

Bangladeshi High Commissioner says

# SL Requires Multi-Fronged Approach to Resolve Crisis

Bangladeshi High Commissioner to Sri Lanka, Tareq Md Ariful Islam, who was appointed to Sri Lanka in late 2020, was the Deputy Permanent Representative in the Permanent Mission of Bangladesh to the United Nations in New York between 2016 and 2020. A career diplomat, who joined the Bangladesh Foreign Service in 1988, Ariful Islam says in Bangladesh, tackling terrorism is not politicised, but treated as a social issue. On China's influence in South Asia, he said, "Different countries have different perspectives and aspirations. Strategic issues abound in larger countries. This isn't a new concept. It's spreading worldwide. The same thing is happening in the Indian Ocean region. It comes in a variety of forms and dispensations, shapes and sizes. We'll be alright as long as we maintain equidistance."

**By SULOCHANA RAMIAH MOHAN**

Following are excerpts of the interview:

**Bangladesh's economy has grown within the last ten years, with inflation reducing. The country has set an example for the rest of South Asia. How do you compare Bangladesh with Sri Lanka in the present context?**

**A.** As SAARC countries, we are bonded together by what we call the SAARC spirit. We have many commonalities, but we have not done justice to all of them when it comes to trade. We are not the most integrated region in the world. There are many differences between SAARC countries too. For instance, the way we are dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic. Sri Lanka did it in its own way. The pandemic was novel and many of the governments had no idea how to deal with it. We need to make use of the best regional practices from one country and replicate them in another. A Bangladesh health delegation recently visited Sri Lanka to learn more about the country's health system. They were very impressed, especially by the midwifery system and said they would replicate it in Bangladesh.

**Bangladesh offered Sri Lanka a US\$ 200 million currency swap. Were there any conditions attached?**

**A.** There is a three-to-six-month payback period. On the execution of the exchange, the two central banks in the countries decide the terms and conditions circumstances. We're giving it out as a gesture of goodwill. The Central Bank of Sri Lanka has drawn the amount in three instalments. Those are standardised practices that will be followed.

**Is the Sri Lanka Government negotiating with Bangladesh for further currency swaps? Have they approached you?**

**A.** We'll need to assess the issue. The currency swap has its genesis in the joint communique signed by the two countries issued during the visit of Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa in March 2021 which opened up avenues for cooperation between the two central banks. In regard to further swap, we'll have to wait and see.

**Talking about trade between Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. It appears to be minimal, and you recently met the Chairman of the Ports Authority. Bangladesh is enthusiastic about expanding bilateral trade. Many of Sri Lanka's garment factories have relocated to Bangladesh. There are even a few Sri Lanka private banks operating there. So, while Bangladesh benefits greatly from Sri Lanka, is there a win-win situation for both countries?**

**A.** The volume of exports and imports between Sri Lanka and Bangladesh is quite small. It's around US\$ 200 million and has been that way for quite some time. There's a suggestion for taking it to the next level. The bilateral political relations have also been excellent for many years. If the sectoral cooperation complements the political relations leadership, the gains will be significant.

**What are the bottlenecks in the trade relations with Sri Lanka that you see?**

**A.** It is the engagement, not the bottlenecks that matter. We've been



Bangladeshi HC, Tareq Md Ariful Islam

having discussions regarding trade boosts, such as free trade agreements (FTA), for the past six/seven years. But that did not happen since both countries are struggling to come to terms with the circumstances. There are some issues which we are discussing. You would be happy to know that a preferential trade agreement (PTA) is currently under negotiation.

**What exactly is blocking?**

**A.** It's about how the FTA would benefit both countries. In such areas, further examination is required, which our two sides are doing. In any case, a FTA is under negotiation, which will create an important entry point which can be taken to the next level.

**What does Sri Lanka import from Bangladesh, and what does Bangladesh import from Sri Lanka?**

**A.** Bangladesh's main exports are pharmaceutical products, apparel items, electrical and electronic products, woven fabric, potatoes etc. Sri Lanka's main exports are petroleum gases, electrical and electronic products, woven fabric, yarn and other textile accessories, petroleum oil etc. But the quantities are small in both ways. Our economy is growing, and we want to expand our horizons as well. Bangladesh provides many opportunities, and Sri Lanka companies are becoming increasingly interested in Bangladesh. We want to find out what more can be imported to Sri Lanka and exported to Bangladesh from various stakeholders. If all goes well, we can expand the basket and add more tradable items, eventually leading to a free trade deal between the two countries.

**How about the shipping line connections?**

**A.** Yes. Unless a strong shipping connectivity is in place, the trade will not pick up. We already have feeder services and bulk carrier shipping connections. A good shipping network is a prerequisite for trade. For transportation, we are using the Port of Colombo. We'd like to make greater use of the Port of Colombo. We also use other ports.

**What is your active shipping route?**

**A.** It is through the ports of Colombo, Singapore, and Malaysia, and the volume is evenly distributed.

**Sri Lanka's economy used to be well ahead of Bangladesh, but the Easter Attacks, followed by the pandemic, has pushed the country into chaos. Bangladesh has had its ups and downs, like the rest of the world, but it has now done a US\$ 200 million currency swap. How did you overtake Sri Lanka?**

**A.** Bangladesh has grown considerably in the last 10 years as a result of the political stability provided by the present government, led by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. It was not so prior to this government.

the SAARC is no longer active. Even the BIMSTEC, we imagined, would take over and tap into the region's interest, transforming into a global powerhouse. What are your thoughts on the SAARC and BIMSTEC, which are currently on hiatus due to various reasons including political turmoil? Is this a significant setback for the South Asian region?

