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Bangladesh

Statement of
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At the Sixty-Third Session of the
UN General Assembly

The United Nations, New York
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Mr. President,

Let me begin by congratulating you on your well-deserved election as the President of the 63rd Session of the General Assembly. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon for his very effective leadership in promoting global peace, security and development. I take this opportunity to deliver the statement also on behalf of the Least Developed Countries. This has been a difficult year for many LDCs, amid rising food and energy prices and a looming economic slowdown. But we have remained resolute in confronting the crisis in the spirit of mutual understanding, support and cooperation, as enshrined in the United Nations Charter.

Mr. President,

My statement today will address three inter-related issues: food security, democracy and development. These issues are inextricably linked to one another, and are of fundamental importance to the welfare of the citizens of Bangladesh and as well as of other LDCs. We have witnessed during the course of this year an extraordinary rise in food and energy prices, which has undermined the food security of many least developed economies. This experience should strengthen our resolve to look for long-term solutions for a world free of hunger. In the 21st Century, food security for all citizens in this world must be acknowledged not just as a development imperative, but also as a moral imperative. Each and every human life is sacred, and it is our collective duty to provide adequate nutrition to people throughout our world.

The recent global rise in food prices has been acutely felt in Bangladesh, even though imports account for a small percentage of our cereal consumption. Domestic rice prices spiked by nearly 60% during the year through February 2008, against the backdrop of two devastating floods and a tropical cyclone that caused large-scale devastation of one of our key harvests. For a country like Bangladesh, where roughly 40% of the population lives below the poverty line and where poor households spend as much as 70% of their income on food items, such a steep increase in food prices has had significant adverse effects on food security, poverty and human development.

Mr. President,

Food insecurity can disrupt the core of a democratic polity and derail its development priorities. The cost of food insecurity is measured not only by deprivation, but also by increased instability, which can be very costly for a society. While free market remains an incomparably powerful tool for efficient allocation of resources, markets are often imperfect, and no government can stand idle and hope that the private sector will resolve a food crisis. Making food available for all, and at affordable prices, remains a cardinal responsibility of all governments. In Bangladesh, we took this responsibility very seriously and delivered rice to our citizens through a public food distribution system, in an effort to ensure that no one went to bed hungry.

Mr. President,

Soon after assuming office in January 2007, our government announced a roadmap for holding a truly democratic and meaningful election. This was no easy task, as decades of corruption had seriously undermined both our democracy and our economy. Corruption's ill effects corroded our vital public institutions, and the cost was ultimately borne by the ordinary citizens of Bangladesh, who could ill-afford it. My government is determined to ensure that corruption does not imperil

the rights of the under-privileged, and that in future, our democracy ensures the good of all Bangladeshis. Our fight against corruption has been the first step in a long and difficult process, and we believe that the work will continue under the auspices of the independent Anti-Corruption Commission that was created as an institutional bulwark against corruption. Legal actions were initiated against corrupt individuals, but we never compromised due process and judicial independence.

Mr. President,

The foundation of a democracy rests on a compact between the state and its citizens. This begins with ensuring that each and every eligible citizen can vote, freely and without fear, and that each and every vote is counted. To this end, my government has completed the monumental task of electronically registering over 80 million voters with photographs and fingerprints. This was achieved in just eleven months, and is a feat that I believe is without precedent anywhere in the world. Our Election Commission trained over 500,000 election workers, deployed over 10,000 laptops, webcams and fingerprint scanners, and set up over 90,000 registration centers to ensure that every eligible voter could have their photograph and fingerprints digitally captured. Multiple layers of safeguards were put in place to ensure that the new voters list was flawless.

In addition to creating a world-class photo voters list, we issued national identity cards to all those who registered. The Election Commission, with newfound independent authority granted to it by our government, completed this task in record speed with the support of the Bangladesh Army. Our armed services personnel —many of whom have shown their deep and abiding commitment to the ideals of the United Nations through their service in UN peacekeeping operations — provided critical logistical support. Their experiences, we believe, could be invaluable to support and strengthen democracy in post-conflict environments. Our success with the voter list was the result not just of civil-military cooperation, but also international cooperation: we are deeply appreciative of UNDP's technical assistance for this project, as well as the financial support of our development partners.

Mr. President,

An election is only the first pillar of democratic governance. During the past twenty months, my government has relentlessly worked to shore up democracy's other pillars. We have made the judiciary fully independent. My government has established the National Human Rights Commission to protect and promote the fundamental rights of all our citizens. We have enacted a Right to Information law that will help provide the transparency that is necessary to a well-functioning democracy. We have, in consultation with the political parties, amended and strengthened the Representation of People Order, under which forthcoming elections will be held. This law and regulations under it will require registration of political parties for elections; ensure intra-party democracy implement campaign finance reforms that will limit the influence of corrupt money in our political system.

