

## 'India for secular Bangladesh, US not necessarily'

Dhaka - India is for a secular Bangladesh, and the US is probably not. This is the inference the Bangladesh media has drawn following statements by India's Minister of State for External Affairs E. Ahamed and US Assistant Secretary of State Richard Boucher.

India wants a 'secular democratic' Bangladesh emerging as a result of 'free, fair and transparent' elections in January, but to the US it is enough that the people get to exercise 'real and fair choice' to decide their political future.

To the US, 'a truly fair and free polls' matter, said Boucher, prompting media headlines: 'Secular Bangladesh not US cup of tea.'

India and the US came up with varied views on the need for a 'secular' Bangladesh as the country heads towards a general election with distinctly two political schools based on secular and pro-Islamic state policies, UNB news agency reported.

'New Delhi calls for a secular democratic Bangladesh to emerge out of the forthcoming polls while Washington calls the term 'secular' a political buzzword,' the Bangladesh Observer said.

The different perceptions became clear from Ahamed's luncheon speech and the media conference of Boucher, the US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs.

Even as Boucher, a seasoned career diplomat, tried to do a balancing act, 'some people in diplomatic and political circles feel that Boucher's crisis-management theory seemingly tilted towards the position taken by the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)', the report said.

On the other hand, Ahamed, speaking at a private friends-of-India bodies' function, said: 'A strong, stable, secular, democratic and prosperous Bangladesh is not only in the interest of the people of India but also for the region as a whole, and most importantly, for the people of Bangladesh.'

Describing Ahamed as 'a Muslim leader of the Hindu-majority secular India,' UNB quoted him as saying: 'There is no dilution, whatsoever, in our commitment to extend all assistance and cooperation to help Bangladesh achieve these goals.'

Boucher, responding to a query about strengthening secular forces in Bangladesh to fight religious extremism, said: 'I guess some of the things are political buzzwords. I again want to stress on our interest in seeing people of Bangladesh having real and fair choice so that they decided the future of this country.'

He said he finds the people of Bangladesh committed to moderation - good Muslims and good democrats - having respect for religious ideals and tolerance, which is the foundation of democracy.

'Boucher considered the Jamaat-e-Islami a democratic party and didn't find any evidence of Jamaat being involved in bombing or connected to bombing,' the report noted.

However, both Ahamed and Boucher emphasized the need for a 'truly free and fair' general election.

In an oblique reference to the debates over reforms relating to a caretaker government and the election commission, Ahamed said 'the discussions ... that surround the coming elections are a clear demonstration of the strength of democratic tradition in Bangladesh'.

Both Ahamed and Boucher tried to take a neutral stance regarding the electoral outcome.

While Ahamed said he 'looks forward to working with whichever government the people of Bangladesh elect', Boucher said the US was interested in 'the election process, not in the outcome of elections', a media report said.

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