

Don't neglect mother tongue: PM

Says she feels pity for those who speak Bangla in English accent

UNB, Dhaka

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has said it is necessary to learn languages in the era of globalisation, but it should not be done by neglecting the mother tongue.

"The world is now a global village. To live here, to communicate with others, to do business, to know about other cultures and literatures, one needs to learn different languages, but it should not be done by excluding the mother tongue," she said.

The PM was addressing a programme marking the inauguration of a four-day programme of the International Mother Language Institute in the capital's Segunbagicha yesterday. The event was organised on the occasion of the Amar Ekushey and the International Mother Language Day 2020.

Hasina blasted a section of the young people who cannot speak Bangla properly.

"Many of us are forgetting Bangla while staying in Bangladesh. They cannot speak Bangla with proper Bengali pronunciation. They speak Bangla in English accent. What will I say to them? I can only pity them."

Talking about the Pakistani

conspiracy to exclude Bangla from the life of Bangalees, the PM said it was a blow to the existence of the whole nation.

"We've achieved independence depending on that movement [Language Movement]. This is the reality."

Bangabandhu had said the blow to Bangla made him determined not to stay with Pakistan anymore, she added.

"He launched every movement and took every step of his life keeping that in mind," the premier said.

Referring to the history of the Language Movement, Hasina said although the February 21, 1952, saw the tragic incident, the movement for mother tongue had begun much earlier.

She said at the proposal of Bangabandhu, the State Language Action Council was formed comprising of Chhatra League, Tamuddin Majlish and other student organisations in 1948.

This Action Council had called for a general strike on March 11, 1948, across the country. On that day, Bangabandhu was arrested, the PM

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CORONAVIRUS OUTBREAK

Airlines set to lose \$29.3 billion

Warns Int'l Air Transport Association

AFP, PARIS

Airlines stand to lose a combined \$29.3 billion of revenue this year in the ongoing coronavirus crisis, the International Air Transport Association said yesterday.

The estimate is based on projections of a 13-percent full-year decline in passenger demand, mostly in China, the trade body said.

In total, airlines in the Asia Pacific region are set to see a \$27.8bn revenue loss in 2020, while those outside Asia are expected to lose \$1.5bn in revenue, IATA has forecast. Airlines in China's domestic market alone are estimated to lose around \$12.8 billion in revenues.

"This will be a very tough year for airlines," IATA CEO Alexandre de Juniac said in a statement. "Stopping the spread of the virus is the top priority."

IATA said its estimate assumed that COVID-19 behaved like the SARS outbreak nearly two decades ago, which was "characterised by a six-month period with a sharp decline followed by an equally quick recovery".

Relocation plan

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the 40sqkm island under a Tk 2,312 crore housing project for accommodating one lakh of the nearly 1 million Rohingyas sheltered in cramped camps in Cox's Bazar.

Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen, Enamur and officials concerned visited the project site on the island, in Noakhali's Hatia upazila, around 37 miles off the coast of Bay of Bengal, on February 13.

Meanwhile, Momen on Sunday said if the Rohingyas were shifted to Bhashan Char, they might not agree to leave the place in future.

"We want the Rohingyas to go back to Rakhine. We want to repatriate them. That's our priority," he told reporters at his ministry office.

The housing project, funded with public money, was taken after some 750,000 Rohingyas fled a brutal military campaign in Myanmar's Rakhine and took shelter in Cox's Bazar since August 2017. They joined some 300,000 other Rohingyas, who had fled previous waves of violence in Rakhine.

Disaster management ministry officials said destruction of forest and hills and risk of landslides in Cox's Bazar prompted the authorities to choose the temporary housing site on Bhashan Char.

They said the project implemented by Bangladesh Navy has 120 cluster villages that are capable of accommodating one lakh Rohingyas.

The houses have been built four feet above the ground with concrete blocks. The entire housing site is protected by a 13-km-long flood embankment. There are also 120 cyclone shelters, which are planned to be used as schools, medical centres and community centres.

The officials also said there are large swathes of land that could be used for livestock and fish farming if the Rohingyas were relocated there. The refugees in the Cox's Bazar camps have a very little work to do now.

UN and several international aid agencies have been opposing the relocation plan from the beginning. Human Rights Watch too said the island is not sustainable for human habitation and could be seriously affected by rising sea levels and storm

This will be the first time since the 2008-2009 financial crisis that demand for air travel has declined, De Juniac said.

However, if the virus spreads more widely to Asia-Pacific markets then the impact on airlines from other regions would be larger, IATA warned.

IATA had previously estimated Asia-Pacific airlines to register growth of 4.8 percent this year, but they are now on course instead for a contraction of 8.2 percent, it said.

But there are some factors potentially softening the blow, IATA said.

"Governments will use fiscal and monetary policy to try to offset the adverse economic impacts. Some relief may be seen in lower fuel prices for some airlines, depending on how fuel costs have been hedged," it said.

It was therefore difficult to predict by how much exactly lost revenue would weigh on profits.

