

Powell likes Dhaka to send troops to Iraq, but makes no official request

REZAUL KARIM

Although the United States looks forward to involvement of Bangladeshi troops in peacekeeping in Iraq, no decision was taken to involve Dhaka militarily in line with a United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolution.

"We discussed it but I made no special request for that. I leave the matter with Bangladesh government, prime minister, cabinet and the legislature to decide on an appropriate way of deployment of troops," said US Secretary of State Colin Powell yesterday.

"This is a matter for Bangladesh government to decide. It's not a demand from the United States," Powell told a joint press conference with his Bangladesh counterpart M Morshed Khan at Sheraton Hotel.

"Bangladesh has a very positive record in international peacekeeping and is a leading provider of troops. We would welcome (Bangladesh) to take part in humanitarian efforts in post-war Iraq."

Powell referred to the UNSC resolution 1483, passed unanimously on May 22, which called on all member states to assist Iraqis and the reconstruction of the war-ravaged country.

Washington deeply appreciates Bangladesh's support for the war against terror and efforts to build democratic institutions and fight poverty, he said. "The United States considered Bangladesh a valued friend and partner and would like to see the South Asian country make

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PHOTO: STAR

Visiting US Secretary of State Colin Powell talks to Prime Minister Khaleda Zia at the Prime Minister's Office yesterday. Powell headed for the Middle East yesterday afternoon after his layover in Dhaka.

Dhaka, Jakarta sign MoU to avoid double taxation

Megawati spends busy day in capital

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Dhaka and Jakarta yesterday signed an agreement to avoid double taxation and a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on counter-trade arrangement.

The two countries also exchanged letters listing tradable commodities under the counter-trade arrangement while their apex trade bodies inked a MoU to form a joint business council.

The developments came as immediate outcomes of the official talks between Indonesia and Bangladesh at the International Conference Centre (ICC) at the Prime Minister's Office yesterday morning.

The visiting President of Indonesia, Megawati Soekarnoputri, and Prime Minister Khaleda Zia led their respective sides at the talks preceded by a tete-a-tete between them.

Emerging from the talks at the ICC, Finance and Planning Minister M Saifur Rahman and Indonesian Minister for Industries and Trade Rini MS Soewandi signed the Agreement on Avoidance of Double Taxation.

Commerce Minister Amir Khasru Mahmud Chowdhury and Soewandi then signed a MoU on the Counter Trade Arrangement. Khasru hoped that under the new arrangement trading of commodities worth US\$20 million would take place in the first year with no LCs required for businessmen.

Bangladesh has already listed 17 commodities and will propose export of seven items under the arrangement in the first phase.

The two ministers exchanged letters listing commodities to fall under the counter-trade arrangement.

Another MoU on the establishment of the joint business council was signed between the chambers

of the two countries. Representatives of FBCCI and KADIN, apex trade bodies of the two countries, signed it.

Briefing newsmen at a city hotel in the afternoon on the official talks, Foreign Secretary Shamsheer Mobin Chowdhury said that both sides expressed similar views on non-tapping of huge trade potentials between the two countries.

"It's more a question of increasing total trade volume between Indonesia and Bangladesh than the issue of trade balance. At the official talks emphasis was laid on raising the trade volume," he said, adding that the trade balance was tilted towards Indonesia currently.

Although Indonesia is a big market, Bangladesh did not tap it vigorously before, he said. Similarly, the foreign secretary said, the Indonesians feel that until the cur

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JS body says no to raising perks with retrospective effect

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs Ministry yesterday recommended passage of four bills to increase perks for the prime minister, Speaker, Deputy Speaker, ministers, state ministers, deputy ministers and members of parliament.

The nod came at the first meeting of the committee yesterday held in the parliament. The committee will place its report incorporating some amendments to the bills before the House next week.

According to the proposed bills, the recipients are to get enhanced benefits with retrospective effect from July 1, 2002. But the committee recommended that the perks would be applicable from July 1, 2003.

Law Minister Moudud Ahmed also agreed to the amendment, sources said.

Chairman of the committee and BNP lawmaker Khandaker Mahbub Uddin Ahmed presided over the meeting.

Amid strong opposition by the main opposition, the Awami League, LGRD and Cooperatives Minister Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan and Moudud Ahmed tabled the bills on June 16.

Chaos rules Ctg (north) BNP unit council

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, CTG

The biennial council of Chittagong (north) district unit of the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) was held amid chaos yesterday.

Tension ran high on two occasions at the council over the speech of Giasuddin Quader Chowdhury, who was running for the presidency of Chittagong (north) district BNP. Chowdhury lost the October 2001 parliamentary election in Raozan constituency.

Chowdhury, younger brother of the Prime Minister's Parliamentary Affairs adviser Salauddin Quader Chowdhury, in his speech at the council criticised the activities of the Chittagong (north) district BNP, triggering a war of words with Syed Wahidul Alam MP, ruling party whip and lawmaker from Hathazari.

He also took dais while the election was going on in the afternoon.

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Dhaka's berth in ASEAN Regional Forum brightens

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Bangladesh's chance to become a member of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) has brightened with Indonesia giving it support yesterday and the lifting of a moratorium on new membership to forum.

Foreign Secretary Shamsheer Mobin Chowdhury told journalists yesterday that Jakarta has supported Dhaka's wish to get a berth at the ARF and the forum itself has lifted a moratorium on new membership yesterday.

