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REMARKS BY
U.S. AMBASSADOR MARCIA BERNICAT
ON
“LEVERAGING THE BANGLADESHI DIASPORA IN THE
UNITED STATES TO STRENGTHEN THE BANGLADESH-U.S.
BILATERAL ECONOMIC RELATIONSHIP”

MAY 19, 2015
INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS FORUM OF BANGLADESH

International Business Forum of Bangladesh
IBFB President Hafizur Rahman Khan,
FBCCI President Kazi Akram Uddin Ahmed,
IBFB Founding President, Mahmudul Islam Chowdhury,
Other distinguished members and leaders of IBFB,
Business leaders,
Members of civil society,
Representatives of multilateral institutions,
Fellow diplomats,
Members of the Press Corps
As salaam-u Alaiykum
Dear friends.

Thank you for the invitation to speak with you today. I have been honored to meet many of you on various occasions over the past few months and cherish the opportunity to speak with IBFB, a well-respected and non-partisan business forum today. As many of you know,

I began my career in the private sector and know first-hand the importance of an environment that allows business to unleash its energy. Over the course of my career, I have seen how committed and focused business groups advocate to significantly improve the business and investment climate for foreign and host country companies alike.

Secretary Kerry has made clear that economic issues are part of a diplomat's core mandate.

For example, I recently participated in our semi-annual Partnership Dialogue with the government of Bangladesh. We reviewed all aspects of our bilateral relationship, but a central component of our discussions focused on boosting economic growth through trade and investment. Secretary Kerry's Special Representative for Commercial and Business Affairs, Scott Nathan, led this part of our discussion, sharing insights drawn from his wide geographical and private sector experience. And yes, the Blue Economy was one of the new areas we discussed, as was regional trade, a subject I would love to come back and talk with you about in the future. We will continue to dwell on these themes in our next Trade and Investment Cooperation Framework Agreement, or TICFA discussions, hopefully to be held later this year.

And let me make one comment right at the beginning on GSP. I have met with government leaders to discuss Bangladesh's progress on worker safety and labor rights. This is an important issue and one which I take very seriously. My message has been clear: the U.S. government recognizes the significant progress that has been made, especially on improving worker safety in the RMG sector, but also notes there is still work to be done, especially to improve labor rights.

Let me be clear: In order to regain its Generalized System of Preferences – GSP – and other trade concessions, the best path forward is for Bangladesh to show concrete progress on labor rights. An improved labor environment enables all of us to argue in favor of trading privileges which would further support Bangladesh's remarkable economic development success story.

Let me also note that in March, I attended Secretary Kerry's annual conference with all U.S. Ambassadors, where Under Secretary Catherine Novelli – one of the highest ranking U.S. officials working on economic issues - outlined her goals for economic diplomacy. She highlighted commercial advocacy, the trade agenda, sustainable energy, and the blue economy, among other priorities. As I am sure you can tell already, such issues are particularly relevant to our work here in Bangladesh. My team and I intend to continue expanding our engagement in each of these areas. Our embassy translates this high level of interest in economic engagement here into strong support for building business ties with companies like yours.

You can see this engagement exemplified in our talented economic, commercial, and consular teams... in the multiple trade missions we organize to the United States every year... in how our USAID mission supports the boosting of regional trade... and in the work of our Public Affairs Section to promote entrepreneurship and create employment opportunities for women living in economically disadvantaged communities.

I have had my eye on serving in Bangladesh since my earliest days as a diplomat. And I have had the privilege of working in and on South Asia throughout my career.

For those of us who know and love this region, the attractions of Bangladesh are clear... most notably, this country's wonderfully warm, industrious, charitable, and hospitable people. Further, with over two decades of robust economic growth, this country is on the cusp of becoming an important regional crossroads and consumer market.

As the representative of the President of the United States in Bangladesh, my instructions are clear: to help this country, home to 166 million people, further develop economically and to strengthen our bilateral relationship, including our commercial ties. I could spend all afternoon referring to how decades of impressive growth correlate with striking improvements to living standards, education levels, and improvements in public health here. I am so pleased that the United States has been such a strong partner with Bangladesh on this successful journey.

Today, I'd like to speak with you about an aspect of our partnership that deserves greater attention – engaging people from Bangladesh who are now based in the United States. By some counts, this group may number as much as 500,000. Some are now U.S. citizens, others hold immigrant visas, and still others are on temporary work, education, or exchange visas. And, speaking about educational opportunities in the United States, I will note that Bangladesh is about to become one of the top 25 countries sending students to the U.S. There are strong, vibrant, and successful communities of Bangladeshis across the United States, ranging from my home state of New Jersey to New York, California, Texas, Florida, our nation's capital of Washington, DC, and many more.

