

Staff Reporter

Myanmar on Sunday agreed to start the process for the repatriation of its 'documented' nationals from Bangladesh within the next two months, which Bangladesh considers a 'breakthrough' as the process remained halted since 2005.

"They've agreed to start works towards the repatriation of verified Myanmar nationals within two months," Foreign Secretary M Shahidul Haque told reporters at a press conference after the eight round of Foreign Office Consultation (FOC) between the two neighbours.

The Myanmar's feedback came when the Bangladesh side sought a specific timeframe for the repatriation of its documented citizens from Bangladesh.

Secretary (Bilateral) Mustafa Kamal was also present at the press conference.

Shahidul Haque said the process will start with a small number -- 2415 out of 32,000 registered Myanmar nationals in two camps -- and a joint working group will be set up soon to work on the process.

"We'll take preparations within the next two months to look into how quickly the repatriation can be started. I think it's a breakthrough. We're very happy to see the outcome," said the Foreign Secretary.

Earlier, both sides had nearly a four-hour long meeting from 10am discussing a wide range of issues. Foreign Secretary Shahidul Haque and Myanmar Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs U Thant Kyaw led their respective sides in the meeting.

Terming the meeting 'fruitful and frank' Shahidul Haque said there has been a 'qualitative difference' between the two meetings - 7th and 8th FOC. "We've discussed all the issues very frankly. It's clear that Myanmar wants to take the relations with Bangladesh to a newer height." Bangladesh side floated an idea to bring in all the aspects of Bangladesh-Myanmar bilateral relations under an 'umbrella framework' for better understanding and cooperation.

"We felt that all the aspects should be brought under an umbrella framework -- Framework Arrangement on Trust and Cooperation for Development between Bangladesh and Myanmar," said the Foreign Secretary.

He said it contains eight components -- strengthening the trust or enhancing the trust, security and cooperation dialogue; trade and connectivity; energy, environment and natural disaster; agricultural and rural development; education, health and culture; sub-regional cooperation and collaboration in the Bay of Bengal.

"We've handed over it to them to have a broader framework and a common platform as we want to look into all the aspects of relationships," Haque said adding that it was prepared in light with Bangladesh's experience with India and the USA.

He mentioned that it will be reviewed at the Foreign Minister-level meeting to be held in Dhaka early next year.

The home side also discussed quick repatriation of Bangladesh and Myanmar nationals now in jails of the two countries. Currently, some 190 Bangladesh nationals are in Myanmar jail while 110 Myanmar nationals in Bangladesh jail.

"Ambassadors of the two countries have been given the responsibility to develop a system and quicken the reparation process," said the Foreign Secretary.

On better border management issue, he said there has been regular contact with the border forces of the two countries and both sides will start discussion to have Home-Secretary level meetings in addition to FOC.

The Foreign Secretary said the first Joint Commission meeting between the two countries will be held early next year when the Myanmar Foreign Minister will visit Bangladesh.

The two sides also agreed to strengthen efforts to control drug and human trafficking.

The Foreign Secretary said they discussed issues relating to energy cooperation, especially on gas.

On road connectivity, he said the discussion has begun again after 2008 and both sides are thinking about alternative routes in addition to the existing proposal.

Besides, the Myanmar side wants to send two teams to Bangladesh to learn from Bangladesh's successes in agriculture and livestock.

On the other hand, the agreement on cultural cooperation between the two countries has been extended for another four years as it expired earlier.

The Myanmar side made an initial comment on 'Agreement on promotion and reciprocal protection of investment' and it will be signed once the proposal is finalized.

Meanwhile, the ratification of treaty between Bangladesh and Myanmar on the demarcation of land section of the boundary north of the Naaf River will be signed at a Foreign Minister-level meeting. "It was signed in 1998, but not ratified. Now they're ready," said the Foreign Secretary.

A delegation of Myanmar, led by Thant Kyaw, arrived here on Thursday night on a four-day visit to attend the eighth round of FOC, which was originally scheduled for June 18.

Earlier on Friday, the Myanmar delegation visited Sylhet and returned to the capital on Saturday.

The Myanmar Deputy Foreign Minister also met Foreign Minister AH Mahmood Ali after the FOC.