



Proceedings

17th Edition of Country Lecture Series (CLS) 2024



Bangladesh-Malaysia Relations: Moving towards Prosperity

Sunday, 15 September 2024

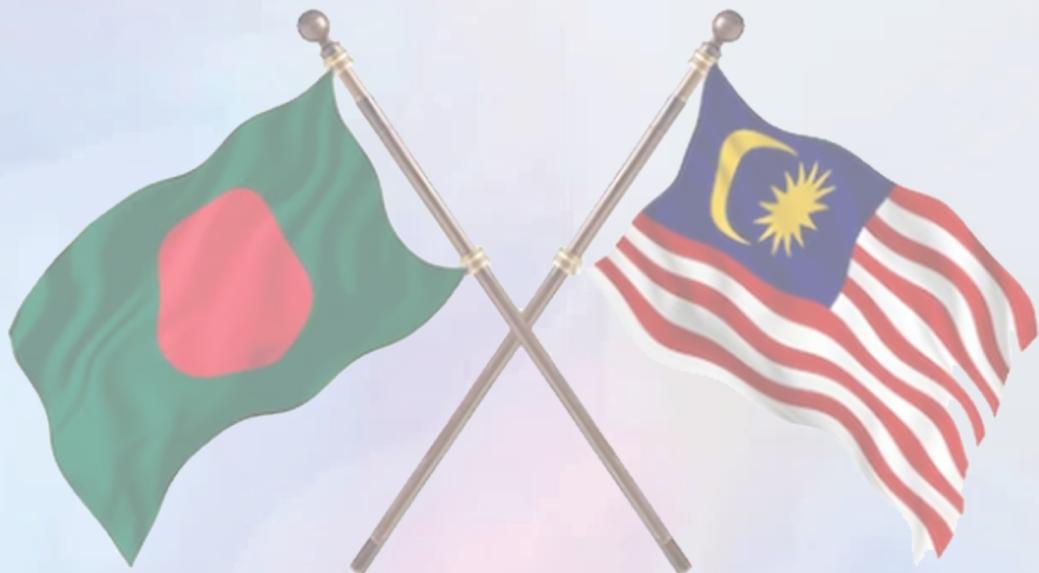
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PROCEEDINGS

17th Edition of Country Lecture Series (CLS) 2024 on Bangladesh-Malaysia Relations: Moving towards Prosperity

Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS) organised a Lecture under its Country Lecture Series (CLS) 2024, titled “**Bangladesh-Malaysia Relations: Moving towards Prosperity**” on Sunday, 15 September 2024 at BIISS auditorium. **Ambassador M Riaz Hamidullah**, Additional Foreign Secretary, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bangladesh graced the event as Special Guest. **H E Haznah Md Hashim**, High Commissioner of Malaysia to Bangladesh delivered the keynote presentation. **Ambassador A F M Gousal Azam Sarker**, Chairman, BIISS chaired the session and **Major General Iftekhar Anis, BSP, awc, afdc, psc, PEng**, Director General, BIISS, delivered the welcome address. Following that, an open discussion session was held to gather insights from the audience as to how Bangladesh-Malaysia relations can be strengthened further in the coming days. As a flagship event, BIISS introduced the CLS in 2013. The objectives of this lecture series have been to enhance knowledge and understanding of Bangladesh regarding the partner countries as well as to study the relationship between Bangladesh and a particular development partner country to explore further the scope and potential of the bilateral relationship. This is the maiden session of the BIISS Country Lecture Series in 2024 after an interruption due to Covid-19.

Senior officials from different ministries, ambassadors, high commissioners, former diplomats, senior military officials, media, researchers, businesspeople, teachers and students from various universities, and representatives from different think tanks and international organisations participated in the CLS and enriched it by presenting their valuable opinions, comments, suggestions, and observations during the open discussion session.

Welcome Address



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

Major General Iftekhar Anis, BSP, awc, afwc, psc, PEng, Director General, BIISS, welcomed all the participants and expressed his gratitude to the Special Guest, Ambassador M Riaz Hamidullah and the Guest Speaker, H E Haznah Md Hashim, High Commissioner of Malaysia to Bangladesh for their gracious presence at the BIISS CLS 2024. He noted that as a flagship event, the BIISS Country Lecture Series introduced in 2013, aims to enhance knowledge and understanding regarding the partner countries by studying the bilateral relationship and exploring further the scope and potential of the bilateral cooperation. After a long hiatus due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this session marked the first edition of the 2024 series.

The Director General highlighted that Bangladesh has earned international recognition for its moderate religious and cultural ethos, social tolerance and ethnic cohesion that characterises the country as a liberal and tolerant Muslim-majority country. Malaysia was one of the first

Muslim-majority country to recognise Bangladesh after the glorious War of Liberation. Since then, the two countries have seen a rapid growth of cooperation between them. Being co-members of Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), Commonwealth, D-8 and ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and as strong proponents of multilateralism, Bangladesh and Malaysia share a common understanding on major regional and international issues. Bangladesh and Malaysia enjoy good bilateral relations based on the foundation of faith, history and culture. Furthermore, he said that, over the years, the relations between the two friendly countries have grown in depth and diversity. The state of good relations is reflected in the fast-growing bilateral cooperation spanning across a broad range of sectors, including economic and technical assistance, trade and investment, employment of Bangladeshi workforce in Malaysia, defence cooperation, education exchange, tourism, culture and sport, technology-transfer and human resource development. The two countries have been working closely in the international arena to promote peace, stability and growth.



