



**Report of the Canadian Parliamentary Delegation
on the Bilateral Visit to Bangladesh and India**

**Canadian Branch of the
Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA)**

**Dhaka, Bangladesh and Calcutta, India
March 8 - 16, 2013**

Report

A delegation of the Canadian Branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association visited Bangladesh and India from March 8 – 16, 2013. Mr. Russ Hiebert, M.P., Chair of the Canadian Branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, led the delegation composed of Hon. Nancy Ruth, Senator, Hon. Mobina Jaffer, Senator, Mr. Ed Holder, M.P., and Ms. Jinny Sims, M.P. The delegation was assisted by Ms. Elizabeth Kingston, Executive Secretary of the Federal Branch.

Dhaka, Bangladesh

The CPA constitution encourages visits between member countries with the objective of giving parliamentarians the opportunity to discuss matters of common interest in bilateral relations and issues within the international Commonwealth organization. The objective of the visit to Bangladesh centred around the values of the Commonwealth Charter as recently adopted in full by the Commonwealth and signed by her Majesty the Queen, and particularly matters related to human rights, the rule of law, civil society and the development of trade relations between the two countries. Moreover, as Bangladesh is recognized by Canada as a country of focus based on its level of need, its demonstrated ability to achieve its goals, and on Canada's capacity to make a real difference, the delegation concentrated much of its efforts in visiting various CIDA funded initiatives with a view to assessing the impact derived from such investments.

Bangladesh is home to approximately 156,000,000 people, giving this lowa-sized nation the eighth highest population in the world, with a population density of almost 3,000 per square mile.

Population growth has slowed dramatically, however, thanks to a fertility rate that has fallen from 6.33 live births per adult woman in 1975 to 2.74 in 2007. Bangladesh also is experiencing net out-migration.

Bangladesh first proclaimed its independence on March 26, 1971 and eventually achieved such in December 1917. Its struggle for independence as a sovereign nation dates back to 1947, when India declared its independence from Britain and at that time, Pakistan, which included what is now Bangladesh was partitioned from India along religious (Muslim – Hindu) and communal lines. The new Muslim state however, faced a dramatic problem of geography, with East Pakistan being separated from the four western provinces by about 1,000 km of Indian territory a well as language, with Urdu being spoken in West Pakistan and Bengla in East Pakistan. These two factors were the driving forces in declaring the independence movement in what is now Bangladesh.

In 1970, the Awami league, the leading party in East Pakistan and an advocate for autonomy for the East, unexpectedly won a majority of seats in both national and provincial elections. While negotiations for a constitutional compromise between East and West Pakistan then took place, they broke down and the country's President then

suspended the session at the National Assembly. This suspension then led to a formed civil disobedience movement with activities such as refusal to pay taxes, general strikes and other forms of protest. This in turn led to civil war in March 1971 when East Pakistan declared its independence. Both the government and the western part of the country refused to accept this declaration of independence and civil war ensued, with over a million East Pakistanis being killed and another 10 million fleeing to India. India officially recognized the new state of Bangladesh in December 1971. At the time, the increased tension between India and Pakistan resulted in the Indian forces siding with the Bangladeshis, leading to a retreat by the Pakistanis in their fight to retain East Pakistan as part of its territory.

With Bangladesh finally declaring its independence in December 1971, the previous president of the Awami league, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was released from prison where he had been held since 1966 for advocating independence for East Pakistan. He became Prime Minister and after seven months a constitution was formally adopted, coming into effect in December 1972. He is often referred to as the founding father of the nation.

In the summer months of 1974, Bangladesh endured severe flooding which led to famine and cholera, leaving thousands dead. What ensued was a period of near anarchy, leading to the declaration of a state of emergency and a revision of the Constitution providing for a presidential system of government and a one-party state. Critics of the Rahman administration and journalists were imprisoned. In August 1975, a group of right-wing military officers mounted a coup and attacked the home of President Rahman, killing him, his wife and five of his daughters. The present Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina Wajed, one of Rahman's daughters survived the attack as she was not home at the time. The delegation had the unique opportunity to meet with her while in Dhaka.

