

Zia, Ershad, Khaleda were not serious about development

Says PM in Rome

UNB, BSS, Rome

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on Tuesday said Ziaur Rahman, HM Ershad, and Khaleda Zia were not serious about the country's development as they were not born on Bangladesh soil.

"Only my father and I are from the soil of this land. Others who came to power are from outside Bangladesh," she said.

The PM was addressing a civic reception accorded to her by the Italy unit of Awami League at Parco dei Principi Grand Hotel and Spa in Rome.

She said Zia was born in Bihar, Ershad in Cooch Behar and Khaleda in Siliguri. "If you look closely, you will find that except Bangabandhu and me, no one was from the soil of this land."

Hasina said she, being the child of this soil, has some responsibilities towards this land.

"Many came to power but they didn't know the country properly as they were not born here," she said, adding that it was essential to know the country properly to develop it.

The premier said Bangladesh has attained the right to advance further by competing with any other nation in the world and none can take the country backwards any more.

"We are implementing 90 percent of our development projects with our own fund. Donors don't come to give alms to us anymore. Rather, they come to provide assistance mentioning us as their development partners. Because we don't seek alms from anybody," she said.

Referring to the construction of the Padma Bridge with the government's own fund, Hasina said, "We have proved that we can do any work by ourselves."

She said the World Bank wanted to put blame on the government over the construction of the bridge. "I took it as a challenge that we will build the bridge with our own fund and now we are implementing the project with our money."

Mentioning that the country was advancing fast economically, the PM said the Father of the Nation had turned Bangladesh into a least developed country by rebuilding the war-ravaged country.

"Our government has given Bangladesh a status of a developing country from that position and we have to maintain the status till 2024 to turn Bangladesh into a middle income country... we have already met three criteria which is needed to achieve the target."

The premier said those who had grabbed power illegally after the assassination of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975 had been busy changing their lot.

"At that time Bangladesh was known in the world as a country of cyclone, tidal surge and famine. The world would look down on Bangladesh during that period which was shameful for us."

Hasina said her government has brought down the extreme poverty rate to 10 percent and the poverty rate to 20.5 percent. She hoped the rates would be cut by another two to three percent by this year.

Talking about steps taken by her government for the welfare of the expatriate Bangladeshis, the PM said the government has set up Probashi Kalyan Bank so that those willing to go abroad do not need to sell their land or property for this purpose.

She said the government has set up 5,800 digital centres through which the people intending to go abroad can register their names with the expatriates' welfare ministry.

"We have also taken an initiative so that we can send 1,000 people abroad from every upazila. To make it happen, we have made arrangements for smart cards for them."

Hasina said the Awami League, as a political party, has an economic policy and target. "We don't only issue an election manifesto... We frame each budget with the manifesto in mind."

About the demand of the expatriate Bangladeshis living in Italy for introducing Biman flights to Rome, she said a discussion was underway with the Italian government in this regard.

Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen and the president of Italy AL, Mohammad Idris Farazi, spoke at the programme, among others.