Major General Iftekhar highlighted that Malaysia is Bangladesh's largest investment partner from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) region whereas Bangladesh is Malaysia's second-largest trading partner in South Asia, after India. Despite the challenges posed by the pandemic, bilateral trade reached approximately US\$ 2.6 billion in 2019, demonstrating resilience and growth. He pointed out that while agricultural products and leather goods make up the bulk of Bangladesh's exports to Malaysia, there is significant potential to diversify and expand exports further.

He noted that Bangladesh has the highest export volume to Malaysia among ASEAN countries, with imports from Malaysia standing at US\$ 3.46 billion in FY 2022-23, making Malaysia Bangladesh's third-largest import partner after China and India. Additionally, Bangladesh saw a positive trend in remittances from Malaysia during FY 2023-24, especially as Malaysia resumed recruiting workers from Bangladesh after a four-year pause.

While the trade relationship is growing, the Director General expressed concern over the widening trade deficit, which he attributed to low Bangladeshi exports in the Malaysian market. He explained that tariff barriers have been a key obstacle, despite efforts by Malaysia to grant duty-free access to certain Bangladeshi products since 2011. He also highlighted the challenges posed by uneven market competition, as many of Bangladesh's export competitors enjoy preferential treatment under bilateral and multilateral free trade agreements (FTAs) such as the ASEAN-China Framework Agreement and the Malaysia-India Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (MICECA). Non-tariff barriers, logistical inefficiencies, supply chain weaknesses and a fragile production structure have further exacerbated the trade imbalances.



In conclusion, the Director General hoped that the seminar would foster meaningful dialogue, collaboration and knowledge-sharing on Bangladesh-Malaysia relations. He encouraged participants to engage in discussions and share ideas that could contribute to the formulation of specific policies aimed at enhancing bilateral cooperation between the two nations. He thanked the distinguished speaker, participants, and audience for their contributions, expressing his hope for fruitful deliberations and a prosperous future for Bangladesh-Malaysia relations.

Keynote Presentation



Her Excellency Haznah Md Hashim

High Commissioner, High Commission of Malaysia to the People's Republic of Bangladesh

H E Haznah Md Hashim, High Commissioner of Malaysia to Bangladesh expressed her sincere gratitude to BIISS for inviting her at the maiden Country Lecture Series of 2024 to deliver a talk on Malaysia-Bangladesh relations and their trajectory toward prosperity.

With a view to analysing the dynamics of the relationship between Bangladesh and Malaysia, she started by discussing Malaysia's foreign policy, development policy, and trade policies. Since independence, Malaysia underwent several changes in government and political administration. Despite these changes, Malaysia has maintained a pragmatic foreign policy based on principles of peace, humanity, justice, and equality. The core focus of Malaysia's foreign policy is to safeguard national sovereignty and interests while contributing to a just and equitable international community through effective diplomacy.

The High Commissioner explained that Malaysia's foreign policy is shaped by three key factors: its strategic location in Southeast Asia, its identity as a trading nation, and its unique demographic composition. Although the foreign policy approaches have evolved in response to changing domestic and external circumstances, the foundational principles established at independence have remained constant. Credibility, consistency, and coherence have guided Malaysia's policy-making to serve its best interests.

Her Excellency noted that the establishment of ASEAN in 1967 has been the cornerstone of Malaysia's foreign policy, significantly enhancing the country's engagement at the regional level. Strengthening both bilateral and multilateral relationships will continue to be a vital focus, as the nation's well-being is intertwined with fostering strong and friendly relations with other countries by upholding commitments to the multilateral system.

Under the current leadership of Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, Malaysia is promoting a forward-looking and pragmatic foreign policy aimed at facilitating trade, attracting foreign investment, and projecting itself as a stable and peaceful country. Malaysia is an active member of the United Nations (UN), fully committed to multilateralism in advancing global peace, security, and prosperity. Malaysia has participated in numerous peacekeeping operations and engages in international discussions to address various global issues.

The High Commissioner stressed that Malaysia believes in engagement and cooperation rather than isolation and unilateral action. She pointed out that sustainable growth is achievable with shared prosperity. Malaysia has shared technical cooperation with other developing countries, including Bangladesh, through various mechanisms including but not limited to the Malaysian Technical Cooperation Program and bilateral humanitarian assistance.

Highlighting the importance of solidarity among Muslim-majority nations, Her Excellency noted the significance of the OIC in Malaysia's foreign policy. Furthermore, she indicated that as a developing nation, Malaysia values its membership in the NAM and other regional organisations, such as the Commonwealth, G77, D-8, and the Asia Middle East Dialogue (AMED). Through these organisations, Malaysia advocates for South-South Cooperation and emphasises the proximity neighbour policy to enhance economic relations with neighbouring countries, including Brunei, Indonesia, and the Philippines, as well as the ASEAN Growth Area, Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), and the Indonesia-Malaysia- Thailand Growth Triangle (IMTGT).

