

**Statement by Hon'ble State Minister for Foreign Affairs for the Diplomatic Briefing
16 January 2014, UNCLOS Conference Room, Ministry of Foreign Affairs**

**Excellencies,
Members of the Diplomatic corps,
Dear friends and colleagues,**

Introductory:

A very good afternoon to you all! I thank you for your kind presence. I have assumed office this week as State Minister for Foreign Affairs as part of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's newly formed government. I felt we should get introduced to each other and perhaps also take this opportunity to share and exchange with you some thoughts and ideas of our newly elected Government. Some of you may be aware that I come from a business background and have been wearing two hats for the past 5 years- one as a private sector person championing growth and prosperity for Bangladesh and the other as a politician championing liberal, secular and progressive global values and thoughts.

Expression of Appreciation:

And in that context, I would like to begin by thanking our friends in the international community that have steadfastly stood by Bangladesh and its people during the last 5 years in our government's journey towards building a democratic, pluralist, tolerant and secular knowledge-based society, pursuing a robust economic growth and poverty reduction performance. All of you who are present here today, our friends who have resident Missions in Bangladesh and those of you that have not, our tested partner, the United Nations, let me reaffirm that the newly elected Government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina appreciates your sustained cooperation and engagement with Bangladesh through various episodes of celebration and dejection of our vibrant nation including the challenging months preceding the 10th parliamentary elections. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is grateful to all those countries that have felicitated her and her government for successful election to office.

Excellencies, we look forward to your continued support and friendship to the Government and people of Bangladesh as we aspire to continue making our mark in the international development discourse and maintain our active contribution to international peace and security as a responsible member of the comity of nations. The Government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina having assumed office on 11 January 2014 given an electoral mandate in the 05 January parliamentary elections, would continue to add impetus to the momentum of growth generated during the past 5 years that has put Bangladesh firmly on an irreversible track of change. Our second term would be marked by realization of promises we made in our 2014 election manifesto: "Marching Ahead, Bangladesh: Road to Peace, Democratic Development and Prosperity."

We appreciate the positive interest taken by our friends in the international community in the recent situation leading to the elections, and the views, concerns and suggestions that they have shared with us mostly in a constructive manner. We consider this to be part of a process of a healthy dialogue and engagement with our international friends and partners, and would continue to encourage this trend. Such engagement would perhaps be even more imperative in the current post-election scenario.

Constitutionality of the Elections:

We appreciate the fact that many of you in your post-election comments have duly recognized the constitutional obligation for holding the 10th Parliamentary election in Bangladesh. Soon after Bangladesh's independence, the Awami League Government had offered the nation a Constitution that was considered to be ahead of its time in many respects, and was firmly grounded in the values and ethos of our War of Liberation in 1971. It would, therefore, challenge the Awami League's legacy and credibility as one of the foremost political organisations in the Sub-continent to allow for any transgression from the Constitution that undermines its sanctity and the fundamental principles of our State Policies and Statehood enshrined in it. It is our unwavering commitment to the Constitution and the inalienable democratic ideals for which so many of our ranks and file have given up their lives that led Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to steer the nation towards the successful holding of the 10th Parliamentary Election on 05 January 2014. It would be obvious to any discerning observer that it was the independent and empowered Election Commission that conducted the election being in the driver's seat only after having conducted 5828 elections completely free of controversy over the past 5 years many of which were won by Opposition BNP. The all-Party, election time Government extended all possible cooperation to the Commission at the latter's behest to ensure free, fair, impartial and largely non-violent election.

BNP's Election Boycott and Violent Resistance:

As you are well aware, the 18 Party Alliance led by the BNP-Jamaat combine made it a point to stay out of the election at any cost. When the ground was all set for elections, they vowed to sabotage the elections through open terrorist acts, arson, blockades and indiscriminate violence against civilians, including women, children and minorities. Thanks to the decisive role played by the Election Commission in the face of many provocations, and the vigilance maintained by the law enforcement apparatus, the elections were held in a peaceful manner in most places in the country. It was perhaps no mean feat that the elections had to be postponed only in 3 per cent of the polling centres across the country due to the senseless violence and arson attacks by the BNP-Jamaat miscreants. The Election Commission has already mobilized the law enforcement and security agencies to ensure that people in the remaining 7 constituencies, where re-polling is taking place today, can exercise their voting rights without fear of persecution or intimidation. The Bangladesh Army has been asked to

remain on the ground till 19 January 2014 to ensure public order and security during and in the aftermath of re-polling at these centres.

