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REMARKS BY U.S. AMBASSADOR JAMES F. MORIARTY ON INAUGURATION OF THE OIRABOT NATURE INTERPRETATION CENTER

TEKNAF, JULY 9 -- U.S. Ambassador James F. Moriarty made the following remarks at Teknaf Game Reserve in Teknaf on the occasion of inaugurating the Oirabot Nature Interpretation Center today:

(Begin Text)

Chief Conservator of Forests, members of the co-management committees, my colleagues from the Nishorgo program, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, As-salamu-alaikum, Namasker, and a very good afternoon.

I am very happy to be here today to celebrate Bangladesh's beautiful southern landscape - the beautiful hills, a flowing river and the bay in the background are awe inspiring! It is a great pleasure for me to inaugurate this Nature Interpretation Center. It was built utilizing a new eco-friendly architectural concept and will be managed by the community itself. I would like to thank the organizers for inviting me to witness this example of how communities and the government can work together to successfully manage natural resources in Bangladesh.

Biodiversity conservation is a critical component of development work. Bangladesh's biodiversity resources are disappearing at an alarming rate. Experts tell us the current deforestation rate will strip this beautiful country of its forest-based biodiversity resources in less than 15 years if this trend continues. It is heartening to see that the Ministry of Environment and Forests is taking a significant step towards conserving the country's biodiversity resources through the NISHORGO program.

Distinguished guests, Bangladesh must not lose its forests. The disappearance of tropical forests would be closely followed by the disappearance of livelihood opportunities for millions of poor people in this country. Over 90% of the population living in and

around the forests depends directly or indirectly on this dwindling resource base. I am encouraged to learn that, through the NISHORGO program, the Government of Bangladesh is empowering local communities with the authority to manage the resources they depend upon.

The potential for foreign investment in the nature-based tourism industry is high. I commend the Nishorgo program for focusing on this potential economic opportunity. The Nature Interpretation Center is just the beginning. In the next few years I believe the Teknaf Game Reserve area will become an eco-tourism site of global standing. Nishorgo has helped transform the Teknaf Game Reserve significantly in terms of biodiversity conservation. This additional focus on eco-tourism will pave the way towards sustainable economic growth.

Bangladesh is experiencing a common problem shared by countries around the world: how to balance population growth and a need for economic growth with a limited environmental resource base. The Nishorgo program is very successfully helping to achieve this balance of conserving natural resources while promoting livelihoods and economic benefits. I am not at all surprised that the Nishorgo best practices have started gaining global recognition. Congratulations for a job well done!

Experience tells us that traditional “command and control” approaches in environmental management have failed elsewhere in the world. Decentralization of administration, devolution of management authorities and new approaches that are both collaborative and technically sound form the pillars of successful natural resources management. This is precisely what USAID, in tandem with the Government of Bangladesh, is trying to do through “co-management” or collaborative management. Co-management involves the entire community - including local representatives of government agencies, elected local government officials, civil society organizations, and others with a stake in the management of the resources. The members of the community, who normally have limited access to publicly managed natural resources, are the cornerstone of this approach. What is most commendable is that the Forest Department has fully embraced these new management approaches. I compliment the Forest Department and the Ministry of Environment and Forest for their timely adoption of sound environmental governance.

For co-management to work, public and private stakeholders must trust each other, and for that to happen, governance must be transparent. You have, in the Nishorgo Program's emphasis on collaborative management, put trust as a central feature in the governance of protected areas. That trust will be enhanced through models of openness, transparency, and dialogue which the Nishorgo Program promotes. The United States strongly supports the promotion of good governance in the environment sector. I know significant policy challenges are still facing us. I am confident we can work together to overcome these challenges.

A shift in policy to support and expand these types of innovative natural resource management programs is both necessary and achievable. First of all, for a community-centered initiative to be successful, the communities must receive sustained benefit from the conservation efforts to which they are devoting their time. I am encouraged that the Ministry of Environment and Forest strongly supports Nishorgo's proposal to institutionalize an entry fee benefit-sharing system in the protected areas. I hope the government of Bangladesh will approve the proposal soon.

Let me take a few moments to give you a quick picture of what else our two governments are working on to improve the environment sector. In 2000, the Government of Bangladesh and my government signed a debt-for-nature swap agreement. I believe that many of you here are aware that Bangladesh is the first country in the world to have been benefited from this debt-for-nature swap. Through this agreement, Bangladesh received debt relief and resources that were used to establish a conservation fund. Under this arrangement, both governments worked together to establish an independent organization named the Arannayk Foundation, or the Bangladesh Tropical Forest Conservation Foundation. The Foundation has resources and the mandate to provide small grants to support tropical forest conservation in Bangladesh. The Arannayk Foundation has also started large-scale protected area co-management programs, complementing the effort of the Nishorgo program. This is the strategic synergy needed in order to address the daunting task of responsible protected area management in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh is moving forward with a pragmatic approach towards conserving its natural resource heritage. In the process, it is improving the livelihoods of countless poor who depend directly on these natural resources. In conclusion I wish you continued

success with the NISHORGO program. We look forward to replication of the Nishorgo co-management model throughout the protected area system.

Over the years Bangladesh and America have been important allies and friends. The United States has a longstanding relationship with Bangladesh and has provided more than 5 billion US dollars in aid since its independence. The United States annually provides development assistance programs in excess of \$100 million. We plan to continue this strong bond of friendship and work with the government, NGOs, the private sector, civil society, and individuals to help Bangladesh progress towards a better and more prosperous future.

Thank you again for inviting me to this beautiful setting and giving me the chance to say a few words about this important initiative.

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** As prepared for delivery*

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Note: *A Bangla translation of this speech is also available at the American Center. If you are interested in the translation, please call the American Center Press Section, Tel: 8837150-4, Fax: 9885688; e-mail: DhakaPA@state.gov; Website: <http://dhaka.usembassy.gov>*