

**CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR  
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**“THE ROLE OF BANGLADESH  
IN SOUTH ASIAN COOPERATION”**

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MS. SCHAFFER: Well good afternoon, again, ladies and gentlemen. This is a joint event hosted by Carnegie, who is, of course, the real host since that's where we are, by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, which is my parent organization, and by the Hudson Institute, represented by Maneeza Hossain, and we are all delighted to have you here, and we are all delighted to received Ambassador Farooq Sobhan on one of his periodic visits to Washington during which he keeps a program that never lets his feet touch the ground.

I was supposed to introduce him, but I'm thinking that perhaps he doesn't really need an introduction, so let me just say that Farooq, besides being one of the most distinguished diplomats that Bangladesh has produced, former High Commissioner to India, former Ambassador to China. He has done all kinds of fascinating and very worthwhile things in his post-diplomatic life. I'm not sure it's really post-diplomatic, but post-being in the foreign service life, in any case. And in addition, a close friend and a close friend of many people who are, like myself, friends of Bangladesh. He has come here as a special envoy sent by the present government in Bangladesh during troubled and turbulent times.

The title of his talk today is "The Role of Bangladesh in South Asian Cooperation," but I hope that he will also give us his perspective and insights on the developments going on in Bangladesh because I think that's what's on most people's minds when one asks about Bangladesh these days. Let me, without further ado, turn over the microphone to Ambassador Sobhan.

AMBASSADOR FAROOQ SOBHAN: I should probably –

MS. SCHAFFER: As you wish. Down or up is fine.

MR. SOBHAN: If I have a choice, then I'll probably settle for down. Well, thank you, Tessi (ph), for that very warm and generous introduction. Ladies and gentlemen, good afternoon. I'm delighted to have this opportunity to share a few thoughts with you on this extremely pleasant Washington afternoon at the Carnegie, with which I have had longstanding relations, as indeed I have with so many other think tanks and so many of you in the room here this afternoon, and thank you for taking the trouble to be here. I would, of course, like to begin by thanking the three co-hosts – CSIS and Tazie, Frederic and Carnegie and last but not least, Maneeza and Hudson – for making this event possible.

The subject for today's discussion, the role of Bangladesh in South Asian cooperation, at the end of the day was a title we felt would enable me to say just about anything and would also then equally give you the opportunity to ask questions on just about anything. Yes, what is certainly uttermost in the minds of a lot of people who take

an interest in this region is what is happening in Bangladesh? And perhaps I should start by saying a few words about that.

You are familiar with the fact that on January the 11<sup>th</sup>, the country, as it were, stood on the brink of an abyss. I think it is the view of many, if not most people, that had the elections planned for January the 22<sup>nd</sup> gone ahead, there would have been serious trouble in the country. Those elections, objectively looking at the situation, were clearly going to be rigged, and this was not going to be acceptable to a large part of the country, and consequently, serious trouble would have resulted.

The army stepped in at that time and put in position a civilian government headed by Doctor Fakhruddin, who is known, indeed, to many of you in this room. He has spent many years at the World Bank and earlier had been in the civil service of his country, a person of, I would say, impeccable credentials, a man of great integrity, and I would add to that, intellectual ability. He also happens to be a very old friend. We were in the university together; he was a year ahead of me. He joined the service; he was a year ahead of me. But we did our training together, and over the years, our paths have frequently interacted, in particular during his period as governor of the Central Bank. We did work together on a number of issues and projects. He is a great exponent of good governance, of good corporate governance, and indeed feels he now has the opportunity to practice some of the things he has earlier advocated.

The advisory council is not there by choice. They were asked to assume this responsibility, and I think they are doing the best they can under very difficult circumstances. I've always maintained that Bangladesh is perhaps, objectively looking at it, one of the most difficult countries anywhere in the world to govern at the best of times. You name a problem, we have it in Bangladesh, whether it's environmental, whether it's related to jobs or the population, it's there in abundance in Bangladesh. So no one, I would think, should voluntarily opt to try and govern a country such as Bangladesh, and if he is asked or she is asked to do so, then what is important and essential is performance.

This government – and there have been questions about its legal mandate. I think, to put it quite bluntly, we are in a situation where there are no alternatives or choices available. They remain strongly committed to giving the country a free and fair election. That is, without question, top of their agenda. The issue arises – what are the requirements for a free and fair election? And here, it is their view, and I would say it is a view which is widely shared in the country and we hope also outside the country, in order to give a credible election, given the experience of the past, and I need to emphasize that perhaps more than anything else. I think a number of things need to be done.

First of all, damage which has been done to a number of institutions needs to be repaired: the damage done, for example, to the election commission itself, and to the election commission, the damage done, for example, to the electoral rolls. I think that is one. Secondly, the damage done to the judiciary, the bureaucracy, the rampant

corruption that was the order of the day, corruption which had a profound impact on the electoral process itself. I think these were all issues which required urgent attention.

To the credit of the caretaker government, the process of reform has started. They have a new election commission in place. I would say that their performance so far has been good. They have taken a decision that the only way forward is for a completely new electoral rolls, that the previous one had been so badly tampered with that it is no longer usable, and therefore the only option available is to prepare fresh electoral rolls.

There was a demand – there continues to be a demand – that these electoral rolls, in order to avoid fraud and tampering, should have – be backed with photographs and also computerized, and they have experts, in fact, at this very moment, visiting Dhaka from the United Nations. They are preparing the technical specifications in terms of the equipment, in terms of the modalities, and really, much of this timeframe that we talk about, 18 months, comes to us from the technical requirements of undertaking such a comprehensive exercise.

I think the second point which needs emphasis is, and what about all the other contributing factors? What do we do about this issue of electoral fraud, and what do we do about corruption in elections? What do we do about the fact that seats are offered, as it were, to the highest bidder. So what we had, in fact, seen in Bangladesh is that whilst we had three reasonable credible elections, we know that in each case, there were objections, but that's why I use the word reasonable. We had the elections, but what came after?

