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Strengthening Bangladesh-Maldives
Bilateral Cooperation**

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Country Lecture on **From Malé to Dhaka: Strengthening Bangladesh-Maldives Bilateral Cooperation**



Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS) organised a country lecture under its flagship Country Lecture Series, titled “**From Malé to Dhaka: Strengthening Bangladesh-Maldives Bilateral Cooperation**” on Thursday, 10 April 2025, at the BIISS Auditorium. The event was graced by **H E Shiuneen Rasheed**, High Commissioner of the Republic of Maldives to People’s Republic of Bangladesh, as the Guest Speaker and **Dr Neyamat Ullah Bhuiyan**, Senior Secretary, Ministry of Expatriates’ Welfare and Overseas Employment as the Special Guest. The Director General of BIISS, **Major General Iftekhar Anis**, BSP, awc, afwc, psc, Peng, delivered the welcome address. **Md Obaidul Haque**, Associate Professor, Department of International Relations at the University of Dhaka, delivered a presentation on Bangladesh-Maldives bilateral relations, setting the stage for the lecture. The session was chaired and moderated by **Ambassador AFM Gousal Azam Sarker**, Chairman of BIISS.

Senior officers from different ministries, ambassadors, high commissioners, former diplomats, senior civil and military officials, media, academia, researchers, students from different universities, and representatives from international organisations participated. Their active participation in a robust open discussion enriched the event, fostering insightful exchanges on strengthening bilateral ties between Bangladesh and the Maldives.

Welcome Address



Major General Iftekhar Anis, BSP, awc, afwc, psc, PEng,
Director General, BIISS

Major General Iftekhar Anis, Director General of BIISS, started his remarks by highlighting that the beginning of the ties between Dhaka and Malé, which began in 1978, were rooted in mutual respect, cultural affinity, shared development aspirations, and a common desire for peace and prosperity in the South Asian region. He mentioned that over the years, this partnership has evolved steadily, drawing strength from their shared memberships in organisations such as the United Nations (UN), South Asian Association for Regional Organization (SAARC), the Commonwealth, the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC), and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM).

The Director General stated that geographical differences between two nations—one being a deltaic country and the other a small island state—Bangladesh and the Maldives have many parallels in their aspirations and challenges. Their development journeys are anchored in regional cooperation, people-to-people connectivity, and the shared need for resilience in the face of global uncertainties. The institutional collaborations and human resource partnerships between the two states that have flourished over time, particularly in sectors such as health, education, construction, and culture exemplify this shared journey.

Major General Anis pointed out a notable feature of the relationship, which is the significant contribution of the Bangladeshi expatriate community in the Maldives. With more than 50 per cent employed in the construction sector, they serve as a bridge of human connectivity and

exemplify how people from both countries contribute to each other's economic vitality. Yet, despite these ties, both countries' trade volume remains modest. In particular, the potential, however, is immense—from pharmaceuticals and ready-made garments (RMG) to leather goods, ceramics, jute, and river sand—Bangladesh has much to offer. Similarly, he added that Bangladesh is keen to learn from the Maldives' expertise in areas such as marine tourism and the blue economy.



The Director General then mentioned some of the key areas of cooperation. He started with tourism as an area where the Maldives shines globally. He hoped that tourism stakeholders of Bangladesh will draw inspiration and practical guidance from the Maldivian experience to better develop the country's own capabilities and market visibility. He further mentioned the shared commitment to climate action. As two climate-vulnerable nations, Bangladesh and the Maldives stand united on the global stage to advocate for urgent and equitable climate solutions. In fact, from deep-sea fishing to sustainable ocean governance and green energy cooperation, the possibilities are vast between the two countries.

In conclusion, the Director General highlighted that dialogue always acts as an instrument of public diplomacy—a chance to build bridges between policymakers, researchers, civil society and students.

Setting the Tone

Bangladesh-Maldives Relations: Revisiting Bilateral Relations and Avenues of Cooperation



Mr Md Obaidul Haque

Associate Professor, Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka

At the outset of his presentation, **Mr Md Obaidul Haque** pointed out that despite geographical differences, a nuanced observation reveals similarities between Bangladesh and the Maldives. The two nations appear to be very different from one another. One is a beautiful archipelago in the Indian Ocean, and the other is a riverine delta with hundreds of rivers crisscrossing it. However, a closer examination reveals striking similarities. Both nations rely significantly on external trade, are vulnerable to sea level rise, and are navigating an increasingly complex and unpredictable global environment.

He argued that this is why collaboration is important. To that end, since its inception in 2013, the BIISS Country Lecture Series has been a space for deep reflection on foreign policy priorities. In that spirit, Mr Haque articulated his keynote in a way so that he could contribute to a discourse that is grounded in facts and open in spirit, highlighting not just what both nations have achieved but also where they can go.

