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Statement
Of
His Excellency
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Mr. President,

I would like to take this opportunity to convey my delegation's sincerest congratulations on your well-deserved election. A special tribute is due to Her Excellency Sheikha Haya Rashed Al Khalifa and to Secretary-General Mr. Ban Ki-moon for their visionary and dedicated leadership.

Mr. President,

Recent events in Bangladesh have evoked considerable interest worldwide, as we struggle to fulfill the promise of democracy for our people. I will take this opportunity to share with the global community some of our recent experiences in consolidating democracy. We have learned that democracy is not an event, it is an ongoing process. It is not just about casting votes and changing governments; it is about social justice, accountability and empowerment of the people.

Those who have followed events in Bangladesh over the past few months will know that the Caretaker Government came into office in January this year amidst a political stalemate. The fabric of our democracy had been torn apart by years of catastrophic corruption. Widespread frustration with the status-quo led to a rising tide of political violence. This in turn disrupted ordinary life and shattered all public confidence in the possibility of credible elections. Moreover, there was little hope that a tainted election could have ended the cycle of violence. A State of Emergency was therefore declared on January 11 of this year in an effort to end the ongoing chaos and to usher in a new beginning.

Mr. President,

As stipulated in our Constitution, the non-party caretaker administration acts as a bridge between successive political governments. Our

task, first and foremost, is to ensure a free and fair election, and we are fully committed to that responsibility. However, our nation has learned through harsh experience that an election cannot simply be a once-off casting of votes, but must be part of a dynamic and a continuing process whereby people freely choose their leaders. While Bangladesh has held three elections in the past two decades, our democracy has been brutally undermined by ruinous corruption. The lack of systemic institutional safeguards allowed corruption to run rampant. This created a “winner-takes-all” electoral system where the spoils of electoral victory were so great and the stakes of winning so high that the political process became hopelessly polarized, leading to a paralysis in even ordinary governance. As the benefits of winning elections increased, so did the costs of securing victory, creating a truly vicious cycle in which corruption was the lynchpin. Corruption thus became both the means to and the end of winning an election. If our democratic spirit is to emerge unscathed from this downward spiral and if we are to deliver a free, fair and meaningful election, we must first free our politics from the clutches of corruption and violence.

Mr. President,

Democracy and the rule of law are not merely concepts, but must be embodied in functioning public institutions. In Bangladesh, the very institutions which form the foundations of democracy have been eroded by ongoing corruption. Re-building these institutions and restoring public confidence through meaningful reforms is a Herculean task, but one in which we cannot and will not fail.

In Bangladesh, the task of conducting a free and fair election is the responsibility of the Election Commission. The Caretaker Government has

already over-hauled the Election Commission, guaranteeing its independence and giving it a broader mandate. The Election Commission, on its own accord, has announced a timeline for holding the next parliamentary election by the end of 2008. Our administration is committed to ensuring that this timeframe is achieved. We will bring to bear the full resources of the government in that effort.

Our government has re-organized the Anti-Corruption Commission to ensure that it can effectively lead the fight against corruption. We have given the Anti-Corruption Commission sweeping powers, including operational independence, not only to apprehend those who have been corrupt but also to work as a deterrent. Our Government acceded to the UN Convention against Corruption within a month of coming into office as a clear signal of our unwavering commitment against corruption. The implementation of the Convention will not only contribute to the reduction of corruption in Bangladesh, but will also help us recover the ill-gotten gains of corruption stored abroad. Those who engage in corruption must confront the reality that there is no safe haven. The world is united in the struggle against corruption, and today Bangladesh pledges itself as an active partner in that endeavour.

One of the most critical elements of a functioning democracy is an independent judiciary. In Bangladesh, the lower judiciary and criminal prosecution were traditionally under the Executive branch of the government, contrary to the constitutional principle of separation of powers. While judicial independence has been part of the political manifesto of successive governments over the past 15 years, each has repeatedly reneged on their public promises in this regard. Recognizing the importance of an independent judiciary to the rule of law, the Caretaker Government within its first month

in office initiated the necessary steps to fully separate the executive and judicial branches of the government. We have also revamped the National Public Service Commission and the University Grants Commission in order to restore the apolitical nature of these important institutions.

Political parties are among the core constituents of democracy. Their accountability and true democratic character remain critically important for democracy to function. In response to demands of the people, the main political parties have themselves initiated various reforms, and the revamped parties will interact with the revitalized institutions of the government to move our nation forward.

Mr. President,

Bangladesh reaffirms its unflinching commitment to universal and inalienable human rights. Any society committed to democracy requires the recognition and enforcement of human rights, and in Bangladesh the fight against corruption and the strengthening of the rule of law go hand in hand with the protection of human rights. The Caretaker Government has therefore taken the decision to establish a National Human Rights Commission to ensure that our laws and public institutions reflect international standards and norms of human rights. It is unfortunate that successive governments have shied away from taking this important step.