We had Parliaments which for all practical purposes were non-functioning. Do we want another election with another Parliament which is non-functioning? Then what is the purpose of such an election? So I think the need, really, to look beyond the elections is something which has agitated the country, civil society, in particular, and as you know, there were initiatives taken by civil society in the lead-up to the elections for clean candidates. And I think there is an effort on the part of the present government to try and give expression to these wishes. It's not an easy exercise, and yet, one of the things this government has done is it has established an anti-corruption commission with a chairman, and he is certainly perceived to be a person of impeccable credentials, as you know, he was a member of the previous government and resigned on a matter of principle, something which we all applauded, and he enjoys a reputation for honesty and integrity. I had a long session with him before coming out here, and indeed, he has assured me that he has a strong commitment in rooting out corruption. No one is above the law, and indeed, as you know, they have gone after the big fish, no exceptions to this.

He is committed, also, to doing this by the book, the rule of law, and the legal processes will be maintained. These are people who will be tried in courts headed by judges of the high court, and the process has begun. They have been charged, and others will be charged. If found innocent, they will be released. If found guilty, they will have to face the consequences.

A number of other reforms have also been initiated: the separation of the judiciary from the executive, a long-standing demand; the establishment of an independent human rights commission, that is also underway; only two days ago, the chief advisor reiterated his commitment to the freedom of the press – this remains in tact and indeed, we hope this will go one step further where for the first time radio and television will be – government radio and government television will be allowed to function independently of instructions from the government itself, and indeed, we hope that the process of liberalization and opening up the media will apply equally to the electronic media also.

So these steps are already underway. I think the chief election commissioner informed me during my meeting with him before I came that he has initiated a dialogue. He has had one round already; he is hoping to have this dialogue soon with the political parties in terms of trying to put in place a set of ground rules relating to the conduct of the parties, the registration of parties, the need for parties to have their books audited, transparency in terms of the accounts as well as practices within the party – a whole set of reforms which it is believed will help not simply in giving us credible elections but in the developments thereafter.

I think it's fair to say that these are early days. I would say that – and some of you may be familiar with the fact that the Asia Foundation, and I'm glad to see that we have the foundation well represented here, has been carrying out some surveys throughout the country on public opinion, and these are very comprehensive surveys, and what is interesting about these surveys is it shows the degree of popular support for the work being done by the government of the day.

We are not, certainly, out of the woods. In Bangladesh, it would be a rash person who could say what's going to happen six months down the road. But the government, in my view, is on the right track. There have been concerns, I know, and I've responded to some of them, indeed, in conversations with some of you, and also in conversations earlier today with the State Department and the National Security Council.

What sort of government does Bangladesh have today? Is it a military government or is it not? And the response to that is that yes, the military certainly helped to put this government in position, but this is a civilian government, as far as I'm aware, and I need to be educated to the contrary. It is, of the 45 ministries that we have in the country, the Army is nowhere to be seen in any of these ministries. Yes, it is the Army which takes a lead role in deciding who gets arrested, but even there, this is being done within the framework of anti-corruption coordination committee with an advisor and a chair.

The process of investigations is being done jointly between the anti-corruption commission and the Army, as well as several other civilian agencies, including the National Board of Revenue. And I'd be happy to take questions during the Q&A. but let me now turn very briefly and quickly to what was billed to be the subject of the day, the region and what is Bangladesh's role in this region? And here, I would like to briefly

touch on two subjects. One is Indo-Bangladesh relations because I think that is of critical importance as far as Bangladesh is concerned, and SAARC and South Asian cooperation.

Indo-Bangladesh relations, in my view, and I track it, I would say, pretty closely and have done so now for the last 15 years or so, has gone through ups and downs, and certainly during the last five years of the BNP government, it was about as down as it could be. We tried – I run a India-Bangladesh dialogue, and it has many sort of manifestations. One part of the dialogue is the young people; another one is for retired people like myself and Howie, you know, keep us out of trouble, all these retired ambassadors who don't have very much to do so you get them involved in dialogues, and they want to solve all the problems which indeed they themselves created when they were in office.

(Laughter.)

But although we were able to see some degree of progress in the dialogues – regrettably at the inter-governmental level, there was very little – and the irony in this exercise was that Bangladesh was very keen in promoting SAARC and regional cooperation and not so keen, at least during those five years, in doing very much about Indo-Bangladesh relations. And my view has always been, indeed, and this is extremely true in particular of Indo-Pakistan relations, that it's really difficult to get regional cooperation going if there are serious bilateral differences in the way. And that, if you track the history of SAARC, has certainly been true. People inevitably ask, why has SAARC made such little progress? And I would say, to a large extent, it had to do with the unhappy state of Indo-Pak relations. I'm not pointing fingers at anyone, but this relationship certainly did stand in the way in the years gone by.

What, in my view, made the 14<sup>th</sup> SAARC summit different was that both India and Pakistan, I would say, for the first time felt that they wanted to invest a certain degree of goodwill, importance and optimism in so far as the future of SAARC is concerned. It was a good summit; some concrete decisions came out of it. We saw India, in my view, take a giant step forward in agreeing to provide duty-free access to the least developed countries, something certainly Bangladesh has been agitating for for many years. Now we have to try and make this into a reality, and that's not going to be easy, but I think we've got off to a great start.

Another subject which, in my view, is of critical importance, is the common fight against terrorism. This, incidentally, has been a subject matter which SAARC took up way back in 1987, when the treaty on, the SAARC treaty on terrorism was signed. But that just remained something on paper. Then we had the additional protocol on terrorism, which was signed some, in Islamabad, but very little happened even after that. This time around, I think there was a shared conviction. We had, of course, Afghanistan also joining SAARC, and President Karzai was there, and the fact that terrorism in one form or another has manifested itself in all our countries – and there are no exceptions. Even Bhutan and the Maldives have had their dose of it, albeit not in the same, not to the same extent or magnitude as some of us, some others. But it is there, and it is, therefore, high

time that we put our heads together and really try and address this problem head on and look at how we can best interact and cooperate with each other.

There was also agreement on a number of other issues: energy cooperation, transporting and communications, this idea of combating poverty together. Some of these were old issues, but fresh life was, in my view, visible in the case of all these initiatives. And of course, the Indian initiative for a South Asian university was endorsed and will go ahead at full speed.

