

EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

DELEGATION FOR RELATIONS WITH SOUTH ASIA & SAARC

PRESS COMMUNIQUE

Dhaka, 27 February 2003

A delegation of the European Parliament has been visiting Bangladesh from 23 to 27 February 2003.

The delegation was led by Thomas Mann (Germany, Christian-Democrat), First Vice-Chair of the Parliament's Delegation for relations with the countries of South Asia and SAARC. It included also Neena Gill (UK, Socialist), Second Vice-Chair, Robert Evans (UK, Socialist) and Benedetto Della Vedova (Italy, independent).

In the course of the visit, the delegation had extensive meetings with the following Ministers:

- the Minister of Law and Parliamentary Affairs, Barrister Moudud Ahmed, MP
- the Minister of Finance and Planning, Mr. M. Saifur Rahman
- the Minister of Local Government, Mr. Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan
- the Minister of Agriculture, Mr. Motiur Rahman Nizami
- the Minister of Post and Telecommunications, Barrister M. Aminul Hoque
- the Minister of Social Welfare, Mr. Ali Ahsan Mohammed Mujahid
- the State Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr. Reaz Rahman

It met **MPs from all political parties**, both government and opposition, as well as the **Chief Election Commissioner**, Mr. M. A. Syed.

It also had extensive contacts with a number of Human Rights activists, academics, and journalists, and visited development projects co-financed by the European Union, both in Dhaka and outside.

This visit, following a formal invitation from the Speaker of the Jatiya Sangsad, Barrister Jamir Uddin Sircar had been planned for several months. However, the recent events in Bangladeshi political life, in particular the "Operation Clean Heart" which had prompted a resolution of the European Parliament on 23 November 2002, has meant the visit focused mostly on the human rights and governance issue raised in that resolution.

The main conclusions of this visit are:

1. We would like first to recall that the **co-operation agreement between the European Union and Bangladesh** of 22 May 2000 is explicitly based on the mutual **respect for Human Rights and democratic values**. Any observation that the European Union makes in this respect is therefore in line with the need to **ensure that Bangladesh respects its bilateral commitments** towards the European Union; **it would be erroneous to view them as an interference in Bangladesh's internal affairs**.
2. With respect to the European Parliament's resolution of 23 November, after four extremely dense days here, we are forced to confirm that many of **the concerns expressed in it are still justified**.
3. **While by and large the Bangladeshi political and legal system is formally democratic and compliant with international standards, its shortcomings and moreover the lack of impartial and efficient implementation may negate this**.
4. In particular, **the recent Indemnity Law** limiting retrospectively the possibility to prosecute members of the armed forces but in court martial, and totally indemnifying police forces and political personnel from acts of murder, torture, illegal arrests and other Human Rights violations committed during the "Clean Heart Operation" **is a blatant violation of the responsibility of Bangladesh to abide by the Rule of Law**.

5. **This Indemnity Law casts a doubt on the real nature of the system of government of Bangladesh**, as do the hampering of the work of the Election Commission, the persistent denial to create **independent bodies** to protect Human Rights, to fight the systematic and widespread corruption, or to enquiry on misadministration (ombudsman), some of which are in direct contradiction with the very Constitution of Bangladesh.
6. **The previous government has its share of responsibility**, as it equally failed at implementing the necessary reforms in its time. **The present government however bears a heavy responsibility in harassing opponents, restricting the freedom of press through harassment or indirect intimidation, interfering with the work of the major national NGOs** and in denying the existence of such violations.
7. We have been happy to witness the good communal harmony and religious tolerance, which are a distinctive character of the Bangladeshi society. Despite the fact that they are still rare, **the recent and converging cases of violence against minorities should not be dismissed or treated lightly**. The role of an independent Human Rights Commission should be in particular to investigate such cases and develop a strategy to avoid their increase.
8. **This country is vibrant** with dynamic entrepreneurs, sensible intellectuals, courageous journalists, dedicated NGOs, young people eager to learn and shape its own destiny, and **a tremendously hardworking population**, who are ready to contribute to its development – provided they are not **deprived** of this opportunity.
9. The delegation has enjoyed **full and frank exchanges** of views with a range of politicians and especially welcomed the dialogue with the government. We have posed many questions, and received **many commitments of action**. **We will watch with interest** to see the developments in Bangladesh in the immediate future and recognize the real progress this country makes.

The European Parliament is the legislative and political body representing the peoples of the 15 member States of the European Union. It comprises 626 members (MEPs) directly elected by the 350 million European citizens.

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