Mr Haque then stated that Bangladesh's connection with the Maldives existed prior to the establishment of embassies and official visits. For centuries, sea routes connected the Bay of Bengal and the Maldives. Traders, travellers, and even early seafarers from Bengal could cross paths with those from the islands. These early exchanges formed the backdrop for a more formal

diplomatic relationship between the two countries. In 1972, just after Bangladesh gained independence, the Maldives was among the first to recognise the country. This was not a small gesture; it reflected a willingness to support a new nation in a difficult geopolitical moment. Formal diplomatic relations began in 1978, and they have steadily grown stronger. Bangladesh opened its High Commission in Malé in 1998, and the Maldives opened its mission in Dhaka in 2008. In more recent years, a noticeable increase in high-level engagement was visible. As a continuation, in 2021, multiple Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) were signed, covering areas like fisheries, diplomatic consultations, and cultural exchange. These were followed by agreements on labour, tax cooperation, youth and sports, and healthcare. Importantly, Bangladesh provided COVID-19 vaccines at a crucial time both through medical assistance and vaccine donations. These are gestures of friendship as well as signs of a growing partnership grounded in mutual benefit.



Mr Haque argued that in recent years, two institutional mechanisms have helped guide bilateral cooperation: a Joint Commission chaired by the two Foreign Ministers and a Bilateral Consultation Framework at the level of Foreign Secretaries. Together, these provide platforms for dialogue, review, and planning. While both nations have made significant headway, many areas remain underexplored. For instance, in bilateral trade, the numbers are modest. In recent years, Bangladesh's exports to the Maldives have averaged around US\$ 06 million annually, while imports remain relatively low, mainly comprising marine products. He opined that mostly logistical arrangements are hindering a more robust trade relationship. Other challenges include, the lack of direct shipping routes, limited port connectivity, and non-tariff barriers like customs delays or differing technical standards. There is a solid base, but unlocking it requires better infrastructure and coordination. He further added that other sectors show promise. For example, in fisheries, the Maldives has deep expertise that Bangladesh can tap into, especially as Dhaka explores deep-sea fishing. In healthcare, hundreds of Bangladeshi doctors and nurses serve in Maldivian hospitals and clinics. In terms of the sharing of culture, a new Cultural Exchange Programme (2022–2025) is already being implemented. There are also MoUs on education, agriculture, security, and even prisoner transfer. This breadth reflects the maturity of the partnership. But again, translating signed documents into lived realities remains the key challenge.

Mr Haque expressed his firm conviction that the most defining feature of the bilateral relationship is people, especially the Bangladeshi migrant workers in the Maldives. They number well over 100,000, about 20 per cent of the total Maldivian population. In sectors like construction, they make up nearly 90 per cent of the migrant workforce. Others work in tourism, retail, hospitality, and healthcare. Their contribution is acknowledged at the highest levels in the Maldives. For Bangladesh, these workers are a vital source of foreign remittance, which helps maintain Bangladesh's current account stability, supports household incomes, and reduces poverty. While empirical data is limited due to informal channels like hundi, the actual inflow is likely substantial. However, Mr Haque also acknowledged the difficulties and challenges. He cited a 2021 International Organization for Migration (IOM) Report, which estimated that over 63,000 Bangladeshi workers were undocumented. Many arrive through dubious agents, paying exorbitant recruitment fees, up to US\$ 4,000, which pushes them into debt bondage. Others become undocumented due to expired short-term visas or manipulative employers. Living conditions can be dire, cramped, unhygienic and unsafe. Workers often face wage theft, delayed payments, passport confiscation, and even verbal or physical abuse. It is indeed a great concern that legal remedies are limited, and fear of deportation keeps many silent.



Mr Haque praised both governments; to their credit, since they have taken steps to tackle these difficulties. For example, the Maldives introduced new employer accountability rules in 2020, whereas Bangladesh's High Commission actively assists with documentation and repatriation. On the other hand, the IOM is setting up a Migrant Resource Centre, while the International Labour Organization (ILO) works to improve migration governance. However, Mr Haque opined that these steps are not enough as both nations need to finalise the proposed MoU on labour migration, adopt rights-based frameworks, and ensure fair recruitment. Ultimately, no bilateral partnership can be truly strong if its human foundation is weak.

Furthermore, Mr Haque argued that beyond labour, bilateral economic ties can, and must, expand. Bangladesh has cleared export advantages in RMG, pharmaceuticals, ceramics, leather goods, jute products, and processed foods. Subsequently, the Maldives depends on imports for nearly all consumer goods. The market is there; but what is missing is connectivity and policy alignment. To that end, Mr Haque highlighted three game changers: 1. Direct Shipping: Without it, bilateral trade relies on third-country transhipment and this increases cost and time.

2. Preferential Trade Agreement (PTA): Still pending, but could be a catalyst for growth. 3. Double Taxation Avoidance Agreement (DTAA): already in place, but needs wider awareness among businesses. On investment, there is scope for two-way flows: the Maldives could explore opportunities in Bangladesh's Special Economic Zones (SEZs), particularly in hospitality and green tourism. On the contrary, Bangladeshi investors could consider construction, services, or information technology (IT) in the Maldives. The blue economy offers further possibilities in certain areas including fisheries, ocean energy, marine biodiversity, and conservation. Mr Haque suggested that knowledge sharing, joint training, and tech exchange can drive this bilateral cooperation forward.

Mr Haque reminded the audience regarding the soft infrastructure of relationships, education, culture, and human connection, as more Maldivian students are now pursuing higher education and medical training in Bangladesh. Bangladeshi universities are affordable and accessible, and the potential here is vast. Cultural exchanges, through art, music, film, and language, can foster greater understanding. Scholarships, summer schools, and joint festivals could deepen ties at the societal level. He argued that while tourism is already a Maldivian strength, it can become a joint platform. Bangladesh's coastline, the Sundarbans, and Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) offer tremendous potential if supported by training and marketing partnerships.

