

ELEVATED EXPRESSWAY

Fresh funds to speed up work

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

After years of sluggish work, construction of the first Dhaka Elevated Expressway is likely to gain pace soon, as the problem over funding the much-anticipated project has been solved, officials said.

Two Chinese companies will start disbursing Tk 7,318 crore, out of Tk 8,940.18 crore of the construction cost of the project from next month, they said.

Two deals were inked in this regard yesterday.

As per the new deadline, the construction work of its first phase -- Airport to Banani Rail Crossing -- will be completed by this October while the second phase, from Banani Rail Crossing to Moghbazar, will end by October next year. The third and the final phase -- from Moghbazar to Kutubkhali on Dhaka-Chattoogram Highway -- will be completed in October 2022.

"As the funding-related issue is over, we hope the work will get momentum and will move quickly towards its completion," Road Transport and Bridges Minister Obaidul Quader said at the contract signing ceremony, at Setu Bhaban in the capital.

Bangladesh Bridge Authority (BBA) had signed a deal with Italian-Thai Development Public Company in January 2011 to build the 47km expressway, with 19.73km main line stretching from Shahjalal International Airport to Kutubkhali, under public-private-partnership at a cost of Tk 8,703 crore.

Once completed, it would help people cross Dhaka without facing the huge traffic congestion within the city, at the cost of a toll.

The deal was revised and signed again in December 2013, with the cost revised at Tk 8,940 crore after bringing several changes to the design.

The government is to spend Tk 4,885 crore on land

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PHOTO OF THE DAY

AMRAN HOSSAIN



Spring awakens nature. It's the time when trees shed their dried leaves overlaid with dust of winter and bring forth fresh, colourful sprigs. This photo was taken at the capital's Ramna Park around 4pm yesterday.

Petition seeks praying space for women at all mosques

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A Supreme Court lawyer has filed a writ petition with the High Court seeking its directive on the government to take necessary steps so that women can perform prayers at separate spaces in mosques across the country.

Advocate Md Mahmudul Hasan Mamun submitted the petition to the HC on Monday, also requesting it to order the authorities concerned of the government to arrange separate washrooms and places for ablution in the mosque for women.

Citing the petition, Advocate Mahmudul told The Daily Star yesterday that every citizen has the right to profess, practise or propagate any religion under article 41 of the constitution.

But women of the country cannot perform prayers in most mosques, which is discriminatory, he said.

Advocate Mahmudul said he will place the writ petition before the HC next week for its hearing.

11 YEARS OF BDR CARNAGE

Retrial, if BNP returns to power: Fakhru

UNB, Dhaka

BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhru Islam Alamgir yesterday said their party, if it returns to power, will take steps for retrial of the 2009 BDR carnage through "fair" investigation.

"Those convicted in the case alleged that the trial was not fair. The full report on investigation into the incident has not been published. We also think the trial was not fair," he said.

The BNP leader further said, "We'll surely take steps for a fair trial of the incident though a neutral investigation, if we get back to power."

Fakhru came up with the remarks while taking to reporters after placing wreaths at a monument set up at Banani Graveyard in memory of the army officials killed in the Pilkhana carnage, marking the 11th anniversary of the incident.

Describing the BDR carnage as conspiratorial, he said the incident was carried out to demoralise Bangladesh Army, a symbol of the country's independence and sovereignty.

"Our independence is now at stake..."

there's no democracy in the country. Khaleda Zia, an uncompromising leader of democracy, has been kept in jail unfairly," he claimed.

Fakhru along with party leaders and ex-army officials went to the graveyard around 10:40am. They also offered special prayers there.

Kalyan Party Chairman Maj Gen (ret'd) Syed Muhammad Ibrahim; BNP vice chairmen Maj (ret'd) Hafizuddin Ahmed and Air Vice Marshal (ret'd) Altaf Hossain Chowdhury; Maj Gen (ret'd) Ruhul Alam Chowdhury; retired army officers Fazle Elahi Akbar, Mizanur Rahman, M Shahjahan and Sarwar Hossain were, among others, present.

On February 25-26, 2009, a disgruntled group of the then Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) killed 74 people, including 57 army officers, of the paramilitary force at the Pilkhana headquarters.

On November 5, 2013, a Dhaka court awarded death sentence to 150 BDR members and two civilians, and life imprisonment to 160 others in the case. On November 27, 2017, the High Court confirmed death penalty for 139 out of 152 accused.

CORONAVIRUS

Govt amps up preparedness

MOUJIB AHMED SUJAN

The government has started weighing its preparedness to tackle a potential novel coronavirus spread, as the virus has continued spreading to a number of countries Bangladesh has close communications with.

High-ups from different organisations concerned yesterday held a meeting at the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) in Dhaka.

"There is no infection in the country yet; but we are concerned as many countries outside China are reporting high numbers of infection. We are preparing every detailed plan for any situation," Prof AK Azad, director general of DGHS, who chaired the meeting, told The Daily Star.

Chiefs of different organisations including the Department of Drug Administration, Dhaka Medical College, Army Medical Services, World Health Organization (WHO), and the US Center for Disease Control attended the meeting, among others.

The DGHS boss said he would discuss recommendations of the meeting with the health minister today, so the minister could coordinate it with the Prime Minister's Office and other government organisations.

