**Opening Remarks**

**H.E. Mr. Anisul Huq, MP, Hon’ble Minister for Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs and Head of Bangladesh Delegation to the 4th Cycle of UPR**

**1000 – 1330 hrs, 13 November 2023, Human Rights Council, Geneva**

**Mr. President**

**Members of the Troika**

**Excellencies,**

**Distinguished delegates**

**Ladies and Gentlemen**

A very good morning to you all.

It gives me immense pleasure to address this august Council at the outset of the consideration of Bangladesh’s fourth cycle of UPR.

Bangladesh is now in its 5th term of membership in the Human Rights Council, which is effectively for all possible terms as per the rules of business of this Council. I, on behalf of the Government of Bangladesh, convey our deepest gratitude to the international community for a consistent support to and confidence in us.

Bangladesh attaches great importance to the UPR mechanism as it has already emerged as a unique peer review process in the promotion and protection of global human rights. This is evident from the fact that though our next national elections are only two months away, even then, we are here with a delegation comprising high level representatives from all the concerned bodies and agencies of the Government.

We would further reiterate that we remain committed to engaging in constructive dialogues with all stakeholders in a collaborative spirit.

We welcome all the 115 countries that have inscribed to participate in our UPR. We also appreciate a number of States that have shared their observations and questions in advance.

**Mr. President,**

This year marks the 75th anniversary of the adoption of the UDHR. The Declaration set out a broad range of fundamental human rights and freedom to which all of us, everywhere around the world, are entitled. However, regrettably, we continue to observe rampant human rights violations leading to a sense of deprivation, discrimination, and injustice among the vulnerable segment of the population worldwide and observe that shamelessly even children are not spared.

In August 2017, recalling our own sufferings during our War of Liberation, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina opened our border for the Rohingyas. Despite constraints and innumerable challenges, we stood by these persecuted people. Now, more than 1.2 million Rohingyas are on temporary shelter in Bangladesh with more than 30 thousand newborns being added each year.

It is frustrating for both Rohingyas and host communities that even after six long years, not a single Rohingya could return to Myanmar. The government of Bangladesh demands their safe, dignified, and voluntary repatriation to Myanmar. The Rohingya people deserve equitable global solidarity and support in meeting their humanitarian, accountability and repatriation challenges. Bangladesh alone cannot solve the crisis that Myanmar has imposed upon us.

We fear, if they are not repatriated to their own country, their frustration would turn them into a severe threat to peace and stability of the region and beyond.

**Mr. President,**

In 1971, Bangladesh gained liberation after a nine-month-long bloody war under the charismatic leadership of our Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. People from all walks of life irrespective of religion and ethnicity fought against all forms of exploitation, inequality, and injustice in our Liberation War. Three million people sacrificed their lives, and two hundred thousand women were violated in exchange for the dream of our political and economic emancipation.

The foundation of Bangladesh stands on its constitution that reflects the aspiration of the people. To uphold democracy, rule of law, equality, human rights and social justice, the constitution captured the provisions of the *‘International Bill of Human Rights’* i.e., the UDHR, ICCPR and ICESCR even though Bangladesh became a member of the UN or a party to these Covenants much later.

Article 11 of our constitution deserves mention, that reads - *“The Republic shall be a democracy in which fundamental human rights and freedoms and respect for the dignity and worth of the human person shall be guaranteed….”*

The rights to life, liberty, freedom of association and assembly, freedom of express of opinion, to be treated in accordance with law, and to equality and non-discrimination, prohibition of slavery and forced labour and many other provisions of the ICCPR were inserted in the constitution as *‘fundamental rights’* of the people which are justiciable and protected by constitutional guarantees.

At the same time, we have incorporated the economic, social and cultural rights as fundamental principles of State policy. With the attainment of economic prosperity and growth, we are gradually implementing these rights through various domestic laws in different phases.

**Dear Delegates,**

The continued political stability in the country and the Government’s pragmatic and people-centric policy interventions under the dynamic leadership of our Prime Minister have helped us achieve unprecedented socio-economic development. At the same time, we have continued our legislative, executive, and judicial measures to respect, protect and fulfill the human rights of the people.