While discussing the common geopolitical realities, Mr Haque argued that both countries are navigating a delicate regional balance. They maintain ties with India, China, the US, and other partners. Both are active in Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and committed to inclusive Indo-Pacific cooperation. Platforms like SAARC may be stalled, but the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and IORA remain promising spaces for maritime cooperation, disaster risk response, and energy connectivity. While the Maldives is not a BIMSTEC member, Bangladesh's active engagement in BIMSTEC, alongside IORA, offers opportunities for triangulated or parallel cooperation on maritime governance, disaster preparedness, and regional connectivity. Bangladesh's 2023 Indo-Pacific Outlook emphasises peace, prosperity, rules-based order, and connectivity, values that align closely with Maldivian foreign policy.

Mr Haque identified the stalled implementation process as the biggest obstacle. Too often, MoUs remain inactive, commissions meet, but tangible outcomes fail to materialise. While in migration, labour protection, shipping, and even cultural cooperation, good intentions and promising initiatives are delayed and even frequently undermined by weak follow-through. In this regard, he recommended that the gap between policy and delivery must be bridged through better coordination, stronger capacity, and clearer accountability.

In his conclusion, Mr Haque highlighted that the Bangladesh–Maldives relationship is more than diplomatic; it is practical, personal, and full of promises. These two nations are bound not just by proximity, but by purpose: to thrive in a world of uncertainty by leaning on shared strengths. He emphasised the operationalisation of direct connectivity by sea and air, ensuring the rights and dignity of migrant workers; spurring trade and investment through real frameworks; deepening collaboration on the blue economy and climate action; and above all, delivering on commitments. In his view, the journey from Malé to Dhaka and Dhaka to Malé is not symbolic. It is strategic, and it is human, and both nations should walk that path together, with clarity, commitment, and a shared vision for progress.

Lecture by the Distinguished Guest Speaker



Her Excellency High Commissioner Shiuneen Rasheed

High Commissioner of the Republic of Maldives to People's Republic of Bangladesh

At the outset of her speech, Her Excellency **High Commissioner Shiuneen Rasheed** reflected on the strengthening bonds of friendship between the Maldives and Bangladesh which continued to deepen across various sectors. Despite differences in size and geography, she underscored that the two nations were united by shared values, historical connections, and a mutual desire for a peaceful, stable, and prosperous future. She highlighted the steady growth of their partnership in areas such as labour, tourism, climate action, defense, human resource development, and trade. She also expressed her hope to reflect on their shared journey and explore avenues for even closer collaboration.

Her Excellency Rasheed acknowledged Professor Haque's point that their ties predated the formal establishment of diplomatic relations in 1978, with historical records and oral traditions indicating that Maldivian seafarers and traders who had long navigated the Bay of Bengal, visiting ports in what is now Bangladesh. On the economic front, she described Bangladesh as an increasingly important trade partner for the Maldives, noting that trade had expanded over the years, with Bangladesh exporting food items, pharmaceuticals, construction materials, and textiles to the Maldives. In return, she mentioned that the Maldives primarily exported fish meal and fish products but was keen to explore further opportunities to expand these exports to Bangladesh.

While recognising the steady growth in trade High Commissioner Rasheed emphasised certain areas which have significant potential for further expansion. She pointed out that discussions about establishing a direct shipping link were seen as vital to this goal. She also highlighted how the Maldives' strategic location and tourism-driven economy generated growing demand for Bangladeshi goods, particularly in construction and hospitality, while Bangladesh's strong manufacturing base offered opportunities to diversify exports to the Maldives. Additionally, she identified investment as a promising area for collaboration, stating that the Maldives welcomed Bangladeshi investments, particularly in tourism, construction, and services. By simplifying procedures, enhancing connectivity, and fostering business-to-business partnerships, she believed both nations could unlock substantial potential for mutual prosperity. She also mentioned that there were currently seven active Bangladeshi investments in the Maldives, spanning real estate, financial services, agriculture, tourism, and retail and wholesale sectors.



According to High Commissioner Rasheed, tourism—a vital pillar of the Maldives' economy—accounts for over 30 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) and employs a significant portion of the population. In 2024, over 30,000 Bangladeshi visitors traveled to the Maldives, marking a 17.5 per cent increase from the previous year, which she attributed to the growing appeal of the Maldives and the rising Bangladeshi middle class. To sustain this trend, she emphasised efforts to enhance air connectivity between Dhaka and Male. She also mentioned that Maldivian tourism operators were eager to collaborate with Bangladeshi travel agencies to create tailored tour packages and share expertise in sustainable tourism, particularly in island-based regulations and service standards.

High Commissioner Rasheed, then, highlighted the shared climate vulnerability of the Maldives and Bangladesh. This area was detected as an opportunity for cooperation in preserving the environment and ensuring climate resilience. She pointed to Bangladesh's experience in managing ecosystems like the Sundarbans, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Site, as a valuable lesson for the Maldives' marine and coastal sustainability efforts. She suggested that exchanges on conservation,

alongside collaboration in niche sectors like coastal tourism, eco-tourism, and climate-resilient infrastructure, could foster deeper ties. She also encouraged private sector involvement, noting that joint initiatives between tourism operators, travel agencies, and hospitality businesses could drive mutual growth and market access as infrastructure improves in both nations.