Addressing the complexities of global affairs and expanding international relations, the High Commissioner reiterated that Malaysia's actions would continue to be guided by respect for independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-interference in other nations' matters. She stressed the importance of peaceful dispute resolution and mutual benefits in international relations.

Regarding Malaysia's development policy, H E Haznah Md Hashim remarked that being an upper-middle-income country, Malaysia tries to overcome the middle-income trap and develop policies that align with its aspirations to become a high-income nation. Over the years, the country has made significant progress in nation-building, economic development, and improving the quality of life for its citizens, with an average GDP growth of 6.5 per cent per

annum since independence. In 2023, Malaysia recorded a 3.7 per cent growth in foreign direct investment (FDI), amounting to nearly US\$ 40 billion.

The High Commissioner highlighted that Malaysia's development is guided by the vision and efforts of its leaders, as enshrined in the constitution. She provided an overview of Malaysia's long-term development plans, including the New Economic Policy (1971-1990), the National Development Policy (1991-2000), the National Vision Policy (2001-2010) and the New Economic Model (2011-2020). She emphasised that the latest framework, the Shared Prosperity Vision 2030, aims to ensure equitable economic development across all levels of society and reflects Malaysia's commitment to implementing the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. As per the visions of the current Prime Minister, the concept of 'modernising Malaysia' focuses on building a sustainable, caring, respectful, innovative and prosperous Malaysia. She added that an economic modernisation framework has been established to address historical challenges and foster new areas of sustainable growth.

Shifting the focus to trade, H E Haznah Md Hashim indicated that Malaysia operates as an open trading economy within a competitive global marketplace. She acknowledged that advancements in information and communication technology (ICT) have transformed transaction speeds and the nature of economic growth, making it increasingly a knowledge-based economy. The opening of markets in China and India has dramatically altered the economic landscape for both developed and developing countries. As an open economy, Malaysia continues to advocate for trade liberalisation, seeking improved market access for its goods and services while attracting foreign direct investments to sustain economic growth. She reiterated that international trade is crucial to Malaysia's economic development. While supporting open global trading, Malaysia insists that it must be fair, particularly for developing nations. She assured that Malaysia would remain actively involved in World Trade Organization (WTO) negotiations to ensure fair trade regulations.

Her Excellency continued, while maintaining a focus on a rules-based multilateral trading system, Malaysia views regional and bilateral trading arrangements as complementary to this approach. The country has successfully concluded multiple free trade agreements (FTAs), beginning with Japan in 2006, followed by New Zealand, India, Chile, Australia, and Turkey. In addition, Malaysia has implemented nine regional FTAs since 1993, covering agreements with ASEAN countries and two significant FTAs: the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) in 2022. Trade with countries in 2022, covered by these agreements constituted over 67 per cent of Malaysia's total trade, valued at nearly 2 trillion Ringgit. Regarding recent investments in global artificial intelligence, she highlighted that major companies like Google, Microsoft and International Business Machines Corporation (IBM) have invested substantial amounts in Malaysia. The diverse Malaysian economy has shown impressive export values, particularly in high-tech products, which reached around US\$ 66 billion in 2022.

At this point, the High Commissioner discussed Bangladesh-Malaysia relations and recounted the historical significance of the diplomatic relations established on 31 January, 1972. Malaysia was the first Muslim-majority country to recognise independent Bangladesh. Over the past 52 years, Malaysia and Bangladesh have cultivated warm relations across various sectors, including

trade, defence, education, culture, tourism and technical assistance. High-level visits between the two countries have further solidified the cooperation, including the first visit by a Malaysian head of state in December 1974. Since then, numerous high-level exchanges have occurred, enhancing collaboration in various sectors. The High Commissioner emphasised that the relationship extends beyond government-to-government interactions, highlighting flourishing trade between Bangladesh and Malaysia. During January to April 2024, trade between the two nations reached US\$ 1 billion, marking a 16 per cent increase from the same period in 2023, with Bangladesh's trade also growing by 25 per cent. Despite differing trade values in exports and imports, Her Excellency expressed optimism that these differences could be addressed through a potential free trade agreement, emphasising key trading goods including but not limited to ready-made garments, plastic articles, machinery, petroleum, and palm oil.

About the Rohingya crisis, the High Commissioner assured that Malaysia remains one of the strongest supporters of Bangladesh, actively advocating for their rights in various multilateral forums, particularly at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). Malaysia has consistently participated in leading meetings and issued official statements addressing the plight of the Rohingyas, calling for international action. In addition to diplomatic efforts, Malaysia has rendered humanitarian aid since the beginning of the Rohingya crisis. As early as 2017, Malaysia dispatched multiple relief missions to Bangladesh, delivering food and essential items to the refugees. She highlighted Malaysia's efforts to further strengthen this support by establishing a field hospital in Cox's Bazar in 2017, which was operational until March 2021. This initiative, known as the Malaysian Field Hospital, treated over 108,000 patients and gained recognition from organisations such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and other nations. Malaysia takes pride in being the first country to set up a field hospital to assist the Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals (FDMNs) and continues to stand by them. About recent developments, she added that the Prime Minister of Malaysia had reaffirmed the country's commitment to ending the violence and political marginalisation in Myanmar. Malaysia remains engaged with other ASEAN member states to push for peace and effective humanitarian mechanisms in Myanmar, alongside efforts to politically engage all relevant stakeholders.