BNP-Jamaat Terrorist Acts, specially Attacks on Minority Communities:

And, in this context, Excellencies, we share the concerns expressed by some of our international friends over the unfortunate and vicious face of violence unleashed before and after the elections by the BNP-Jamaat combine. They had resorted to creating a reign of terror by setting alight buses with on-board passengers and lorries with cows, murdering law enforcement personnel and election officers, persecuting and killing Awami League activists, intimidating activists from other political parties, committing arson on school buildings, and felling trees on highways. Their tactic was to bring the entire nation including lives of common people, businesses and children's education to a standstill with blockades and violence and thereby force the Government to bend down to their unconstitutional, illegal demands for holding elections under a non-party, caretaker government system. This was coupled with their pressure tactic to halt the ongoing war crimes trials and to set at large those charged and indicted by the Tribunals for committing Crimes against Humanity.

And, yet what hurts us most as the party that led Bangladesh to its independence in 1971 to witness to our utmost horror, the repetition of the episodes that we had seen in this country in the past. In the immediate aftermath of the elections on 05 January 2014, the BNP-Jamaat has re-enacted their vile, old tactic to vent their anger and frustration by attacking the religious and ethnic minorities, again in some identified parts of the country. It appears that the same forces that remained opposed to Bangladesh's inclusive, secular identity forged through our War of Liberation, and nurtured through sustained political and cultural movements led by Bangladesh Awami League, still continue to haunt our harmonious socio-cultural fabric and tend to attack it whenever they find an opportunity. We appreciate international community's unqualified rejection of the senseless violence committed against minorities by BNP-Jamaat alliance, and reiteration of their continued support to our stand that violence cannot be an acceptable norm in democracy or democratic protests.

BNP's Rejection of Dialogue and the Election results:

Excellencies, all this could have been averted and an inclusive and fully contested election could have been held only if the BNP had been genuine in responding to the various overtures of the Government for peaceful dialogue and participation in the 10th polls since months before the elections. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina reached out to the then Leader of the Opposition repeatedly with a number of constructive and innovating offers to address the stalemate on the question of the election-time Government. However, it became apparent that the more the Prime Minister created space for the Opposition to enter into a meaningful dialogue within the Constitutional framework to form consensus on the issue of the election-time Government, the more hardened the Opposition's stance turned out to be in its outright rejection of any offer

by the Government. As time went, the Opposition could hardly match the constructive offers made by the Prime Minister, and in order to cover up for their inability relentlessly chose the path of terrorism, violence, arson, subversion and shutdowns.

At the end the Opposition's intransigence on the issue of the caretaker government system, despite their own admission of its inherent loopholes and real possibilities of abuse as we had seen earlier, stood as an obstacle to inclusive elections. The result has been a somewhat diminished election, where voter turn out at nearly 40% has definitely not been in conformity with the electoral tradition in Bangladesh. However, in the face of blatant threats and acts of violence by the BNP-Jamaat, the fact that the votes could at all take place, and that in some areas, the voter presence was as high as 50 - 70% is quite a remarkable achievement. It was indeed somewhat disappointing for all of us that candidates had to be declared elected uncontested in 153 seats. But, again, with a foremost political party such as the Awami League fielding candidates without any major opponents to reckon with is bound to lead to a situation such as this. The fact that candidates from different political parties out of the 12 that took part in the election for the 139 seats have emerged victorious in the elections on 05 January 2014, including a fairly good number of independent candidates, validates the credibility and impartiality of the elections.

The Way Forward: Government's Fresh Overtures for Dialogue

Excellencies, be as it may, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in keeping with her tradition of championing dialogue, and as part of her forward-looking strategy for reinstalling an inclusive pluralist polity, has in her post-election speech to the media has already made fresh offers to sit for dialogue with the BNP to arrive at a shared understanding on the modalities for conducting the next general elections within the Constitutional parameters. However, she has also cautioned that the BNP must genuinely prove its willingness to engage with the Government in purposeful dialogue. To our mind, as affirmed by the Prime Minister, this can only happen provided the BNP decided to shun the path of violence and subversion, and also disentangle itself from the clutches of Jamaat.

We are encouraged by some vibes from the BNP leadership about their interest in pursuing the path of dialogue with the Government and their decision to withdraw their programme of blockades in the aftermath of the election. We hope that such decisions and pronouncements by the BNP would help pave the way for dialogue with the Government in a peaceful atmosphere sooner than later. While we take in positive stride BNP Chairperson's announcement of some peaceful political programmes and her call for dialogue and understanding from her press briefing yesterday, we remain disappointed that she has once again put all blame for violence, including those against the minority communities, squarely on the Government.

Immediate Post-Election Priorities for the Government:

Let me now reflect on some of the post-election priorities of our government in our current tenure.