But airlines are already taking "difficult decisions" to cut capacity, or even routes, IATA said.

surges.

In October last year, Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner (RRRC) Mahbub Alam Talukder said some 6,000 to 7,000 refugees had expressed their willingness to be relocated to Bhashan Char.

UN agencies then decided to send a technical mission to the island. They intended to look at the risks of natural disasters, water supply, access to basic services, including health and education, and the freedom of movement within Bhashan Char and to and from the mainland, a UN official said.

Later, the government set a condition that there should be terms of reference for the UN technical mission. Since then, there has been no visible progress on the matter.

Now, ministers and officials concerned say they are considering not to relocate the Rohingyas to Bhashan Char and that they are thinking of an alternative plan.

Requesting anonymity, an official said different relevant ministries reached an informal agreement on shelving the plan to relocate the Rohingyas to the remote island, but the final decision would be taken by the Prime Minister's Office.

"Bangladesh earned so much praises for sheltering the Rohingyas. It should not have a bad reputation now by executing the relocation plan, going against the will of the Rohingyas and the international aid agencies," the official said.

Asked about the future of the housing project if the government changes the relocation plan, Foreign Minister Momen said they were yet to decide on it. He, however, thinks homeless people from other parts of the country could be accommodated on the island.

The government maintains the island is safe for human habitation.

Bhashan Char is only 25 kilometres from Sandwip, another island in Chattogram, he said, adding, "With the fast siltation rate, Sandwip and Bhashan Char can get connected in the near future. Eventually, we will have a huge landmass. We can do a lot of things."



Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her younger sister Sheikh Rehana look at the mural of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman after unveiling it at the International Mother Language Institute in the capital's Segunbagicha yesterday.

PHOTO: PID

Homage to language martyrs

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reminded the sacrifice made by the Language Movement martyrs.

On February 21, 1952, students and people from all walks of life took to the streets in Dhaka to protest the then Pakistan government's refusal to recognise Bangla as one of the state languages and imposition of Urdu as the only official language of Pakistan.

Salam, Barkat, Rafique, Jabbar, Shafiur and a few others were killed when police opened fire on their procession.

Yesterday, people started gathering at the Central Shaheed Minar before

midnight.

President Abdul Hamid and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina paid homage by placing wreaths at the Shaheed Minar in the first minute of the day amid tight security.

They then stood there in solemn silence for a while as a mark of profound respect for the fallen heroes.

Ministers, advisers to the prime minister, lawmakers, the chiefs of the three services, foreign diplomats, senior Awami League leaders, and top civil and military officials were present on the occasion.

Speaker of the Jatiya Sangsad

Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury paid tributes to the martyrs by placing a wreath at the Shaheed Minar.

Flanked by cabinet members and senior leaders of Awami League, Hasina, also the AL president, later placed another wreath on behalf of the party.

Leader of the Opposition Raushan Ershad also placed a wreath.

Like previous years, the Dhaka University authorities organised programmes on the Central Shaheed Minar premises in coordination with other relevant agencies.

Afterwards, a sea of people started paying tributes to the language

heroes imbued with the spirit of patriotism. The crowd grew bigger at daybreak.

Many children were also seen with their parents, carrying flowers in their hands.

"I have come here with my father as I heard the tales of the Language Movement many times," said Ayana Rahman, a class IV student.

The day was a public holiday.

Bangladesh Betar, Bangladesh Television, private television channels and radio stations aired special programmes on the occasion. The national dailies published special supplements marking the day.

Separated, yet not

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land. I have to return to collect the card before the camp closes at four in the afternoon," describes Habibur. "They frisk me twice a day, on my way to my land and back."

Meanwhile, Mamun and his brother have no such restrictions, even though they are the ones crossing political borders. "We are the ones who actually take care of the land. We guard it at night so that the crops do not get stolen," said Mamun.

At Tarapur of Chapainawabganj, the river known to us as Padma, and to the Indians as the Ganges, acts as a border between the two countries. For a river that people should not be able to cross, it had far too many large sampans that were clearly not meant for carrying passengers -- Tarapur's residents are all flourishing cattle-rearers... and smugglers.

But a smuggler named Shaikat (name changed for protection) does not see this as smuggling. "They do not need cows, but we need cows. Our forefathers have always brought cows through this route. We have a lot of open land here under the mango orchards for the cows to graze in, so rearing cows here is cheaper. Everyone has always done this," he explains. For him, international laws of trade and taxation are a far removed concept -- in his perception, what he was doing is as simple as bringing cattle across a river so narrow, you can see the other side.

A man stood in front of the river to show his sister-in-law's house on the other side in India. "See that tower there? That is where she lives. They put up a fence 10 years ago. Before that, we used to cross the river to visit her routinely. Since the fences were erected we have to make a very long detour through the immigration office, so we barely see her anymore."

This is true -- my grandfather, a former Indian national, crossed the river the same way multiple

times before fences were put up. He crossed the Padma at the Godagari-Lalgola border where the river is at its narrowest, to marry my grandmother, a young eligible woman hailing from Sirajganj.