The political history of Bangladesh, despite it being such a young nation, has been characterized by a series of traumatic events ranging from attempted coups, constitutional amendments and at times uncertainty, a host of natural disasters and another notable assassination, that of General Jiaur Rahman (Zia). President Zia was confirmed as president in May 1977, won a presidential election in 1978, then killed in May 1981. The delegation had the opportunity to meet with his wife, Begum Khaleda Zia, Leader of the Opposition.

The People's Republic of Bangladesh is a parliamentary democracy, with the president as chief of state, and prime minister as head of government. It was in August 1991 that the Constitution was revised to provide for a parliamentary rather than a presidential form of government, in effect giving more executive power to the prime minister, who at the time was Begum Zia.

The president is elected to a 5-year term, and may serve two terms in total. All citizens over 18 years of age can vote.

The unicameral parliament is called the *Jatiya Sangsad*; its 300 members also serve 5-year terms. There are also 50 seats reserved for women. The president officially appoints the prime minister, but he or she must be the representative of the majority coalition in parliament.

The current president is Zillur Rahman, while Bangladesh's Prime Minister is Sheikh Hasina. The Awami league (AL) has an absolute majority, with 230 seats, while the main opposition Bangladesh National Party (BNP) has 30 seats.

Parliamentary elections were held until 2011 under a non-party caretaker government, headed by the immediate-past Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. This system was dropped following a Supreme Court order declaring it illegal. This has in turn led to political discord between the AL and the BNP. The BNP has boycotted Parliament like the AL did while it was in opposition. Both parties have a history of making demands through causing rancor in the streets rather than sitting in Parliament, thereby leaving the institution of Parliament virtually non-functioning.

The Parliament was designed by architect, Louis Khan, an American, in 1975 and is one of the largest legislative complexes in the world, comprising some 200 acres, and is described as one of the twentieth's century's most significant buildings. The delegation was most impressed by the scope of the building and its grounds, which houses all members of parliament as well as staff persons.

While at the Parliament, the delegation met with the Speaker, Abdul Hamid, as well as the Chief Whip, Abdus Shahid. Delegation members thanked them both for their hospitality and expressed the importance that Bangladesh holds for Canada and its ongoing commitment to supporting its democratic institutions. Concern was expressed with the lack of attendance of the opposition parties in the Parliament, and the need to strive for good governance, a properly functioning parliament, all within the context of a vibrant civil society. Delegates hoped that the upcoming elections would be free, fair and transparent, with all parties participating and acting in good faith.

While in Dhaka, the delegation had heard of bouts of unrest in the streets leading up to the elections. These disturbances were enough to prompt the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Honourable John Baird to issue a statement condemning the violence and loss of life and to urge citizens of Dhaka to respect the rights of freedom of expression and of assembly in a peaceful and democratic manner.

The delegation held a meeting with High Commissioners and Ambassadors from six different countries, ranging from the United States of America, to Denmark, Norway, Australia and the United Kingdom. It allowed for a full exchange of ideas and information from the perspective of like-minded countries and allowed the delegation to explore fully the initial perceptions and present political turmoil that was present at the time of the visit.

In addition to visiting the Parliament, the delegation travelled to the garment district, whereby it had a tour of the Shahriyar Fabric Industries Ltd., a subsidiary of Gildan Activewear Inc. of Canada. This represents Gildan's first venture outside of the Americas and the factory stands out as a model for what other factories in the garment district should be. It has clearly demonstrated industry-leading labour and environmental practices, and provides comprehensive medical services as well as a free lunch to their employees each day. Bangladesh was selected as a strategic location for Gildan's foray into the Asian manufacturing hub, offering a low cost and high quality production base for its target markets.

