

Celebrating the end of voter registration in Bangladesh

Radisson Water Garden Hotel

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Speech by Ms Renata Dessallien

UN Resident Coordinator and UNDP Resident Representative

Honourable Chief Adviser, Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed

Honourable Speaker

Honourable Members of Cabinet

Honourable Chief Election Commissioner, Dr. ATM Shamsul Huda and the two respected Election Commissioners

Honourable Chief of Army Staff, General Moeen U Ahmed and Chiefs of Navy and Air Staff

Civil and military government high officials

Representatives from Media

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

Assalamu Alaikum and good afternoon.

We have come together today to congratulate the Government and people of Bangladesh for a truly historic achievement: the successful, on-time registration of over 80 million voters, with digital photographs and finger prints.

This is a proud day for Bangladesh. If there were a Nobel Prize for voter lists, Bangladesh would be the clear winner!

Never before, in any other country, have so many people been electronically registered in such a short time.

This in itself is an outstanding achievement. But it is not only the immense scale of the undertaking that is so impressive. So is the accuracy of the list. Modern technology enabled the elimination of duplicate and fraudulent entries, and will significantly reduce the occurrence of vote theft.

The people of Bangladesh can feel proud that their 2008 voter list is world class quality. It compares favourably not only with other developing countries, but also with many developed nations.

One year ago, many of us said it could not be done. Since smaller countries had taken years to complete voter registration with photographs and some had even given up along the way,

we thought Bangladesh would also fail. Registration of 80 million voters in 12 months was simply impossible, we said.

Fortunately, the government did not listen to the sceptics. And through Herculean resolve, ingenious trouble-shooting, meticulous planning, and excellent cooperation among many actors, Bangladesh completed its photo voter roll on time.

The challenges were huge and many. Some 10,000 laptops, webcams and finger print scanners had to be procured. Close to half a million election workers had to be enlisted and trained; 90,000 voter registration centres across the country had to be established. Equipment had to be configured, transported, maintaining, and relocated from one corner of the country to the other, often in areas without power.

Voter registration teams and their civil society partners went to extraordinary lengths to ensure every eligible person who wished to register, made it onto the list. From the SIDR affected areas in the southwest, to the tea gardens in the north, across all the Island Chars down to St. Martin's Island, the legion of dedicated election workers spared no effort to get the job done.

Enumerators in the Chittagong Hill Tracts walked for hours in rugged terrain to reach remote communities, carrying heavy generators with them. Helicopters and boats were mobilized to reach the most remote areas. People with no fixed residency, people in jail, people in hospitals, the disabled and the infirm -- everyone eligible was included. It truly is a voter list for the people and by the people.

The key to this outstanding achievement was threefold: excellent organisation, great cooperation, and unshakable determination. Many people and institutions were involved in preparing the 2008 voter list. Had they not been well organised, had they not cooperated well together, and had they not possessed unflinching resolve, we would not be celebrating the completion of registration today. The 2008 voter list proves, once again, that when the people of Bangladesh put their mind to a task, nothing can stop them. When they come together and cooperate, they achieve miracles.

Just as the voter list was prepared through this extraordinary, nation-wide determined cooperation, we hope all actors will demonstrate the same spirit of cooperation to usher in a more sustainable democracy for which this country yearns. We all hope and pray that the quality of the electoral outcome will match the quality of the voter list.

We congratulate the Chief Election Commissioner and his two Commissioners for their visionary leadership, their relentless determination and their strong engagement throughout the process. We congratulate the Secretary of the Commission, the Project Director, the entire staff of the Election Commission, the ERD Secretary and his staff, and other cooperating ministries for their vital contributions, sparing no efforts to get the job done well. We congratulate local government officials at Divisional, District and Upazila level across the country for their relentless assistance.

We congratulate the Chief of Army Staff and the Chiefs of Staff of the Navy and Air Force, and all members of the Armed Forces who made this extraordinary service to the nation. I would be totally remiss if I did not mention the outstanding, behind-the-scenes, 24/7 contribution of Military Secretary Maj Gen Shafique, who saw this effort through thick and

thin, right from the start. Without the professional support of the Armed Forces, the nation's 2008 voter list would not have been possible.

We congratulate the civil society and local voluntary groups and the tens of thousands of enumerators who mobilised people to register, familiarised them with the new procedures and ensured local conditions and social concerns were taken into account.

We thank the development partners, who generously contributed not only financial resources, but also their valuable moral support and encouragement for this special project -- Denmark, EC, Republic of Korea, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, and the UK.

Finally, we congratulate the people of Bangladesh. They deserve a great voter list, and now they have it. This voter list is for them.

Congratulations to all. Congratulations Bangladesh!

Thank you.