The significant contribution of over 100,000 Bangladeshi migrant workers in the Maldives, who support the economy and enrich cultural exchange, was acknowledged by Her Excellency. She reaffirmed the Maldivian government's commitment to their rights and welfare, citing Operation KURANGI, an ongoing initiative to regularise and document migrant workers through biometric registration. She expressed her confidence that this would address challenges and ensure fair treatment for these workers.



She, then, highlighted Bangladesh's vital role as a partner in the Maldives' healthcare and education sectors, realising that approximately 65 Maldivian medical students were currently interning in Chittagong, gaining valuable experience to strengthen the Maldives' healthcare system. She also acknowledged Bangladesh's supply of affordable, high-quality pharmaceuticals, which bolster the Maldives' health infrastructure. She further added that Maldivian students pursue higher education in Bangladesh, particularly in medical fields, fostering a skilled workforce essential for national development. As a step ahead, she expressed a desire to expand collaboration into emerging areas such as agriculture, aquaculture, and engineering, emphasising their importance for food security, sustainable development, and climate resilience through partnerships in research, technical training, and knowledge sharing.

The deepening defense and security cooperation between the Maldives and Bangladesh, driven by a shared commitment to regional stability was addressed by Her Excellency. This collaboration includes maritime security, intelligence sharing, disaster response, and capacity building, given the Maldives' strategic location along critical Indian Ocean trade routes, which carry over 80 per cent of global commerce. She stressed the importance of ensuring freedom of navigation under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), while

addressing challenges like piracy, smuggling, illegal fishing, terrorism, and human trafficking. To counter these threats, she proposed enhanced maritime domain awareness, coast guard coordination, joint naval patrols, and a potential maritime security pact that focuses on collaborative surveillance. In counterterrorism, she highlighted shared challenges like radicalisation and cyber vulnerabilities, suggesting combined intelligence centers, extradition treaties, joint cyber resilience programmes, and bilateral training to strengthen responses to domestic and cross-border threats.

Her Excellency also emphasised opportunities for collaboration in addressing climate-induced disasters, praising Bangladesh's expertise in managing floods and cyclones as a valuable resource for the Maldives, which faces rising sea levels and severe weather. She described environmental security cooperation as an essential for both vulnerable nations. In terms of capacity building, she highlighted the training of Maldivian officers at institutions like the Bangladesh Institute of Peace Support Operation Training (BIPSOT) and National Defense College, which have enhanced their skills and preparedness. She stated by affirming both nations' commitment to neutrality, multilateralism, and a rules-based order, envisioning a comprehensive security partnership built on coordinated maritime patrols, intelligence sharing, counterterrorism initiatives, disaster risk reduction, and a shared commitment to peace in the Indian Ocean.



As remarked by the Guest Speaker, both Maldives and Bangladesh are like-minded partners in international forums, sharing values of democracy, human rights, and sustainable development through their Commonwealth membership, where they advocate for small island developing states and least developed countries. Within SAARC, Her Excellency noted their joint efforts on poverty alleviation, regional connectivity, and climate adaptation, while in IORA, their collaboration focuses on maritime security, trade facilitation, and renewable energy, with growing strategic importance in climate diplomacy. She highlighted their aligned positions and shared stance in global negotiations, such as the Conference of the Parties (COP) process under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), where both nations

jointly advocate ambitious targets and robust support mechanisms for vulnerable states. Additionally, she underscored their unity within the OIC, rooted in shared cultural and spiritual bonds, which strengthens their collective voice on global issues, particularly in their unwavering support for the Palestinian people against human rights violations and humanitarian injustices.

Looking to the future, Her Excellency outlined several strategic priorities for deepening bilateral ties. These include expanding trade and investment through improved connectivity and business partnerships, boosting tourism with more flight options and tailored travel packages, and enhancing labour cooperation through fair migration policies. She also stressed advancing educational collaboration in fields like engineering, agriculture, and aquaculture, as well as collaborating on climate resilience and adaptation, clean energy, and defence ties through maritime and disaster security initiatives. She described these efforts as essential to building a future driven by shared opportunity, mutual respect and lasting solidarity.

Reflecting on the enduring relationship between Malé and Dhaka, Her Excellency Rasheed portrayed it as a testament to friendship built on trust, mutual respect, and shared aspirations, rooted in people-to-people connections and enriched by cooperation across diverse sectors. She called for continued investment in youth, workers, knowledge exchange, and creativity, as well as stronger ties between institutions, businesses, and communities. Finally, being the High Commissioner of the Maldives to Bangladesh, she expressed her deep commitment to this journey of cooperation and common purpose, urging both nations to shape a future of progress, partnership, and peace, and to write the next chapter of their shared story together.