So I would say that this, for the first time, and I've said this in an article I wrote recently, I was tempted to give the title "Manmohan Singh's Summit," but people told me that I am maybe doing some damage to the process so we should tone it down a bit. But really, what I was trying to say was that unless India takes SAARC seriously, SAARC is not going to move ahead. And India did, without question, take SAARC seriously and go one step further. Dr. Manmohan Singh believes in SAARC and unlike – are there any retired Indian diplomats here, or not retired? – and contrary to the views of the South Block, does believe in SAARC. I say this from several first-time encounters with Dr. Manmohan Singh. I took an initiative some years back to convene a meeting of what we call the Citizens' Commission for South Asia, and it was a small group – there were, I think, no more than 20 of us there – but among the 20, we had Dr. Manmohan Singh and Mr. Gujral, and we all know of Mr. Gujral's longstanding commitment to reaching a cooperation, but I can assure you that Dr. Manmohan Singh's is no less, and he is a believer and we saw ample evidence of that at the SAARC summit.

So SAARC is on track. I think, now, it is also important that in looking at the way forward, we cannot ignore the importance of bilateral relationships. In a sense, these are, if you like, important building blocks. Yes, if SAARC moves forward, it will reinforce the positive development in bilateral relationships and vice versa. But there is no avoiding the fact that the bilaterals are important, in particular, the India-Pakistan bilaterals, and I think there was ample evidence of that in Delhi during the summit.

What was important, of course, was that both Bangladesh – and India, too – have agreed to turn a new leaf and move forward, and I would say both in Delhi and before that when Mr. Pranab Mukherjee came to Dhaka, we have seen some forward movement on a broad range of issues, and I think it is very much in the common interest of both these countries to move forward. There is so much to be gained through bilateral cooperation and so much to lose without it.

But what we are also seeing happening in our region, and these will be my concluding thoughts, is that Asia itself is on the move. And we are seeing, really, three major, if you like, developments within Asia taking place. Of course, central to this has been the rise of China and India, and for the benefit of my friend, Steve Cohen, who wrote about emerging India, I suppose India now has emerged and is, without question, a powerhouse, not simply in the region but well beyond. But what is, I think, perhaps most significant of all in this is the emerging Sino-Indian relationship. It is – there is, perhaps,

still residue of mistrust and mutual suspicion. I think the plusses now heavily outweigh the minuses in that relationship. I think that, in my view, is a very important factor.

The second is, of course, what is happening in so far as ASEAN and China is concerned and simultaneously between ASEAN and India. So we see these three sort of major, if you like, power centers, and more than that, economic centers really move forward and reach out to each other. So it's India, China and ASEAN, and really, in my view, it's absolutely imperative and essential that India is not simply India but it's the region itself, and that South Asia as a whole must come together to be a part of this process of integration that is taking place. We need, whether it's in the area of trade, which is central to this exercise, but also infrastructure and energy, where there is so much happening and so much more which could happen if we all come together. Thank you for listening to me, and now I'm all set for questions.

MS. SCHAFFER: Thank you very much, Farooq, for a really, most incisive presentation. I'd like to exercise the privilege of the chair by asking the two other co-hosts if they would like to kick off the questioning.

MR. SOBHAN: For the questions, I'm going to stand up.

MS. SCHAFFER: And if you could please identify yourself and your affiliation, even if I know you.

Q: Okay. Maneeza Hossain at the Hudson Institute. Thank you so much for your carefully worded and eloquent talk on the current situation in Bangladesh. I just had a two-part question –

MR. SOBHAN: Do you want to knock me off my pedestal, right?

(Laughter.)

Q: Knowing – being fully aware of the deficiency of human resources and the grand task that the caretaker government has ahead of it, how do you suggest that Bangladesh will compensate for the tools that we have and how we can make the most out of what we have in front of us, right? We need to fix the bureaucracy, deal with corruption, fix the election commission, redo the electoral rolls, clean up the politicians, and set clean candidates for elections in 18 months, knowing that we've got a huge deficiency of human resources and institutions. That's the first question, how the caretaker government might deal with that.

And the second part is, how soon do you think the state of emergency can be lifted and the restoration of fundamental human rights? Is it possible for Bangladesh to put those on hold for 18 months or longer? Those are the questions.

MR. SOBHAN: Good questions. Well, the first answer, on this deficiency of human resources is, Maneeza, we want you back in Dhaka – (laughter) – and indeed, we



would like to see so many of our best and brightest, who we seem to have lost to the United States and Canada and the United Kingdom and many other countries, come back. But I'm deeply also conscious of the fact that if we can somehow persuade you to come back, we have to utilize you properly and fully. Indeed, I would say, maybe we need to set aside 20 or 30 seats in Parliament for the best and the brightest in order to tempt you back. One of the things, for example, which struck me about the current Indian parliament was that it does have some extremely talented young people in it. Whether they are being properly used or not or been given a chance to contribute, that's another question, but certainly some of the best and brightest have gone back to India and are now occupying important positions. We want to see that happen.

We are seeing it happen, up to a point. We've got three, now, at long last, state-of-the-art hospitals in Bangladesh, and a lot of bright doctors have gone back to man these hospitals, and hopefully many more will go back. I've always maintained, and in fact, this is one of the subjects I discuss periodically with friends in Washington and back in the embassy in Dhaka, in the U.K. and Canada is how can we do some serious bridge-building in terms of, if not bringing them back, at least giving them the opportunity to contribute? Because we are seeing this happen more and more in the case of India and Pakistan – not so in the case of Bangladesh.

The issue of the state of emergency, this, again came up today, and I think certainly this is uttermost on the minds of most people. I'm certainly not privy to what the government has in mind other than to say that political activities, whether it's limited or otherwise, is certainly an issue which they are seized with at the moment. There was an expectation that the state of emergency will come to an end, in fact, today, the eighth of May, but I believe it hasn't happened. Has it? But this is and has to be, if the road to the, the road to elections, I think elections cannot take place so long as the state of emergency is there. I will certainly take back with me the views that have been expressed here in Washington, and that one of them is the view that the state of emergency should be lifted, fundamental rights restored as soon as possible, and that point is certainly well taken.

Q: Yes, Frederic Grare. You mentioned a need for SAARC to evolve a common policy to fight terrorism. How is it practically feasible in an organization in which some of the members are still actively supporting terrorism in the region against other SAARC members?

MR. SOBHAN: Ah, well. That's, I think that, in all fairness, Frederic, and we were at the same conference only a few days ago and this did figure – I would say that it will be primarily through a collective effort, that some of these issues would be put on the table. I think what is happening now is that intelligence agencies, by and large, have a free run in terms of dictating the agenda to their respective governments. I think it's important to put them all around the table and face each other on some of these common issues and problems. I was talking earlier today about the need for us to craft a common anti-terrorism strategy for South Asia, and central to that, in my view, is for the

intelligence agencies to meet periodically, compare notes, and look at some of these common issues and problems which all of them are facing today.