As border control tightened, and passports, visas and land ports became mandatory, my bedridden, dying grandmother had lamented to me, "Seems like I won't be able to see my shoshurbani one last time before I die." She didn't.

Fast forward to the next generation, and my uncle did the same. He traversed the river to marry a girl from India, and on their way back to Bangladesh, while walking across the treeless char under the blazing summer sun, my newly-wed aunt fainted. A few years later, in 1990, my mother crossed the river to go there and back -- not to get married this time, but rather to shop for her wedding benarasi.

Just like a river could not keep my mother away from her coveted sari, immigration rules cannot keep the grooms and brides of Sonamasjid away from the wedding couture of Malda. If one can get someone to shop for their trousseau in Malda, there exists a group of people armed with visas and willing to make a day-trip to Malda to bring the goods back.

Outside the Sonamasjid land port, Bairul paced anxiously. "My nephew is getting married. We got our relatives in Malda to finish shopping for the bride and groom. Today, I sent a person to cross over and get the things from them. He should be back within the hour," he said.

Why did he choose Malda, instead of the divisional city of Rajshahi? "For the people of Chapai, Malda is closer and the goods are better. Especially the cosmetics, which are essential for brides."

At the Burimari-Changrabandha border, a bamboo enclosure exists at the zero point for people of Bangladesh and India to meet. The bamboo

enclosure is unique -- two fences set a few feet apart run in parallel through the middle of the enclosure. People from either side of the border gather around the fences under the watchful eyes of the border patrols to yell pleasantries at each other. The idea is you can see but you can't touch.

Arif Hossain yelled at his uncle in Hindi, "And is everything else going good?" His uncle yelled back in the affirmative. The conversation died down and they gazed blankly at each other, both at a loss of words, both unable to share anything more than a longing look. I asked Arif whether his uncle visits them in Bangladesh.

"No. He left the country many years ago, but has not yet gotten a passport because of lack of documentation. Maybe he can get one soon," replied Arif. What was unsaid but implied is that his uncle is an undocumented migrant in India.

Beside Arif, Babul handed Tk 1,000 to a red-shirted porter and asked him to give it to a woman in a bright orange sari. The porters, who help people carry their bags over the border, are the only ones who can cross over and come back without a visa. "That is my cousin. I need her to send some medicines from India, and there is no other way to send money from Bangladesh," explained Babul, sheepish at having been caught in the illegal act.

Back at Chapainawabganj, near the Sonamasjid-Mahdipur border, the political boundary is as odd as it gets. The border skirts the Kashinathpur-Rajshahi highway for a good few hundred yards before one encounters the immigration office. They are so close, that say if a vehicle skidded off the highway, it would fall into a ditch on the Indian side.

A derelict, abandoned Border Guard Bangladesh checkpoint, which locals have resourcefully co-opted as a dustbin, attempts to let people know that they are now on Indian land -- in vain. Bangladeshi traders and

passengers alike took advantage of the shade provided by the large mango-trees on Indian land.

It is at this spot where Bismillah bhaater hotel begins off in Bangladesh, and ends in India. The modest outfit offers an expansive buffet of the local cuisine for tired travelers, all of which is cooked in its kitchen on Indian land. "Our kitchen is in India," laughs Azizur, one of the cooks, as he kneaded dough for puri, adding cheekily "and so is our toilet!"

And it is here that we found a mentally disabled man, straddling the border. He spends his days sitting under the shade of Indian trees, and then crosses over to Bismillah hotel in Bangladesh for scraps of food. He neither tells anyone his name, nor whether he is Bangladeshi or Indian. All that anybody can say about him is that one day two years ago, he turned up here.

The resemblance to the protagonist of Sadaat Hossain Manto's famous short story Toba Tek Singh is uncanny. The story, set in the Partition-era, revolves around the exchange of inmates of India and Pakistan's insane asylums. The Hindu and Sikh inmates were being sent to India, and the Muslims to Pakistan. The story follows one Sikh inmate who cared only about whether his homeland, a village called Toba Tek Singh, was in India or in Pakistan. In defiance, he fell dead on no-man's-land, and the story ends thus: "There, behind barbed wire, was Hindustan. Here, behind the same kind of barbed wire, was Pakistan. In between, on that piece of ground that had no name, lay Toba Tek Singh."

And just like that, this man, with no name, no citizenship and possibly no cognisance of concepts like nation-states, lives right on the Bangladesh-India border. All he understands -- and needs to understand -- is that Bangladesh gives him food, and India gives him shelter. So, he survives.



A Bangladeshi sharecropper tilling the soil in the Indian territory beside Namochakpara in Chapainawabganj's Shibganj upazila. The owner of the land employs Bangladeshi workers as Milik Sultanpur, the nearest Indian village, is farther away from the plot. Right, Bismillah Hotel straddles the border between Bangladesh and India. The hotel serves its guests on Bangladeshi soil, but its kitchen is in the Indian territory. The photos were taken recently.

PHOTO: ZYMA ISLAM