

PM's remarks in JS offensive: Hasina

UNB, Dhaka

Leader of the Opposition in parliament Sheikh Hasina yesterday said Prime Minister Khaleda Zia's "offensive" remarks in the JS would make her think twice about going back to the House.

"How could the PM say that she would not allow me to speak. I am the leader of the opposition and also the former prime minister. Is it the proper parliamentary language?" she told reporters at the VIP lounge of the Zia International Airport prior to leaving for Saudi Arabia to perform hajj.

Hasina said she had a lot of issues to raise in parliament on Sunday including indemnity, price hike and law and order, but was stopped abruptly. She said the prime minister comes to the parliament to "gag the opposition".

Hasina said the opposition would protest the indemnity ordinance designed to protect those responsible for custodial deaths during the Operation Clean Heart as it "goes against humanity, constitution and also against the spirit of the Geneva Convention".

She questioned why the opposition would not be allowed to talk about the indemnity ordinance and the US decision on new immigration rules imposed on Bangladeshis.

She, however, said that her party members would take part in the thanks motion on the president's address to parliament and also on budget to "unearth misdeeds" of the government.

She said her party was observing the political situation but an anti-government movement at this point would not be required, as people themselves would resist the govern-

ment because of its "repression". She said during her rule Bangladesh stood out as a role model with regard to poverty alleviation, eradication of illiteracy and reducing regional conflicts, but the rule of the present government has increased people's misery.

Rejecting the government claim that negative propaganda by the AL contributed to Bangladesh being blacklisted as a terror-risk country, Hasina said the remarks by the US ambassador in Dhaka in this regard contradicted the government claim.

She said an AL team would soon visit the US to lobby with the US administration to drop Bangladesh from its list of terror-risk countries.

About India's 'push-in' bids, Hasina blamed the prime minister for the situation and said it is Khaleda Zia who during her previous rule had admitted in a joint communique with the then Indian PM, Narasimha Rao, that there were illegal Bangladeshi immigrants in India.

Before leaving to board the aircraft, Hasina said she would pray for the people so that they could free themselves from the "misrule and misdeeds" of this government.

Awami League's Religious Affairs Secretary Sheikh Abdullah, opposition leader's private secretary Nazrul Islam and APS Awlad Hossain are accompanying Hasina on the pilgrimage.

Deputy Leader of the Opposition advocate Abdul Hamid, AL leaders Zillur Rahman, Tofail Ahmed, Abdul Jalil, Saber Hossain Chowdhury, Mirza Azam MP and others were present at the airport to see off their party chief.

34 more NGOs quit ADAB

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Thirty-four more non-government organisations (NGOs) have quit the Association of Development Agencies of Bangladesh (ADAB).

They have expressed solidarity with the National NGO Coordination Committee (NNCC) in its move to hold a convention this month.

In a joint statement yesterday, chief executives of the NGOs said ADAB has failed to uphold the interest of its members and has become an 'ineffective and non-functioning' organisation.

They alleged that the present leadership of ADAB is destroying unity and solidarity of the NGOs instead of taking effective initiatives for poverty alleviation, spread of education and other activities for the welfare of the people.

Earlier, a number of other NGOs had resigned from ADAB.

The NGOs which resigned yesterday are DNK, UPAKAR, SSKS, CARE-Bangladesh, Sylhet, Khasbri Youth Action Group, PARAS, Institute of Development Affairs, Palli Pragati Sangsad, Rural Development Center, Jatiya Tarun Sangha, BARSAs, Palli Karma Shahayak Sangstha, Beel Chalon Development Service Centre, Sacheton Karmo Sahayok Sangstha, Uttoron Adarsha Bahumukhi Samaj Kalyan sangstha, Banga Janani, Sunity Sangha, Sight Moon Organisation, ORA, Organisation for Rural Development, Manob Kalyan Parishad, Palli Mangol Kendra, Samajik Kalyan Sangstha, ESDO, Chetona Unnayan Sangstha, Sammilita Grameen Mohila Unnayan Sangstha, Atmonirbhorshil Samaj Kalyan Sangstha, Nari Kalyan sangstha, Jana Kalyan Sangha, MOTHER, Kanchan Samity, Palli Unnayan Sangstha, Mukti Seba Sangstha and VFDA, according to a press release of the NNCC.

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Jumma refugees demand rehabilitation

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Jumma 'refugees' in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) have demanded immediate steps for 'proper rehabilitation' and return of their land from 'encroachers'.

They have suffered for long as refugees and still they are living in 'extreme insecurity and uncertainty,' they said and demanded an end to this.

The demands were made by the Chittagong Hill Tracts Repatriated Jumma Refugees' Welfare Association at a press conference at the Jatiya Press Club yesterday.

