



PM arrives in Italy

UNB, Rome

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina arrived in Rome yesterday on a four-day official visit to Italy to hold talks with her Italian counterpart Giuseppe Conte.

A VIP flight of Biman Bangladesh Airlines carrying the PM and her entourage members touched down at Fiumicino Airport, Rome around 4:30pm (Italian time).

Minister Plenipotentiary of Italian Foreign Ministry Cristiano Cottafavi and Bangladesh Ambassador to Italy Abdus Sobhan Sikder received her at the airport.

During her stay in Italy, the PM will inaugurate the Chancery Building of Bangladesh Embassy at Via Dell'Antartide in Rome today.

Hasina will hold bilateral talks with Giuseppe Conte at Palazzo Chigi and join the official lunch.

Briefing reporters in Dhaka on Sunday, Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen had said there were three proposals on bilateral instruments between Bangladesh and Italy. These draft agreements are on cultural exchange, political consultations and cooperation in the diplomatic field.

The minister said a joint statement would be issued after the bilateral meeting between the two PMs.

"If it is not possible to sign the proposed agreements during the prime minister's visit, those will be reflected on the joint statement, and the instruments will be signed afterwards," he added.

Hasina is scheduled to return home on Saturday morning.

City polls

FROM PAGE 1 (EVMs). Awami League mayoral candidates -- Sheikh Fazle Noor Taposh in DSCC and Atiqul Islam in DNCC -- won the elections.

Mahbub said two city polls have raised the question about the future of elections and democracy in Bangladesh.

People's apathy for voting in the city elections begs the question whether the nation is gradually moving towards a void of democracy, he said.

Incidents of violating the electoral code of conducts, which took place from the announcement of polls schedule to the end of the elections, have made the code of conduct redundant, he claimed.

Moreover, there was no indication that the allegations were verified, the election commissioner said, adding that these are the primary element of "free-style" elections.

"I found the low turnout in Dhaka city corporation elections quite normal. It may be an ominous sign for democracy, but this is the real picture," he said.

If the election process fails, the normal process of handing over power gets blocked, he said, adding that the future of country's elections and democracy depends on discussion among the political parties.

'EC WORTHLESS' Meanwhile, BNP lawmaker Harunur Rashid yesterday termed the Election Commission "worthless" in parliament and demanded the resignation of the incumbent election commissioners for their "failure to arrange fair elections".

Speaking on a point of order, he said this government and the EC have totally failed to arrange any fair election.

Referring to the February 1 elections, Harun said the voter turnout was only 27 percent and 24 percent in the two city elections.

French police clear last migrant camp in north Paris

AFP, Paris

French police yesterday cleared the last migrant tent camp in northeast Paris, moving 427 people to shelters as part of a plan to take migrants off the streets.

The migrants, who included four women, were living in 266 tents and makeshift shelters in a canal-side camp "strewn with waste and refuse, overrun by rats and giving off a pestilent and foul-smelling odour of urine and excrement", according to the authorities.

The operation to tear down the camp began at 6:00 am (0500 GMT) and lasted two hours, the regional prefecture said.

Dozens of informal settlements have sprung up in recent years around the French capital.



Nobel laureate Dr Muhammad Yunus speaks at a memorial service for Brac founder Sir Fazle Hasan Abed at the city's International Convention City Bashundhara yesterday. Seated beside him is Gonoshasthaya Kendra founder Dr Zafrullah Chowdhury.

PHOTO: STAR

Measures at airport

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"It's basics that any passenger suspected of carrying the virus must remain separated from others," said Prof Saif, also the chairman of the BSMMU's virology department.

Asked, Dr Shajriar Sajjat, assistant health director at the airport, said, "There is no separate immigration booth for passengers from China. As a result, the purpose of the screening is not being fully met now."

"We asked our higher authorities to take steps in this regard. It has not been done yet," he said.

Meanwhile, health officials at the HSA said lack of adequate manpower and other facilities were making it difficult for them to screen inbound passengers.

There are only seven doctors, 10 nurses and 20 staff members assigned by the Directorate General of Health

Services (DGHS), they said.

Besides, two of the seven doctors were not on-duty. One of them is kept in quarantine after he accompanied the 312 Bangladeshi who returned from China's Wuhan, the epicentre of the coronavirus outbreak. The other one was on sick leave.

The five other doctors were struggling hard to screen passengers round the clock, they said.

Recently, three thermal scanners were installed at the airport, including one at the VIP terminal, to check body temperature of passengers.

There are eight boarding bridges at the airport and all passengers are screened through the scanners once they step out of the bridges.

Usually, multiple flights from different countries land at the airport around the same time and passengers have to gather at certain

places, including in the immigration queues.

"It's tough for us to maintain the standard with the shortage of manpower, especially when multiple flights arrive carrying Chinese nationals," Dr Zahidul Islam, assistant health director of the airport, told The Daily Star.

Contacted, Dr Abul Kalam Azad, director general of the DGHS, acknowledged that there could be chances of virus transmission under the current arrangements at the airport.

He, however, claimed the chances were slim.

Kalam said they would discuss the matter with the immigration department.