The High Commissioner also touched upon another key foreign policy issue for Malaysia—its unwavering support for the Palestinian cause. Malaysia continues to advocate for Palestinian statehood, calling for an end to the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories. Both the Malaysian government and its people have long supported the Palestinian struggle, providing humanitarian aid during crises and opening hospitals to treat critically injured Palestinians. Malaysia's higher education institutions have also offered support, including waiving tuition fees for Palestinian students affected by the ongoing conflict. These efforts reflect Malaysia's broader foreign policy principles of justice and self-determination for oppressed peoples.

In a reflection on the bilateral relations between Bangladesh and Malaysia, the High Commissioner expressed her sincere appreciation for the contributions made by Bangladeshi workers to the prosperity of Malaysia. She highlighted the remittances sent to home by Bangladeshi workers, which amounted to US\$ 251 million in August 2024 alone, contributing to Bangladesh's economic growth. However, she also noted that the relationship between the two countries extends beyond human resources, with significant investments made by subsidiaries

of Malaysian Government-linked Companies (GLCs) in Bangladesh. These investments have been pivotal in fostering bilateral relations and shared prosperity between the two nations. Malaysian GLCs, including Robi Axiata, have invested over US\$ 5 billion in Bangladesh, creating tens of thousands of jobs and contributing to Bangladesh's telecommunication sector. She also called for reforms in Bangladesh's business environment to attract more foreign investment and encourage further collaboration between the two countries.

Finally, Her Excellency expressed hope that a free trade agreement between Bangladesh and Malaysia could be realised soon, enhancing economic cooperation and mutual prosperity. Additionally, she introduced Malaysia's recent initiative to offer its second national car, Perodua, to the Bangladesh market, symbolising the deepening economic ties between the two countries. The High Commissioner invited Bangladeshis to explore Malaysia's medical tourism sector, emphasising the high-quality yet affordable healthcare services available in Malaysia. Medical tourism, she noted, would further strengthen people-to-people contact and enhance bilateral relations. She reaffirmed that Malaysia's foreign policy and trade policies are aimed at fostering shared prosperity between the two nations. As her tenure in Bangladesh drew to a close, she took the opportunity to express her gratitude for the support and friendship she had experienced during her four years in Dhaka. The High Commissioner underscored that the relationship between Malaysia and Bangladesh is stronger than ever and will continue to grow in the years to come.

Open Discussion Session



Ambassador Shamsher Mubin Chowdhury Bir Bikrom

Former Foreign Secretary, Government of Bangladesh

Ambassador Shamsher Mubin Chowdhury raised critical trade issues during his remarks. He mentioned that supply chain instability deserves further exploration.

He questioned why Bangladesh faced such instability in its supply chains and suggested that while a trade imbalance was understandable, deeper insights are required to resolve it. Ambassador Chowdhury pondered whether Bangladesh should pursue a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) rather than an FTA with Malaysia. He noted a potential obstacle on Bangladesh's part in entering into FTAs, speculating that this could be difficult to manage

due to both lack of experience or knowledge. He also pointed out that while Vietnam had successfully signed 16 FTAs, Bangladesh appeared to be lagging.

Ambassador Chowdhury then mentioned about his experience as an Institut Tadbiran Awam Negara (INTAN) alumnus. He highlighted the excellence of INTAN as a human resource development institution and inquired whether Malaysia would be willing to extend scholarships for Bangladesh's civil servants and public administrators to attend. Ambassador Chowdhury believed that such opportunities could significantly benefit Bangladesh's public administration.



Lt Col (Retd) Md Shahadat Hossain, psc, MBA, MDS

Lt Col (Retd) Md Shahadat Hossain mentioned that Malaysia's historical relationship with Bangladesh was rich, extending even before the country's independence. He suggested that any partnership between Bangladesh and Malaysia should be a win-win situation for both nations. He also highlighted that Bangladesh and Malaysia could collaborate on infrastructure projects like it has with China. Additionally, he saw great potential in boosting tourism between Bangladesh and Malaysia. He noted that only a handful Malaysians currently visit Bangladesh, primarily due to a lack of adequate facilities. He pointed out ways to improve people-to-people contact to encourage more travel between the two nations. Lastly, Lt Col Hossain proposed the

idea of establishing Malaysia-Bangladesh Friendship Complexes in Dhaka and Kuala Lumpur. He envisioned these hubs as spaces that could facilitate business exchanges and strengthen cultural and trade ties between the two countries.



Salahud Din Ahmed

Former Member, Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission

Salahud Din Ahmed recalled that Malaysia had been one of the first nations to recognise Bangladesh after its independence, a gesture the country would never forget. He also expressed appreciation for Malaysia's support in addressing the Rohingya crisis. He emphasised that Malaysia's support had been invaluable in addressing this humanitarian issue.

Turning to the topic of bilateral trade, Mr Ahmed argued that trade between these two nations should be free from hegemonic attitudes, sustaining with mutual respect and equality at the forefront of any partnership. He also expressed particular interest in the prospects of medical tourism in Malaysia. He encouraged the relevant authorities to take steps to make medical tourism a reality, as it could bring significant benefits to citizens of both countries.