Dhaka applied for the ARF membership after the coalition came to power in 2001 and "now that the forum has withdrawn the moratorium, we shall be one of the first countries to become a new member", he said.

The foreign secretary said the ARF membership would link Bangladesh more directly to Southeast Asia and beyond. He said the ARF pursues "preventive

diplomacy" and foreign ministers of the member countries meet once a year to discuss issues like peace and stability.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) slapped a moratorium on the ARF membership in 2000 when North Korea was allowed to the forum's meeting in Bangkok. Alongside Bangladesh, East Timor and Pakistan are the two other top candidates for getting the ARF membership.

Currently, the ARF has 23 members -- 10 ASEAN and 11 non-ASEAN countries. These are Brunei, Burma, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Laos, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, the European Union (EU), Australia, Canada, China, India, Japan, South Korea, New Zealand, North Korea, Russia, the US, Papua New Guinea and Mongolia.

US to consider free access of goods

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Washington has assured Dhaka that it will consider giving it duty- and quota-free access of goods to the US.

Dhaka raised the issue during the official talks with US Secretary of State Colin Powell at Hotel Sheraton yesterday, according to sources.

"We have tabled our demand of duty-free market access and they have assured us of considering it," Commerce Minister Amir Khasru Mahmud Chowdhury told The Daily Star after the talks.

He said the contribution of the garments sector to economy was also highlighted at the discussion and the US officials were "sympathetic to various emerging issues in the sector".

Dhaka also urged Washington to speed up the process of passing the Middle East Trade and Engagement Act 2003, which has

been placed before the US Congress recently.

After the passage of the bill, the US would provide a number of trade facilities including duty-free access of goods from 18 Muslim countries including Bangladesh and Pakistan.

The commerce minister said the issue of signing the Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA) with the US was also discussed. Washington proposed the signing of the agreement in February this year.

"We have prepared a draft and waiting for the counter draft from Washington," Khasru said.

Regarding the protection of US investment in Bangladesh, Washington urged Dhaka to maintain consistency in its investment policy, meeting sources said.

The US has invested over \$1 billion in Bangladesh's oil, gas and energy sector.

Powell snubs Hasina for not cancelling hartal

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Leader of the Opposition Sheikh Hasina had no meeting with US Secretary of State Colin Powell during his layover in Dhaka yesterday afternoon, and her scheduled meeting with visiting Indonesian President Megawati Soekarnoputri was cancelled too.

AFP quoted a US official as saying Powell snubbed Hasina because she refused to back down on the strike, sponsored by her party's student wing, which coincided with his visit.

"We asked her to call off the hartal but she wouldn't, so we cancelled the meeting," the official told the news agency.

Awami League sources, however, told The Daily Star that there was no definite schedule for any meeting between Hasina and Powell. They disclaimed receipt of any request for calling off the hartal.

Foreign Secretary Shamsheer Mobin Chowdhury told a questioner at a news briefing at a city hotel yesterday, "The US embassy has

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AL MP stabbed in Jhenidah

Partial hartal observed

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Jhenidah

An Awami League MP and three other leaders of the party and its front organisations were stabbed in two separate attacks on pro-hartal processions in the town yesterday.

According to witnesses, local MP Abdul Hye, 54, Jubo League district unit president Mahmudul Islam, 44, and Chhatra League leader Bachchu, 24, received stab injuries when a group of armed men reportedly belonging to the ruling BNP swooped on a pro-hartal procession in front of the Sadar Police Station at around 7:00 am.

The hartal was called to protest the June 16 killing Saiful Rasul Palash, a leader of main opposition Awami League's student wing.

Protesting the attack, about 200 Awami League activists brought out a procession in the town at about 9:00 am. When the procession neared Agrani Square, the anti-

hartal activists again attacked it, leaving Krishak League district unit secretary Krishna Pada Dutta, 44, injured.

Awami League filed a case with local police station, but none was arrested till yesterday evening.

The injured MP alleged that police did not go into action during the attacks.

District unit of Awami League held a rally in front of its office in the afternoon condemning the attacks on processions. AL leaders demanded exemplary punishment to those involved.

A tense situation is prevailing in the town. BDR personnel have been deployed to avert any possible trouble.

Meantime, the six-hour hartal was observed partially elsewhere.

No major violence was reported

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Magnetic train from Dhaka to Ctg planned



A file photo of magnetic train.

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The government plans to introduce magnetic levitation train service between Dhaka and Chittagong, slashing the travel time to less than an hour, Communications Minister Nazmul Huda said yesterday.

"We are considering proposals from international vendors to make the dream project for the most modern and fastest train service a reality. Dhaka-Chittagong train journey would then take less than one-fifth the time required now," he told a press conference at the Jatiya Press Club.

The press conference was also attended by Arafat Rahman, youngest son of the prime minister, Nazmul Huda's younger brother Badrul Huda and Director General of Bangladesh Railway (BR) Rezaul Karim.

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Chairman of German company InterGlobe EURO-ARAB Group Prof. Alexander Wagner, who was also present, said his company could install the proposed train service at an estimated cost of \$500 million. "We could install the service at a cost of \$2 million per kilometre and offer a fare rate of Tk one per kilometre," Wagner added.

The project could be completed in 18 months, he said. In China, his company executed such a project connecting Shanghai with Beijing, he mentioned.

Wagner said the proposed train service would also be able to transport bulk gas, reducing the need for pipelines.

The government wants implementation of the project on build, operate, transfer (BOT) basis, to be financed by a consortium of inves