

**REMARKS TO THE MEDIA BY
H E Rt. Hon DON McKINNON,
COMMONWEALTH SECRETARY-GENERAL
DHAKA, WEDNESDAY, 21 MARCH 2007**

I have had very useful discussions here in Dhaka over the last two days.

I met the Chief Adviser and Foreign Affairs Adviser, as well as the Chief Election Commissioner. I also had discussions with a number of political parties, civil society and others.

Bangladesh is a valued member of the Commonwealth. We work together with this country in a number of ways; we wish the people of Bangladesh peace, progress and prosperity.

Your country has made a lot of progress in a number of areas. Your social indicators are impressive and your economic performance good. Bangladesh deserves to be congratulated for that.

This is a critical and somewhat unusual time for your nation. You are in virgin territory and your situation is unique.

You have a transitional government, seeking to create the conditions for a credible election, held on a level playing field.

The Caretaker Government (CG) says it is taking this once-in-a-generation opportunity to re-design and rebuild your democratic institutions. This is an immense task, which in these circumstances can only be done with the continuing consent and support of the people.

I am principally here to see how the Commonwealth can assist the CG in achieving that objective.

It has become clear to me that the CG has popular support. I have emphasized in my discussions, however, that sustaining that consent, support and confidence will be a challenge.

This requires, among other things, that the people are kept informed in a transparent way and at every stage, with “best estimate” target dates, of what the government is doing, and planning to do.

It requires, in particular, that a roadmap of programmes and major policy objectives leading up to inclusive and credible elections is made available as soon as possible, with time-lines attached.

At the moment there is no national or local government assembly in this country; as such there is no forum where the voice of the people can be heard. No people should be deprived of such a forum any longer than absolutely necessary. This is a fundamental right.

Your commitment to a new voters’ register, including photographs of each voter, will create the higher level of confidence that is so necessary. Your desire to see more democracy and transparency within political parties is part of a positive global trend. Having also witnessed your National Assembly in operation, I can candidly say it could do better, through changes to its own rules and standing orders.

Once a new voters’ register is ready, elections should be held expeditiously.

I have got the loud and clear message that the people of Bangladesh want a fresh start to their democracy. They also want to get it right.

This is not just about getting elections right. It is about all the institutions of good governance, about parliament, about the independence of the judiciary, about human rights, about integrity and accountability.

I appreciate the statement of the Foreign Affairs Adviser about Bangladesh’s commitment to Commonwealth principles and would urge the CG to adopt the Latimer House Principles endorsed by Commonwealth leaders in 2003, which set out clearly the roles, both independent and inter-dependent, of the Legislature, the Executive and the Judiciary.

I commend the CG for signing the UN Anti-Corruption Convention, an issue which must be tackled resolutely and comprehensively; there must be a commitment to stay the distance if Bangladesh is to get off the bottom of this ladder.

The World Bank/IMF proposal to corporatise your state banks would be a significant step.

It is ironic that the Grameen Bank, which lends to poor people, has such a high rate of loan repayment, but large public sector banks, which lend to the others, have to declare appalling losses.

I commend the CG also for having decided in principle to establish a Human Rights Commission and to set up a high-level committee towards that end.

In the meantime, human rights, the rule of law and due process must be respected. This is particularly important in the context of the large number of persons recently detained.

I note the current state of emergency and the suppression of party political activity. These should be lifted without unnecessary delay, and certainly not tied to the completion of the voter registration process. In that context, I would urge all political parties to work harmoniously together to enable the production of the new voters' register.

I have made it clear to the Chief Adviser and his colleagues that the Commonwealth is a friend of Bangladesh and stands ready to assist in every possible way to rebuild and strengthen institutions.

For far too long, this country has been dogged by narrow, partisan, winner-take-all politics. For any country to go forward, the welfare of the whole nation must come before party or self.

It is for Bangladeshis themselves to determine what national institutions best suit their requirements, within the essential parameters of democracy. These include the primacy of elected and accountable constitutional authority.

The Commonwealth will remain engaged with your government and do all it can to assist in the creation of a genuine and sustainable democracy.