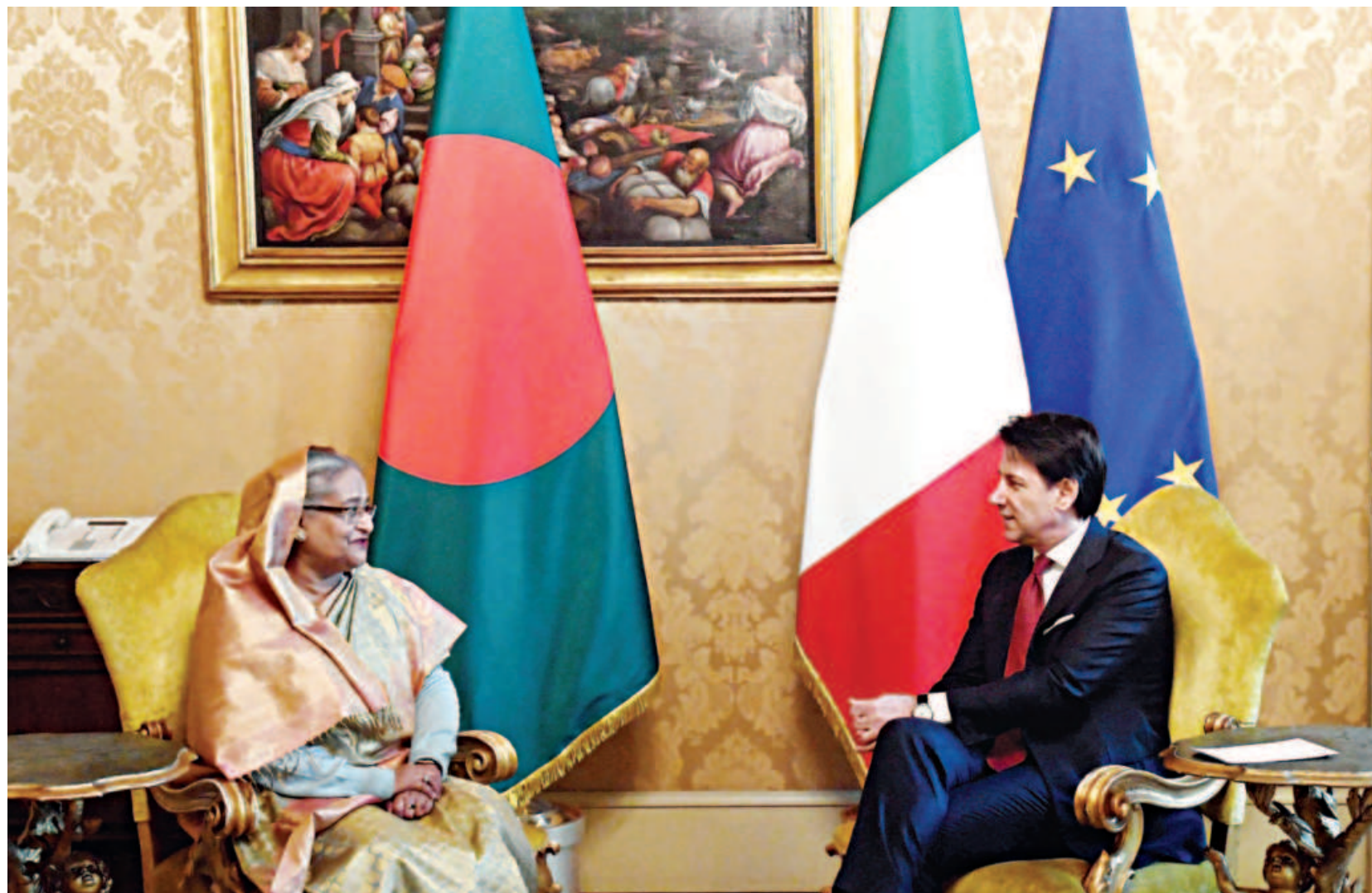
CHANCERY BUILDING OPENED
In the morning yesterday, Hasina inaugurated the Chancery Building of the Bangladesh embassy in Rome.

She formally opened the five-storey building, constructed on 23.9 kathas of land by unveiling its plaque in Rome's Via Dell'Antartide area.

PM's younger sister Sheikh Rehana and daughter Saima Wazed Hossain were present.

Later, the premier went round different sections of the chancery building. She also signed the visitors' book there.

Hasina arrived in Rome on Tuesday afternoon on a four-day official visit to Italy at the invitation of her Italian counterpart Giuseppe Conte.



Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina calls on her Italian counterpart Giuseppe Conte in Rome, Italy, where she is on a four-day visit.

PHOTO: BSS

Outbreak could delay Padma bridge

FROM PAGE 1

The ministers and the senior secretary made the comments when there is an apprehension that work on several mega development projects may be hampered if the coronavirus situation does not improve soon.

Many Chinese nationals working under those projects are now home on leave to celebrate the Chinese New Year. Given the situation in China, they might not be able to return and join work on time, said officials linked to the projects.

Several hundred Chinese nationals working in many of the projects have had their leaves extended and there could be further extension. Besides, several other project authorities were mulling similar steps, they said.

The projects include Padma Bridge, Padma Bridge Rail Link, Payra 1320MW Thermal Power Plant, Chattogram to Cox's Bazar (Ramu) Rail Link, construction of a tunnel

under the Karnaphuli river, and upgrading the Dhaka Bypass Road.