I would like to think that, and this was a commitment which all the heads shared and made collectively in Delhi, that they will, now, for the first time, move forward in terms of concrete action. In September, we will see a meeting of the heads of police of all these SAARC countries, followed by a meeting of the home secretaries and then the home ministers. As you know, they met last year in Dhaka, they did agree on doing a number of things; well, it's now time that they moved from talking about doing these things to actually doing them.

And I think one of them is the things which they need to do is exchange of information and really facing up to this issue which you have stressed about each side – and mind you, each side has a range of charges against the other; this is true in the case of India-Pakistan, it's true also in the case of India-Bangladesh, and no doubt true of other countries, too, that one side accuses the other, and the other side has counteraccusations. I think we need to put these on the table and really see how we can move forward because until then, unless there is some mechanism to doing so, we will not be able to get beyond the basics. We need to share information and intelligence; that is not happening at the moment. And we need to see this, increasingly, as a common problem.

I think one of the things Frederic and I, we were together at a conference very recently in Maschat (ph) which was jointly hosted by double-I double-S in London and the South Asia Center at the National Defense University in Washington, with strong participation from India, Pakistan and not so strong from Bangladesh, but nonetheless we were there, and we – I think all of us noticed the common problems and issues which each of us was dealing with, and I think it was important that we try and come together in dealing with these issues and problems. And I hope that that's going to happen soon and that something tangible will come out of this meeting in September of the home ministers.

MS. SCHAFFER: I have three people on my list. You first, sir.

Q: Colonel Datta, Foreign Policy Association. Your Excellency, a welcome. Could you please express your views on the serious problem of illegal immigrants, Bangladeshi immigrants, in India since it's been going on for quite some time?

MR. SOBHAN: Well, what can one say, Colonel? Incidentally, you may not be aware of this, but we have 100,000 Indian professionals working in Bangladesh and probably 75,000 of them are there illegally. But, you know, this is a phenomenon common to our part of the world. We have people who come and go; you have people that come and go –

Q: More than – (unintelligible).

MR. SOBHAN: But – (unintelligible) – is –

MS. SCHAFFER: Give him a chance to answer.

H.E. SOBHAN: – is a drop in the ocean. You have – do you know how many Nepalese you have in India? Eight million. What difference does it make to India? Obviously, if you have Bangladeshis here, they have economic reasons for being there. We are not kind of – there's not sort of fifth column initiative involved to sort of take over India through illegal Bangladeshis. That'll take a long time and involve a lot of planning. These people are economic migrants. They're presumably performing some kind of job. In America, you have lots of them here, including, I suspect, some Indians and Bangladeshis and so on. So my thesis on this, and I say this because this is something which my Indian friends raise with me from time to time, is that look, we are all on the same side.

Our common goal and objective is two-fold. One is, we want the doors to be opened throughout the world. We want, just as we are talking about trade liberalization, we want to see the doors opening for labor. Europe is aging, they need people, and yet, the shutters are coming down, forcing the illegal movement of labor, and I can assure you that you have as many illegals in Europe as we do. So we are on the same side there. Secondly, in the case of South Asia, we are talking about an economic union, what is going to be central to an economic union? It's going to be the free movement of labor. So why quibble about something which is happening today which was going to happen anyhow tomorrow? So we are all going to be moving around freely in our part of the world.

I think one of the worst things that has impeded regional cooperation in South Asia are the visa policies of our country, and I think certainly the worst offenders here would be India, Pakistan, and we only settle for the bronze medal there – (laughter) – but we are there too. But why? Who are you keeping out through this visa policy? Throw it out of the window, remove all restrictions on travel, let everyone in the region move freely, and I think we'll all be better for it. So if there – (unintelligible) – incidentally, you've let me off very lightly. The Indian foreign office spoke about 20 million illegals, and sometimes they'd say it's 10, the next day it was 25, which suggested that this was a highly mobile population – (laughter) – coming in and out all the time.

MS. SCHAFFER: Either that or a highly mobile number. The gentleman in the back of the room.

Q: Hello, good afternoon. I'm Golam Akter, Bangladesh-USA Human Rights Coalition. You talked about human rights, and you know human rights is against death penalty, but I am carrying the six JMB people who have been hanged because their terrorism and injustice, only this government have taken care of. They had been created by the two past, three, four governments. They were carried or camouflaged, protected, and when you took care of them, everybody appreciated. Now, our two respected ladies are not cooperating with this government, neither the court system also. I found in the newspaper they are asking you four weeks time to testify when – (unintelligible) –

restricted, why these why (?). You started with corruption, which is number one. Through corruption, negligence of corruption, those terrorism came. This terrorist people, whatever their disqualification is, to tell the truth because they will go to Heaven by telling the truth, and our leaders never tell the truth. And now you are fighting against these two leaders, respected leaders, and against the Supreme Court, and only, I – (unintelligible) – you are to hand over to the Army. What is your opinion?

MR. SOBHAN: No, I certainly hope not. I think – I did have a meeting with the Army chief before I came. I said I'm going to be in Washington, and one of the questions I'm sure they're going to ask me is, A) is this a military government? B) if not, when is the Army going to take over? I mean, I don't hold any crystal ball, but let me share these thoughts with you.

First, he said, absolutely not; yes, we helped to put this government in position, but this government is running the show. As I said, there are some 45 ministries; you don't see the Army visible in any of them. The Army is involved, up to a certain extent, in the campaign against corruption. I don't see any reason why the Army should take on a role beyond what they have done so far. I would like to think that they have learned a few lessons from the past, in particular during the closing years or months of the Ershad government. It took them quite awhile to repair the damage. They have regained a sense of professionalism and take pride in it, as you know. Our troops participate in peacekeeping operations all over the world, they've gained a good reputation for it, and I'm confident that they want to keep it that way.

This was not an Army which sought power. This was an Army which was obliged to play the role which it did play. I hope it stays that way, but as I said, I don't have a crystal ball, and as I indicated earlier, it's a rash person who would predict what's going to happen six months or nine months down the road. All I can assure you is, and this is with due apologies to General Musharraf lest this is misconstrued, but General Moeen is no General Musharraf; I don't think he has any long term ambitions, and what we do know – and I did make a reference to this – running Bangladesh is not a picnic that you would voluntarily set aside what is otherwise a fairly honorable existence, peacekeeping and all the rest of it, to take on a job which you know, in next to no time, is going to make you extremely unpopular and you'll have to face a dozen problems to which you have no answer. Why on Earth would you voluntarily want to do this?