"We had signed a 20-point accord with the then government in 1997 and following this, 12,222 families returned to the country from across the border. But the government is yet to rehabilitate us properly. This is inhuman and undemocratic," President of the association Probhakar Chakma said.

Association leaders alleged that settlers (Bangalees who had settled in the CHT after 1971) backed by a section of security personnel frequently attacked the refugees.

The government has not yet formed a task force to monitor implementation of the '20-point accord' and for this rehabilitation of Jumma refugees has come to a halt, they said.

"We had submitted a memorandum to Prime Minister Khaleda Zia on March 4 last year, demanding immediate implementation of our demands. These include adequate ration, Tk 10,000 to buy bulls, loan facilities, funds for repair of temple, jobs in police force, army, ansar, VDP and appointment of a tribal as chairman of the CHT development board", one leader added.

General Secretary of the association Santoshita Chakma Bakul read out a statement at the press conference while Vice Chairman Hemendra Tripura, Prafulla Kumar Chakma and Safur Marmar were present.

"The people of India have a soft corner for Bangladesh and the people of Bangladesh. We don't want any quarrel with them. We want the friendliest of relations with them. But, then, you always clap

with both hands," Sinha said. The group has been holding noisy protests amid growing tension between the villagers on either side of the border.

Sinha said in India there were a "lot of sentiments" for Bangladesh because "we had a role in their independence struggle."

"I don't know if these sentiments are shared by Bangladeshis. They may or may not admit it today. But the fact is that Indian blood flowed alongside Bangladeshis blood in their liberation struggle, and we can't forget that."

He dismissed Dhaka's charge that India was pushing its nationals into Bangladesh and said it had been a "one-sided migration" for a long time. "They are coming to India in search of livelihood. They come and settle here."

"Economic conditions in Bangladesh are not as good as they are in India. So migration will take place from there, from a place where economic conditions are not very good to a place where economic conditions are considered to be better," he said.

Sinha said the 4,000-km India-Bangladesh border was so artificial and porous that it was not possible to enforce a "clear-cut boundary norm". Villagers from each side crossed over to the other side.

"In such a porous border, clearly it is very difficult to effectively enforce a check that the border will not be crossed," he said.

He said India was not trying to deport the illegal immigrants despite a High Court order to the effect.

"India is only preventing illegal immigrants from crossing into Indian territory. That is the bottom line. But deportation will not be

done, cannot be done by pushing them into Bangladesh," he said in the interview.

ADP trimmed

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"very dismal", with only 33 per cent spent till the third quarter of the fiscal year. Usually, about half the allocated money is spent by this time.

As a result of the cuts, several ministries and divisions that have fallen behind in the implementation of projects - including the education, science and information technology ministry, public administration and physical infrastructure - have had funding cuts.

The money saved will be spent on roads, local government engineering works, and rural electrification.

The government is in a dilemma about whether to cut the education budget, however, because it could be politically damaging.

The new budget has no food aid component, as food grains will be converted into cash and used as local currency.

Pilgrims

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ments made at the directive of Prime Minister Khaleda Zia," State Minister for Civil Aviation Mir Mohammad Nasiruddin told the parliament yesterday after the question hour.

Nasiruddin assured the House that the swindlers would face tough action.

The minister also informed the House that for the first time this year, the national flag carrier Biman ferried 25,000 Hajj pilgrims from Dhaka and Chittagong on time. The pilgrims will start returning home from February 14 according to schedule, he said.

Carnival

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ised to be a spectacular showcase.

"I think the watershed for this tournament will be this weekend. The opening ceremony ... people who watched the dress rehearsal said it was stunning and the following day there will be a magnificent cricket match at Newlands (in Cape Town)."

"I think those two exciting events will set the tone for a wonderful World Cup," the tournament's executive director Ali Bacher said Thursday.

The Cape Town city council said it had spent millions of rands to upgrade two cricket stadiums and deploy additional police, traffic and emergency officials.

Disaster management manager Greg Pillay said: "We have proactively assessed all risks and drafted appropriate emergency plans for all venues, especially Newlands stadium, various City hotels and other special events areas."

"The Cape Town Disaster Management Centre is geared to handle any eventuality," he said.



Hundreds of homebound passengers queue up for tickets at the Kamalapur Railway Station in the city yesterday on the eve of the Eid-ul-Azha.

Speakers warn against arsenic in food chain

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Widespread use of groundwater for irrigation suggests that ingestion of crops so produced could be a major source of arsenic poisoning.

Besides, "phyto-toxicity" due to increased arsenic in soil/water and its long-term impact on agricultural yield is an area of concern, said speakers at a seminar in the city.

And naturally occurring arsenic and arsenic-rich wastes, generated from a wide range of arsenic removal systems, also pose a threat "In the absence of any clear guideline for safe disposal, such wastes are often disposed in a very unsafe way", they added.

