

India evacuates citizens, BDR on high alert

213 deportees' fate hangs in balance

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Tension is running high at the Lalmonirhat border after India started evacuating of about 5,000 civilians from Satgachiya area to "a safe distance".

"The situation may deteriorate at any moment, as the Indian security forces has created a war-like situation," Lt. Col. Ashfaque Islam, commanding officer of the 19 battalion of the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR), told The Daily Star.

The BDR has threatened "necessary actions" unless the Indian Border Security Force (BSF) stops push-ins.

The warning came at a company commander-level flag meeting at Kurigram yesterday.

The simmering border confrontation follows a statement by Indian Deputy Prime Minister LK Advani that some 20 million "illegal immi-

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A woman weeps while holding children in the no-man's-land between India and Bangladesh at the Satgachiya border crossing, near Coochbehar, on Monday. A group of 213 men, women and children have been stranded at the tense border for days and are short of food and falling ill.

Conspiracy on to foil UP polls, Bhuiyan tells Sangsad

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The government suspects conspiracy in the allegations of unfairness in the ongoing Union Parishad elections.

"Conspiracy is on to foil the elections," LGRD and Cooperatives Minister Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan told the Jatiya Sangsad yesterday as his attention was drawn to an Election Commission observation about the UP polls.

Chief Election Commissioner MA Syed on Monday dismissed the UP polls as "more or less a futile exercise".

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War petroleum reserve abroad planned

STAR REPORT

The government will store petroleum products in another country as emergency reserve in the event of a war in Iraq.

The authorities have been negotiating with Singapore and Hong Kong for storage facility, according to sources.

Bangladesh cannot store more than a month's petroleum requirement.

The contingency plan was taken as it imports fuel mostly from the Middle East. Any war there would snap shipping links, making it impossible to import.

The government will also try to import fuel from Indonesia and Malaysia.

"In case of a war, it would be difficult for us to import petroleum. So we have decided to build an emergency reserve in another country," Finance and Planning Minister M Saifur Rahman told newsmen at his secretariat office yesterday.

Saifur said a war in the Middle East might serve a severe blow to economy. "The next three months are very crucial for us," he said.

The cabinet discussed the issue in its regular weekly meeting on Monday and asked relevant ministries and departments to chalk out a plan.

How much reserve it will build abroad is yet to be decided, State Minister for Energy and Mineral Resources AKM Mosharraf Hossain told the BBC Bangla Service yesterday.

"We have written to a number of countries and may send somebody to negotiate the reserve build-up," Mosharraf added.

During the Gulf war in 1990, Bangladesh stored petroleum in Singapore.

Annually, Tk 4,000 crore petroleum products are imported, the state minister said.

HC summoned in Delhi, asked to take back stranded people

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

New Delhi summoned Bangladesh High Commissioner to India Tufail Karim Haider on Monday and told him that Dhaka should take back the 213 people stranded in the no-man's land along the border with West Bengal.

Haider was called to the Indian External Affairs Ministry by Additional Secretary Meera Shankar and handed over an aide memoire.

This is the second time in three days that a senior Bangladeshi diplomat was summoned to the ministry and handed over an aide memoire on the illegal immigrants issue.

Haider was told by the Indian official that Bangladesh should enforce the modalities agreed to by

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W Bengal wants to mediate

SAKYASEN MITTRA, Kolkata

The West Bengal wants to mediate between India and Bangladesh on the Satgachiya stand-off over 213 people stranded in the no-man's land.

Sources at the Writers Building said yesterday Deputy Prime Minister Lal Krishna Advani would hold a meeting with West Bengal Chief Minister Buddhadev Bhattacharya.

Advani is in Singapore and is expected to return to Kolkata today to hold discussions with Bhattacharya on the border crisis.

The chief minister earlier said the state government would not accept the 213 people stranded at the "Zero Point".

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IMF links loans to bank privatisation

Govt asked to act fast on free-float exchange rate

SHAHRIAR KARIM

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) loan will depend on privatisation of at least one nationalised commercial bank (NCB).

A visiting IMF mission also told Finance and Planning Minister M Saifur Rahman yesterday to act fast on free float of the exchange rate.

The minister argued that fear of a war in the Gulf and a fragile reserve position did not permit the government to immediately float the exchange rate.

Saifur also told the IMF mission that the government was yet to take a decision on NCB privatisation and

would refer the issue to the Bangladesh Bank and the Bank Reforms Committee.

"We cannot float the exchange rate now when there is a fear of war in the Gulf. A decision on this will depend on reserve position and overall perspective of external trade," Saifur told newsmen after the meeting.

The government is negotiating with the IMF for about \$1.8 billion in loan for the next three years under the Poverty Reduction Growth Facility (PRGF), official sources said.

Since its arrival on January 27,

the seven-member IMF mission has met the prime minister and government high-ups for a firsthand appraisal of strengths and weaknesses of the economy.

The mission will file a report to the IMF board. The report would be the basis for the IMF, and also the World Bank, to commit any fund.

"Both sides reached a good understanding. We're hopeful," Saifur said after the meeting.

"We had a wonderful and productive discussion, but we did not discuss any amount," said David Burton, IMF director for the Asia-

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Edible oil slips on purity test

MORSHED ALI KHAN

About half of 300 samples of randomly collected edible oil have been found adulterated, according to sources in the Public Health Institute (PHI).

Experts also tested cooked foods from restaurants registered with the Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) and were appalled by the extent of contamination.

The first batch of samples was so contaminated that scientists thought errors had occurred in the collection process. But tests on a second batch at the Public Health Laboratory showed similar contamination.

A source said some edible oil sold from drums in the market was found to contain what experts described as a "pre-cancerous" chemical. Other branded edible oil contained contaminated chemicals that could not be identified without better laboratory equipment.

The experts also tested 300 samples of edible salt from markets in different parts of the country and found 'most' brands inconsistent in the amount of iodine that had been added. Some packets contained the required five per cent mixture of iodine while other packets from the same brand had a lot more, less or none at all.

Many samples collected from around the country had BSTI (Bangladesh Standards and Testing Institution) approval. The institution has issued standards for 46 food items.

But experts said that after receiving BSTI certification, the producers simply use "whatever ingredients they like" with any checking by inspectors.

In many cases, BSTI and DCC inspectors, they claimed, are "on a pay list" of the companies. According to official sources, some BSTI, DCC and PHI inspectors have made personal fortunes out of malpractice at the cost of public safety.

The tests were conducted under a Tk 1 million Food Safety

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