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A PARTNERSHIP WITHOUT BOUNDARIES: U.S.-BANGLADESH RELATIONS

REMARKS BY

Wendy R. Sherman

Under Secretary for Political Affairs

DHAKA, MAY 27 -- U.S. Under Secretary for Political Affairs Wendy R Sherman delivered the following remarks at the Hotel Ruposhi Bangla today.

(Begin text)

Dear friends, thank you for inviting me to speak here today. I am so pleased to visit Dhaka and to co-chair the second annual U.S.-Bangladesh Partnership Dialogue. Foreign Secretary Haque and I had productive discussions earlier today. I'd like to thank both delegations for their tremendous work, and I especially want to acknowledge our outstanding ambassador here, Dan Mozena. Here and in Washington, Dan has been a tireless advocate for this partnership—and he has kept us focused on what our partnership is all about. I'd like to thank as well the leadership of the Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS) for hosting me here today.

The friendship between the United States and Bangladesh goes back a long time. More than 40 years ago, as Bangladeshi heroes fought and died for this country's freedom, an American hero, Senator Ted Kennedy, traveled here to support Bangladeshis and uphold their right to freedom and self-determination. In the past several years, our partnership has gone far beyond simply warm relations. We have made remarkable progress in a relationship that touches upon nearly every field of human endeavor. The Partnership Dialogue, launched by Secretary Clinton last year, is a testament to our efforts. This is my second time in Dhaka as Under Secretary, and with every visit I come away with a renewed sense of dedication to this partnership.

I will have a great deal more to say about Bangladesh's impressive development, about our shared vision and values, and about the bright future of our relationship.

But I must begin somewhere else, on a busy road 18 kilometers from here, at 8:45 on the morning of April 24, a day that few of us will forget. My heart, and the hearts of the American people, go out to the victims of the Rana Plaza disaster and their families. The stories of the

precious lives lost--the injured or maimed, families torn apart and children orphaned--have touched all of us. Haunting images from the tragedy – a motherless child in his aunt’s arms, the wife collapsing at the sight of her husband’s body, the couple buried alive, embracing in death – are seared in our minds.

We also think of the heroism the days after: The first responders and Army personnel who helped thousands of survivors reach safety. The worker from the factory next door, who, risking his own life, crawled into wreckage to free a girl whose hand was crushed beneath tons of concrete. The doctors who rushed to the scene to care for the wounded. And an incredible 19-year-old woman, who, by sheer force of will, survived 17 days in the darkness amidst the wreckage.

We need to do all that we can to make sure this doesn’t happen again. We are working together with the government of Bangladesh, the Bangladeshi and American private sectors, labor and civil society groups, our partners in the international community, and members of the Bangladeshi diaspora. We are encouraging international investors not to turn their back on Bangladesh, because the solution is reform, not withdrawal. Ultimately, success will depend on the will and commitment of industry, government, civil society, and everyday Bangladeshis to come together to change the culture of workplace safety and worker rights in Bangladesh.

The responsibility for enforcing robust labor standards is the responsibility of the Government of Bangladesh. But as your country faces these challenges, its friends stand ready to help. For instance, we are working with American companies that source garments from factories in Bangladesh to secure their support for enhanced safety inspections. Engineers and architects from the Bangladeshi diaspora in the United States have stepped up to help recruit a corps of independent safety inspectors. The United States is also funding local labor and civil society organizations to promote respect for fundamental rights at work, including freedom to join a labor union.

This morning, I hosted a roundtable with government, civil society, and industry leaders, where we discussed what more we could do together to improve worker safety in Bangladesh. We have some experience with this. Over a century ago, another tragedy – the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in New York City – shook the conscience of the American public, and spurred government and industry to implement crucial reforms. We hope that, out of the grief and debris of Rana Plaza, out of the ashes and pain of the Tazreen Fashions and Smart factory fires before it, you can chart a new way forward; that you can build a national consensus on how to improve the lives of workers – indeed the lives of all citizens – in Bangladesh.

Why Bangladesh Matters

These reforms are important for workers and industry. They are also critical to restoring Bangladesh’s image in the eyes of the international community. The success of the Bangladesh story has implications not just for Bangladeshis, but for the entire global community. Your entrepreneurs enhance regional trade, your artists and writers enrich the cultural discourse, your peacekeepers bring hope to the downtrodden. Millions around the globe see Bangladesh as a powerful model for democratic and economic development and seek to replicate your success.

