, with focus on UK, US and the EU.

### **Transport Infrastructures:**

- Noted nation's pride in self-financing the multi-purpose Padma Bridge and spoke on Deep sea ports projects.

### **Manufacturing – green factories:**

- BHC noted that 500 more ready-made garment apparel factories are in pipeline will earn them a lead green certificate status.

### **Climate Change:**

- Climate budget & financing: The BHC noted that Bangladesh has been the voice of Low Developing countries (LDCs) emphasised main focus was climate financing to adapt and mitigate. She noted the annual adaptation financing gap amounted to \$50 billion.
- Welcomed UK contribution for loss and damage fund. Noted COP28 in Dubai raised \$770 million but was disappointed at some of the richest countries' contributions.
- Since Paris COP, stated a big imbalance in mitigation and green climate fund.
- Quoted PM Sheikh Hasina comment during COP26 – G20 countries responsible for 80% total global emissions whilst bottom 100 countries accounted to 3.5% - Consequently, BHC called out for climate justice & questioned legality of rich countries emissions which vulnerable countries are paying for.
- 2 cases submitted by Bangladesh, Vanuatu & other Small States to ICJ and International Tribunal Law of the Sea

### **Gender Equality:**

- BHC spoke on women empowerment and leadership in the region mentioning an index showing Bangladesh is the most gender paired country in South Asia, second in Asia and 71<sup>st</sup> in the world.
- Noted that one of the key drivers of the country's economic growth was women's empowerment – with a women's workforce currently of 42% from 23% just in 2009.

### **Refugees:**

- BHC spoke on refugee crisis – referring back to 1971 when 10 million Bangladeshis were refugees and had to flee to neighbouring India to escape persecution and genocide, which explains why Sheikh Hasina has demonstrated such generosity and humanity towards Rohingya refugees that fled from Myanmar in fear of persecution. They are currently 1.3 million Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh.
- BHC urged the international community to financially support Bangladesh as aid has been shrinking, putting pressure on the nation's economy and public services to spend \$2 billion per year.

### **Bangladesh UK relations:**

- BHC spoke on great Bangladesh-UK relations based on values of 1971 -when Father of the Nation, Banga Bandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman visited London on 8th January 1972 after his prison release. This historical visit was a major step in the great friendship with the UK and Scotland based on common values of democracy, secularism, inclusive society, social justice and equality.
- Bilateral relations continued to grow over the past 52 years with great focus on business partnerships (with UK exports to Bangladesh increasing to 50% and

Bangladesh exports to UK with 54% growth – UK is 3<sup>rd</sup> largest foreign direct investor); security cooperation; defence procurement; Pacific strategic interest.

- BHC emphasised special relationship with Scotland and expressed Bangladesh wish to now strengthen trade relations with Scotland and encourages more investment in Scotland.

#### **Bangladeshi Diaspora in the UK:**

- BHC spoke on the great political, economy and community contributions of the Bangladeshi Diaspora in the UK – mentioning about 200 British-Bangladeshi councillors representing all parties across the UK and Scotland and congratulated professionals such as teachers, barristers, solicitors, doctors etc for their outstanding contributions to UK society.

#### **Education:**

- Noted the UK is pursuing cross-border education programmes where UK universities want to have a Bangladesh campus and called for more research collaboration between with Bangladeshi and Scottish Universities.

#### **Commerce & Trade:**

- BHC noted lack of connectivity with Scottish Chamber of Commerce and Dhaka Chamber of Commerce

- **CPG suggestions:**

- The BHC made a few humble recommendations to the Cross-Party group as enumerated below:

1. To discuss within the Parliament, the Bangladesh genocide of 1971 –calling for a common approach to recognise the genocide, referring to a book 'The Blood Telegram' by Gary J Bass.
2. Called for the Scottish Parliament to discuss the Rohingya Refugee Crisis – at least take a motion debate.
3. Encouraged Scotland Enterprise to sign an EMU with Bangladesh just as it did with Japan and France to explore green and renewable energy- especially floating offshore wind energy and green hydrogen projects and, transfer green technology to Bangladesh.
4. Digital Innovation: With Bangladesh having a 65% young population, Bangladesh is strongly pursuing enterprise and digital innovation and hopes they can work with Scotland on this expanding sector.
5. Smart City proposal – the BHC took Edinburgh City Council's Smart City Programme as an example and hopes something similar can be achieved in Bangladesh.

- The BHC concluded by hailing the great relationship between Bangladesh and Scotland in Bengali, English and in Gaelic.