MS. SCHAFFER: Professor Mansingh? There's a mic coming.

Q: Surjit Mansingh, American University. First, let me thank you for that very strong statement on economic union and free movement of labor and free movement of persons. I have been writing and speaking along those lines for more than 20 years now, but yours carries much more weight.

My question is, at a recent – I think a March meeting, a track-two meeting of the BCIM – Bangladesh, the Bangladesh delegates came out rather strongly in favor of transit rights, communications, and as you know, the BCIM was sponsoring this car rally.

My question is, is that only words, or is the Bangladesh government going to follow through on transit rights and better communications?

MR. SOBHAN: Well, very nice to see you, Surjit, and I know about your strong commitment to SAARC, regional cooperation, and the free movement of labor, and it's always good to meet a fellow traveler, even if it's in Washington as distinct from back home.

Are we serious? Well, BCIM is Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar. For those of you who aren't familiar with this initiative, it's otherwise known as the Kunming initiative, and it was the Chinese that took the initiative in proposing a new regional grouping which would link together the Yunnan province, Southern China, Myanmar, the northeast of India and Bangladesh, and the two main sort of elements which they were pushing forward in this grouping, one was trade, quite naturally, and the other was communications, transportation highways, reviving the old Burma Road which linked India, Burma and China during the Second World War, otherwise I think known as the Stilwell Road, built by General Stilwell, who was an American, right? So we had America involved too.

Now, where we stand regarding this at the moment is that in the case of – this is supposed to be a track two initiative. In the case of Bangladesh, in fact, the moving spirit happens to be my older brother, Rehman Sobhan, who has been a great protagonist, like his younger brother, all things regional and subregional, we somehow think that's the way forward. In the case of, of course, India and – I beg your pardon, Burma or Myanmar and China, it's really very difficult to distinguish between their track one and track two. I think, frankly, it's really all track one. Track two may masquerade as track two, but they're indistinguishable. And, of course, we have India. Now, in the case of China, Myanmar and Bangladesh, we've all agreed to elevate this from track two into a track one exercise. So whatever we've agreed to at track two levels would then be handed over and made operational at the track one level. The only point here is that it hasn't happened yet in the case of India. India is still mulling this over, and all we can say is that hopefully this will happen.

But that in no way detracts from the more, let's say substantive, issue, which is, what does this mean for transit rights and the rest? Well, I hope, and as I said, this is my own crystal ball, these transportation links – as you know, we have on the table the Asian highway and the Asian railroad, and Bangladesh, and I understand it now, is going to move forward as far as the Asian railroad is concerned, and I hope it will also move forward in the case of the Asian highway. What is also relevant to mention is that if we breathe life into SAFTA, as was agreed to in Delhi, I think central to this is also going to be the issue of transit rights, not simply for India but across the board. So we have transit rights for Nepal in Bhutan; as you know, that's a big issue in terms of the trilateral relationship, Nepal, India and Bangladesh, because we see enormous possibilities in terms of Nepal-Bangladesh trade as well as providing Nepal access to the sea, provided India agrees to make an earlier agreement operational.

And we are also talking about transit rights, let's say, between Pakistan and Bangladesh through India. So in other words, we really want to remove all the borders and see the free movement, not simply of people but of goods and traffic. And I think we cannot make SAFTA, and certainly we cannot even make anything close to a South Asian economic union, possible or credible without addressing these issues. And I hope this will happen in the very near future.

MS. SCHAFFER: I have three people on my list, starting with Shabbir (?).

Q: Thank you.

MR. SOBHAN: I hope it's going to be a tough question. Don't let me off lightly

—

Q: Okay.

MR. SOBHAN: — just because we are friends.

Q: I got a call from an editor of a newspaper in Bangladesh this morning, and he asked how is the B.D. Kissinger doing in Washington. I was quiet for awhile; I couldn't figure out since when Henry Kissinger has changed his name to B.D. Kissinger, but I figured that he was referring to you. Obviously, Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed has chosen the best diplomat from Bangladesh to come in here and speak with the administration and the Congress, and you are doing a great job. I thank you for that.

My question to you is — there are two questions. One, why is it that it is so widely believed in Bangladesh that United States was behind this coup in Bangladesh, one? Secondly, you mentioned in your statement that the previous administration had embarked on rigging the elections. I think it is also, it has been widely known that they had embarked on rigging the elections three and a half years ago when the parliament approved the extension of retiring chief justice by two and a half years. This question to you is, other than the political agitation and the other warnings that came legitimately from the political, many political parties, what were the think tanks in Bangladesh doing, such as Bangladesh Enterprise Institute that you run and your brother Rehman Sobhan runs, CPD? What were their roles —

MR. SOBHAN: In doing what?

Q: (Inaudible) — that these people are going in to rigging the elections. What about the early warnings? Why was it missing from the so-called civil societies and think tanks? And I would also like to ask Teresita the same question — did the think tanks here in Washington alert the State Department that the process of rigging an election had started? Thank you.

MR. SOBHAN: Well, firstly, we'd like to believe that think tanks in Bangladesh are taken seriously, but I have not really found any tangible evidence of this, so unlike

Washington, where certainly think tanks are taken seriously, precisely the reason why I'm standing here before you, I don't think this – this is hopefully something which will happen one day in Bangladesh. We do enjoy attending seminars and roundtables, indeed, Bangladesh can claim to be the seminar capital of the world, but that doesn't necessarily make the seminars particularly important. I'm not aware of the fact that statements or decisions or roundtable meetings at our seminars have had any impact whatsoever in influencing the government. Mind you, we've had even seminars and meetings; I referred to Indo-Bangladesh dialogues. Did it make any difference at all in terms of government policy? I think not. So the government's sort of immunity to constructive criticism or advice, I think, was perhaps one of the important features of the government. Hear no evil, see no evil, but do a lot of evil – I think that was the variation on the theme. Regarding your point about why is it that people believe that the U.S. was behind the coup, Tazie, I think that should be for you to answer.