In the past two decades, life expectancy in Bangladesh has increased by ten years, infant mortality has declined by nearly two-thirds, female literacy has doubled, and economic growth has averaged over 5% annually. Bangladesh has become the world's second largest exporter of ready-made garments, it has achieved self-sufficiency in rice production, and is on track to become self-sufficient in food production altogether by the end of the decade. At the same time, Bangladeshis have crafted a vibrant democracy in the world's seventh-most populous country.

Challenges

This impressive progress is to be applauded. But as a steadfast friend of your country, I must be frank and say that the ultimate success of the Bangladesh story is not guaranteed. My colleagues and I, along with a great many Bangladeshis, have watched with dismay as the streets of Dhaka have been shut down by *hartal* after *hartal*, by angry demonstration after angry demonstration. I cannot presume to tell the people of Bangladesh or your leaders what issues demand attention, what wrongs must be righted, or what approach your country must take as it faces the grave challenges of the future. In Bangladesh, as in any democracy, this is for the people alone to decide.

But speaking as a friend of Bangladesh, I worry about a cycle of violence that shuts down a city of millions on what seems like a daily basis, that dramatically slows Bangladesh's economic growth, that feeds a political culture that rejects compromise, that breeds fear in minority populations, that brands some citizens and their beliefs less worthy than others, and that radicalizes segments of the population. To truly prosper, Bangladesh must free itself of this long-standing cycle of election-year violence.

What we Are Doing to Advance the Relationship

The United States has a vital interest in ensuring the success of the Bangladesh story, and these challenges, while daunting, are not insurmountable. There is a great deal we can do together to address our shared concerns and advance our shared objectives. The U.S.-Bangladesh Partnership Dialogue speaks volumes for how much we value our shared vision and how bright a future we see for our bilateral relations. This partnership is deeply rooted in our shared democratic values, our strong economic ties, our mutual security concerns, and our broad and deep people-to-people connections. We are elevating and institutionalizing the framework for the relationship, accelerating our engagement across the board, enhancing our already excellent cooperation on counterterrorism, narcotics, climate change, food security, health, police training, disaster risk management – the list goes on. Let me talk about a few examples.

Together, we have worked hard to disrupt terrorist networks and combat the threat of violent extremism, both in Bangladesh and beyond. This memorandum adds to our existing partnerships designed to ensure security in the region. We also applaud Bangladesh's cooperation with India to combat terrorism in both countries, which is helping to keep the entire region, and the world, safer and more secure. The struggle against violent extremism is a long one, but we have been inspired by the ordinary Bangladeshis who declare they are proud Muslims, proud Bengalis, and proud citizens of an open and pluralistic democracy.

What impresses me so much is that Bangladesh is as diligent at waging peace as it is at battling extremism. Bangladesh is one of the world's largest contributors to UN peace support operations, with nearly nine thousand military and police personnel on the ground in eight different operations across the globe. And Bangladesh is working to expand its activity by a further 50 percent within the next few years!

Your commitment to peacekeeping operations is matched by one of the most impressive and dynamic civil societies in the world. Two Bangladeshi institutions – BRAC and the Grameen Bank – serve as world models in the fight against poverty and suffering. Both began as domestic efforts to empower the poor and assist the needy. And both are now international operations, working in some of the world's most destitute areas. BRAC and Grameen epitomize all that is great about this country: the ingenuity, compassion, and creativity of the Bangladeshi people. We want to see Grameen's independence and effectiveness continue so the rights and interests of its women shareholders can be safeguarded. We were so pleased to see last month Bangladesh's native son honored in the Capitol rotunda by our political leaders in both parties. Professor Mohammad Yunus became the first Muslim of any nationality to receive the Congressional Gold Medal, the highest civilian award our Congress can bestow.

We have tried to match your commitment to building peace in the world and exporting development innovation with our commitment to Bangladesh. USAID's yearly development budget for Bangladesh is about \$200 million, our largest development commitment in Asia outside of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Bangladesh is the only country in the world that is a beneficiary of all four signature Presidential Initiatives – Feed the Future, Global Health, Global Climate Change, and Engagement with the Muslim world.