Open Discussion



Dr Noor Mohammad Sarker

Assistant Professor

Department of Political Science and Sociology (PSS)
North South University (NSU)

Dr Noor Mohammad Sarker applauded the presenters for their enlightening and comprehensive presentations. He highlighted his concern about the notable changes in South Asian regional politics, particularly in countries like Maldives and Bangladesh, which he observed were balancing influences from India, China, and to some extent, the US. Dr Sarker queried whether the speakers believed these shifting foreign policy dynamics could aid in reviving SAARC, emphasising the importance of revitalising the organisation to promote a collective regional perspective and enhance trade, security, and development. He further enquired if enhanced cooperation among South Asian nations, such as between Bangladesh and Maldives, could contribute to SAARC's revival.

Air Vice Marshal (Retd) Mahmud Hussain

BBP, OSP, ndc, psc, acsc, GD(P)

Distinguished Expert, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman
Aviation and Aerospace University (BSMRAAU)
and former Ambassador of Bangladesh to Brunei

Air Vice Marshal (Retd) Mahmud Hussain raised a specific concern about climate security, noting that both speakers had highlighted the vulnerability of the two countries to sea-level rise, which could jeopardise their territorial integrity. He explained that he viewed climate security as having two dimensions: a scientific component and a political one. For the scientific aspect, he suggested that Bangladesh and Maldives could collaborate closely, with their ministries and universities conducting joint research to address the climate threat to environmental security. However, he described the political component as more challenging, as it requires obtaining funds from international agencies for joint research efforts, which he believed is crucial. He pointed out that, despite several existing MoUs, none specifically focused on addressing the shared climate threat between the two countries. He asked Her Excellency whether she considered an MoU was necessary, particularly in light of South Asia's current political dynamics, and if so, how both nations might proceed to tackle this existential challenge.





Rear Admiral (Retd) A S M A Awal, ndc, psc

Former Ambassador and Assistant Chief of Naval Staff,
Bangladesh Navy.

Rear Admiral (Retd) A S M A Awal, ndc, psc, drawing on his experience as a diplomat in Maldives from 2010 to 2014, connected his observations to contemporary issues. He recalled Maldives' 1972 recognition of Bangladesh under President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, despite opposition, and the influence of Maldivian students returning from East Pakistan helping shift political opinions in Maldives.

Highlighting the presence of Bangladeshi workers and professionals in Maldives, Rear Admiral Awal noted challenges rising from a deeply entrenched syndicate spanning Maldives and Bangladesh, which complicated labour migration from Bangladesh to Maldives. He also shared his unsuccessful efforts to certify work permits through the Bangladesh High Commission, despite presidential interventions, due to bureaucratic resistance and syndicate influence. Regarding other areas of cooperation, Rear Admiral Awal considered a direct shipping link unfeasible due to modern shipping's reliance on hub ports like Colombo, where syndicate delays had previously undermined a potato export initiative from Bangladesh despite competitive price. He, therefore, suggested focusing on hub-based shipping rather than pursuing a direct link. Finally, Rear Admiral Awal proposed collaboration in deep-sea fishing, agriculture, counter-terrorism and addressing radicalisation (praising Maldives' approach). He also touched on geopolitics, given Maldives' strategic location, urging innovative approaches to strengthen bilateral ties.

Ambassador M Shameem Ahsan

Former Representative of Bangladesh
to the United Nations Office in Geneva

Ambassador M Shameem Ahsan remarked on the appeal of travelling from Dhaka to Malé, and acknowledged the High Commissioner's observation about growing Bangladeshi tourism to Maldives. Reflecting on the detailed remarks of former speakers, he emphasised the historical bond between the two nations, described as distant neighbours with shared perspectives, but noted the challenge of translating this connection into tangible outcomes due to their geographical separation. He pointed out a recurring issue of unimplemented commitments despite frequent consultations, urging the Chairman and Director General of BIISS to review past discussions to track progress and address unfinished business.



Recalling his experiences working with Maldivian diplomats, Ambassador Ahsan suggested that ambassadors and high commissioners should regularly follow up on collaborative efforts between the two countries, a practice he believed was somewhat in place but needed reinforcement. On direct shipping, he referenced a November event where Bangladesh's exports were rerouted through Maldives, expressing concerns whether progress had been made, especially given recent decisions making, this issue is critical. He praised Maldives' digitisation efforts, particularly their global ranking of 30 in internet speed. He proposed collaboration in digitising tourism in Bangladesh, such as through online booking and cashless payments to enhance customer satisfaction, alongside joint ecotourism initiatives mentioned by the Guest Speaker. He also suggested mutual training of diplomats at each other's foreign service academies and highlighted the importance of learning from Maldives' expertise in conservation and environmental protection, an area where Bangladesh lagged but has room to improve further. In his conclusion, Ambassador Ahsan expressed hope for enhanced mutual cooperation in the future.



Dr Lailufar Yasmin

Professor

Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka

Dr Lailufar Yasmin acknowledged the numerous areas identified for cooperation between Bangladesh and Maldives. She highlighted two specific issues for discussion. The growing strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific region, particularly with the US focusing on it as an area of competition, Dr Yasmin asked how Bangladesh and Maldives could align their maritime interests and strengthen cooperation to address the strategic dynamics of the Indo-Pacific. She mentioned Bangladesh's recent full membership in the Colombo Security Conclave since July and inquired about the ways Bangladesh could contribute to enhancing the Conclave's efforts in tackling regional maritime threats, such as counter-terrorism, disaster management, and maritime security. She also requested Her Excellency's perspective on how the Colombo Security Conclave might work together with regional bodies such as Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) to tackle maritime challenges in the region.