Responses from the High Commissioner



In response to the questions and comments during the open discussion session, the Malaysian High Commissioner offered insights into trade agreements and regional cooperation. Addressing the issue of FTAs and their impact on bilateral relations, **H E Haznah Md Hashim** explained that Malaysia's standard practice, upon finalising an FTA with any country, is to appoint a dedicated trade officer to its mission in the capital of that nation. Currently, such an arrangement is lacking in Dhaka, but the High Commissioner assured that once an FTA is formalised between the two countries, this gap would be addressed. She mentioned that although trade remains a top priority for Malaysia, the absence of a dedicated trade officer means that relevant matters are managed remotely from India. The High Commissioner expressed confidence that the appointment of a

trade officer would serve as a crucial factor in enhancing bilateral relations. She emphasised that having an officer stationed in Dhaka to focus exclusively on trade matters would undoubtedly strengthen trade relations.

She also reiterated the importance of FTAs in fostering mutual trust, which extends beyond mere economic agreements and builds deeper ties between nations. Reflecting on her previous experiences with trade negotiations, H E Haznah Md. Hashim recalled Malaysia's attempts to negotiate an FTA with the US, even though the agreement ultimately did not materialise. However, Malaysia still ended up participating in the CPTPP. The High Commissioner stressed that the process itself has strengthened relations through trust-building, which can lead to long-term benefits.

On another note, the High Commissioner addressed concerns about Malaysia's visibility in Bangladesh, particularly in sectors like medical tourism. She acknowledged that many in Bangladesh might not be aware of Malaysia's competitive and affordable healthcare services, which stand alongside other South Asian countries as viable options. She highlighted that healthcare costs in Malaysia are regulated by an Act of Parliament, ensuring affordability without compromising quality. Public healthcare is almost free, while private providers are subject to government-imposed ceilings on charges, closely monitored and enforced. The High Commissioner noted that this issue of visibility would be taken back to Putrajaya, with the aim of further promoting Malaysia's offerings in Bangladesh.

Lastly, the High Commissioner reaffirmed Malaysia's solidarity with Bangladesh regarding the ongoing Rohingya refugee crisis. She expressed hope that a long-term solution would soon be reached, emphasising Malaysia's continued support for Bangladesh's efforts in addressing this humanitarian issue.



Dr Abul Kalam Azad

Professor, Department of International Relations, BUP

Dr Abul Kalam Azad, in his remarks acknowledged the broader discussions on international relations, which he characterised as official and value-laden, but chose to diverge slightly from that discourse to focus on specific concerns. Addressing the High Commissioner, he expressed his appreciation for the reference made to the positive contributions of Bangladeshi migrant workers to Malaysia's development. However, he voiced scepticism about the treatment of these workers in Malaysia, citing instances of human rights violations that have raised concerns among Bangladeshi civil society and other stakeholders.

Dr Azad specifically referred to the conditions faced by migrant workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. He inquired whether Malaysia had ratified the 2003 convention on the prevention of discrimination against migrant workers and their families, as this remained a pertinent issue in Bangladesh-Malaysia relations.

Dr Azad also touched upon the issue of people-to-people contact. He deliberated on medical tourism, noting that Malaysia was a potential destination for such services. He further noted the absence of scholarships and cultural exchange initiatives from Malaysia, comparing this with similar programmes from other countries. He also expressed concerns about visa complications, stating that the process for obtaining a visa to Malaysia has been difficult, especially, for the business community. He mentioned about the extensive documentation requirements, which he felt hindering the flourishing of business relations. Dr Azad emphasised that despite the strong ties between Bangladesh and Malaysia, some issues, such as the treatment of migrant workers and the complexity of visa processes, need to be addressed to ensure a more balanced and mutually beneficial relationship.



Md Anwar Shahid

Senior Vice President, Bangladesh Malaysia Chamber of Commerce and Industry (BMCCI)

During his intervention, **Mr Md Anwar Shahid** raised important issues regarding Bangladesh's evolving trade landscape. He noted that while Bangladesh has benefitted from various facilities as a least developed country, the impending graduation from this status means that an FTA will become necessary post-2026. He expressed the view that the government of Bangladesh is proactively working on establishing such agreements. He suggested that to enhance the trade balance, Malaysia could consider establishing a trade office in Bangladesh, similar to the one it has in Chennai, India.

He emphasised that while some embassies operate trade offices without formal trade agreements, having a dedicated office in Bangladesh could foster greater trade relations even before the FTA is finalised.

Additionally, Mr Shahid referred to discussions about increasing Bangladesh's involvement with ASEAN, recognising Malaysia as a key player within the organisation. He inquired about the role Malaysia could play in facilitating Bangladesh's deeper engagement with ASEAN, particularly regarding its aspirations for membership or observer status. He expressed curiosity about how Malaysia, given its active role in ASEAN, could support Bangladesh in achieving these objectives.