He also said 10 new doctors would join work at the airport today.

He then reiterated that all measures

were in place at the airport to prevent the virus from entering the country.

"We cannot guarantee but we can say we have been able to reduce almost all probabilities."

"We have to keep in mind the fact that almost all the cases are related to China, especially Wuhan. The number of cases outside China is insignificant, so we should not be panicked."

"We are working complying with the guidelines of WHO and other international organisations. We are fully prepared to contain any possible spread of the virus," he added.

Meanwhile, the 312 Bangladeshi, who were brought back from Wuhan in a special chartered flight on Saturday, were doing fine at the capital's Ashkona Hajj Camp, where they are kept in quarantine, said a government press release.

Despite rout, BNP

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election irregularities to place those before the diplomats.

The BNP leaders and activists had been on the streets during the polls campaign, but their presence in and around the polling centres was thin on the election day. Even there was no polling agents of the two BNP mayor candidates in many voting centres.

The BNP's Dhaka north and south mayor candidates, Tabitha Awal and Ishraque Hossain, lost to their AL rivals Atiqul Islam and Sheikh Fazle Noor Taposh.

Echoing the views of Moudud, BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhruul Islam Alamgir said a fair election was not possible even by using EVMs.

"We have been raising our voice against the use of EVM in elections for a long time. The latest city polls proved that manipulation of polls results is possible using the EVM," he said.

BNP leaders said the party didn't boycott the February 1 polls halfway through the polling day like they did in the previous city polls in 2015 because they didn't want to take the

blame for boycotting the elections.

The party faced huge criticism from within and outside the organisation for boycotting the January 5, 2014 city polls.

Several BNP leaders said its Dhaka city leaders failed to organise any major protest programme in the capital in the last 10 years. Many top city BNP leaders even didn't go to polling centres on Saturday to cast their votes.

Asked about the issue, Fakhruul said, "Many leaders and activists of the Dhaka city BNP faced massive

repression in the last decade. The highest number of BNP men disappeared from the capital during the same period. But we could reach out to our voters during campaigning for the February 1 city polls."

He, however, said they evaluate the polls results and the party's performance after every election. He said they would certainly identify the party's weaknesses and fix those in future.

Meanwhile, the BNP standing committee is scheduled to meet today to discuss the city election results and devise its next course of action.

Tk 50,186cr

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the rescheduled loans has turned bad again.

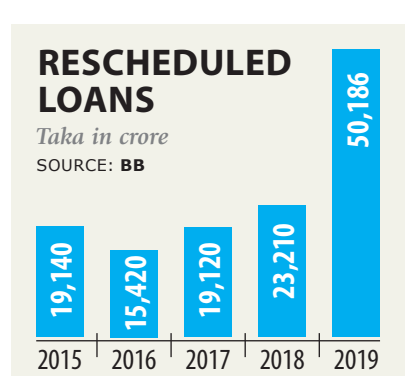
"Actually, this is just an eyewash to camouflage the actual situation of defaulted loans," Mansur, also chairman of Brac Bank, told The Daily Star yesterday.

Wholesale rescheduling indicates that banks are trying to clean up their financial balance sheets artificially in a bid to show profits, he pointed out.

"But this is not a solution for improving financial health of banks," said Mansur, also a former official of the International Monetary Fund.

He further said lenders must speed up the recovery of their defaulted loans or else they will be in deep trouble.

In November last year, defaulted



loans dropped to Tk 96,986 crore from Tk 116,288 crore two months earlier, as defaulters jumped at the BB offer to reschedule loans under relaxed conditions.

The volume of non-performing loans (NPLs) would have increased

significantly if banks had not regularised the defaulted loans in a relaxed manner, Mansur said.

Last year, private banks regularised Tk 30,547 crore or 61 percent of the total rescheduled loans. Eight state-run banks rescheduled Tk 19,601 crore and foreign banks Tk 38.10 crore, according to BB data.

Talking to this newspaper, Salehuddin Ahmed, a former governor of the central bank, said the large volume of rescheduled loans is squeezing the banks' capacity to give fresh loans as a major portion of the defaulted loans has not been recovered yet.

Small and medium entrepreneurs are being deprived of funds, he mentioned.

"The economy has faced sluggishness in recent times. And it

package of measures that you have to put in place," she said.

"If people use the entire package, it is fine. If they just use masks, I think it is not enough."

HK REPORTS FIRST DEATH

Three more Asian countries yesterday confirmed coronavirus infections among citizens who had not travelled to China, as Hong Kong reported its first death from the disease and millions more people in Chinese cities were ordered to stay indoors.

More than 20 countries have confirmed cases of the virus, prompting the World Health Organization to declare a global health emergency, several governments to institute travel restrictions, and airlines to suspend flights to and from China.

But it has continued to spread with Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand yesterday reporting new infections that were not imported from China.

will prolong if banks fail to disburse fresh loans."

Faruq Mainuddin Ahmed, managing director of Trust Bank, said offering rescheduling facility to habitual defaulters is an injustice to good borrowers.