#### **Agenda item 4:**

**Debrief from MSPs who travelled on their first CPG Trip to Bangladesh from 17-26<sup>th</sup> November 2023**

- Purpose of trip was for delegation members to engage with senior politicians within the Bangladeshi government, organisations, academics and business leaders to strengthen relationships between Bangladesh and Scotland, especially on issues of joint importance such as climate change, education, support for refugees and, fair pay and conditions for garment workers, and to build skill and knowledge sharing opportunities which will benefit both our nations.
- FoysoI thanked the High Commissioner in London and Bangladeshi Ministry for Foreign Affairs for their great efforts in a facilitating very productive visit and ensuring all the right connections were made. Further thanking the Prime Minister of Bangladesh for her warm welcome, Foreign Affairs Minister; Dr Hasan Mahmud MP and all government officials they have met. FoysoI further thanked Sylhet City Corporation and Mayor of Sylhet who supported them.
- Miles Briggs MSP thanked the High Commissioner and her team for her support. Described visit as eye-opening – noting tremendous warm welcome received. He spoke on the many opportunities to build closer links notably in business, culture and politics. He highlighted future opportunities which “Smart Bangladesh” presents, noting its economic progress and need for UK to support and partner up. He spoke on meeting the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and his surprise that she along with other Bangladeshi officials in Bangladesh much appreciated famous Scottish poets.
- He debriefed on Visit to Rohingya camp and recognised huge sacrifices made by Bangladesh to host 1.3 million refugees with no horizon of people going back to Myanmar. Expressed hope that there will be an opportunity for debate on what Scotland and the UK must do to help alleviate the crisis and called that it continues to be a priority for the global community.
- Furthermore, he spoke on how the CPG can build at strengthening relationships – with one of the asks being Edinburgh Military Tattoo to showcase Bangladesh in Scotland. He also spoke on Scotland’s fishing industry and training opportunities which were discussed with the agriculture minister.
- Miles debriefed on the visit to the Cancer Hospital in Sylhet and work needed to get access to key cancer treatment equipment as well as equipment costs of MRI scanners and potential business partnerships that can be achieved outside the CPG.
- He recognised importance of Smart Bangladesh 2040 goals and potential to partner up schools and digital equipment
- He concluded that trip was overall remarkable and hopes the CPG will continue to build on these partnerships, tap into future opportunities and deliver results following visits and meetings such as fundraising for permanent water projects.
- Evelyn Tweed MSP have her perspective on the CPG visit acclaiming the warm welcome, meeting the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasima for the second time; conveyed the Scottish Government keen interest in how climate change is impacting Bangladesh, economic progress, meeting young female entrepreneurs with keen interest to keep working with Bangladesh to further achieve outputs and concluded thanking the Bangladesh Government and High Commissioner, Saida Mona Tasneem.
- FoysoI Choudhury MSP also spoke on the Sylhet visit, meeting with Mayor of Sylhet and visit the local streets to find out more about their City Clean programme which members took part in.

- Sarah Boyack MSP positively commented on High Commissioner's CPG suggestions and hopes economic and academic links to be built, suggesting talking to British Council to build relations with academic institutions particularly in terms of sustainable development and climate change agenda as well as sharing knowledge and expertise.

## **Agenda item 5: Open Discussion**

### *Questions taken from Members and Guests*

- A member of who is an executive member of Bangladesh Medical Association and qualified doctor spoke on the need of rural districts needing CT, MRI scans, incubators and other medical facilities and asked what can be done to acquire these?
- A member from North Bengal commented on strong Scottish connection during Liberation war and said that he was in Glasgow at that time when Bangladeshi young expats formed Scotland-Bangladesh Action Committee. He discussed established academic connections with Bangladeshis institutions and called for the need to expand that. A suggestion was made for Bangladesh communities to take part in **Language Week** from 29<sup>th</sup> January till 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2024.
- Chairman of the Bangladeshi Student Association encouraged members from Glasgow Bangladeshi community to be more active in the CPG especially as Glasgow community is growing. He also spoke on the Charity Education International who have established a college in Bangladesh – highlighting importance of women empowerment. He also spoke on need to look at holistic health rather than just looking at pharmaceutical health – which he believes Scotland and Bangladesh can collaborate on plant medicine.
- Convenor suggested if members were interested to organise a Glasgow group to do a presentation of 10 mins at the next meeting.
- Miles Briggs MSP answered question on medical supplies – noting the medical school they visited arranged specific equipment such as blood screening pieces for early diagnoses of cancer; noting importance of training to use equipment. He noted companies who owned patents helping keep in check costs and enable to provide supplies at low costs which can be rolled out across the developing world.
- The BHC commented on Culture Festival at Scottish Parliament which Bangladeshi Culture Minister previously attended and proposed for a culture MOU between Scotland and Bangladesh with keen focus on disabled people and improvements in theatre links.
- Convenor concluded thanked the High Commissioner, CPG members and guests for attending.

## **Agenda item 6:**

Date and Time of **Next Meeting** to be confirmed

AOCB