Mr. President,

Bangladesh remains resolute in its relentless campaign against international extremism and terrorism. We recently acceded to the International Convention for the Suppression of Acts of Nuclear Terrorism. Bangladesh is now a party to all terrorism-related UN conventions, a testament to our commitment to fighting terrorism in all its forms. On the

domestic front, we have taken stern measures against militant groups and their patrons. In particular, we categorically reject the claims of those who cloak themselves in the rhetoric of Islam to justify terrorism. Bangladesh is steadfast in its commitment to curb religious fundamentalism in all its manifestations.

Mr. President,

Our experience in re-instilling confidence in the government has a wider relevance to the international community. The problems that we are facing today are not unique to Bangladesh. After all, in the developing world democracy does not necessarily ensure good governance. Many countries face similar problems of political violence, mis-governance and corruption. This is particularly true for post-conflict and transition societies, where the politics of mistrust is pervasive. We feel that a greater understanding of our challenges, and more importantly, of our efforts to re-build political and social institutions can serve as benchmarks for others facing similar situations. For example, Bangladesh represents an effective model of civil-military cooperation in crisis prevention. Our experience in crisis management could be relevant for many crisis-torn, nascent democracies.

One way in which we can share our governance experience is through our robust presence in UN peacekeeping operations. We have consistently been one of the top troop contributing countries in the world, and our peacekeepers have earned accolades for their contribution. We are confident that Bangladesh will continue to play a leadership role in multi-dimensional peacekeeping efforts, and we are ready to provide "comprehensive deployment packages" in future peace operations. We also remain active in the UN's peace-building endeavours in post-conflict societies. We warmly

welcome the Secretary General's timely initiative to restructure the Department of Peacekeeping Operations. The world is witnessing a natural evolution from monitoring of peace to multidimensional tasks of peace building, democratization and development. As one of the largest troop contributing countries (TCCs), we strongly feel that the TCCs should have an equitable representation and play a greater role in deployment and other strategic decisions.

Mr. President,

The UN is in the midst of a continuing evolution. It is our collective responsibility to make the UN more relevant to the present day world, to fulfill the promise Dag Hammarskjöld spoke of when he said, "the day will come when men will see the UN and what it means clearly". The Secretary-General's report on system-wide coherence presents several useful recommendations in this connection. We, however, feel that the reform exercise should focus on the requirements of achieving the MDGs and we recognize that the speed of reform must be gradual. We must reflect upon what is needed by the UN, in terms of financial and human resources, to foster development. Keeping in mind that developing countries differ greatly in their political, administrative and social structures, the reform exercise must take into account this diversity and allow individual countries to determine the structure of the UN at the country level, the representation of different UN agencies and their country programmes. We must not undermine the identities of individual UN agencies, including their mandates, independence and institutional integrity.

Mr. President,

Earlier this week, we discussed the exceedingly important issue of climate change. The world leaders re-affirmed our shared commitment to

addressing the issue of global warming. Bangladesh is particularly vulnerable to global warming given that as much as 30 percent of our land will be submerged if the Bay of Bengal rises by just one meter. The adverse effects of global warming, deforestation and increased salinity are already evident in Bangladesh. Floods have become an annual calamity, and this year our people have suffered particularly severe losses due to flooding. While the resilience of our people and quick mobilization of our limited domestic resources helped us overcome the crisis this year, we envisage that this may become harder in the future. We, therefore, urge enhanced international cooperation to meet the challenges of global warming and its consequence.

Mr. President,

There is a growing acknowledgment that trade liberalization can be an effective tool for economic development. For the least developed countries (LDCs), the trade-to-GDP ratio averages about 58%, while it is roughly 25% for many OECD countries. These statistics show that the LDCs are far more dependent on trade than their developed counterparts. But Bangladesh, along with many other LDCs, is facing significant tariff and non-tariff barriers in accessing developed markets. Global trade regimes must provide unimpeded access to all products of LDCs, to ensure that the fruits of progress are shared by all.

Mr. President,

While representing a nation of 140 million people, squeezed into an area roughly the size of New York State, I must underscore the importance of migration to our development efforts. For many in Bangladesh, and in other developing countries, temporary labor migration provides a livelihood option and a route out of poverty. If we are to reduce poverty by half by 2015, we

must strengthen our efforts to ensure the free movement of labor. The international community is recognizing the critical linkages between migration and development. It is encouraging that the Global Forum on Migration and Development held in Brussels this July accorded migration its due priority. We must also intensify our efforts to defend the rights of migrant workers. We would also like to see momentum in the liberalization of Mode IV services. We call for renewed international efforts—at the WTO and in other forums—to facilitate the free movement of labor services.

Mr. President,

Let me conclude by reiterating my government's unswerving commitment to democracy and to the protection of human rights. We have pledged to put Bangladesh on a higher trajectory of good governance, rule of law and development. We are determined to hold a free, fair and meaningful election within the timeframe stipulated by our independent Election Commission, and to keep our country firmly on the path of democracy. My government is fully committed to ensuring that our reform initiatives are comprehensive and irreversible. Bangladeshis now stand united for a prosperous future for their country, and the world.

Thank you, Mr. President.

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