Fatema-Tuj-Juhra

Assistant Professor

Department of International Relations
Bangladesh University of Professionals (BUP)

Focusing on the potential for educational collaboration and exchange between Bangladesh and Maldives, **Ms Fatema-Tuj-Juhra** pointed out that approximately 100 to 150 Maldivian students were studying in Bangladesh. She queried whether there were plans to expand this exchange, such as attracting more Maldivian students or enabling Bangladeshi students specializing in fisheries, marine biodiversity, or the blue economy to study in Maldives to gain practical insights. She also mentioned Bangladesh's Saint Martin's Island, which she felt was not currently at its best, and asked if Bangladesh could learn from Maldives' expertise in tourism management to revive this island. Additionally, she highlighted Bangladesh's strengths in maritime fisheries and related fields, asking whether any concrete joint projects or collaborations were underway, as she had mostly encountered recommendations rather than evidence of active initiatives.



Mr Salahud Din Ahmed

Former Member, Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission (BERC)



Salahud Din Ahmed expressed his gratitude at Her Excellency's remarks about Maldives' efforts to protect the rights and ensure the welfare of poor workers. He noted that migrant workers, particularly those in abroad, were often unfairly treated, disrespected, and faced even harsher conditions in their home countries, where they were frequently maltreated. He suggested that good people should instead unite for positive, compassionate missions to treat such workers with kindness and fairness across all countries, not just in Maldives. He highlighted Maldives as a potential example for others, including Bangladesh, to learn from in fostering decency and kindness, framing his comment as a challenge to those not upholding such values.

Responses from the Guest Speaker



Her Excellency High Commissioner Shiuneen Rasheed *High Commissioner of the Republic of Maldives to People's Republic of Bangladesh*

In response to questions and queries, Her Excellency **High Commissioner Shiuneen Rasheed** began her deliberation by addressing the question on the revival of SAARC in light of changing geopolitics in the region. She expressed her personal view that there was not much connection between bilateral relations and SAARC revival, noting that both Bangladesh and Maldives have been maintaining good relations as founding members committed to SAARC principles. She emphasised that both countries believe SAARC is integral to regional peace, safety, and integration, but clarified that the two nations alone could not accomplish much since all eight SAARC members needed to be equally committed to revival. The Honourable Ambassador also acknowledged that while SAARC remained politically stagnant at present, significant technical work continued on the platform, and both countries remained ready to collaborate for its revival.

Regarding climate security, Honourable Ambassador Rasheed agreed with the observation that Bangladesh and Maldives engaged on numerous climate-related issues in international forums, including efforts at COP meetings to address financing gaps. However, she acknowledged that at the local political level, progress was lagging. She suggested exploring potential MoUs or other collaborative initiatives to address climate security challenges together.

On the issue of migrant workers that several speakers had highlighted, the Guest Speaker provided an update on the current situation. She explained that the present Maldivian government is committed to addressing migrant worker issues, noting that while the Maldives population was approximately 500,000 people, the migrant worker population is substantial, with over 100,000 Bangladeshi workers and professionals contributing significantly to the country's socioeconomic development. She confirmed that a large number remained undocumented, for which the government had initiated a regularisation process involving biometrics collection and documentation of migrant workers from all countries in the Maldives, and it is set to conclude by April 30th. This process, she explained, would provide accurate data on worker numbers and their employment sectors, enabling better protection of workers' rights and ensuring fair wages by compelling employers to meet their obligations. She emphasised that successive governments had attempted to address this major issue, and the current initiative would help achieve better outcomes.



High Commissioner Rasheed also addressed shipping linkages, mentioning that since July of 2024, some Maldivian companies had begun exploring the potential of routing Bangladeshi products via Maldives to Europe and other countries. She explained that arrangements had been established with several airlines including Emirates, Turkish Airlines, and Qatar Airways for shipment, with some products being re-routed via Sri Lanka to the Maldives. While acknowledging the current limited scale due to the absence of direct shipping links, she expressed optimism about the potential for growth in this area.

In response to comments about training for diplomats, the Guest Speaker mentioned that a Maldivian diplomat is currently at the Foreign Service Academy in Bangladesh. She noted that the Maldives had a small, nascent foreign service institute that is working to build capacity through partnerships.

Regarding Indo-Pacific dynamics, High Commissioner Rasheed stated that she did not believe the bilateral relationship between Maldives and Bangladesh is defined by relations with other

countries, citing their unique connection that would not be significantly impacted by evolving regional dynamics.

Regarding the Colombo Security Conclave, she expressed satisfaction that Bangladesh had become a member, describing it as an excellent platform for countries to coordinate positions on security-related issues, particularly those affecting the Indian Ocean region such as human trafficking, illicit drug trafficking, and smuggling.

Addressing educational collaboration, the High Commissioner noted that numerous Maldivian students were in Bangladesh, primarily for medical internships. She reported that the number of students had decreased from over 100 last year to around 65 currently, with expectations of more students arriving to complete internships. She mentioned that many Maldivian students were pursuing MBBS degrees and specialisations in Bangladesh. The Guest Speaker also expressed interest in reciprocal contributions, offering training opportunities in the tourism industry and sharing expertise in areas such as deep-sea fishing, while acknowledging Bangladesh's expertise in freshwater fish farming and aquaculture, suggesting potential for research collaboration in these sectors.