While in Dhaka, the delegation also visited the IFAD Multi Products Ltd. Wheat Factory, which is a routine buyer of Canadian wheat for its wheat processing and flour milling. The factory is recognized as one of the largest consumer food producers in Bangladesh, producing instant noodles, biscuits and cookies, packaged whole spices and bottled water. It also is a leader in the promotion of health and well-being of its workers, in the empowerment of women and in environmental protection.

in Dhaka, the delegation then had the opportunity to visit a BRAC school in the Korail Slum. BRAC (Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee) is an international development organization based in Bangladesh, and the largest non-governmental development organization in the world, measured by the number of employees and the number of people it has helped, as of November 2012. Established by Sir Fazle Hasan Abed in 1972 soon after the independence of Bangladesh, BRAC is present in all 64 districts of Bangladesh as well as in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Uganda, Tanzania, South Sudan, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Haiti and The Philippines as of 2012.

BRAC employs over 100,000 people, roughly 70 percent of who are women, reaching more than 126 million people. The BRAC primary school is a model for the BRAC education program, which strives to address issues of access to and quality of education for children and youth in Bangladesh. The program serves to provide quality basic education to over 2 million children including ethnic minorities and children with special needs, operating some 30,000 pre-primary and 33,000 primary schools, rigorous teacher training, as well as 7000 adolescent centres.

Also visited was the Central Cold Storage Facility for the Expanded Program of Immunization (EPI) based in Dhaka. This CIDA funded project works to reduce the deaths of children under 5 years of age throughout Bangladesh by providing vaccines throughout the country, targeting specifically undeserved areas. This project is part of the Canadian International Immunization Initiative (CIII) that works to increase the availability of immunization services for children at risk of contracting preventable and often fatal illnesses in low income countries.

While in Dhaka, the delegation had the opportunity to meet with the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina. The delegation was informed of the tragic history of her family and her father's role in the founding of the nation of Bangladesh in 1971. All delegation members were then kindly presented with a book of his memoirs. Delegation members discussed Canada's contribution of \$4.3 billion in assistance with

Bangladesh being one of CIDA's countries of focus. The delegation also expressed its strong relationship with Bangladesh built upon shared values of democracy and pluralism and its close ties as members of the Commonwealth. In upholding the principles of the Commonwealth and in its present role as Chair of CMAG (Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group) the delegation also called upon Bangladesh to discuss with its Sri Lankan colleagues the concern expressed of continued lack of improvement in the area of human rights following its civil war.

The delegation also had the opportunity to meet with the leader of the Opposition, Bebum Khaleda Zia. Delegates re-affirmed their message of encouraging Bangladesh to be a robust and inclusive democratic society and would hope that all parties would work towards peacefully resolving the growing divisions in Bangladeshi society.

While in Dhaka, the delegation also attended a Commonwealth Day reception hosted by the Canadian High Commissioner, Heather Cruden, in conjunction with the High Commissioners of the United Kingdom and Australia. During the reception, the delegation Chair Russ Hiebert addressed the gathering as well as the Chair of CMAG, the Bangladeshi Foreign Minister Dipu Moni.

The aims and objectives of the visit to Dhaka, Bangladesh, namely to explore the strong array of programs offered in support of Canada's role to improve the livelihood of citizens of Bangladesh, to explore expanding trade opportunities for Canadian investors, and to examine the differences between the Bangladesh parliamentary system and the Canadian system were all successfully achieved and deepened the understanding of all parliamentarians with respect to the enormous challenges facing the country especially from a social, democratic, and infrastructure perspective.

Kolkata, India.

Following a most successful visit to Dhaka Bangladesh, the delegation then travelled to Kolkata, India as part of its continued mandate of fostering trade relations between Canada and India and the goal of reaching \$15 billion in trade opportunities between the two countries by 2015.

Kolkata, formerly known as Calcutta in English, is the capital of the Indian state of West Bengal and is located in eastern India on the east bank of the River Hooghly, a tributary of the Ganges River. The city was a colonial city developed by the British East India Company and then by the British Empire. Kolkata was the capital of the British Indian Empire until 1911 when the capital was relocated to Delhi. Kolkata grew rapidly in the 19th century to become the second most important city of the British Empire.