The Government stepped up efforts in building adequate infrastructure to expedite economic growth of the country. We implemented the self-funded Padma Multi-purpose Bridge, the first ever Metro Rail service in the capital city of Dhaka, the 3.2-kilometer Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Tunnel under Karnaphuli river – first of its kind in South Asia. Several others are currently under implementation.

We aspire to transform Bangladesh into a knowledge-based ‘Smart Bangladesh’ by 2041 and a prosperous and climate-resilient delta by 2100 by ensuring sustainable economic growth, women empowerment and creating equal opportunities for all.

Our headcount poverty reduced from 41.5% in 2006 to 18.7% in 2022, and extreme poverty from 25.1% to 5.6%. Our per capita income has tripled in just a decade and the GDP increased from $90 billion to $460 billion. According to the IMF, Bangladesh is the world’s 25th largest economy as per GDP (PPP) and the 35th largest economy as per GDP (nominal).

On the occasion of the birth centenary of the Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the Government declared a policy that every homeless family will be given a home with land. Accordingly, till date, around 840 thousand landless and homeless families have been given such homes under the flagship ‘Ashrayan’ (Shelter) project.

Bangladesh is ranked as world's 5th best COVID-19-resilient country, and South Asia's best performer. Despite our severe resource constraint, we fully vaccinated the whole of our target population entirely free of cost. As for financial and other incentives, 28 packages worth over USD 14.6 billion, i.e. 4% of our GDP, were directed to 73 million people and two hundred thirteen thousand organizations. To us, this means human rights.

**Mr. President,**

In our 3rd cycle of UPR, we accepted 178 recommendations. We made every possible effort to implement the recommendations through a consultative process engaging the government as well as the civil society.

We have adopted numbers of legislative, executive and judicial measures that significantly contributed to building a robust normative and institutional framework which enabled human rights to flourish in every sphere of our democratic and secular polity.

With the engagement of all concerned government actors, the implementation of UPR recommendations were regularly followed up. Relevant ministries designated human rights focal points in their offices to ensure continuity of work and necessary coherence.

We thank the National Human Rights Commission, the civil society organizations and the UN agencies for their valuable thoughts and inputs that contribute to the reports which is the basis of today’s consideration.

**Mr. President,**

Our respect for the human rights is also well manifested by Bangladesh’s ratification of almost all core UN international human rights conventions – 8 out of 9. Since our last UPR, we have worked closely with the UN Human Rights Mechanisms. Bangladesh submitted the Initial Report on Convention Against Torture in 2019 and took part in the dialogue with the CAT in the same year and with the Committee on CRPD in 2022.

During this period, Bangladesh has hosted ten visits by seven Special Procedures mandate holders. This is the highest number of such visits in UN Member States during this period. We also hosted five visits of the Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar established by the HRC in 2018.

Upon the invitation of the government, the High Commissioner for Human Rights visited Bangladesh in August 2022 as the first official visit by any UN Human Rights chief. She had extensive meaningful and constructive dialogues with the government and other stakeholders. We remained extensively engaged in Geneva through several meetings with the High Commissioner at ministerial level as well as through regular interactions between our Permanent Mission and his Office as well other HR mechanisms. Bangladesh was represented in the Committee on Situations in 2019.

We commit to continue our engagement and cooperation with the human rights mechanisms and looking forward to more visits in the days ahead.

**Mr. President,**

While we continue our pledge to consider acceding to the remaining human rights instruments, we would also like to put on record that before entering any further international obligations we need to focus more on the capacity building of our national institutions.

The NHRC, with an eminent chairperson and a pluralist composition, continues to play a significant role in the promotion and protection of human rights in an inclusive manner. Since 2018, the government allocation of funds to NHRC was doubled and its personnel strength almost doubled. Between 2018-2022, NHRC resolved 3,666 human rights complaints.

The NHRC activated Human Rights Focal Desks in the ministries and in the Divisional and District headquarters to enhance outreach to the people. It has developed a web-based human rights course for school students to educate on basic human rights.

Fifty Parliamentary Standing Committees and the Anti-Corruption Commission also oversee human rights issues including the implementation of UPR recommendations.

