

## 'Teesta water no longer a hurdle in ties'

Hossain Toufique Imam

The pending resolution of the Teesta river water-sharing agreement is “no longer an issue” for Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s government, her political adviser, Hossain Toufique Imam, said here on Saturday. The statement indicates a major shift in position for the Hasina government, which has been appealing to New Delhi to resolve the issue ahead of the general elections in December.

“Teesta is no longer a problem,” Mr. Imam said in reply to a question from *The Hindu* while speaking at a think-tank event.

### Resigned to delay

“PM Hasina often says we are a lower riparian state, and rivers flow downwards. You cannot stop Teesta flowing into Bangladesh, and today or tomorrow a formal agreement will take place. But it is not a problem between the neighbours anymore,” he added, indicating that his government may be resigned to the fact that the agreement will not be signed soon.

The agreement has been pending since it was nearly signed in 2011, but was blocked at the last minute by West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee.

Mr. Imam’s words were in sharp contrast to Ms. Hasina’s repeated appeals thus far, referring to the water-sharing agreement as “transformational” for India-Bangladesh ties.

An Awami League delegation had also met Prime Minister Narendra Modi in April, stressing that the Teesta issue was a “serious problem” for the ruling party, which needed to be resolved.

Speaking at the Observer Research Foundation, Mr. Imam, however, conceded that the Opposition parties, led by the Bangladesh National Party (BNP), would, during the election campaign, raise the failure of the government to conclude the agreement.

Mr. Imam’s visit to Delhi, where he met Minister of State for External Affairs M.J. Akbar, comes a month after a delegation of the Opposition BNP addressed several think-tanks here.

In an interview to *The Hindu*, BNP standing committee member Amir Khosru Chowdhury had appealed to India to push for free and fair elections in Bangladesh and “not back any one party in the elections”. The BNP’s outreach, given its past tense relationship with India, has been viewed with much interest in Delhi and Dhaka.

### Condemns opposition

Responding to a question, Mr. Imam, who holds the Cabinet rank in Ms. Hasina’s government, said it was “impossible” for the BNP and India to reconcile their differences, and added that Delhi should “expel all BNP elements from the country”.

“The BNP members who came here are not only pro-Pakistan but also pro-China and have virtually been taken over by the Jamaat-e-Islami (which has been banned from elections). They are working against Indian interests,” Mr. Imam alleged, also warning that “pro-Pakistan” elements would attempt to disrupt the Bangladesh elections.

The sharp allegations and counter-allegations during visits by political leaders on both sides of the Bangladesh political spectrum indicate how heated the upcoming campaign is likely to be.

This week, the Awami League also criticised comments by U.S. Ambassador to Dhaka Marcia Bernicat, who had expressed concerns about irregularities in the recent Gazipur and Khulna bypolls. Ms. Hasina's son and adviser, Sajeeb Wazed Joy, seen as her political successor, called the U.S. Embassy in Bangladesh a "mouthpiece for the BNP", while other leaders warned against any "foreign interference" in the elections.

Concern has also grown over the possibility of violence in the months ahead, which had marred the run-up to elections in January 2014, which the Awami League won.

### **Co-opting the fringe**

This time around, the Awami League has been accused of tacitly seeking support from the Islamist group Hefazat-e-Islami, which organised violent protests in 2013 where dozens were killed.

Asked by *The Hindu*, Mr. Imam played down the concerns over the growth of the Hefazat cadres and madrassas in Bangladesh.

"Their numbers are so large that no one can stop them with force; we have to do it tactfully. We have converted many Hefazat students in madrassas to Awami League supporters, so that is why we feel in the elections, we don't think they will be a factor," he said.

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