Responses from the Presenter



Md Obaidul Haque

Associate Professor, Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka

In response to the queries from the open discussion, **Md Obaidul Haque** initially addressed the questions regarding SAARC and the international relations strategies that states like Maldives and Bangladesh should adopt. He briefly commented that multilateralism represented an aspect of foreign policy that had been underutilised for a long time, suggesting it could be an alternative approach to balancing influences and pressures. Regarding SAARC, Mr Haque concurred with the High Commissioner that the two countries alone might not be able to accomplish much, but contended that current circumstances were particularly conducive to initiating discussions among member states about reviving the organisation.

On climate change cooperation, Mr Haque highlighted a significant information gap regarding ongoing climate research at universities in both countries and suggested collaboration between universities in Bangladesh and Maldives to facilitate meaningful partnerships in climate change research.

Addressing the comments about the lack of follow-through after diplomatic visits, Mr Haque agreed that there is often insufficient follow-up to initiatives started by public offices. He observed that despite the extensive list of potential areas for collaboration between Maldives and Bangladesh across numerous sectors (as mentioned by both the High Commissioner and in his own presentation), limited progress had been made, likely due to insufficient business interest from the private sector.

Mr Haque identified a critical gap in feasibility studies and information. He suggested that think tanks like BIISS could initiate feasibility studies in each specific area of potential cooperation to determine benefits and opportunities. He stressed that private sector involvement is crucial for successful public-level engagements, citing the example of digitising tourism. He pointed to possible knowledge gaps, lack of awareness, or uncertainty about potential benefits as barriers to joint ventures and cooperation in various fields.

Regarding educational collaboration potential, Mr Haque highlighted the importance of specialised education and the need for better marketing and promotion in this area, concluding that joint collaboration in this area was certainly possible.

Speech by the Special Guest



Dr Neyamat Ullah Bhuiyan

Senior Secretary, Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment

Dr Neyamat Ullah Bhuiyan reflected on the warm diplomatic relationship between Bangladesh and the Maldives since 1978, noting its expansion across trade, education, healthcare, human resource development, and employment of Bangladeshi workers. He acknowledged that, at a first glance, the two nations might seem vastly different—Bangladesh as a bustling deltaic powerhouse with over 170 million people, and the Maldives as a stunning island nation known for its pristine beaches and thriving blue economy. Yet, he emphasised that beneath these differences lies a deeper truth: both nations share common aspirations, face similar challenges, and are bound by an unbreakable spirit of regional solidarity. He noted that water has shaped their histories, with the mighty rivers of Bengal and the Maldives' coral reefs—the seventh largest in the world—defining their landscapes and livelihoods. He stressed that, beyond geography and history, their shared vision for a future built on peace, prosperity, and sustainable development that truly unites them. He described their friendship as more than just diplomacy, emphasising that it is about touching lives, uplifting communities, and shaping a collective future. He posed the question of how to elevate this partnership to new heights, proposing five strategic areas where collaboration could be transformative: promoting the welfare and empowerment of migrant workers; expanding trade and economic ties; strengthening tourism and cultural diplomacy; combating climate change together; and enhancing maritime security and regional stability. He expressed his belief that strengthening

cooperation in these areas could pave the way for a stronger, more resilient and prosperous future for both nations.

Turning to the welfare and empowerment of migrant workers, Dr Bhuiyan called it a crucial aspect of their bilateral cooperation and a shared responsibility at the heart of people-to-people ties. He traced the history of human resource cooperation, which began in the 1980s with informal labour migration to support the Maldives' expanding tourism and construction sectors. By the mid-2000s, he noted, Bangladesh had become one of the top labour-sending countries, with over 30,000 workers, both documented and undocumented, contributing to the Maldives' economy. He highlighted the enactment of the Maldives Employment Act in 2008 and a regularisation programme in 2012 as key efforts to address irregular migration and improve worker protections. By 2015, he informed, the Bangladeshi workforce had grown to an estimated 70,000, prompting a formal bilateral labour agreement. During the COVID-19 pandemic, he added, over 5,000 Bangladeshi workers were repatriated through coordinated humanitarian efforts. He announced that, as of today, the number of Bangladeshi workers in the Maldives has reached 100,221, marking an encouraging milestone.



Dr Bhuiyan outlined how Bangladesh and the Maldives have strengthened their bilateral ties through several key MOUs. In February 2021, he added, an MOU on labour cooperation was signed, addressing worker recruitment and regularisation. During President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih's state visit to Dhaka in March 2021, he noted, additional MOUs were signed, including one establishing a joint commission on comprehensive cooperation. In December 2021, he mentioned MOUs focused on healthcare workforce recruitment and renewing medical cooperation, deepening sectoral engagement were signed. He expressed that these developments present a promising opportunity to further enrich and strengthen bilateral ties for mutual benefit.

While acknowledging that the human resource partnership has become a cornerstone of their bilateral relationship, he pointed out several persistent challenges that limit its full potential, affecting not only worker well-being but also labour mobility and cooperation between the two nations. He stressed that addressing these challenges is essential for building a more transparent, humane, and productive labour framework. He identified that a significant portion of Bangladeshi nationals working in the Maldives remain undocumented, with estimates suggesting they make up nearly half of the total Bangladeshi population there. He explained that these workers often enter through informal channels, making them vulnerable to labour exploitation, deportation risks, and exclusion from legal and social protections, while their undocumented status complicates workforce planning and bilateral coordination.