The seminar on the 'Fate of Arsenic in the Environment', jointly organised by Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET), International Training Network (ITN), Centre for Environment and Sustainable Development (ESD) Programme and the United Nations University (UNU), was held at the BUET

Council Bhaban. Experts from India, Japan, Britain, Pakistan and Bangladesh participated at the seminar.

The discussion session was divided into two parts. In the first session, experts presented technical papers on the fate of arsenic extracted with groundwater, influence of upstream sediment on arsenic contamination of groundwater in Bangladesh, the cancer risk of drinking arsenic-contaminated water and a pilot study in Sonargaon.

M Ashraf Ali presented the paper on the 'fate of arsenic extracted with groundwater'. He said although considerable work had been done on arsenic removal from contaminated groundwater and alternate water supply options, the presence of arsenic in irrigation water did not receive due attention.

And the dependency on groundwater for public water supply and irrigation results in a huge quantity of arsenic being cycled through the environment each year with major

Fernandes, Sinha

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out of control and in this particular case, things have unfortunately gone beyond control," Fernandes told reporters in Bangalore.

"There is tension at the border. It is unfortunate and additional BSF personnel have been deployed near the no-man's land where the migrants are stranded," he said.

Nevertheless, India hopes the issue will be sorted out soon, he added.

Regarding the possibility of another round of talks with the Bangladesh authorities, he said the issue was being handled by the home ministry and he would not comment on it.

Fernandes said India never shied away from humanitarian aid and even now BSF personnel were in contact with the Red Cross Society to ensure that the people in the no man's land are not deprived of the basic necessities.

UNB adds: Indian External Affairs Minister Yashwant Sinha said, Delhi does not wish to quarrel with Dhaka and will not allow the present problem of illegal immigration to get "out of hand".

"We don't want the situation to blow up, to get out of hand. We have always looked at Bangladesh as a very friendly neighbour," Sinha told Indo Asia News Service (IANS) in New Delhi in an interview made available in Dhaka yesterday.

"The people of India have a soft corner for Bangladesh and the people of Bangladesh. We don't want any quarrel with them. We want the friendliest of relations with them. But, then, you always clap

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Case for Iraq war

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risked irrelevance if it did not now consider the "serious consequences" contemplated for non-compliance.

He also presented what he said were eyewitness accounts of Iraq's ongoing biological weapons programmes.

Saddam has investigated "dozens" of diseases, including cholera and typhus, Powell said. "He also has the wherewithal to produce smallpox."

In a dramatic gesture, Powell held up a small phial, saying it could hold enough anthrax to shut down the US Senate.

While Iraq has declared the past production of 8,500 litres of anthrax, Powell said UN inspectors had previously estimated the total at 22,000 litres.

Such an amount added up to "tens upon tens upon tens of thousands of teaspoonfuls," Powell said. "And Saddam Hussein has not accounted for even one teaspoonful of this deadly material."

Iraq will have the right of reply following the presentation, which Baghdad's official press Wednesday denounced in advance, dismissing it as a deeply flawed bid to justify a US attack.

"All that Powell will present in terms of alleged satellite pictures and some obscure recordings will be no more than fabrications," wrote Al-Jumhuriya in a front-page editorial headlined "Powell's contrived lies."

Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tareq Aziz said the US top diplomat would fail to provide convincing evidence against Baghdad because none exists.

"Ninety-five per cent of (Iraq's) missiles were already destroyed" when UN inspectors left the country in 1998, Aziz told France's Le Figaro newspaper.

Doves in the crisis also took up advance positions, led by Security Council member Germany, with Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder's spokesman Bela Anda saying Berlin would not be swayed by Powell's new evidence.

The European Union made a formal appeal to Iraq to give up any weapons programmes it may be developing.

Possible US coalition partners are finding scant public backing for war, including Britain, where polls indicate that only 10 per cent would back action without a UN mandate.

Even in the United States, nearly

two-thirds of the populace oppose military action without a green light from the world body.

Meanwhile a NATO official said the body's ruling council will meet today to discuss a formal US request to support military action against Iraq.

NATO member Turkey, which the United States wants to use as a staging area for an initial onslaught against neighbouring Iraq, on Wednesday called on France, Germany and Belgium to drop their insistence that diplomatic options be exhausted before the Alliance began any military planning.

President returns to Dhaka by road as chopper wouldn't start

UNB, Mymensingh

A helicopter carrying President Iajuddin Ahmed went out of order here yesterday afternoon and the president had to return to Dhaka by road.

The pilots failed to start the chopper for mechanical faults when the president boarded it at about 2:30pm in the Mymensingh Circuit House premises, witnesses and official sources said.