The independent judiciary continues to play its due role for ensuring justice to all. For enhancing capacity of the judiciary for rendering justice expeditiously, we have executed many reforms that are elaborately stated in our National Report.

**Mr. President,**

Since assumption of office by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, there has been significant qualitative improvement in terms of political space for the opposition political parties. The opposition political parties in the parliament are enjoying the maximum liberty. Some chairmanship positions of the parliamentary standing committees were also given to the opposition party contrary to the political culture that previously existed. In enacting laws, the recommendations from the opposition Members of Parliament were taken into due consideration.

**Excellencies,**

In our last UPR, we received some recommendations on the accountability of the law enforcement agencies (LEAs). We maintain a ‘zero tolerance’ policy against any violation of human rights. We conduct thorough investigations and undertake stringent administrative and/or judicial measures, as the case may be, whenever LEA agents are proven to have unlawfully exercised force or authority.

Since 2015, 1,692 criminal cases have been filed against LEA personnel; major departmental punishments were handed to 8,488 Police personnel and minor punishments to more than a hundred thousand.

In 2022, a court in the Southern district of Cox's Bazar sentenced seven members of Police to 12 years’ imprisonment in a case over kidnapping and extortion of a businessman. In another case in 2021, five people, including three Police personnel, were arrested for alleged abduction and extortion in the Northern district of Dinajpur.

Till August 2023, twenty-four cases have been filed under the Torture and Custodial Death (Prevention) Act, 2013. In 2020, a court in Dhaka sentenced three police officers to life imprisonment for a killing in custody in 2014.

**Mr. President,**

In Bangladesh, people from all religions, races and ethnic backgrounds coexist in harmony; cultural diversity forms an essential part of our social fabric.

Bangladesh has formulated legislative and policy measures for the protection of minorities. The 15th Amendment of our Constitution saw the insertion of Article 23A to protect and develop the unique local culture and tradition of the tribal and ethnic communities. The ethnic minorities, who form 1% of total population enjoy 5% quota in certain job recruitments in the government, semi-government, and autonomous bodies.

We are fully committed to implement the Chottogram Hill Tracts Peace Accord in its entirety and reconstituted the CHT Accord Implementation Committee in 2018. To date, 65 out of the 72 clauses of the Accord have been implemented, 03 have been partially implemented and 04 remain under the implementation process.

Interfaith dialogues, community engagement, and strict actions against hate speech and religious extremism have played a significant role in promoting harmony and safeguarding the rights of religious minorities.

**Mr. President,**

The Constitution of Bangladesh fully guarantees freedom of opinion and speech, in line with Article 19 of UDHR and Article 25 of ICCPR. To enrich the democratic environment, the government has taken effective measures to ensure freedom of expression – both online and offline – and freedom of the press and media.

This is well-manifested through the 39 TV channels, 576 daily newspapers, 182 online portals of daily newspapers, 2328 local NGOs and 267 international NGOs freely operating with no restriction or censorship by the government.

The government ensures due consultation with every stakeholder and follows all relevant international standards while formulating any law or policy relating to the media. The recently enacted Cyber Security Act, 2023 helps us protect women, minority communities, journalists and activists from targeted harassments and abuses in the cyberspace.

**Mr. President,**

Women empowerment and gender equality, as one of the 10 special initiatives of our Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, remains at the core of our national development.

Currently, all ministries/divisions adopt gender-responsive budgets. Rate of participation of women workforce has increased to 42.7 percent in 2022 from 36 percent in 2016.

Service desks attended by trained female officers are being launched in all police stations for ensuring safe and friendly services to women. Police Cyber Support for Women was introduced in 2020. The Evidence Act was amended to disallow the character of a woman as a feature of evidence against a victim.

We have extended the tenure of women MPs in reserved seats in the Parliament by amending the Constitution. There are 73 women Members out of 350 seats in the outgoing Parliament. To promote women leadership at the grassroots level, one-fourth of the seats are reserved for women in the local bodies.

The government also introduced using mother’s name alongside father’s name in the identity documents of every citizen.