Bangladesh, a founding member of the Climate and Clean Air Coalition, is recognized worldwide as a leader in combating climate change. Our respective governments are working together to improve the national greenhouse gas inventory system; to conduct economic assessments and landscape mapping in agriculture, forests and wetlands; and to build Bangladesh's institutional capacity in developing clean energy. We are proud to be working so closely with your government on this important issue, one that Secretary Kerry is deeply passionate about.

Our cooperation in the private sector is just as active. Just look at what we've accomplished. More than \$6 billion in trade every year. A surge in American exports to Bangladesh. More and more American companies looking to put down roots. That means more jobs for Bangladeshis and for Americans. It means greater opportunity and prosperity. It's no wonder Goldman Sachs called Bangladesh one of the best emerging economies for trade and investment.

We added a private sector forum to our government to government meetings, which gives another dimension to our discussions and is a first for our annual Partnership Dialogue. The private sector forum reflects the growing importance so many place on Bangladesh's burgeoning economy and gives business leaders from America, Bangladesh, and the region an opportunity to better inform our government discussions and make recommendations to our governments about ways to improve bilateral trade and increase investment in Bangladesh.

We expect our partnership to deepen even further as we continue to ramp up American engagement in the Asia-Pacific. We want to see an Indo-Pacific Economic corridor to connect the dynamic countries of South Asia to the major markets of Southeast Asia and beyond. To speed up the flow of goods, services and people throughout the region, we'll need to break down trade barriers between countries, and build up the infrastructure: roads, bridges, electrical transmission grids, railways, sea ports, and pipelines. If we can accomplish this, Central, South, and Southeast Asia can once again become a bustling hub for global commerce. To borrow a phrase from Indian Prime Minister Singh, we dream of a world where one can have breakfast in Kolkata, lunch in Dhaka, and dinner in Rangoon.

The seeds of progress have already been planted. The trade environment has improved between Bangladesh and India. Bilateral trade between the two countries has expanded from \$300 million annually in the early 1990s to well over \$5 billion in 2012. Bangladesh is a leading voice within SAARC and other regional forums in calling for greater connectivity. And as Bangladesh engages more with its neighbors on security, trade and investment, development and other issues, the region is becoming more integrated and stable.

We also have an extensive public diplomacy effort here in Bangladesh that engages participants across the spectrum of society. With the opening of the Edward M. Kennedy Center for Public Service and the Arts last year, our efforts to engage young Bangladeshis have taken on a new momentum. We believe, as you do, that a strong and vibrant civil society is essential to maintaining a strong and vital democracy. With 80 percent of Bangladesh's population under the age of 40, it is vital to energize and encourage entrepreneurship, activism, and responsibility in this segment of the population that represents your country's future.

Similarly, our Embassy is very active in promoting women's empowerment, for their inclusion in economic and political life; we believe strongly that a country cannot realize its full potential, if only half of the population is participating. Last year, the State Department sponsored two major forums – one in Chittagong and one here in Dhaka – to promote women's entrepreneurship, leadership, and networks. We are so pleased that Bangladesh has prioritized women's empowerment, resulting in drops in maternal and infant mortality, and substantial increases in girls attending and graduating from schools. Organizations like Grameen Bank, with its millions of women beneficiaries, have turned micro-finance into a byword in the ongoing effort to change the opportunity structure for women.

Conclusion

I hope I have conveyed to you how much we value our partnership and friendship with Bangladesh, and the pivotal stake we have in your country's success. There are obstacles along the road, but if the past is any indicator, I am certain Bangladeshis will be able to make the hard choices necessary to not only to meet any challenge, but to prosper. We are here to support you. We are working to support civil discourse and political bridge-building. We are engaging U.S. businesses to make sure we are doing all we can to promote safe working conditions in Bangladesh. And we are working to help Bangladesh achieve its potential as a lynchpin of regional stability and commerce. As I said, you have tireless advocate in Ambassador Mozena

and in me. But greatest champions of all are you: the citizens of Bangladesh who work tirelessly everyday for the betterment of your country and to build better lives for your children. In this endeavor, the American people are your partners. As Senator Kennedy said in 1972: “The real foreign policy of America is citizen to citizen, friend to friend, people to people. For in a sense, we are all Bengalis, we are all Americans and we all share the great alliance of humanity.”

Thank you again for inviting me here today, and I wish you and your country all the success you deserve – and will surely achieve – today and in the future.

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