MS. SCHAFFER: I can't understand why people believe the U.S. was behind the coup because it seems to me that everything that was happening in and from the U.S. government suggested a strong disposition to go along with whatever processes were put in place as long as they led to elections. Now, you can argue about whether that was the correct policy, but I think that is the way policy is being carried out.

Now you asked another question: where was U.S. civil society and think tanks in warning people about the implications of the extension of the retirement age for the chief justice? I don't think you needed think tanks to point out the implications of that. I think that the U.S. government was very well aware of the implications of that. But the U.S. government was also impressed, for better or for worse, with the way the caretaker government had ultimately worked on previous occasions. You may recall that there was controversy about a number of the personnel moves that the previous government had made, that the Awami League government had made before the 2001 elections. In the end, the Awami League lost that election.

In the end, the chief justice whose retirement date was postponed didn't become the chief advisor. We might all have been better off if he had. This unfortunate casualty of this is that the confidence that people had – maybe it was, as they say in children's games here, confidence with your fingers crosses – in the caretaker government system, it's going to be very hard to recreate that. And so the process of putting in place safeguards both for the election that we all hope will happen, I would hope, sooner than the 18 months that we've been talking about, and especially for the one beyond that, this is going to be a very difficult job.

What seems to have happened is you had really a very creative invention by the Bangladeshi political system, which worked pretty well the first time and got progressively more difficult to operate as time went on because both parties – guess what – wanted to win. This is, if you're in politics, you presumably are in politics because you want to win. But each successive prime minister was more desperate to break the curse of formerly incumbent governments losing elections and got progressively more desperate about what kind of measures would be necessary to build that insurance policy,

and in the end, what was created was a monster. So I think the task for Bangladesh's political system, both in preparing for this election and beyond, has gotten a whole lot harder.

Now, I have three people on my list. One is the gentleman in the middle of the second row here.

Q: My name is Adnan Morshed. I teach at the Catholic University in Washington, DC. Last year, when Professor Yunus won the Nobel Peace Prize, there was mass celebration of the Nobel Peace Prize coming to Bangladesh for the first time. At the height of the frenzy, Dr. Yunus promised that he would enter politics and so on, and civil society apparently assured that it would stand by him and so on, and we have seen much zigzagging around the position, and just a couple of weeks ago, or a week ago, perhaps, Dr. Yunus withdrew from that position. My question is, what went wrong, and if, indeed, something went wrong, is it somehow illustrative of the political culture in Bangladesh?

MR. SOBHAN: Yeah, that's a tough question, tough because I might share with you that I had several conversations with Dr. Yunus during the past few months about his entry to politics. I think, and this is my view, that perhaps he needed to have prepared the ground more carefully. The decision to enter politics was his alone, in terms of the timing, in terms of the fact that he really hadn't done any preparatory work prior to announcing this decision. Some of us advised him that he really needs to do this preparatory work and there was no need for him to rush into politics at precisely that time. There was, after all, a state of emergency, no political activity was permitted, so why should he not take his time to prepare the ground?

In other words, I think he was – and again, I should stress, these are my views – that he kind of rushed into it. And equally, I think he kind of rushed out of it. This must have been one of the shortest-lived entries into politics that I can think of in recent memory, probably two months and five days or something like that. Whether Dr. Yunus would have succeeded or not, I don't know. What we do know is that he enjoyed enormous credibility internationally and indeed within the country, respect for what he had achieved, admiration for the Nobel Peace Prize. I know him well; we were in the university together, our paths had frequently crisscrossed over the years, and certainly I would have believed that there would have eventually been quite a lot of support for Dr. Yunus down the road.

Whether that would have been enough support for him to challenge the two major political parties, I don't know, but certainly, he would have given some kind of a choice or option to people. What I do know is that a lot of young people in Bangladesh, in the U.S., responded with great enthusiasm to his decision to go into politics, and I would suspect that there is great disappointment at his decision to – (inaudible). Yes, he has said that people who he was counting on let him down. I think, frankly, it was too soon for him to have made such a judgment about those people. But then, at the end of the day, it's his decision, we have to respect it, life goes on. I still see him as something close to a



national treasure, so we must cherish him, make the most of him. I wrote a piece shortly after he got the Nobel Peace Prize in which I said, we can't think of anyone who can serve the interest of Bangladesh better than Dr. Yunus in enhancing the image of the country.

Indeed, throughout my diplomatic life, I have always gone out of my way to speak when people speak about the less savory developments inside Bangladesh. I have always counted that with pointing to Dr. Yunus to – (unintelligible) – and the fact that today we have some 12 million women who are self-employed throughout the country thanks to the microcredit program. And it's not simply in Bangladesh anymore. The microcredit message now has spread to some 75 countries all over the world. Millions of women have benefited from this and, indeed, men all over the world. Dr. Yunus is, in fact, going to be in Washington later this month. He is appearing on the 16<sup>th</sup> of this month before the Senate Finance Committee and will make a presentation on the importance of giving a country like Bangladesh and the other least-developed countries in Asia duty-free access, the same duty-free access which the entire developed world has now given to all the LDCs, without exception. In the case of the United States, this has been extended, so far, to all the LDCs minus the Asian LDCs. So we hope that Dr. Yunus's presentation and testimony will help in influencing Congress. We would like to deploy him as often as possible in as many parts of the world as possible. He is, as I said, a national treasure, and we will continue to cherish him, whether he is in politics or out of politics.

MS. SCHAFFER: I still have three people on my list. This seems to be the magic number. Kumar.

Q: Thank you very much. I am Kumar from Amnesty International. Ambassador, this is my personal comments, not an organizational comment. We get people coming to Washington from different countries where is run by the military or dictatorships, and they usually give very eloquent reasons why it should be there. You have done your great job, Ambassador. It's not sarcasm; I am saying that it's truly sad that people like you, who should stand up as the civil society leaders, basically giving excuses for the current state in Bangladesh. I should respect you because you said that military basically selected all these people, so I was wondering where this caretaker government got their mandate, now if I knew (?), they got the mandate from the military, so at least we are very clear about that.

Having said that, over 100,000 people have been arrested. We don't know how many people have been released, and we heard today that 3000 are going to be charged for going to the airport to welcome former Prime Minister – (unintelligible). And you also mentioned that big fish, no exception, will be caught and tried. These are tough words. We are glad that you are using the tough words, but the concerns are that it's only partial. You are only selectively applying these tough standards, to basically destroy democracy in the name of fighting for democracy. And also, the question is, it's coming to Maneeza's question, coming capital deficiency in 18 months, can you do it? I mean,

don't worry, you can always extend it because there is no one to question you. That's what is happening here.