It is not desirable that the amount of defaulted loans would be brought down in an artificial way, he noted.

Syed Mahbubur Rahman, managing director of Mutual Trust Bank, said lenders should not reschedule bad loans to get immediate results, rather they should allow defaulters to regularise NPLs based on cashflow of enterprises.

The relaxed rescheduling policy, however, helped banks recover part of the NPLs, he said adding that the lenders had earlier failed to recover any money from defaulters.

Virus outbreak not pandemic yet: WHO

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"We would like to make sure that we don't have a second Hubei type of scenario," she said.

Authorities in China have taken dramatic measures to halt transmission, while other affected countries have put in place steps to rein in the spread.

WEARING MASK NOT ENOUGH "Countries are implementing early case detection, early isolation and treatment of patients, contact tracing to make sure they identify very early contacts that become symptomatic," Briand pointed out.

"We hope that based on ... measures in Hubei but also in other places where we have had spillover, we can stop transmission and get rid of this virus," she said.

She acknowledged that halting the spread of the new pneumonia-like virus would be "challenging".

"I am not saying it is easy, but ... we believe that it can be done," she said.

The respiratory disease spreads through droplets, for instance when people sneeze or cough, or likely through direct contact with infected people or with objects they have touched.

But Briand said it remained unclear how long the virus could linger on an object, stressing the need for frequent hand-washing to protect against transmission.

"To stop transmission of this virus, it is very important that sick people wear masks" to avoid infecting others, she said, adding though the benefits of healthy people wearing masks as a precautionary measure were less clear.

People wearing masks but not taking other precautions like frequently washing their hands could have a "false sense of security", she said.

"Masks alone are not enough. It is a

MYANMAR SHELLING

Two Rohingya women killed

Internet curb re-imposed in Rakhine, Chin states

REUTERS, Yangon

Two women were killed and seven other people were wounded when shells hit a Rohingya village in Myanmar's Rakhine state on January 25.

The army rejected accusations from a local lawmaker, a villager and the Arakan Army (AA), a rebel group, that the Myanmar military was responsible for the shelling at Kin Taung.

Maung Kyaw Zan, a member of the national parliament for Buthidaung township in northern Rakhine state, said shells fired from a nearby battalion hit Kin Taung village in the middle of Saturday night.

"There was no fighting, they just shot artillery to a village without a battle," he told Reuters by phone, adding it was the second time this year that civilians had been killed.

Soe Tun Oo, a Rohingya villager living a mile from the village, told Reuters by phone that two houses were destroyed.

A military statement confirmed the deaths, but blamed the AA, a Rakhine ethnic rebel group which has been fighting for greater autonomy in the state for more than a year. Two military spokesmen did not answer calls seeking comment.

"AA terrorists committed firing at Bengali villages with the use of heavy weapons and planting mines," the statement said.

The Arakan Army said in a statement on its website that there was "ample evidence" that the army committed the killings without giving specific details. It accused Myanmar's forces of "deliberate, false and misleading lies" aimed at discrediting the group.

Reuters was unable to independently confirm the details of the incident.

At a press conference on Monday, the army objected to the story about the deaths, saying the account was biased.

The Hague-based International Court of Justice ordered Myanmar on January 23 to protect the Rohingya against further atrocities and preserve evidence of alleged crimes, after west African nation the Gambia launched a lawsuit in November accusing the country of genocide.

INTERNET SHUTDOWN

Myanmar has re-imposed an internet shutdown in two conflict-torn western states, after partially lifting the blackout five months ago, a leading telecoms operator said late on Monday.

Norwegian mobile operator Telenor Group said in a statement the transport and communications ministry had ordered for mobile internet traffic to be stopped again in five townships in Rakhine and Chin states for three months.

A months-long internet blackout in four Rakhine townships - Maungdaw, Buthidaung, Rathaung, and Myebon - and one in Chin state had been lifted in September amid peace talks seeking to end clashes between government troops and ethnic insurgents.

Officials cited "security requirements and public interest" for the reinstatement, Telenor said, adding that four other townships remain under a blackout first imposed in June last year.

Tun Tun Nyi, a Myanmar military spokesman, said the army was unaware of the shutdown. "We don't know and we haven't heard about it," he told Reuters by phone yesterday.

Ministry officials did not respond to calls from Reuters seeking comment.

Voters' apathy

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He said the negative campaign against the EVM and the ruling party was the main reasons behind the low voter turnout.

"However, it was a good election. In future, political parties will play a role in mobilising public opinion by learning from these mistakes," Quader said.

About BNP's rejection of the city polls, the minister said, "Despite its messy organisational condition without a leader, it has done well ... Seriously, they fared well!"

Quader termed the attacks on journalists during the city polls "isolated incidents" but said it should not have happened.

"I don't know where the reporters were attacked. I'll keep an eye open so that such incidents don't occur in future. There were no major clashes during the elections," he added.

About the allegation that many councillors who were elected have cases against them and were involved in running casino business, the minister said, "Whoever is elected by people's votes becomes a public representative and I can't ignore what people want."

BNP's mayor candidates for Dhaka south and north city corporations lost to their AL rivals.