

Address by H.E. Mr. Anwar Choudhury, British High Commissioner

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Good morning. Assalamu Alaikum. Honorable Foreign Minister, Mr. Chairman, Dr. Siddiqui, Your Excellency, distinguished guests.

First of all, thank you for inviting me to speak at this event. The subject of the two-day roundtable on this area is of great importance to Bangladesh, and I would like to thank FIAS, JICA and BEI for organizing the event. The UK government, through DFID, is very pleased to support this event. DFID has been very active in promoting private sector development in Bangladesh and the new program concepts that are emerging. Bangladesh currently stands at somewhat of a crossroad; it has achieved much through economic growth during the 1990s, it has made good progress on poverty reduction; these are credible achievements. It has also created a world-class garment industry. This is a great achievement, but there are clouds and threats. Next year, the MFA expires which, whilst perhaps not impacting Bangladesh thankfully as much as one predicted before, could well open up the RMG sector to much greater levels of global competition. It means Bangladesh will have to be able to compete head on with China, the US and European markets. There are significant constraints to Bangladesh being able to compete; chief amongst that is the slow port processing times. Now it is easy to beat up on the port; this is not our intention here at all. Chittagong is the main port of Bangladesh. It is crucially important that this does not become a bottleneck for outflow and inflow of goods. It will strangle the investment climate and the export potential of this country. But there are also high levels of bureaucracy and red-tape. These are challenges that need to be sorted out and sorted out urgently. It will benefit everyone in the country, from the farmer to the entrepreneur to big business. This is a must and a big win for the country.

I heard yesterday from the President of BGMEA that it takes up to 5-6 days to export through the port here, while in Singapore it takes 5-6 hours. This is the sort of benchmark you are facing. Five to six days probably doesn't sound too bad, but if your competitor can do it in 5-6 hours, that gives you the level of threat that you face. And I'm told that, if they wanted to, they could do it in 2 hours, you know, if they were really in a hurry, they can turn it around in 2 hours. This type of disparity, of course, cannot exist if Bangladesh is to grow and compete in the naked market. The types of solutions are clear: reducing export steps, reengineering the business. It's not just simply beating up on people but looking at the way business is conducted, looking at that process that was perhaps designed years ago - is it still relevant today? - computerizing procedures, but applying IT on the reengineered process as opposed to the process that already exists; investing in infrastructure - all of those are clear things that need to be done.

The UK government, as always, as a friend of this country, stands ready to support you in these solutions and others. I think we have something special to bring to this area. You might be aware that the United Kingdom through DFID got involved in Mozambique in the Maputo port, which was turned from what existed to a globally competing port. So we have experience to bring to bear, and we offer that again, as a friend, as a wish to actually assist in a helpful way.

The second threat to poor investment climate in Bangladesh is in the area of governance, or to put it simply, corruption. Bangladesh has a poor image for investment, and this saddens us – this saddens us all, because as we know, I've only been here seven months, but even I can tell that this country has huge potential – why? – because if you look at the people of Bangladesh, the toil they put in day after day, the amount of hours they work, their simple capacity. Last week I attended a conference to actually hand out awards to students. It was students of O and A Levels, and, not a lot of people would actually believe this, but Bangladeshi children achieved the best results in the whole world in O and A Levels. This is the sort of potential you have in your country. And this is what, perhaps, friends of Bangladesh are frustrated about. Bangladesh is of course growing at 5.5% - a remarkable achievement –, Bangladesh is a country that can feed itself, Bangladesh has now got a primary education structure. There are many, many things that I think Bangladesh can stand proud of. But the thing that frustrates us is potential. We know its people, we know its potential can be so much more. That growth could be 10.5%, if it wasn't for the things that are stunting it. That is the frustration, and that is what you must focus on.

I don't have the time to go into all the areas and issues that I am sure you will deliberate on. But what I ask you to do is to find solutions that are actionable, that are implementable. We have many reports that actually tell you what the right answer is. We need to look at why those things aren't implemented. So in the deliberations, look for easy wins, things that will be easier to implement. If they are not easy to implement, then give us the answers that would improve that situation. Look at the barriers that are standing in the way and tell us how to overcome those.

So I wish you the very best of luck in your deliberations. Do know, as my friend the Japanese Ambassador has said, and as others will say to you, that this country has many, many friends who will stand by it, who want to see it do well. We think it is doing well; but it can do so much better. So best of luck to you all. Thank you very much indeed.