So my question to you, Ambassador, it's very sad that the status quo of the country is going downhill. Whether the so-called corruption investigation will be broad-based, whether there will be some uniformity in arresting people without political consideration, and also were they to look inwards to see if there are anyone in the so-called caretaker government are also involved in any form of activities, for personal reasons or political reasons. I am not taking judgment but I noticed that the caretaker government chief, Fakhruddin Ahmed's own brother-in-law is a foreign advisor. So we are talking about the family business coming into play. I don't know. I am just throwing these questions; I am not an expert on Bangladesh. Thank you, Ambassador.

MR. SOBHAN: Well, I've certainly taken careful note. I thought I'd said it very clearly, that this is a difficult situation. I'd go even one step further; these are unchartered waters. I'd like to again recall the circumstances under which the Army stepped in. There was a choice, and I think – I'm not dramatizing this – the country would have descended into something close to a bloodbath had the Army not stepped in when they did. Would you rather have had that happen? Would you rather see Bangladesh as it might still be today in the throes of a civil war? Which part of the subcontinent do you originate from, Mr. Kumar?

Q: I am from Sri Lanka.

MR. SOBHAN: I suspected that. I mean, would you like to see a Sri Lanka-type situation?

Q: That's an ethnic issue- its different.

MR.SOBHAN: Huh?

Q: That's an ethnic issue.

MR. SOBHAN: It's, well, whatever it is. We were one country, I think our politics have pretty much divided us into two, and I think we would have faced an extremely dangerous situation and indeed we've been saved from that, and that is, in my view, a widely held view within Bangladesh. So far – it may change. As I said, you know, I'm not holding a crystal ball, and I would like to also emphasize, I'm not a spokesman for the government. I came – I was asked to undertake this mission – I shall go back to private life. So I speak as much as a citizen of Bangladesh as anyone else in this. And my view here is that these were exceptional circumstances, and we are still experiencing those exceptional circumstances.

I think the issue of constitutionality has been raised in this case. Well, I would say the operative word in the constitution is free and fair elections and ensuring that you have conditions for free and fair elections. Certainly, what we were going to get on the

22<sup>nd</sup> of January were not free and fair elections, and I think, had those elections taken place, it would have taken us months, if not years, to undo that damage. So that's the background which I think needs to be recalled. I don't want to sort of get into – there will always be room for criticism. I am, myself, one of those who feels there is much which we can criticize about the caretaker government. This is – there are problems; they are human beings in office. But I think given all the compulsions and constraints, they're doing the best they can. I don't think we can, so far, point a finger at anyone, irrespective of the issue of relationships which you have raised, in terms of their integrity, their performance, and their honesty. So that's where we are at the moment, and I think I'll emphasize one last point, that this government is deeply conscious of one thing, and that is that at the end of the day, their legitimacy is going to be judged entirely by their performance, and that is critical to the existence of this government.

MS. SCHAFFER: The gentleman here.

Q: My name is Hafizur Rahman. I'm – (unintelligible) – I came from the Maryland Advisory Council for New Americans. I'm a Bangladeshi-American. First of all, thank you very much for your very scholastic and thoughtful lecture. We knew about a lot of things that were (?) Bangladesh for military liberation (?), and at the same time we are grateful to the economy being helped by the – (unintelligible) – I know that T484 (?), the foreign currency deserves this to \$4.5 billion, and I'm sure 70 or 80 percent of that is being contributed by the – (unintelligible). So at this moment of time, I am grateful to the – (unintelligible) – for whom I myself decided, being involved in the war of liberation, to leave the country, to lead an honest life, and to basically be a part of the economic development of our country.

What is happening in Bangladesh, my friend from Sri Lanka has indicated, the constitutionality and all that – (unintelligible) – of the people, and so far I know, the people of Bangladesh gave the mandate, although there was no election, but majority of them gave their mandate that in order to eradicate this – (unintelligible) – this military-backed civil government is welcome, and the end product of this civil government is basically to ensure better and quality government so if we define democracy, it cannot be mobocracy. Unluckily, it is unfortunate that Bangladesh people, I will not blame them, lot of people are very emotional and believe in mobocracy and the politicians exploited that. Ambassador Farooq was elaborating how India has emerged – why not Bangladesh? And I believe if the middle class and the poor people's sons, daughters are properly educated and given incentive, they can climb that ladder, I believe so. But now, my question is that we say clean politician or clean candidates – I do not know, Ambassador, how we will be creating these clean candidates, because so far, I know my country, the civil society is very good, they are contributing a lot, but a lot of them do not have any relationship with the public.

MS. SCHAFFER: I think that you need to get to the point.

Q: – so how we, the civil society can create the clean candidates, I'd like to know from you, sir.

MS. SCHAFFER: Thank you.

MR.. SOBHAN: Well, in brief, we have – we'd like to think so, at least – a lot of good people in politics. It's Mr. Hafizur Rahman? First of all, let me tell you, I fully endorse what you said about wage earners and remittances. They play a vital role in the economy of the country, and we hope, we'd like to see remittances increase. But –

MS. SCHAFFER: Mr. Sobhan has an engagement at five, so what we're going to have to do is, I've got two more people who want to ask questions, and I'm going to have to ask you to be extremely brief, and then we will give Ambassador Sobhan the opportunity to respond. So, Sajeeb?

MR. SOBHAN: Before Sajeeb, just to finish answering your question about clean candidates, where do we find them? Three points here. Number one is, we want to see good people come forward and contest the elections. One of the issues – I have some water here – one of the problems, and I made a reference to this, was the role money was playing, the fact that if you paid whatever it was, a million dollars or the equivalent in Takas, for a nomination, or if you paid or had to pay another million or two million to get elected, it basically narrowed the field, and you were getting two types of candidates coming forward in this situation. One was the very wealthy, and in many of these cases, you weren't very sure where they got their money from. And in another case, it was the popular word in Bangladesh is *mastans*, hoodlums, people who kind of extracted money in various ways. And you saw, really, a sharp decline in the quality of the people – I'm okay, thanks – a sharp decline in the quality of the candidates coming forward.