According to the Global Gender Gap Report 2023, Bangladesh is one of the only two countries in the world where women held the highest political positions for longer than men. The same report has placed Bangladesh on 7th position in the world in terms of political empowerment of women and as the top South Asian country in terms of achieving gender equality.

**Excellencies,**

The government is committed to ensure the rights of women and children at all levels. The Government has banned corporal punishment in all educational institutions. To help children facing violence, 24-hour toll free national help line has been launched. More than 18 thousand community clinics with a woman-friendly platform provided about 95% of service to women and children. The UNGA adopted a resolution last year to acclaim this innovative model of primary health care services, dubbed as Sheikh Hasina initiative.

In addition to the existing laws and rules, we are implementing the National Action Plan to Prevent Violence against Women and Children 2018 – 2030 and the National Action Plan to Prevent Child Marriage in cooperation with the NGOs and civil society organizations.

**Mr. President,**

We have taken numerous administrative measures to protect and promote the rights of persons with disabilities. This has been properly included in our eighth five-year plan.

To promote the wellbeing and development of individuals with autism and intellectual disabilities, we have established Neuro-developmental Disorders Service Centres across all the eight administrative Divisions offering accommodation, education, training, employment, and rehabilitation services. We have also introduced “Bangabandhu Disabled Welfare Insurance” to address their health issues.

We have introduced integrated Education Programme for visually impaired children in all districts, and in schools and training centres for children with other forms of disabilities.

The government has reserved 1% quota for persons with disabilities in the government recruitment of Class I and 10% in the lower categories of jobs.

**Mr. President,**

Bangladesh continues to ensure and uphold the rights of migrant workers. We are playing a leading role internationally in promoting the objectives of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration.

In 2019, Bangladesh ratified the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children. We have issued a rule in 2019 to ensure transparency and accountability in recruitment process of migrant workers. The 8th Five-year Plan (2020-2025) contains a 10-point ‘Paradigm Shift Agenda’ to improve overseas employment and the well-being of migrant workers.

The government is working on formulating a policy on the reintegration of migrants and diaspora.

**Excellencies,**

Since our last UPR, we have taken a number of initiatives to reform the labour sector. We have enacted Bangladesh EPZ Labour Act, 2019, EPZ Labour Rules, 2022 and the National Action Plan on the Labour Sector of Bangladesh, 2021-2026. In 2021, we submitted a roadmap to ILO for addressing the outstanding labour issues. In 2022, we also ratified the ILO Convention 138 on minimum age and the Protocol of 2014 to the Forced Labour Convention (P029).

Bangladesh Labour Act and Bangladesh Labour Rules were amended in 2018 and 2022 respectively reducing the membership requirement for forming trade unions to 20% from 30% of the workers of an establishment and repeal the provision to employ children below 12 years in light work.

A Tripartite Working Group is working on further amendment of the Labour Act as per ILO observations. Trade Union Registration process has been simplified and made online since October 2022.

Bangladesh EPZ Labour Act, 2019 gives workers the right to form Workers’ Welfare Association (WWA) and the right to strike and protection from anti-union practices.

Only last week we formally announced the minimum wage for the workers of the RMG industry. overtime being extra to this, as agreed by the Minimum Wage Board through several rounds of consultation. The revised salary is an increase by 56.25 percent over the previous one excluding over time which is over and above this. The increase by 56.25% also takes into consideration cumulative inflation of last 5 years which has never crossed 12%. This will come into effect on 1 December. I want to make it clear that this is a routine revision done after a five-year period in 43 sectors of our economy.

The overall manpower of the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE) was increased by four times in 2023. To ensure workplace safety, an Industrial Safety Unit was formed with the DIFE in 2022.

In the present labour unrest, we see an inter-lining of instigation targeted to thwart democratic process rather than expression of dissatisfaction over labour rights. Such actions will not be recognized as movement to secure labour rights; rather these will be considered as acts of sabotage against the free will of people to elect their democratic representatives.

The Government does not only seriously protect the rights of all workers, but also interferes when such rights are violated against any individual or cluster of workers.