Just last month, the Bangladesh Election Commission organized the successful holding of some local and mayoral elections. This marked a new beginning in our electoral process in many years, our citizens were able to exercise their franchise without undue influence of money or muscle power. The elections were held without disruption and drew an unprecedented number of voters. Let me reiterate here, in the presence of a global audience, that my government is fully committed to holding a free and fair parliamentary elections on 18 December this year, as announced last week. We are confident that all political parties will participate in the elections under the new laws and regulations.

Mr. President

Few nations face the challenges that we face in Bangladesh for mere survival. Our development gains - achieved through the work of years and decades - can be wiped out in matter of hours. One cyclone can push hundreds of thousands of people back below the poverty line. Bangladesh is particularly vulnerable to climate change given that we are a low-lying delta in one of the highest rainfall areas of the world. There is growing concern that an irreversible climatic shift will displace tens of millions of our people. By some estimates, a one meter sea-level rise would submerge about one-third of the total area of Bangladesh. Given our population and its vulnerabilities, this would result in the greatest humanitarian crisis in history. Inaction is simply no longer an option. It is nothing less than a basic moral imperative that countries which have contributed little to this crisis, such as Bangladesh, not be left alone and unsupported to suffer most from its consequences.

Adaptation is necessary, but may not be sufficient to cope with the unavoidable impacts of climate change. Countries like Bangladesh will face the worst consequences in the absence of a legally binding commitment on mitigation. International efforts to minimize emission levels should not, however, disproportionately tax poorer nations. We must have guaranteed access to appropriate mitigation technologies and know-how at affordable terms. We strongly feel that the post-Kyoto agreement should set up a Technology Transfer Board, in order to ensure that the least developed economies have access to affordable, eco-friendly technologies. Bangladesh will not be able to attain sustainable development without appropriate technological support.

Mr. President,

We would not have discussed the food crisis issue here in this august Assembly, if we believed this was a one-off event. The crisis will revisit us, perhaps in greater intensity and frequency, unless we put in place both short and long-term measures to prevent its recurrence. Many of us in the developing world were deeply encouraged when the Secretary-General responded to our urgent request for a high-level Task Force to address the current food crisis. It was also timely and appropriate that FAO convened the Food Security Summit in Rome this June. The Summit afforded us the opportunity to deliberate on systemic and non-systemic issues that exacerbated the current food crisis.

Bangladesh, as a representative of the Least Developed Countries, also urged the Secretary General to look into the possibility of creating a Global Food Bank. We suggested that the Food Bank could allow countries facing a short-term shortfall in production to borrow food grains on preferential terms. Once they overcame the shortfall, these countries could return the quantum to the Food Bank. We could also explore the possibility of determining special drawing rights for each country, using criteria such as population, level of poverty and annual variation in their level of food production. Such an arrangement would allow us to prevent hoarding and price gouging by speculators in anticipation of, and during, a food crisis, and we believe that a mechanism can be put in place to guard against any moral hazard issues that might arise.

Mr. President,

Since the adoption of the Brussels Programme of Action in 2001, LDCs, as a group, have made some progresses in their macroeconomic performances as well as in a few social indicators. The progress is, however, insufficient and uneven. More importantly, their economic growth has made little dent on poverty. LDCs continue to face serious structural hurdles in their development

efforts. They remain acutely susceptible to external economic shocks, natural as well as man-made disasters. The full and effective implementation of the BPoA has now become a greater necessity. It is, however, highly unlikely that we will achieve the overarching goals of the Brussels Programme of Action, and the MDGs, unless international commitment for LDCs in the areas of aid and trade are fully delivered.

The Brussels Programme of Action will conclude in 2010. The UN General Assembly is in the process of preparing for the 4th UN Conference on LDCs towards the end of the current decade. The upcoming conference will provide an important opportunity for LDCs and their partners to critically review past performance, especially in areas of failures and weak implementation. This will help us develop a new, action-oriented strategic framework for the next decade to assist the LDCs in their development efforts. I call upon the member states to extend full and effective support to successfully holding the next UN Conference on LDCs.

Mr. President,

Bangladesh is in the midst of a profound change that we believe is highly relevant to people all around the world, especially to those fighting poverty, corruption and under-development. As with any process of change, it is not without setbacks, and will take time to complete, but in the end we remain confident of our success. Our goal is to strengthen democracy in Bangladesh, and my government has done everything in its power over the course of the past 20 months to work towards this end: I have spoken about the remarkable achievement with our voters list, which will ensure that the elections this December and every election hereafter can be free and fair; and I have also discussed some of the fundamental institutional reforms that we have undertaken to bolster the foundations of democracy. Many countries around the world are in their own ways going through similar processes, and we hope to share our experiences in order to help them, as we ourselves have benefited from the support of the international community and organizations like the UNDP.

Thank you.