**A.** These two regional forums have immense potential, but the member States do not see eye to eye on many things. There are a number of bilateral instruments under the SAARC platform which should be implemented. Sectoral cooperation, such as trade and shipping, is also not gaining traction. To make it happen, the leaders must sit and discuss. Under the umbrella of BIMSTEC also there are a number of bilateral instruments being discussed. I'm hoping that this year's BIMSTEC Summit in Colombo will create that opportunity and help address these issues more comprehensively.

**Can Bangladesh, as a fast-growing country, play a crucial role at the upcoming BIMSTEC Summit? What role will Bangladesh play in the SAARC and BIMSTEC organisations?**

**A.** Because the BIMSTEC Secretariat is headquartered in Bangladesh, we bear some responsibility. We're attempting to push the BIMSTEC in our own way. We have reasons to be optimistic because our leaders will meet at the BIMSTEC Summit. When they meet, some of the issues will hopefully be resolved.

**Bangladesh, like Sri Lanka, is facing a slew of human rights allegations. Journalists are harassed and intimidated in Bangladesh. At least 15 journalists have been slain in Bangladesh in the last decade, according to the United Nations Human Rights Council. They said no justice was served for the two prominent journalists Sagar Sarwar and Meherun Rumi. Can we infer that political forces in Bangladesh have harmed press freedom? Is free speech and media protection a problem in your country?**

**A.** It will take time to have a perfect human rights record. On those lines, we are working on clearing some issues. Human rights violations occur in all countries, more or less. The most important thing is to keep such issues under control with good intentions. We are working hard in this regard.

**The murders of these journalists have yet to be investigated. Why?**

**A.** The investigations are underway. Certain issues take a longer time to resolve. And some just look at one side of the story, which is not fair. Such incidents must be investigated and we are doing that.

**In 2016, Bangladesh endorsed China's Belt and Road Initiative. How's it going so far?**

**A.** Our relations with China are largely economic. They are contributing to building our infrastructure and our development journey. We're happy with it as long as that is the case. The country's development is our prime objective. We engage with all countries on the basis of that philosophy.

**China's economic dealings with Bangladesh have been slammed. There are also rumours that Bangladesh is having trouble repaying China, and your government has taken serious precautions to avoid getting too close to China and falling into a debt trap, as well as to protect your own wealth. Are you cautious?**

**A.** We didn't default on anything, with China, and not with any other country. We have a reputation when it comes to debt servicing. As a result, we are receiving financial support and investment from countries all across the world. Because China is in our business, doing business with them is a logical and natural choice.

**Are you a non-aligned nation?**

**A.** Yes, we are, and it has always been a cornerstone of our foreign policy which is friendship to all, malice towards none."

**Some of China's project plans were rejected, and it announced that Bangladesh would self-fund projects like the Padma Bridge. Also, the Sonadia Deep-Sea Port Project was cancelled. According to the Media, Bangladesh has learned a few lessons from Sri Lanka on how to avoid a debt-trap. Is that accurate?**

**A.** We are not concerned about our debts because they are spread in a balanced way across our development partners.

**Bangladesh's Foreign Minister rebuked China's Envoy in Dhaka for advising the country not to join the Quad grouping, warning that doing so would create "damage." Is China applying such pressure and political meddling with Bangladesh?**

**A.** With China and other development partners, we have friendly relations. It's not about other countries putting pressure on us. Anything that has to do with assisting us with our development efforts, we are open to that.

**What do you think of China's influence in South Asia?**

**A.** Different countries have different perspectives and aspirations. Strategic issues abound in larger countries. This isn't a new concept. It's spreading worldwide. The same thing is happening in the Indian Ocean region. It comes in a variety of forms and dispensations, shapes and sizes. We'll be alright as long as we maintain equidistance.

**Bangladesh rejected some Chinese projects, something Sri Lanka has never done. With loans from China, Nepal and Pakistan are also experiencing serious debt problems. Seems you have done your homework well?**

**A.** We're making progress because we've found a good balance. It's all about how to deal with countries in terms of trade and preserve balanced relations. I won't pass any comment about Sri Lanka ties with China. I know your government knows better how to deal with its development partners.

**According to the United States, the Hambantota Port could be used as a Chinese military base. With the help of Chinese funding, you've also built a port. Is this a cause for concern?**

**A.** Many Chinese development projects have been completed in our country, and we are quite fine with that. Some countries will have to outsource their projects to another country. We don't have any issues with any of our development projects, regardless of whether it is executed by China or any other country.

**Sri Lanka is currently having difficulty resolving its financial issues, including the dollar crisis. What do you think Sri Lanka should do now? Your country demonstrated to South Asia how to do business and avoid falling into a debt trap, how to deal with terrorism, and so on. What comes to mind when you view Sri Lanka's current situation?**

**A.** I look at it as a short-term problem. Each country has its own perspective about addressing development challenges. Your tourism industry, a major source of your foreign currency income, has suffered a major setback as a result of the pandemic. Sri Lanka has overcome numerous challenges, as we have seen in your history and I am hopeful you would do it again. Getting over the current situation will require a multi-pronged approach which also includes currency swaps. Our big domestic market protects us from external shocks. We have that advantage. I am not in a position to provide any recommendations about your country but has the ability to handle the situation. We can only share our development experience and best practices. (amiesulo@gmail.com)