Shabbir A Khan

President, Bangladesh Malaysia Chamber of Commerce and Industry (BMCCI)

Mr Shabbir A Khan shared his insights on the rapidly growing semiconductor and microchip industry, projected to reach US\$ 1.3 trillion by 2030. He noted that during a recent delegation visit to Malaysia, discussions highlighted the country's ambition to capture 18 to 20 percent of this global market share. He mentioned that the Malaysian Prime Minister had announced substantial government support, with an investment of US\$ 300 to US\$ 400 billion aimed at bolstering the industry. Mr Khan also pointed out that despite Malaysia's progress, there is a pressing need for skilled engineers in this sector. He emphasised that while Malaysia excels in packaging, Bangladesh has several strong industries in semiconductor design and engineering, which are already exporting to the US. He underscored the potential for collaboration between the two countries, particularly in supplementing each other's strengths.

Mr Khan urged the High Commissioner, who serves as the chief patron of the chamber, for assistance in facilitating skill development opportunities for Bangladeshi engineers in Malaysia. He highlighted that local companies like DBL and dealers like Ulkasemi are currently struggling due to a shortage of technical expertise and urged for initiatives to address this gap.

Responses from the High Commissioner



On the Rohingya issue, the High Commissioner **H E Haznah Md Hashim** acknowledged the immense challenges both countries face. She reiterated that ASEAN is actively engaged in addressing the crisis, emphasising the importance of regional cooperation. H E highlighted that ASEAN operates on the principle of consensus, which necessitates the support and cooperation of all its members.

About agricultural collaboration, the High Commissioner spoke positively about the potential for further partnership between Malaysia and Bangladesh. She recalled a visit to a mango farm in Rajshahi, Bangladesh, which had been organised by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The experience left her with a strong belief that agricultural cooperation between the two countries has promising prospects. She highlighted on how an FTA could remove

trade barriers and streamline such exchanges. While both countries are members of the WTO, and cannot impose preferential or discriminatory practices, FTAs allow for certain exceptions that could benefit both economies.

The High Commissioner also touched upon Malaysia's desire to strengthen trade relations through an FTA. She noted that many Malaysian furniture producers are eager to export to Bangladesh, but high tariffs currently hinder this trade. With an FTA, these barriers could be lowered, enabling more competitive trade between the two countries and providing Bangladesh greater access to the Malaysian and ASEAN markets. She expressed hope that, following Malaysia's bilateral FTAs with India and Pakistan, a similar agreement with Bangladesh could soon be realised.

Regarding Bangladesh's role within ASEAN, the High Commissioner confirmed that Malaysia is fully supportive of Bangladesh becoming a Sectoral Dialogue Partner. However, as ASEAN decisions are made by consensus, all ten member states must agree. She expressed optimism that Bangladesh's formal engagement with ASEAN could progress in the near future.

The High Commissioner also addressed concerns raised about the treatment of Bangladeshi workers in Malaysia. She thanked the audience for their comments and highlighted that, like many other countries, Malaysia had imposed strict lockdowns and quarantine measures to prioritise saving lives when vaccines were unavailable. She emphasised Malaysia's appreciation of the contributions made by Bangladeshi workers and assured that the country remains committed to upholding laws and regulations that protect their well-being. She pointed out that many Malaysian companies demonstrated their responsibility by arranging chartered flights to bring Bangladeshi workers back to Malaysia at little to no cost. The High Commissioner reflected the level of care Malaysia places on safeguarding both its businesses and workers. Malaysia

continues to work toward ensuring the welfare of workers while fostering strong bilateral relations.

Lastly, the High Commissioner acknowledged difficulties in the visa application process, especially in light of Malaysia's rigorous efforts to combat human trafficking. She expressed regret over any delays or unintended consequences faced by applicants and assured that Malaysia is working to resolve these issues swiftly.



Brig Gen (Retd) Hasan Md Shamsuddin

Lead Researcher, The KRF Center for Bangladesh and Global Affairs (CBGA)

Brig Gen (Retd) Hasan Md Shamsuddin began by expressing his gratitude to the High Commissioner for her eloquent speech, and acknowledged her efforts over the past four years in strengthening the bond between Bangladesh and Malaysia. Turning to the Rohingya crisis, he pointed out that the Rohingya population has become increasingly dependent on aid, which is diminishing. He emphasised the urgent need for capacity-building initiatives aimed at Rohingya youth to empower them for the future. He also raised concerns about the high population density in the Teknaf and Cox's Bazar areas,

leading to various law enforcement challenges. He suggested that relocating some Rohingya individuals to Bhasan Char could alleviate this issue, but noted that infrastructure development and transportation logistics need to be addressed.



Shahriar Jaman Shaon

Student, University of Dhaka

Mr Shahriar Jaman Shaon posed two questions during the open discussion. Firstly, he inquired about the potential for Malaysia to establish a youth exchange programme with Bangladesh, similar to the existing student exchange programme with India. He emphasised that such a program could allow a significant number of Bangladeshi students to travel to Malaysia, fostering cultural and educational exchanges to strengthen the bonds between the two nations. Secondly, he pointed out the concept of blue tourism. He mentioned that Bangladesh has established a blue economy cell since 2017, prompting him to ask if Bangladesh and Malaysia can collaborate in forming a joint blue economy cell to develop this sector.