The seventh strain of the coronavirus was first detected in China's Wuhan city in December. At least 492 people have died with more than 25,000 confirmed cases around the world.

Obaidul Quader said 332 out of 980 Chinese nationals working for the Padma Bridge project went on leave. Thirty-three of them returned, of whom eight completed the quarantine period while the rest are on observation.

"Our works will go on if their leave is not prolonged," he added.

The headquarters of China Major Bridge Engineering Co Ltd, which is implementing the bridge, is in the Wuhan city, the epicentre of the outbreak.

Quader said 38 Chinese nationals are involved with the construction work of the Dhaka Elevated

Expressway Project. Of them, 18 are on leave. "This will not create any problem," he added.

He said 71 Chinese nationals are involved with the Bus Rapid Transit project. Of them, only one went on leave, while 31 out of 58 Chinese nationals, involved in the Metro Rail project, went on leave. "Their absence would not create any problem in the progress of the projects," he claimed.

Quader also said that he has given directives to the Roads and Highways Department to cancel work orders of contractors if they failed to complete the work on time and if necessary, blacklist them.

He said the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority would collect 4 lakh licences from Bangladesh Machine Tools Factory as interim measures as a tender process in this regard has been cancelled over some allegations.

Iraq PM-designate meets anti-govt protesters

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq's premier-designate Mohammad Allawi has met with dozens of representatives of the protest movement rocking the capital and Shia-majority south since October, a participant in the meetings said yesterday.

The protesters have been demanding an overhaul of the ruling elite and have rejected Allawi as a product of the political class they have been protesting against for months.

When he announced his designation on February 1, Allawi extended a hand to the protesters and urged them to keep up their demonstrations.

"Since the beginning of the week, Mohammad Allawi has held a string of meetings with several dozen representatives of protesters from the eight provinces taking part in the uprising," said Hisham al-Hashemi, an Iraqi security expert present at the meetings.

Surplus

FROM PAGE 1

organisations, Rumeen said.

"Since the government is heavily in debt, the bill was brought to loot the money of the self-governed organisations," she said, adding that if the bill was passed it would have huge adverse impact on the stock market.

The government initiated the move as there was massive corruption in mega projects, Rashid said.

"If the bill is passed, the 61 self-governed organisations will be destroyed and their efficiency will decline," he said.

Rashid said if the government passed the bill, the consequences would be dire and the financial discipline would collapse.

"The government puts its hands into the pockets of the people after looting the money from banks. Bring back the laundered money as tens of thousands of crore taka was siphoned off the country," he said.

Taking a swipe at Kamal, Mujibul Haque said since the finance minister was a businessman, such a situation was not unexpected.

Noting that the present finance minister was a talented student and successful businessman, Haque said: "We expected that he would make the economy stronger, but it didn't happen."

Shameem Haider Patwary termed the bill disgusting, dangerous and anti-state.

"It will be a historical mistake and the finance minister would be held responsible for that."

In reply to the MPs' remarks, Finance Minister Kamal said the bill was for financial discipline. The people of the country would benefit, he said.

The government has undertaken many development projects and only regular revenue income is not enough to bankroll them. So, the government is utilising the fund for the development projects.

The draft law was approved by the cabinet in early September, when the cabinet secretary said state-owned autonomous organisations held Tk 212,100 crore in deposit in banks as of May last year.

They held Tk 218,839 crore in banks until June 30 last year, according to finance ministry statistics. The cabinet decision, however, evoked reaction from bankers, who fear the law would hit the cash-starved banking sector hard.

The ongoing liquidity crisis would worsen if the government transfers the money from banks to the national exchequer, they said, adding that the move to bring down the interest rate to single digit is likely to face hurdle due to the initiative.

HRW accuses Rabat of using jail threat to silence critics

AFP, Rabat

Human rights groups yesterday called for the release of at least 10 Moroccan citizens arrested and prosecuted over the past five months who "did nothing but peacefully express critical opinions".

Those arrested include students, artists, citizen journalists and social media commentators, Human Rights Watch and the Moroccan Association for Human Rights said.