One hour later, the president left Mymensingh by a jeep of the district administration, as the chopper could not be repaired although sources said it was "a minor technical fault".

At about 4:30pm, another helicopter came from Dhaka along with technicians who repaired the other chopper. Afterwards, both choppers headed back for the capital at 5:05pm.

Earlier, President Iajuddin Ahmed came here in the morning to attend the 5th Convocation of Bangladesh Agricultural University as chief guest.

At 1:00pm, he returned to the Circuit House and exchanged views with local leaders of the ruling four-party alliance.

FM dismisses

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ence between the two countries should be resolved through negotiations, not confrontation.

"They (India) have the right to send troops to the border. But I think Bangladesh is a friendly neighbour," he said.

However, the foreign minister made clear that the country would do everything to protect the border.

The government has initiated a move to take back some Bangladeshi fishermen, who crossed over to India in inclement weather, Morshed said.

"If there are any documents that prove the 213 people stranded in the no-man's land are Bangladeshis, we would take them back, too."

However, the foreign minister does not believe there are any such documents, legal or illegal. "It is not important what religion they practise. Rather, it is important whether they are Bangladeshis or not."

Meanwhile, India's External Affairs Minister Yashwant Sinha phoned Morshed Khan last night and invited him to visit New Delhi 'soon', according to a late night UNB despatch.

Digital fitness

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certify smoke emission, alignment, brakes, opacity, headlights, undercarriage, etc. The machines were not equipped to check tyres.

But due to lack of co-ordination between the BRTA and the equipment provider, Vicom of Singapore, the computer programming could not be modified and VIC projects never saw the light of the day.

"The company that provided the equipment did not fulfil the requirements. So we have not paid them in full. A bill worth Tk 2.48 crore was forfeited on December 31 last," MA Mostafiz, deputy director (Engineering) of the BRTA, said.

Now most of the equipment of the VIC has gone out of order. The BRTA now plans to hand over the VIC to the private sector. It has already proposed to the ADB for further funds to activate the centre.

The operator of the VIC in Mirpur, Mohammed Jalal, said they now cannot inspect more than 10 vehicles a day as the battery is down.

"We sometimes check vehicles of different embassies and ministries, but not public vehicles" he said.

In the manual testing system, vehicles which appear to be unfit are

passing the fitness test, according to sources. The unfit vehicles are contributing to air pollution in the city leading to the respiratory tract infections (RTIs) including asthma and bronchitis among the city commuters.

"The fitness certificate has virtually become a purchasable commodity," says a middleman, requesting anonymity. He says they can have the BRTA inspectors issue fitness stickers for any vehicle in exchange for a certain amount of money. "Or you can approach the inspector yourself."

It was found on last Thursday that BRTA inspectors are providing fitness stickers for vehicles without any test. An inspector was found asking drivers to pay the government-fixed fitness test fees of Tk 645 for small vehicle and Tk 945 for the big ones. In turn, they were providing fitness stickers which remain in force 2004.

A microbus driver said he received the fitness certificate last Thursday by paying the inspector Tk 150 in bribe in addition to the fee. A government Jeep also got the fitness certificate without any checking.

measures for their management and safe transfer.

Pro-environmental lobbies have expressed their reservations about genetically modified crops. But protagonists of bio-food argue the launch of the committee does not necessarily mean growing of all genetically engineered crops will start right away. Instead, it would eliminate the risk of use of GMOs hazardous to Bangladesh's soil and ecology.

Many view bio-food technology as the only way of feeding around 800 million people across the globe who face chronic hunger. International anti-GMO groups like Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth, however, maintain the world produces enough food to feed its entire population plus another three billion

Post-polls clashes leave 60 hurt in Kushtia, Barisal

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

At least 60 people were injured in post-polls violence in Kushtia and Barisal yesterday.

According to our Kushtia correspondent, a group of BNP activists led by Afsar Ali, a defeated chairman candidate of Dharmapur union, attacked the houses of their opponents at around 3 pm yesterday.

Afsar, also a BNP leader, defeated to JSD leader Arman Ali in Dharmapur union parishad election held on Tuesday. Supporters of Arman retaliated, resulting in a fierce clash between the two sides.

The clash continued for four hours, leaving 50 people injured. On information, police rushed to the spot, fired teargas shells and brought the situation under control.

Eight of the injured, identified as Nabiran, 35, Bagha, 27, Shilpi, 18, Badal, 28, Hasina, 30, Anwar, 22, Khokon, 28, and Rahima, 16, were admitted to Kushtia hospital while the rest given first aid.

Our Barisal correspondent reports, ten people were injured, seven of them seriously, in a post-polls violence in Laxmipasha union under Bagerganj upazila yesterday.

According to local people, supporters of a newly elected chairman came under attack by their opponents in the morning.

They beat them mercilessly, leaving