I want to highlight just a few Bangladeshi-Americans who are leaving their mark on the United States and the world: the first Member of the U.S. Congress of Bangladeshi descent, former Representative Hansen Clarke from Michigan; academic leaders such as geneticist Maqsoodul Alam; economist M. Shahid Alam; inventors like Jawed Karim, the co-founder of YouTube; Salman Khan of the non-profit Khan Academy and Anika Rahman, the former CEO of the Ms. Foundation for Women.

These individuals and communities offer deep pools of resources that can drive new investment. They can propagate best practices in business, spread new technologies, and open the way for new sectors to flourish in Bangladesh itself. They are proof that investment refers not just to capital and machines, but also to human beings and institutions.

I've been thinking lately about Long Island, New York, where there are many pharmaceutical companies owned by the Bangladeshi-American community and also about the emerging pharmaceutical industry here in Bangladesh, where local firms such as Beximco, Square, and many more are manufacturing active pharmaceutical ingredients and finished medications for the domestic market and export. I am deeply inspired by the synergies I see -- and this is just one market segment!

I also see examples daily of Bangladeshis based in the United States moving back and forth, bringing new opportunities to this country. Just a few quick examples: Didar Islam is working hard to bring solar power to rural communities. Kamal and Iqbal Quadir teamed up to revolutionize mobile banking, Maliha Quadir founded Shohoz, the online bus ticketing service, and her husband Khalid set up an investment firm, all members of an entrepreneurial family with a passion for investing in Bangladesh's future.

So I ask: What can you do to better link up with the global community of Bangladeshis to harness their experience and skills, and yes, their capital, to help grow and diversify Bangladesh's economy?

I want to challenge everyone in this room to think broadly, to look for opportunities and to create the conditions for ideas and new initiatives to flourish. And for practical ways you can use this community's talents here. I met with groups in San Francisco and Los Angeles and they told me how much they want to help. They want to volunteer their skills and expertise, but don't know how to identify partners to work with. I welcome your ideas about how the U.S. Embassy can help be a catalyst in this regard.

And in deepening your links to the Bangladeshi diaspora, you will of course want to keep your eye on the broader American corporate community that is increasingly eyeing this country as a place of opportunity. Prior to coming to Bangladesh, I met with many U.S. companies who do business here. These businesspeople lauded Bangladeshis for their entrepreneurial spirit.

And I see the strong interest here in building commercial ties with the United States. Chevron, Halliburton, Coca-Cola, Pepsi, Johnson & Johnson, Proctor & Gamble, Caterpillar, Boeing, GE, and Ellicott Dredges.

The message is clear: U.S. companies and their local partners are investing in Bangladesh, bringing great technology, and selling valuable goods and services. These are win-win developments and we can create more of them.

While this is a good news story, and one which I am so very pleased to tell both here and throughout the United States, we cannot rest on our laurels. There is much room for improvement and we -- those of us in this room today -- have the power to strengthen the U.S.-Bangladesh economic relationship. Doing so will likely consist of many small actions taken over and over again which lead to profound change. I'm reminded of the proverb that, drop by drop, a lake is made. However, this lake can fill much more quickly when the power of a diaspora is leveraged and trade and investment flow at full force in both directions.

For this to occur, we also need to tackle obstacles to a healthy business climate such as the absence of dispute resolution mechanisms and difficulties in obtaining land and gas permits. We can, and must, all advocate for – and thank you, Honorable FBCCI President Ahmed, for mentioning this - two way capital flows, political stability, increased investment in infrastructure, improvements to protecting intellectual property rights, in short, creating the best, most competitive, climate for business possible.

You have heard the trade numbers: Bilateral trade is currently around \$6.4 billion a year. \$5.3 billion of that consists of Bangladeshi exports to the United States, not surprising as we are the number one single country destination for Bangladeshi goods, primarily ready-made garments. U.S. exports to Bangladesh make up \$1.1 billion from a wide-range of sectors from planes to chemicals. Can we increase these numbers? The answer is yes and I will turn to all of you to help make this a reality during my tenure in Dhaka.

Our bilateral trade creates a significant number of jobs, brings new technologies and best practices, and stimulates foreign direct investment. Many of these jobs are filled by women and as such create accelerated opportunities for economic empowerment.

The path forward is clear. We need to continue to make Bangladesh a vibrant economic partner, a partner which is improving workers' rights and creating safe working environments, a partner that works hand-in-hand with its global diaspora, a partner with a fully welcoming business climate.

I assure you that the United States stands with you in making this great future happen. Please know that you have the full support of the U.S. government. We are Bangladesh's long-term friends and partners and wish you the absolute best.

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**As prepared for delivery*