

BD, Myanmar start fresh efforts to boost bilateral trade

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PM's visit expected to uplift relations

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Bangladesh and Myanmar have started fresh efforts to strengthen bilateral relations for boosting trade and investment, officials said Sunday.

"The relations between the two nations are expected to have a new dimension following the upcoming visit of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to Myanmar," PM's press secretary Abul Kalam Azad told the FE.

Warm relations between the two neighbours are likely to help both the countries to explore economic potentialities of each other, traders said.

Prime Minister Hasina has accepted an invitation from her Myanmar counterpart U Thein Sein, and the visit may take place in December. However, the itinerary will be worked out later, Mr Azad said.

Myanmar has also expressed its willingness to take back Rohingya refugees from Bangladesh, living in and outside camps here, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials said.

"Myanmar has agreed to take back the Rohingya refugees living in Bangladesh," Foreign Secretary Mijarul Quayes told a news conference Saturday.

"The strengthening of ties is important for both the countries for improving bilateral trade and investment," Haji Rais Ahmed, a trader engaged in business transaction between Myanmar and Bangladesh, told the FE.

Myanmar is rich in natural resources, while Bangladesh has expertise in various fields. Both the countries have scope for small and medium-scale investments in energy sector and agro-based industries, traders said.

Energy-starved Bangladesh can import natural gas from Myanmar's gas-fields in western Rakhain state, just southeast of Bangladesh, energy experts said.

Myanmar is also capable of exporting a substantial quantity of rice to Bangladesh, traders said.

Both the countries now conduct bulk of their official bilateral trade, amounting to a paltry amount of \$65 million per year, through Bangladesh's Teknaf land-port on the bank of the river Naaf.

Bangladesh exports steel products, light engineering machinery, cement, dry foods, and cosmetics etc to Myanmar, and imports fish, timber, spices, synthetic foot-wears, and pickles etc from there.

Meanwhile, the volume of unofficial trade between the two countries is at around \$300 million per year, said officials of the Border Guard of Bangladesh (BGB).

A large quantity of petroleum products, fertilisers, agricultural inputs, and automobile parts etc are smuggled into Myanmar, from where drugs etc are smuggled into Bangladesh.

"A huge quantity of smuggled goods, bound for both the countries, is seized annually," a BGB official said, though he did not give an actual figure.

Connectivity between the two neighbours has been very poor throughout the ages due to various reasons, mainly because the two nations are separated by a range of almost inaccessible forested hills.

Recently Bangladesh and Myanmar, who share some 320-km-long border partly demarcated by the river Naaf, have agreed to establish road connectivity, and a project in this regard is being implemented.

The strained relations over the Rohingya refugee issue have started melting, as Myanmar has agreed to take back the refugees.

Myanmar often agreed to take back the refugees in the past. However, the Muslim Rohingya refugees declined to return there, fearing fresh persecution by the Buddhist Myanmar authorities.

More than 28,000 Rohingyas are still living in two camps near Cox's Bazar, run by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). They are the remnants of some 250,000 refugees, who flocked into Bangladesh in 1991, alleging persecution by Myanmar military regime. Most of them were repatriated following the UNHCR's mediation.

However, officials claim that more than 200,000 other Rohingyas are living in Cox's Bazar, where they have intruded illegally over the years.