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WELCOME REMARKS
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ALUMNI GENERAL ASSEMBLY
BANGABANDHU INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE CENTER
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Asalaam ‘malaikum and good evening.

I forgot to bring my hard hat ... I should be wearing a hard hat here ... this is not just a cavernous room; this is a construction zone.

You are not just teachers, engineers, politicians, businessmen, artists, government officials, members of the military, doctors, technicians, specialists, home-keepers, and the list goes on ... you are something more; you are builders, great builders of bridges, builders of great bridges, so many bridges between America and Bangladesh ... strong, powerful, effective bridges of understanding between the people of two wonderful nations.

You began construction of these bridges last year, five years ago, a decade back, or maybe 20, 30 or 40 years ago when you participated in a U.S. Department of State exchange program. As you lived with, interacted with, engaged with, communicated with, developed friendship directly with Americans and America during the course of your program, you laid the foundations of the bridges and then built them so rapidly. These are splendiferous bridges ... each is different ... each is unique ... each is of differing size and shape and age, but each is sturdy ... each is enduring ... and each bridge, regardless of size, shape or age is a two way bridge ... traffic flows both ways across the bridge.

During your exchange program, whether last year or many decades ago, you got to know America ... you saw America up-close and personal ... you experienced the diversity, the complexities, the simplicity, the contractions, the wonders, the sadnesses, the strengths, the shortcomings ... you truly experienced America ... you absorbed America ... you came to understand America, and after your return to Bangladesh and up to this very day, you share these understandings with Bangladesh ... indeed, the traffic across these bridges is heavy.

But the traffic goes the other way, too. While in America and since, you have helped Americans discover Bangladesh. When you were on your program, how many days passed before you first

came across an American who knew the capital of Bangladesh or even who could find Bangladesh on a map. You helped America discover and understand Bangladesh, the real Bangladesh, the Bangladesh beyond the stereotypes, the Bangladesh that is filled with optimism as the economy steadily grows, as millions are lifted out of poverty, the Bangladesh that has undertaken an agricultural revolution that has already made the world's most densely populated country rice self-sufficient, the Bangladesh that could be/should be the next Asian Tiger ... you get the idea.

Indeed, we all should be wearing hard hats tonight, as construction on these bridges is ever ongoing.

This Alumni General Assembly is an opportunity to bring together hundreds of bridge builders, hundreds of alumni of State Department exchange programs, a most extraordinary group of individuals. This afternoon we celebrate what Bangladeshi Alumni have accomplished and look forward to what the future will bring.

Numbering about 2000 individuals, these Alumni ... you ... span every discipline, every profession, and every region of this great nation. I know ... as I crisscross Bangladesh from Tetulia to Teknaf, from Sylhet to Satkhira, no day will pass without meeting at least one alumnus of these exchange programs. Similarly, here in Dhaka, I have yet to attend a reception where there has not been at least one program alumnus who came up to me to share with me in vivid detail his or her experience in America as a Fulbrighter, Humphrey fellow, participant in the International Visitor Leadership Program, in the Youth Exchange and Study Program, in the International Writing Program, in the Young Entrepreneurs Exchange, or in one of nearly twenty different programs. I so enjoy these encounters.

A listing of program alumni is a veritable who's who of Bangladesh. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was an International Visitor in 1952. Muhammad Yunus was a Fulbright student in 1965. Humayun Ahmed joined the International Writing Program in 1990 ... the list goes on ... the Speaker of Parliament, numerous current Cabinet Members, a Supreme Court Justice, Members of Parliament, Vice Chancellors of universities, NGO leaders, educators, corporate CEOs, and the young students who will be the leaders of tomorrow ... and most especially you.

I mentioned earlier that this is a construction zone, as each of you continues to broaden and strengthen your bridge of understanding with America. But it is a construction zone in another important sense: you are building the New Bangladesh, the Middle-Income Bangladesh, the Bangladesh where all have the means to provide their families safe, secure housing, ample, nutritious food, good healthcare and quality education.

You have a leading role to play in building Sonar Bangla. Each of you was selected for your talent, your achievement and your excellence in so many fields. Each of you has succeeded in challenging academic or professional programs. And now each of you is at work building Bangladesh.

Given the extraordinary caliber of our program alumni, I believe this alumni network is one of the most powerful and dynamic forces for change in Bangladesh.

This afternoon's program will help all of us to get to know each other better and to get a fuller understanding of the wealth of talent and resources available through the alumni network. I encourage each of you to take fullest advantage of this opportunity to engage with, contribute to and benefit from this wondrous network of incredible people.

I close by again welcoming you to the Alumni General Assembly in the hope that you find today's program most enjoyable and instructive.

Thank you.



**As prepared for delivery*