

Sobhan expects bilateral treaty to boost economy

Tuesday, 06 September 2011

Author / Source : Interviewed by MIR MOSTAFIZUR RAHAMAN

DHAKA, SEPT 5: Farooq Sobhan, former Bangladesh High Commissioner to India, and former foreign secretary noted that the country can raise its GDP growth rate by at least two per cent, by realizing the full potential of the manifold opportunities that exist in enhancing the bilateral economic cooperation between India and Bangladesh. Sobhan stressed the need to implement the decisions, both in letter and spirit, that were detailed in the 50 paragraph Joint Communiqué that was issued at the conclusion of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit to India in January, 2010. He said that a meaningful and wide ranging improvement in bilateral relations between the two countries would be welcomed by other countries in the region, including China and would contribute significantly to not only strengthening both regional cooperation covering China, ASEAN and SAARC but would provide a major impetus to sub-regional cooperation covering Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, West Bengal and the Indian North East.

"We'd like to see implementation of a number of decisions, especially in the areas of security, border management, exchange of enclaves and adverse possession of lands. We'd also like to see the end of border killings by India's Border Security Force," he added.

Sobhan, who is currently the President of the Bangladesh Enterprise Institute (BEI), said that Indo-Bangladesh relations had suffered because neither side had invested sustained high level attention in trying to resolve the long standing bilateral problems existing between the two countries.

Nor had sufficient attention been given to enhancing trade and investment between the two countries. As a result suspicion and mistrust had built up not simply at the official level but also at other levels.

"India used to treat us like a third division team, but our position has now been elevated to the first division," he said. Sobhan added that "for the first time in many years there has been a large number of ministerial level visits on both sides to sort out some of the long standing bilateral problems. India's National Security Adviser, Mr. Shiv Shankar Menon and two Advisers of the Bangladesh Prime Minister, Dr. Gowher Rizvi and Dr. Masihur Rahman, were given the responsibility by their respective Prime Ministers to monitor implementation, meet each other regularly and prepare the ground for the visit of first Sheikh Hasina to Delhi and subsequently the visit of Dr. Manmohan Singh to Dhaka".

"Trade and investment is another critical area. Recently, we have seen the inauguration of border haats and we hope that our products would get unhindered market access in India. This will help to reduce the sizable trade imbalance that currently exists," he said.

Sobhan said that during his tenure as India's Finance Minister and again during his tenure as Prime Minister, Dr. Manmohan Singh had stressed the need for India to do everything possible to support the economic growth and development of Bangladesh. "In the near future, I believe that India would

emerge as the largest single foreign investor in Bangladesh; and would also become the largest market for our products as well," he added.

Sobhan also pointed out that an improvement in bilateral relations will also present a "tremendous opportunity" in resolving the country's acute power and energy crisis.

"Our economy has been badly hit by the power and energy crisis. If we want to solve this problem both in the short term but also in the medium and long term, we must give serious attention to expanding our cooperation in the energy sector with India. Import of power from the North East should be explored, as also the possibility of reviving the proposal for a gas pipeline from Myanmar to India, which would allow for the export of gas to both India and Bangladesh" he said.

"Bhutan is going to generate an additional 10,000 MW of hydropower for export. With the assistance of India, we can negotiate with Bhutan to import at least 1,000 MW," he added.

Sobhan welcomed the steps to enhance connectivity with India by road and rail in addition to the existing connectivity through river transport. Improved connectivity he said would serve the purpose of connecting Bangladesh not only to India but to Nepal, Bhutan, China and ASEAN. "We're only a small part of a larger road and railway network in the Asian region. Thus, we can't afford to remain left out of this network. It's necessary to integrate ourselves with this vast communication network to explore its huge potential to gear up the economy," he added.

Expansion of the regional network would improve our trade and investment through out the region; not only regionally but also globally, he explained. India has provided a soft loan of US \$1 billion to Bangladesh to enable it to improve the country's road and railway network, as well as, all navigational channels through dredging, Sobhan pointed out.

"Sharing of common rivers is another important issue having a serious impact on the bilateral relationship. We hope that an agreement on sharing the Teesta waters would be inked during the Indian Prime Minister's visit," he said. He also said that both countries should work hand-in-hand to counter domestic and external security threats

Sobhan further said, "more than 20 years ago, I said that policy makers in both the countries should engage themselves in strengthening bilateral cooperation. I'm happy to see the positive approach of both the Prime Ministers in this regard."

"First, we should build confidence and trust between the two countries. After Bangabandhu's assassination, relations had suffered a serious set-back," he said.

"We need to resolve this issue of mistrust and recall the historic role of India during Bangladesh's Liberation War," he remarked. Sobhan underscored the need to involve common people in the process of building bilateral relations between the two countries.

"We're able to view Indian TV channels. Similarly, there should be arrangements to make our channels available across the border," he said. A close interaction between representatives from different social strata should help remove the existing mistrust between the two countries, he added.

He said that "instead of talking about illegal immigration, we should try and do away with visas altogether. Moreover, if the vision of a South Asian economic union was to be realized then we should be promoting the free movement of people between the two countries. "It would only boost our two economies," he added.

"India should state, in clear terms, that it would not build the Tipaimukh dam without considering Bangladesh's concerns about the project," he added. About the dispute over the maritime boundary, the former diplomat said that rather than trying to resolve this problem through the time consuming process of international arbitration, if there was a solid relationship based on trust and mutual confidence then this matter should be sorted out amicably through bilateral negotiations.

The two countries can work together to ensure peace in the Bay of Bengal, he pointed out.