They face such charges as showing a "lack of due respect for the king", "defaming state institutions" and "offending public officials".

"Some have targeted the wealth and lifestyle of King Mohammed VI, contrasting it with what they perceive as the state's failure to guarantee basic rights and economic opportunities for young Moroccans," the rights groups said in a joint statement.

Foreigners siphon off

FROM PAGE 1

their home country and return with a fresh three-month tourist visa and continue with their jobs in Bangladesh.

Their salaries are paid fully in cash or to bank accounts abroad, depriving the government of tax too.

"Neither the employers nor the workers abided by the law during the recruitment process," said Dr Ifekharuzzaman, executive director of TIB, at a press conference yesterday.

At the same time, the government organisations that are supposed to ensure application of related laws and regulations have either failed to do so or they lacked efficiency.

"As a result, we can see a picture of institutionalisation of a kind of irregularity in collusion here," he said.

But employment of foreign nationals is a necessity in the face of skill-shortage in Bangladesh.

"Their recruitment has to be transparent, which will also ensure accountability and good governance," Ifekharuzzaman said.

Some 90,000 foreigners are working in Bangladesh following due procedures, according to the report.

And about 41 percent of them come from India, followed by China, Japan, South Korea and Malaysia.

To evade taxes, salaries of legal foreign workers are shown less in the official documents than their actual income.

For instance, the actual salary of a chief executive officer in the garment sector ranges from \$10,000 to \$12,000 per month. But in official documents it is shown to be between \$3,000 and \$3,600.

Furthermore, about one-third the salary of foreign nationals legally working here is paid into the bank accounts; the rest is given in cash, the study found.

And due to tax evasion, the government is deprived of about \$1.35 billion, or Tk 12,000 crore, in revenue from foreign nationals every year, found the Bangladesh chapter of the Berlin-based global graft watchdog Transparency International.

In fiscal 2018-19, 9,500 foreign nationals paid Tk 181 crores as tax under the jurisdiction of Tax Zone-11, the TIB report says.

Foreign workers sent \$46.6 million as remittance through the legal channel in fiscal 2017-18, says the report referring to data from the Bangladesh Bank.

They are mostly employed in garment and textile mills, buying house, multinational companies, power plants, telecom companies, information technology, rawhide industry, healthcare, hotels and restaurants, cargo and freight forwards.

The study, which was conducted from April 2018 to December 2019, excluded foreign diplomats, pastors, researchers, students, officials of the United Nations and its wing offices and of international organisations.

The report mentions some challenges when it comes to ensuring good governance while dealing with foreign workers.

In its nine-point recommendations, TIB called upon the government to launch a "one-stop service" system to provide required services regarding foreign workers' stay and work permit in Bangladesh.

It urged the government to update foreign workers' salary and wage scale, to assess sector-based requirement of foreign workers and to ensure due procedure in their recruitments.

It further called upon the government to conduct drive under a joint taskforce at different offices and factories to avail necessary information regarding foreign workers.

Two more Indo-Bangla train routes

FROM PAGE 1

trains running between Bangladesh and India from next week.

On the Dhaka-Kolkata route, Maitree Express will run five days a week instead of four days from February 11 and Bandhan Express two days instead of one day on the Khulna-Kolkata route from February 16, he said.

The minister added that the prime minister is expected to lay the foundation stone for the Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Railway Bridge over the Jamuna river on March 14 as all necessary formalities had been completed.

NEW ROUTES
Suhan said Rajshahi City Corporation mayor and several lawmakers from the district have long been demanding passenger train service between Rajshahi and Kolkata. "We have also talked to the Indian side."

In July 2017, Fazle Hossain Badsha, a Workers Party lawmaker from Rajshahi-2, sent a proposal to the Indian government through the office of Assistant High Commissioner of India in Rajshahi.

In a meeting with the railways minister in October last year, Riva Ganguly Das, Indian high

commissioner to Bangladesh, raised the issue, a railway official said.

The meeting also decided to carry out a feasibility study on the route, he added.

Sujan said the construction work of seven km broad gauge line between Chilahati and Chilahati border is expected to be done by June this year. A new passenger train route can be opened from Dhaka to Siliguri through Chilahati-Haldibari border, he said.

