



99

Central Intelligence Agency



Washington, D. C. 20505

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

7 October 1983

Bangladesh: Ershad's Visit to the United States



25X1

Summary

The Chief Martial Law Administrator of Bangladesh, Lt. Gen. Hussain Mohammad Ershad, comes to Washington seeking to:

-- underscore the good relations that Bangladesh wants with the United States, a major aid donor, potential foreign investor, and possible protector in Bangladesh's difficult relations with India.

-- enhance his position domestically by demonstrating his acceptability to the United States.

25X1

General Ershad, who assumed power in March 1982 in a bloodless military coup, is trying to move his government toward civilian rule by becoming Bangladesh's next president in elections scheduled for March 1985. We believe Ershad has a good chance of remaining in power at least until then.

25X1



This memorandum was prepared by [redacted] South Asia Division, Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis, in preparation for General Ershad's upcoming visit. Information as of 3 October 1983 was used in preparation of this paper. Comments and queries are welcome and should be addressed to Chief, South Asia Division [redacted]

25X1

25X1

NESA M-83-10253

25X1



~~SECRET~~

SECRET

25X1

While in the United States, Ershad, in our view, will look for official US approval of his economic and governmental reforms. Ershad will appeal indirectly for an increase in US economic aid and may request additional US military assistance to Bangladesh but is not likely to press for modern weapon systems. During his visit, we believe Ershad will stress his anti-Soviet, pro-Western outlook and underscore Bangladesh's moderate position among nations of the Third World. [redacted]

25X1

Ershad, the Man

Ershad has come a long way toward being a viable national leader since his coup in March 1982, and we believe he is generally committed to improving the quality of life for Bangladeshis. The US Ambassador to Dhaka characterizes Ershad as a moderate and a pragmatist. Cautious, Ershad tends to float ideas but withdraws them later if reactions are negative. The US Embassy reports Ershad is learning to handle complex political issues, but he continues to react haltingly to problems, sometimes makes rash and emotional decisions, and is ill at ease when dealing with international topics. While Ershad is a devout Muslim and uses Islamic symbols for political purposes, he is no Islamic fundamentalist, according to the US Embassy. [redacted]

25X1

Ershad's Domestic Position

Ershad is striving to stabilize his country's chaotic politics and institutionalize his position. Effective political power has rested with the military since Ershad's coup, and Ershad is the most senior leader, and we judge the least controversial, among the other potential military contenders for power. The civilian president is only a figurehead. [redacted]

25X1

Ershad's political survivability remains vulnerable to dissatisfied elements in the military and, to a lesser extent, civilian political party and student activists. We believe Ershad, after national elections in March 1985, probably will become Bangladesh's next President. We surmise that disunity within and among the defunct political parties will preclude any major opposition movement, and a slight improvement in the still precarious economy will increase his chances of survival. [redacted]

25X1

25X1

Ershad has undertaken bold and positive reforms to tackle Bangladesh's enormous economic problems caused by a series of poor crops, previous weak economic management, and a poor climate for foreign trade, assistance, and investment. Ershad's economic

SECRET

25X1

strategy has emphasized reducing public-sector activity and an ambitious rural reform plan to attack poverty. The US Embassy reports the government's divestiture of the key jute and textile industries has boosted the confidence of Bangladesh industrialists, and that Bangladesh businessmen have started serious joint venture negotiations with US manufacturers of food products and equipment. [redacted]

25X1

Ershad emphasizes in public statements that a solution to the problem of an already large and rapidly increasing imbalance between the country's population and its limited natural resources is critical to long-term political and economic stability. In our view, ineffective and lethargic bureaucratic administration of the population program, lack of education, deeply ingrained social strictures, and the reluctance of a traditional Muslim society are the major barriers to a solution of the staggering population problem. [redacted]

25X1

Bangladesh's Foreign Relations

We believe Bangladesh's primary objectives are to ensure a continued flow of outside assistance and to maintain satisfactory relations with India. Ershad tends to overestimate the importance of Bangladesh to the United States, according to the US Embassy, and sees the US as a protector and patron in the sense of an aid donor and in offsetting Indian regional supremacy. [redacted]

25X1

[redacted] most Bangladeshis are deeply suspicious of India and tend to view problems in relations with New Delhi as a sign that India is attempting to undermine their government. According to the US Embassy, Ershad while distrusting India, recognizes the reality of Indian dominance. He has, in our view, tried to approach bilateral problems with moderation--to the point that some Bangladeshis consider him "soft on India." Probably in an attempt to counter this perception, Ershad recently has been publicly more critical of New Delhi. [redacted]

25X1

The most pressing bilateral problem with India that Ershad might surface while here is water sharing. Because Bangladesh's main rivers--the Ganges and Brahmaputra--enter the country through India, their technical management and control continue to be a sensitive political issue. President Carter in 1978 expressed a willingness to consider funding studies of water use in the region, providing the countries involved collectively requested such assistance. At present, we and US diplomats believe there is no likelihood of an agreed approach by India, Bangladesh, and Nepal. [redacted]

25X1

We believe Ershad will seek to present his government as anti-Soviet to US officials. Relations between Dhaka and Moscow have deteriorated since the assassination in 1975 of independence leader Sheikh Mujib. [redacted]

25X1

SECRET

25X1

[] we assess the Soviets are trying to exploit the fluid internal situation in Bangladesh by encouraging the leftist political parties to increase agitation against the regime of Ershad. Ultimately, we judge Soviet involvement with Bangladesh will be tempered by the USSR's more important relationship with India, which we believe would oppose the creation of a Marxist regime on its borders. []