Additionally, he referred to successful collaborations in technical education and infrastructure development between Bangladesh and other countries, such as the Bangladesh-South Korea and Bangladesh-Japan technical schools. He expressed hope for the establishment of a similar technical school or college between Bangladesh and Malaysia, with support from the Malaysian government.



Naoshin Tasneem Rishti

Student, Bangladesh University of Professionals (BUP)

Ms Naoshin Tasneem Rishti first inquired about the leniency of Malaysian universities in providing scholarships to Bangladeshi students. She expressed interest in understanding what specific measures the Malaysian government plans to implement in the future to enhance equality and equity in relations between the two countries.

Furthermore, she echoed the concerns of her fellow student from University of Dhaka regarding the potential for a youth exchange program. She sought clarification on what steps the Malaysian government is taking to facilitate opportunities for Bangladeshi students to study in

Malaysian universities, thereby contributing to the development of bilateral relations.

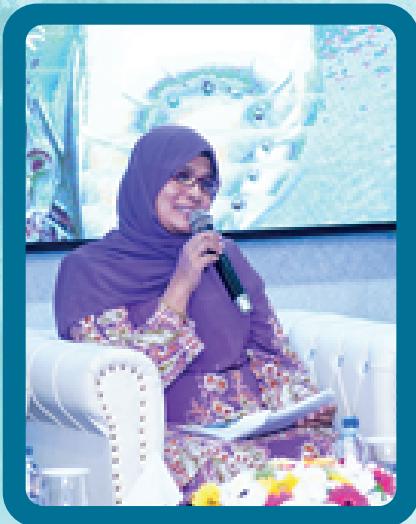


Major General (Retd) Jibon Kanai Das

Former Director General, BIISS

Major General (Retd) Jibon Kanai Das reflected on his experiences in Malaysia and the historical ties between the two nations. He raised a critical concern regarding the challenges associated with obtaining Malaysian citizenship, pointing out that the process is quite difficult. He acknowledged Malaysia's innovative program, Malaysia My Second Home (MM2H), but expressed worry about the influx of Bangladeshi applicants and the issue of illegal money transfers related to this program. He asked what measures Malaysia is implementing to scrutinise these applications and ensure that they are awarded to deserving individuals. His questions aimed to clarify Malaysia's approach to managing this program while maintaining the integrity of its immigration policies.

Responses from the High Commissioner



H E Haznah Md Hashim, the High Commissioner of Malaysia addressed several important proposals deliberated during the open forum, starting with the one concerning skilled engineers. She emphasised that while the proposal had significant merit, it would require careful consideration from both the governments and relevant stakeholders before any concrete steps could be taken. She suggested that the priority should first be on resolving the current issues concerning regular workers, as that was of immediate importance. Regarding capacity building, the High Commissioner mentioned that her government has been actively looking into ways to strengthen this area.

About student exchange programmes, H E Haznah Md Hashim acknowledged that there were none currently in place. However,

she welcomed the suggestion of introducing a technical school exchange initiative and mentioned that it was something the government could explore. Additionally, she touched upon the concept of 'blue tourism,' indicating that it might be another area worth considering in the future. She expressed her gratitude to those who raised these ideas and specifically acknowledged seeing familiar faces from University College Sedaya International (UCSI) University in the audience.

The High Commissioner also encouraged students to consider Malaysia for postgraduate studies, assuring them that they are always welcome to pursue higher education there. She noted that a branch of a Malaysian private university had been established in Banani, Bangladesh, in March 2023. Ranked 284th globally, this institution became the first foreign university to open a branch in Bangladesh, providing Bangladeshi students the opportunity to experience Malaysian education locally.

In response to the question about scholarships, the High Commissioner confirmed that scholarships are available for deserving students. She specifically mentioned international universities in Malaysia, noting that while the selection process was rigorous, those who qualified could benefit from numerous scholarship opportunities. She also highlighted the Malaysian Technical Cooperation Program (MTCP), a short-term initiative that offers training programs lasting up to a year. She shared that this programme had benefited many Bangladeshi professionals across various fields, recalling her meeting with a firefighter who had undergone training in Malaysia. The MTCP, fully funded by the Malaysian government, is open to public entities from Bangladesh and other countries.

The High Commissioner concluded by extending a warm invitation to the audience and their families to experience Malaysian education, whether by studying in Malaysia or through local branches. She reassured parents, especially those concerned about safety, that Malaysia is a secure and accessible destination for students, with direct flights between Dhaka and Kuala Lumpur. Although flight frequencies had slightly reduced from 62 to 50 per week, it remained the highest between any Asian country and Dhaka.

Remarks by the Special Guest



Ambassador M Riaz Hamidullah
Additional Foreign Secretary,
Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh

Ambassador M Riaz Hamidullah, Additional Foreign Secretary, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, highlighted that the essence of a relationship extends beyond past achievements and current circumstances—it is about looking into the future. He emphasised that relationships are not simply defined by shared values, but by a combination of shared values, mutual trust, respect, and, importantly, the mutuality of interests. Drawing from his experiences in South Asia and Europe, he suggested that shared values alone are insufficient; the real depth of a relationship comes from aligning mutual interests between nations for the future.