"We have expressed our interest in this regard and the Indian high commissioner also did the same in a meeting recently."

"We are considering to start discussion soon about whether Bangladesh-India connectivity can be established through these two passenger train routes," he opined.

Railways Ministry Senior Secretary Mofazzel Hossain told The Daily Star that feasibility and traffic demand studies would be carried out if the two countries agreed to operate passenger trains on the routes.

MORE TRIPS
Currently, Maitree Express operates on Saturdays, Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. The train service will also be available on Tuesdays from February

11, Sujan said.

On the other hand, Bandhan Express will operate on Sundays, in addition to Thursdays from February 16, he said.

In a meeting between Sujan and Indian Railway Minister Piyush Goyal on August 6 last year, the ministers agreed to increase the number of trips of the trains, railway sources said.

As per the decision, Maitree Express was supposed to run six days a week and Bandhan Express three days a week.

Asked about the matter, Md Shamsuzzaman, director general of Bangladesh Railway, said the Indian Railways authorities could not manage slots for Maitree Express running six days a week.

Besides, Bandhan Express cannot run for three days a week due to shortage of carriages, he said, "We will increase the trips in the near future."

The operation of Dhaka-Kolkata train service resumed on April 14, 2008, ending the 43-year pause, as two passenger trains named Maitree Express started simultaneously from Dhaka and Kolkata.

Bandhan Express was launched on the Khulna-Kolkata route on November 16, 2017.

Coronavirus can be halted

FROM PAGE 1

dramatic measures taken by China offered a chance to halt transmission.

"While 99 percent of cases are in China, in the rest of the world we only have 176 cases," WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said.

"That doesn't mean that it won't get worse. But for sure we have a window of opportunity to act," he said.

He urged all health ministers to improve data-sharing on coronavirus immediately and said he would send a team of international experts to work with Chinese counterparts.

"Of the 176 cases reported outside China so far, WHO has received complete case report forms for only 38 percent," he said.

The WHO's statement came as Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand all reported new infections not imported from China.

And yesterday Japanese authorities said at least 10 passengers on a cruise ship carrying 3,711 people have the virus.

Thousands of passengers and crew on another cruise ship that docked in Hong Kong were being kept on board yesterday while they were tested for a coronavirus as the city government said that all visitors from mainland China would be quarantined for two weeks,

reports Reuters.

In a sign of growing concern about a spread to other densely-populated Chinese metropolitan areas, millions more people have been ordered to stay indoors.

In Hangzhou, some 175 kilometres (110 miles) southwest of Shanghai, fences blocked streets near the headquarters of Chinese tech giant Alibaba -- one of the world's most valuable companies -- as a fighter jet circled overhead.

The building appeared to be shut down, while deliverymen moved in and out of nearby fenced-in residential areas to drop off groceries. Many people were also seen going out.

At least three other cities in Zhejiang province -- Taizhou, Wenzhou and parts of Ningbo -- have imposed the same measures, affecting 18 million people.

Similar restrictions have been put in place as far away as Heilongjiang province on the Russia border, and in the central city of Zhumadian authorities said one person would be allowed to leave each household only every five days.

Residents of the city of seven million were also offered cash rewards for informing on people from neighbouring Hubei who were in the city.

Vietnam, which has detected 10

cases, joined a growing list of countries banning arrivals from China, and it was setting up field hospitals with thousands of beds to handle a potential spike in coronavirus patients in the country.

Italy announced that passengers from every international flight would be scanned for fevers, reports AFP.

Britain's Foreign Office said late on Tuesday that it will charter another civilian aircraft to help British nationals and their dependents leave China's Wuhan for the UK on Sunday.

United and American Airlines said yesterday they have added Hong Kong to their China flight suspensions.

The disease is believed to have emerged in December in a Wuhan market that sold wild animals, and spread rapidly as people travelled for the Lunar New Year holiday in January.

China's Ministry of Public Security said "political security" was the "top priority" in confronting the epidemic.

"We should take strict precautions against and track down on all kinds of disruptive activities by hostile forces," ministry secretary Zhao Kezhi said in a briefing.

The statement came days after the top leadership admitted "shortcomings" in its handling of the outbreak, for which authorities have been criticised for withholding information.