Law and Order:

The Prime Minister has already made it categorically clear that one of our foremost responsibilities would be to restore law and order and normalcy in public life and the economy. Reconstructing the schools and educational institutions that have been torched and destroyed by the BNP-Jamaat immediately prior to the election is also a priority. Efforts have already started to this effect. Similarly, the Government has decided to rebuild the households and places of worship belonging to the affected religious minority communities. The Prime Minister has personally decided to pay compensation to those who lost their near and dear ones to extremist attacks and is scheduled to visit some of the affected areas to reaffirm her Government's unequivocal commitment to safeguard our minorities. The Government would leave no stone unturned to bring the real culprits to book, and would draw from our experience in Ramu to help heal the trauma and agony suffered by our religious and ethnic minorities in different parts of the country. The number of Law enforcement personnel have been nearly doubled in these areas such as in Dinajpur and Jessore .

Protection of Life and Property:

Excellencies, with a clean slate at hand, we would like to state categorically that the Government has no interest in creating any constraints for the Opposition to pursue their **legitimate, peaceful political programmes** in keeping with our firm commitment to freedom of assembly and peaceful protests. However, as a Government elected to office with people's mandate, we must give primacy to saving public life and property from the BNP-Jamaat's wanton destructive activities. The Prime Minister, in her post-election Statement has also categorically instructed the administration and law enforcement agencies to maintain zero-tolerance towards any form of terrorist and violent acts and take stern action against terrorist and extremist elements within the strict bounds of law. It is with the overwhelming support of our people, we would continue to hold up the morale of our law enforcement agencies, and put people's safety and law and order first in the agenda cut out for our new Government.

Election manifesto 2014: Strengthening Democratic Processes and Forging National Consensus

The formation of a dynamic Cabinet by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina with a combination of veteran and young faces has evoked people's confidence in the new Government's ability to deliver on the promises made. As clearly stated in our 2014 election manifesto a copy of which we have circulated to you along with the speech by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, as a pro-people Government, we would continue to redouble our efforts with renewed vigour to further consolidating our Statutory Bodies in order for them to act as effective watchdogs over our democratic institutions and

practices. Strengthening good governance, devolution of power to elected local bodies, and their further democratization as well as consolidating rule of law and the judiciary and curbing corruption will be a top priority. The Trials of the War Criminals will continue uninterrupted and independently and every bid to foil the trials will be brought to justice. We shall continue to attach high priority to forging national consensus on issues of core national interest across the entire political spectrum and civil society. The political and ideological fault-lines in our society that have resulted in a fractured polity need to be addressed in the larger interest of our nation and its future generations. This would be, not doubt, a painstaking and time-consuming process, but strive we must.

On Foreign Policy:

In terms of our foreign policy conduct, we shall continue to uphold our inalienable mantra of “Friendship to all, malice towards none”, as invoked by our Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. We once again profoundly thank all friendly Governments and international organisations that have felicitated our newly elected Government, and also those that have reiterated their commitment to working together with our Government to promote our shared values and mutual interests. We shall continue to conduct our mutually beneficial bilateral relations with all friendly countries based on the principles of respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity and non-interference in internal matters to deepen political, economic and trade relations.

We shall also continue to further broaden our active engagements and contributions to various regional and multilateral fora, including the United Nations. The overriding message that I wish to leave with you all is that the new Government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina remains ready for business with the mandate of our people, and would look forward to working with all concerned to conclude some of the unfinished tasks in our hand, and to add further new depth and dimension to our ever expanding international relations. Our Government also remains committed to continue with our principled and effective stand against all forms of terrorism, extremism and radicalisation. We have not, and shall never allow our territory to be used for harbouring terrorist or extremist elements. Bangladesh’s achievements in combating terrorism and financing of terrorism during the last five years have been a game-changer in our region. We shall continue to pursue that agenda in a determined and uncompromising manner.

Bangladesh is now ready to assume its rightful place in the Asian century, and lead the way by example for resource-constrained, geographically vulnerable and climatically challenged least developed countries around the world towards sustainable development and long term prosperity. Inspired by Bangabandhu’s vision for a “Sonar Bangla” – a Golden Bengal – Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has laid out a blueprint for a developed and prosperous Bangladesh by 2041. We would need the international community on our side to realize that Vision in an increasingly globalized world. The Government and people of Bangladesh have proven that we can deliver tangible results

and performance in our economic, social and development paradigms—impressive by any standard in a comparable milieu – drawing on meaningful cooperation from our international partners. Now, it is time for us to continue to work together with the international community to take us towards the next level in our democracy and development trajectory. We believe a peaceful, democratically stable, and socially, economically and environmentally sound Bangladesh would prove to be an asset for South Asia, the Asia Pacific, and the world in general. We seek your support in making that happen.

I thank you all.