As you know, and this is also, I hope, partly addresses a point indirectly raised by Shabbir, I thought there was a very good initiative launched by CPD and civil society involving the – (unintelligible) – and others where they went around the whole country asking for good candidates to come forward. And I can assure you there are hundreds of very good candidates throughout Bangladesh, in every constituency, people who actually belong to the major political parties but who were, in a sense, swept aside by this development of money and muscle which took over. And we hope – and that's really at the heart of the agenda, reform agenda, which is being pursued at the moment – both through the electoral commission and by the advisory council itself, to at least create the conditions under which good candidates can come forward and have, at least, a semblance of a chance of being elected.

So you have free and fair elections, so hopefully muscle is eliminated, fraud and rigging is eliminated, and then you don't have to spend millions of dollars to get elected because there are, then, only a few people who can context. So I think this is, in a sense, a critical development, and the success of this will, to a large extent, in my view, decide or determine the complexion of the new parliament that will come as a result of the next elections. Yes?

MS. SCHAFFER: We're going to take both of these questions.

Q: Ambassador, Sajeeb Wazed.

MR. SOBHAN: Yes, Sajeeb.

Q: It's good to see you –

MR. SOBHAN: Likewise.

Q: – with the Bangladesh Awami League. My question has two parts. First of all, I would like to preface it by saying that two months ago, the Awami League formed a high-level committee, and that was sent to the caretaker government to discuss reforms. The committee was rebuffed, and the Awami League was not further engaged by the caretaker. So my question to you on that is, how can you have comprehensive political reforms without engaging the major players?

The second part of my question is that the caretaker has announced these grand plans to completely transform Bangladesh, promising us the moon, but we have not seen any commitments, any concrete commitments, any specific issues, any timeframes. You, yourself, have repeatedly told us, you don't know what's going to happen in six months or nine months, yet we're being asked to wait two years for restoration of democracy with absolutely no idea of where it's headed. So could you –

MR. SOBHAN: Sure.

MS. SCHAFFER: The gentleman in the back of the room.

Q: My name is Mark Riedy with the law firm Andrews Kurth. I want to ask you a business question. What is the ability to get power projects up in Bangladesh right now, and if they would go up, would they be honored by a seceding government?

MS. SCHAFFER: And if I could throw one more question at you – you mentioned the caretaker government's commitment to due process for those accused of corruption. I wonder if you could give us a little bit more on the timing of that because there are people who have been arrested and I believe have not been charged at this point.

MR. SOBHAN: First, to respond to Sajeeb's two questions. I think a dialogue with the political parties is a must, but this is a dialogue which has already been announced by the chief election commissioner, and he's asking for this dialogue right away, and I think, when I raised this with the chief advisor, he did indicate that such a dialogue will take place, it must take place, because as I'd indicated, the chief election commissioner has a lot of – he's already presented a draft in terms of the reforms he's like to introduce, and this will only take final shape through a process of dialogue with the political parties. So all I can say is that such a dialogue, in my view, should take place in the very near future, and I hope it will take place in the very near future because I think that's a must.

Your second point, if I understood correctly, relates to the timetable. There is a very clear timetable, and let me now spell it out for you. The government has said, very clearly, and I thought I did make a reference to this in my introductory remarks, elections will be before the end of the year 2008. Now, the position, as it stands, is as follows: we have a team of UN experts currently in Dhaka. The government has, or rather, the chief election commissioner has entrusted them with preparing the technical details in terms of all the equipment that will be required for the preparation of the electoral rolls. Now, I stand to be corrected, Sajeeb, but this was Awami League's demand to have fresh electoral rolls with photographs.

Now, what the experts are saying, and it's important to understand this, it's not simply our experts, it's the international UN experts, that it's going to take 18 months to do it. And that is the timetable. It's going to take six months to complete the technical preparations, plus ordering the equipment – this is not off-the-shelf equipment; we are talking about 8000 laptops, 8000 scanners, 8000 cameras. We have to train a minimum of 15,000 people to do the data entry work. All this is going to take time. So the time frame is six months in terms of the preparatory process, and then a further 12 months to do the field work.

Now, what I was told was, municipal elections, because elections in Dhaka, Khulna, Rajshahi, Sylhet are going to fall due, and they are hoping that these elections can take place by March next year. So as soon as the equipment starts coming in, they are going to start the work first in the urban centers, and they're also hoping that elections can take place before the general elections. They are deeply conscious of the time schedule, but as of now, it seems that 18 months is going to be the earliest. As you know, there is a climatic factor, mixed with a religious factor – monsoons and Ramadan in September next year, followed by the Eid holidays. So the Eid holidays will be over by the middle of October, so if you'll simply look at all these issues, we are looking at the earliest at an election sometime mid-November.

So that's one. That's the technical side of things, and then setting in position all these ground rules, one of which, and this brings me to answering Tessi's question, you've arrested these people, you must try them now under the law. How much time is this going to take? Well, they're trying to speed up the process. Tessi, five courts have already been established to try these people, headed by judges from the high court. So there are 20 investigation teams which are collecting the evidence, trials have already begun – I would say so far it's in the case of four – and I am told that every week, as in when the investigations are completed, more and more of the trials will begin. And – (unintelligible) – that everyone will be presented before court, before the courts, to face the charges, and will either be found guilty or not guilty, as the case might be. So due process will certainly be followed, but in these cases, some measure of time will certainly be required. But I was told that they are deeply conscious of the fact that they need to speed up this process, and that is what is happening.

It's Mr. Mark O'Riedy –

Q: Riedy.

MR. SOBHAN: Mark Riedy, Mr. Mark Riedy, about power project. Yes, the government is very keen to do a power project, and I would suggest you have a word with the commercial counselor who has seated himself strategically right behind you, and hopefully he'll answer your questions regarding the details, and my answer to your point, and I think it is a very important point, that if deals on power projects are signed, will they be honored? Yes, the government of Bangladesh is committed, and indeed, I would say, by and large, that has been the practice, that we do honor agreements signed by one government by successive governments, and I think that is an absolute must, and I hope that will be followed by whichever government is elected in the future.

MS. SCHAFFER: Well, let me ask you to join me in thanking our co-sponsors –

(Applause.)

MR. SOBHAN: Thank you.

MS. SCHAFFER: (Inaudible) – quite a couple of hours. Thank you so much for being so generous with your time –

MR. SOBHAN: Pleasure.

MS. SCHAFFER: – and thank you for being with us.

MR. SOBHAN: Pleasure.

(END)