While in Kolkata, the delegation met with the Indian Chamber of Commerce, Kolkata. The discussion was most informative and wide-ranging and included the notion that Canada may be used as a gateway for doing business throughout North America. The theme of the Economic Partnership Agreement was highlighted with the expectation that trade between Canada and India is expected to reach \$15 billion by 2015. It is incumbent on industries in a multitude of sectors to partake in this wealth and

productivity growth and especially within the realm of the Commonwealth, where principles of democracy, human rights and the rule of law are paramount to the constitutional make-up of all member countries. The delegation then met with the Canadian Honourary Consul and reiterated the tremendous opportunities for Canada in all sectors of the economy, including technological and education exchanges as well as tourism, agriculture, information technology and infrastructure. The discussion also stressed the geographically strategic importance of the northeast region of India, with 98% of its borders neighbouring on Bangladesh, Myanmar, China, Bhutan and Nepal, in essence very much a gateway to ASEAN countries.

Delegates also travelled to the port of Kolkata. This port was the principal port in India until the 1970's, and has since slipped to number 7 in importance. With the Ganges 400 km from Kolkata, it has relied on dredging to bring in the larger ships, and has counted on federal funding to provide for this. Due to the build-up of sediment and sand dunes, there is an annual need for 100\$ million USD for dredging alone and this money has not been forthcoming. It has now been described as more of a backwater of the sea than the sea itself.

While in Kolkata, the delegation had the opportunity to visit the Victoria Memorial. This magnificent memorial was initiated by Lord Curzon, then Viceroy to India in 1901, and finally completed in 1906. It is described as a stately, spacious monumental and grand building surrounded by an exquisite garden.

The delegation was also reminded of the Komagata Maru incident while in Kolkata. This Japanese ship departed from the port of Kolkata, with 354 passengers from India, mostly Sikhs on board. These passengers unsuccessfully attempted to immigrate to Canada, believing they had the right to enter Canada, being British subjects. If citizenship in the British Empire meant anything, they should have been able to travel anywhere within the empire freely. Unfortunately this was not the case, given immigration laws in Canada at the time, and the boat with all its passengers was forced to depart from the port of Vancouver and return to India. This has historically been a difficult point in Indo-Canada relations.

The delegation also had the unique opportunity to visit the Mother Theresa Mission House and orphanage while in Kolkata and were most impressed by the depth of compassion of the Sisters of Charity in making better lives for so many who would otherwise perished under the most desperate conditions of poverty. The Society of Missionaries of Charity was officially established in the Archdiocese of Calcutta in 1950. The work of the Sisters demonstrates in a mood of daily living the greatness and dignity of every human person, the value of little things done faithfully, and the power of God's love.

The objectives of the visit to Kolkata, namely to emphasize the importance of the bilateral relationship in terms of common values, shared regional and global concerns, a growing trade and investment partnership and strong people-to-people ties; and advance Canadian economic interests in India with a focus on trade and investment, tourism, agriculture, information technology, education, business and infrastructure

were all met. Delegates very much appreciated the opportunity to discuss the breadth of trade and investment opportunities in West Bengal and to witness the tremendous wealth of history that this part of India boasts.

In closing, the delegation would also like to express its appreciation to the High Commissioner Heather Cruden and dedicated staff at the Canadian High Commission in Dhaka Bangladesh as well as the High Commission staff in New Delhi. The delegation members all very much appreciated the valuable advice and assistance in arranging the meetings throughout the visit.

Respectfully submitted,

Mr. Russ Hiebert, M.P.
Canadian Branch of the
Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA)

Travel Costs

ASSOCIATION	Canadian Branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA)
ACTIVITY	Bilateral visit to Bangladesh and India
DESTINATION	Dhaka, Bangladesh and Kolkata, India
DATES	March 8 - 16, 2013
DELEGATION	
SENATE	Senator Nancy Ruth, Senator Mobina Jaffer
HOUSE OF COMMONS	Mr. Russ Hiebert, M.P., Mr. Ed Holder, M.P., Ms. Jinny Sims, M.P.
STAFF	Ms. Elizabeth Kingston, Executive Secretary
TRANSPORTATION	\$75,480.37
ACCOMMODATION	\$8,014.78
HOSPITALITY	\$27.95
PER DIEMS	\$4,199.81
OFFICIAL GIFTS	\$1,005.87
MISCELLANEOUS / REGISTRATION FEES	\$81.48
TOTAL	\$88,810.26