Dr Bhuiyan further noted that many Bangladeshi workers are recruited through informal networks and unlicensed agents, leading to fraudulent contracts, excessive migration fees, and, in some cases, labour exploitation. He stated that the lack of oversight in the recruitment process undermines efforts to promote ethical labour mobility and creates reputational risks for both countries. Although demand for labour in sectors like hospitality, healthcare, and construction is rising in the Maldives, he observed that many Bangladeshi workers lack industry-specific training and language proficiency in English or Dhivehi, which reduces productivity, limits upward mobility, and restricts opportunities to transition into higher-skilled roles. Additionally, he highlighted that many Bangladeshi workers, especially those in remote islands or with undocumented status, have limited awareness of their rights and access to legal aid or consular services, leaving them vulnerable to abuse, workplace accidents, and legal disputes, thus weakening their safety.

To unlock the full potential of human resource cooperation, the Senior Secretary urged both countries to shift from reactive management to proactive, structured engagement, prioritising

ethical recruitment, skills alignment, and worker welfare as shared responsibilities. He asserted that strengthening this partnership would benefit both economies and enhance regional labour governance and South-South cooperation. He proposed that the foundation of a modern labour partnership lies in a formal government agreement clearly outlining recruitment protocols, worker rights, dispute resolution mechanisms, and the responsibilities of both sending and receiving countries. He suggested that such an MOU would institutionalise cooperation, reduce irregular migration, and pave the way for long-term workforce planning based on mutual needs.

Through his experiences and observations, Dr Bhuiyan recommended that both governments collaborate to regulate recruitment agencies, introduce digital labour migration systems, and enforce zero-tolerance policies for exploitative practices. He suggested that Bangladesh could strengthen pre-departure orientation and licensing of businesses, while the Maldives could implement a centralised approval system for foreign worker permits to ensure accountability at every stage. He also proposed tailoring Bangladeshi technical and vocational education and training programmes to match the Maldives' demand for skilled workers in sectors like hospitality, healthcare, electrical work, and IT, with joint skill certification, language training, and recognition of qualifications to enhance employability and professional mobility. He advocated for establishing a dedicated joint working group on labour issues to oversee the enforcement of labour rights and coordinate worker welfare initiatives, with increased cooperation between consular offices and local authorities to monitor workplaces and support vulnerable workers, including those in remote areas. He further emphasised leveraging digital platforms, such as a shared digital database for workers, integrated visa and permit systems, and mobile-based tools, to enhance transparency, coordination, and service delivery, reduce fraud, and support real-time monitoring of worker conditions.

In his concluding remarks, the Senior Secretary expressed the importance of redefining the Bangladesh-Maldives partnership as one that extends well beyond labour migrations. He highlighted that both nations face similar vulnerabilities and share common aspirations—particularly their exposure to climate change. He pointed out that climate change affects both their deltas and it has been one of the key concerns between the two countries. Besides, regional stability and maritime security are other challenges, but the potential of the blue economy offers exciting opportunities for cooperation. He stressed that the welfare of their people, especially migrant workers, must remain at the heart of broader collaboration, since investing in their well-being is an investment on the future of their partnership. He described the journey from Malé to Dhaka as not merely a geographical route but a pathway to shared prosperity founded on dignity, justice, and mutual respect. He called for governments, businesses, civil society, and the people who form the backbone of this relationship to walk this path together. He stated that honouring expatriate communities reflects a deep respect for their shared values. By protecting their rights, both countries safeguard the spirit of their partnership and unlock the potential that can shape a brighter and inclusive future.

Concluding Remarks



Ambassador Gousal Azam Sarker
Chairman, BIISS

Ambassador A F M Gousal Azam Sarker started his remarks by thanking all the guests, participants, and the guest speaker for their participation and deliberation. He mentioned that a comprehensive discussion and deliberation have taken place, which has enlightened everyone on the areas of cooperation between Bangladesh and the Maldives. Sectors like trade and investment, connectivity, logistics, infrastructure, tourism, services sectors, blue economy, climate change, education, and cultural cooperation through the soft infrastructure development, institutional cooperation, and people-to-people connection and cooperation, and conducting joint studies will pave the way forward. Signing of MoUs, agreements, and forming a joint commission to discuss and start consultations regularly will allow policy alignment and implementation. Thus, governments can work together in different regional and international forums like climate vulnerable fund (CVF), IORA, UN, etc., for multinational initiatives.

Active participation of the private sector, the institution's build-up, and the people-to-people cooperation of the two countries can play an important role in accelerating support and shaping effective cooperation frameworks to advance bilateral engagement. He observed that such efforts will not only be driven by both countries but also supported by regional mechanisms, international organisations, and multilateral forums. He emphasised the importance of political will and support of different relevant stakeholders both in and out of the governments of the two countries—in driving the shared agenda of cooperation and partnership forward. In conclusion, the Chairman expressed his sincere appreciation to the colleagues at BIISS for organising the event, commending their excellent arrangements and efforts in ensuring its success.

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