25X1

25X1

Although, as a Muslim country, Bangladesh supports Arab positions on Middle East issues, the US Embassy notes that Bangladesh has worked to blunt extreme measures, notably the move to expel Israel from the UN General Assembly last year. The Embassy further reports that Bangladesh led the important early stand by the Islamic world against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. []

25X1

Importance of Bangladesh to the United States

Ultimately, Bangladesh plays a relatively minor role in US policy, and another government reshuffle or military coup probably would have little impact on immediate US priorities in South Asia. Nevertheless, another change in government, in our view, would counter what little postwar political and economic gains Bangladesh has made and undermine international confidence in the continuity of any future Bangladesh government. []

25X1

A sharp deterioration in Bangladesh's political and economic situation could affect US concerns in several ways:

- A political or economic breakdown could lead to the need for even larger doses of economic aid.
- Instability in Bangladesh could foment serious problems in India--given the tendency of Bangladeshis to seek refuge in that country's border states.
- Instability in Bangladesh could provide an opportunity for further Soviet meddling in the subcontinent. []

25X1

What Ershad Wants in Washington

Reporting from the US Embassy suggests Ershad comes to Washington for the positive impact he perceives his meeting with President Reagan and other high-level US government officials will have at home. We judge that Ershad is counting on his US visit to bolster his legitimacy in the eyes of his Bangladesh constituents, particularly the military. We believe the majority of the military will view Ershad's visit here favorably and that he will be able to enhance his stature and survivability over the next year in the wake of his trip. []

25X1

SECRET

25X1

We doubt Ershad will directly ask for an increase in US economic assistance, but he may appeal indirectly by asking for increased US economic aid to the group of poorest less developed countries, which includes Bangladesh. The US Embassy expects Ershad will speak to US officials about the achievements of international development assistance in Bangladesh and the need for its continuation. According to the Embassy, Ershad is anxious to improve prospects for trade between the United States and Bangladesh and to encourage US private investment. He is scheduled to meet with members of the US business community. []

25X1
25X1

We believe Ershad may use the perceived Indian threat to seek an expanded military relationship with the United States in order to build a more credible military force. The Embassy reports that Ershad would like additional training and foreign military sales credits. The Bangladeshis could effectively use only a small amount of new materiel because of inadequate training, poor maintenance, and command, control, and communications problems, according to our analysis. According to US Embassy sources, Bangladesh would be pleased to receive equipment, such as transport helicopters, that could be used in civilian activities as well as for national defense. []

25X1

We do not believe India regards Bangladesh as a military or political threat. Overcommitment of US military or political support to Bangladesh, however, would irritate New Delhi, in our view, and would be detrimental to US relations with India, a far more strategic South Asian country to overall US interests. []

25X1

25X1

SECRET

25X1

Bangladesh: Some Basic Facts about the Country


- Bangladesh is the world's eighth most populous nation and the most densely populated agricultural country in the world.
- Nearly 90 percent of Bangladeshis work in agriculture, primarily as subsistence farmers, or agriculture-related jobs.
- Bangladesh suffers from too many people on too little land. Some 96.5 million Bangladeshis live in a country the size of Wisconsin, and the population will double by the first decade of the next century.
- Most of the country is a flat alluvial plain that floods annually and has been characterized as old mud, new mud, and marsh.
- Most Bangladeshis are Bengali-speaking Muslims who live in rural villages of a few hundred to a thousand people.
- Bangladeshis have a literacy rate of only 23 percent, a yearly per capita income of \$120 and a life expectancy of 48 years.
- Bangladesh's independence of nearly 12 years was won after a bloody nine-month civil war between East and West Pakistan in 1971. Since then, three of the country's leaders have been assassinated and military coup attempts have been numerous.

25X1

SECRET



25X1

SUBJECT: Ershad's Visit to the United States 

25X1

External Distribution:

- 1 - Mr. Robert M. Kimmett, National Security Council Staff
- 1 - Mr. Harmon E. Kirby, Director, PAB, Bureau of Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs, Department of State
- 1 - Mr. Ronald Zwart, Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs, DOD/ISA
- 1 - Capt. Robert G. Anderson, Far East/South Asia Division, Plans and Policy Directorate, Joint Chiefs of Staff
- 1 - Mr. Peter Burleigh, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Department of State
- 1 - Ms. Shirin Tahir-Kheli, Policy Planning Staff, Department of State
- 1 - Mr. Jackson McDonald, Desk Officer (Bangladesh), Department of State
- 1 - Situation Room, The White House

SECRET

[Redacted]

25X1

SUBJECT: Ershad's Visit to the United States

[Redacted]

25X1

Internal Distribution:

Orig C/SO/P

- 1 - DDI
- 1 - DDI Registry
- 1 - C/DDO/NE
- 1 - C/DDO/NE [Redacted]
- 1 - C/DDO/NE [Redacted]
- 1 - SOVA/CS
- 1 - VC/NIC
- 1 - NIC/AG
- 1 - C/PES
- 1 - PDB Staff
- ✓ 1 - CPAS/IMD/CB
- 1 - CPAS Foreign Liaison Staff
- 1 - CIA Liaison Officer Treasury
- 1 - CIA Liaison Officer Commerce
- 1 - NIO/NESA
- 1 - D/NESA
- 1 - DD/NESA
- 2 - NESA/PS
- 1 - C/NESA/SO
- 1 - Chrono

25X1

DDI/NESA/SO/P [Redacted] (7 Oct 83)

25X1