One such glaring illustration is, when a Nobel laureate’s company tried to rob the workers of their 5% profit, the Government stood by the workers so that they could get legal redress.

**Mr. President,**

The government has taken various measures to empower the underprivileged sections of the society, such as the *bedes*, *hijras*, *dalits*, *harijans*, and tea-plantation workers to increase their quality of life, access to government services and integrate them into the mainstream. These initiatives include old-age allowance, education stipend, and training and financial assistance for livelihood.

We have officially recognized the gender identity of the *hijra* or transgender community and allocated social security benefits. We amended our laws allowing the transgender population to participate in elections both as a voter and a candidate with their own gender-identity.

**Mr. President,**

We have adopted National-Food-and-Nutrition Security Policy Action Plan (2021-2030) for food security of our population. We provide subsidies on staple food items to ensure food security to low-income communities. Free or highly subsidized food items are provided to the marginalized groups. We have set up ‘Pure-Food Courts’ in all 64 districts.

I am pleased to further apprise that in 2022, Bangladesh has brought 100 per cent of the population under electricity coverage, a major milestone in the context of a country like ours.

**Excellencies,**

Bangladesh continues its efforts to achieve free and compulsory education guaranteed by the Constitution.

The rate of adult literacy has increased to 76.43% in 2021. To reduce the dropout rate among female students, stipends are awarded to the girls resulting in near 100% enrolments and gender parity in primary education. We provide free textbooks to all students. We have introduced education in five tribal languages and distributed free textbooks to the ethnic minorities. We have also distributed textbooks among visually challenged students. Around three million children in poverty-prone areas are receiving nutrition-dense cooked-meals at school on alternate days.

**Excellencies,**

As a nation, we share the global vulnerabilities that makes us face challenges impeding our endeavours to progress socially, economically, and politically including in the implementation of the UPR recommendations despite our best intentions.

In many ways, we are being punished for no fault of ours!

Despite being one of the least carbon emitters, Bangladesh is among the world’s most climatically vulnerable countries. Notwithstanding our exemplary disaster preparedness mechanisms, global warming and environmental degradation are contributing to higher frequency, unpredictability, and severity of natural disasters.

To combat climate change and its negative impacts, we mainstreamed climate adaptation and mitigation into our national development policies. We have formulated Bangladesh Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan, National Adaptation Plan 2023-2050, Bangladesh Delta Plan 2100 and Renewable Energy Policy. During our last Presidency of the 58-nation Climate Vulnerable Forum, we launched the ‘Mujib Climate Prosperity Plan 2022 – 2041’ that envisions our move towards clean energy transition, climate-smart economy and green job opportunities.

We stress the need for access to climate finance on a concessional basis for our graduating LDC cohort. We also promote the concept of climate justice in all international discourses.

**Mr. President,**

Due to the COVID 19 pandemic and its after-effects, our decades-long development trajectory saw a temporary decline. However, due to targeted and action-oriented approach, our economy rebounded quickly with GDP growth rate increasing to 7.10 percent in 2021-22.

We are dealing with several other impeding factors too such as the hosting of 1.2 million Rohingya, various public health hazards, threat of global violent extremism and terrorism, and transnational organised crimes etc.

Countries like ours are tremendously affected by the sanctions and counter sanctions emanated from ongoing geopolitical tensions leading to a global inflations and supply-chain disruption etc. As a member of the UN Secretary General’s Global Crisis Response Group, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has highlighted these issues at different platforms. She has remained persistently vocal in urging all concerned to stop the ongoing wars including in Ukraine and in Gaza.

**Distinguished delegates,**

There is the time constraint and I acknowledge that these opening remarks are not exhaustive.

I have tried to highlight our unremitting commitment to further protect and promote the fundamental rights of our people and how our forward-looking initiatives have contributed so far to living up to our commitment. We believe, despite the challenges, we have achieved considerable success in materialising the commitments we undertook in our last UPR.

I accept, however, that there are always rooms for improvement and that no society in the World is perfect.

We are looking forward to the recommendations to be made by distinguished delegations and remain open to engage on suggestion and questions during the remaining part of our dialogue today.

I thank you all.

Joi Bangla, Joi Bangabandhu

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