Reflecting on the Bangladesh-Malaysia relationship, he urged the audience to shift focus from historical milestones, such as the countries' diplomatic start in 1972 or their collaboration within the United Nations, to the future. Ambassador Hamidullah proposed looking ahead, specifically

towards 2025 and beyond, noting that Bangladesh is expected to become one of the world's 30 largest economies by that time, while Malaysia is projected to be a high-income nation by 2030. The critical question, in his view, is how these two countries can complement one another's strengths. He underscored the importance of recognising complementarities between Bangladesh's large, manufacturing-based economy and Malaysia's established position as a trading nation.

He pointed out that while growth projections are useful, they are not infallible, especially given the potential for geopolitical shifts. Ambassador Hamidullah cautioned against fixating on rigid economic forecasts, stressing that assumptions about Bangladesh's standing by 2035 could be disrupted by changes in the global landscape.

Trade volumes, he argued, are not the sole indicators of the strength of a bilateral relationship. He suggested that investment flows and strategic collaboration offer a more meaningful measure of progress rather than overemphasis on trade volume. As an example, he noted Malaysia's position as Bangladesh's third-largest source of import and the US\$ 5 billion in investments that have recently flowed into Bangladesh from overseas private equity, pension, and sovereign funds.

Ambassador Hamidullah also touched on regional dynamics, reminding the audience that Bangladesh's involvement in initiatives like the RCEP should not be overlooked. In this context, he suggested that conventional FTAs are no longer sufficient in today's economy. Instead, he pointed to the growing popularity of CEPAs, which go beyond tariff reductions and include provisions for services, investment, and technology transfer. He encouraged Bangladesh to explore the similar approach as it navigates its economic future.

Furthermore, the Additional Foreign Secretary stressed upon the need to deconstruct trade patterns, not just through export profiles but also through an examination of imports, to identify trade substitution opportunities. This analysis, he argued, would pave the way for further investments between the two nations. Looking at specific sectors, Ambassador Hamidullah highlighted the semiconductors, agrotech, energy, and the automotive industry as promising areas for collaboration. He pointed out that Malaysia currently commands 13.5 per cent of the global semiconductor market, and Bangladesh could find a role in this industry, particularly in design and back-end production. Additionally, he noted the potential for cooperation in the hydrogen economy and new energy dynamics, urging both countries to move beyond conventional energy sources.

In closing, Ambassador Hamidullah called for a focus on collaboration, not just cooperation. He emphasised that simple cooperation is no longer adequate in today's complex global economy. Negotiations, he remarked, take time, and countries must be proactive in setting a clear path forward. He urged all stakeholders to think critically about how the two nations can align their economies and embrace future opportunities.

The message was clear: prospecting into the future and embracing the evolving dynamics of global trade and investment will be crucial for strengthening the Bangladesh-Malaysia relationship in the years ahead.

Concluding Remarks by the Session Chair



Ambassador A F M Gousal Azam Sarker Chairman, BIISS

At the commencement of his concluding remarks, the Session Chair of the Lecture, **Ambassador A F M Gousal Azam Sarker**, Chairman, BIISS, thanked the distinguished audience. He noted that the number of questions asked highlighted how stimulating the discussion had been and the interest it had generated among the participants. He expressed that the seminar had provided a clearer understanding of the strengths of Bangladesh-Malaysia bilateral relations and the prospects for the future. The suggestions offered by speakers, distinguished guests, and participants should be recognised as valuable insights into areas for further strengthening cooperation.

Ambassador Sarker pointed out that Bangladesh and Malaysia are already collaborating closely in various international and regional forums, with their bilateral trade exceeding US\$ 02 billion as evidence of this partnership. He acknowledged that while there might be some trade imbalances, considering the contributions of migrant workers painted a more balanced picture that could be further explored. He emphasised the numerous sectors with potential for enhanced cooperation, particularly in technology, science, and innovation, which have been deemed critical for both nations as they looked toward the future. The Chairman described the younger

generations as 'national renewals,' essential for ensuring continuity and seizing future opportunities. He also mentioned the Bay of Bengal region as an area where collaboration between Bangladesh and Malaysia could flourish, both bilaterally and through different regional initiatives.

Ambassador Sarker highlighted the opportunity for Bangladesh to learn from Malaysia's successful transition out of the middle-income trap, a lesson that could be applicable as Bangladesh approaches its own graduation. He identified research and development (R&D) as another area for collaboration, especially as both economies shifted toward service-oriented sectors.

He pointed tourism as a promising sector that do not require significant capital investment but hold vast potential for economic growth. Enhancing connectivity between the two nations has also been suggested as a mean to foster tourism and leverage this sector for quicker economic gains. He encouraged exploring regional cooperation through minilaterals, focusing on specific sectors where both countries could benefit. He asserted that the seminar had generated many ideas and emphasised the need to take action. He assured the audience that BIISS is ready to provide support for further consultations or expert discussions in specific sectors.

In conclusion, the Chairman, BIISS, extended his sincere thanks to H E Haznah Md Hashim, the Malaysian High Commissioner, for her excellent deliberation, stating that this was just the beginning of the conversation. He expressed hope for continued exploration of these ideas in the future and also thanked Ambassador Riaz Hamidullah for his pragmatic and focused contributions.

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