Sources said the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control, and Research (IEDCR) has drafted a preparedness plan in case there is an outbreak. According to the plan, the government would stay prepared for three levels of crisis: alert, serious and emergency.

About the plan, Prof Azad said, "It is not final yet; we would discuss and finalise it in meetings with ministries and organisations concerned soon."

So far, the virus has infected more than 80,000, killing at least 2,700 in more than 30 countries, mostly in China.

Iran, South Korea, Singapore and Italy, which have close communications with Bangladesh, have reported infections at alarming levels.

"Many countries have locked down cities. If we need to do so, we would require decision from the top level of the government. Today's [Tuesday] meeting is to define those measures," Prof AK Azad said.

STILL NO PLACE FOR QUARANTINE

Although experts welcomed the response from the government, they pointed out a major loophole in the preparedness to tackle such a crisis.

"The government is doing well based on its capacity. However, there is a big gap: there is no ideal quarantine place to keep suspected patients," Prof Nazrul Islam, former VC and a virologist of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University, told The Daily Star last evening.

He opined that the government should plan for not only the crisis from novel coronavirus, but also increase capacity for any such outbreak in future.

Meanwhile, five Bangladeshi nationals affected with coronavirus are still undergoing treatment in Singapore. Of them, one is in ICU.

Another infected Bangladeshi national in the United Arab Emirates is also undergoing treatment.

A South Korean national was tested corona negative yesterday, and released from Kurmitola General Hospital.

MUJIB BORSHO

Modi, Sonia among world leaders confirmed to join

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, former Indian President Pranab Mukherjee, Indian Congress Party President Sonia Gandhi, Bhutanese King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, among other world leaders have so far confirmed their presence in different events for Mujib Borsho, to mark Bangabandhu's birth centenary.

Top officials of foreign ministry yesterday informed this to a parliamentary standing committee meeting. The meeting of the parliamentary standing committee on foreign affairs was held at Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban with ruling Awami League MP Muhammad Faruk Khan in the chair.

So far 18 distinguished world leaders and personalities have confirmed their presence on different dates of Mujib Borsho celebrations, which will begin on March 17.

Talking to The Daily Star, Faruk Khan said Indian premier Narendra Modi, Bhutanese King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, among others have confirmed their presence on the inaugural ceremony of Mujib Borsho on March 17.

Pranab Mukherjee, several MPs of UK and Vietnam parliament, among other

distinguished leaders, will attend a two-day special session of Bangladesh Parliament scheduled to start from March 22.

The parliamentary watchdog was also informed that Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen; granddaughter of Bangabandhu and British Labour Party MP Tulip Siddiq; another Labor Party MP Rushanara Ali and former Unesco director general Irina Bokova, among others, have also confirmed their presence during different occasions of Mujib Borsho.

Besides, prime ministers of Australia, Italy and Canada might also visit Bangladesh during the year, meeting sources said.

Bangladesh will celebrate the "Mujib Borsho" from March 17, 2020, to March 26, 2021, through various programmes.

On the Rohingya issue, the parliamentary body yesterday asked the foreign ministry to resolve the crisis through joint initiatives of China, Myanmar and Bangladesh.

Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen, committee members -- Golam Faruk Khandakar Prince, Abdul Majid Khan, Habibe Millat, Nahim Razzaq, Kazi Nabil Ahmed and Nizam Uddin Jilil (Jhon) also participated in the meeting.

Arrest Bismillah Group MD in 7 days: HC

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The High Court yesterday directed the law enforcers to arrest seven convicted executives of Bismillah Group, including its managing director Khaza Solaiman Anwar Chowdhury, in seven days in a case filed over laundering Tk 15.33 crore, as they are absconding and have not surrendered to the trial court concerned.

The court ordered the inspector general of police and the director general of Rab to issue red alert through Interpol to detain them if the law enforcers cannot arrest them in seven days.

Six other absconding offenders are: Chowdhury's wife and the chairperson of Bismillah Group Nowrin Hasib, Shafiqul Anwar Chowdhury, Akbar Aziz Muttakin, Abul Hashem Chowdhury, Riazuddin Ahmed and Akbar Hossain.

The HC also asked the IGP and Rab DG to submit reports on the progress of arresting the fugitives by April 5.

The HC bench of Justice Md Nazrul Islam Talukder and Justice KM Hafizul Alam came up with the order while hearing a petition filed by SM Shoabul Kabir, another jailed convict in the case, seeking bail. It refused to grant bail to Kabir and fixed April 5 for further hearing.

Deputy Attorney General AKM Amin Uddin Manik said a Dhaka court on September 10, 2018 sentenced nine Bismillah Group executives to 10 years' rigorous imprisonment in the case.

In November 2013, ACC filed a case against them. Mustaque Ahmed Khan and Kabir were sent to jail after they surrendered to the trial court. Twelve cases were filed against 54 officials of the company over fraud, money laundering and corruption.

Drizzle no damper for bookworms



What's a little rain compared to the high spirits of booklovers -- who thronged the Amar Ekushey Grantha Mela yesterday wielding umbrellas and smiles. PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

MATHEWS CHIRAN

Although spring sky took a shade of uncharacteristic gloom yesterday, it was no match for last-minute shoppers, who turned out in droves at Amar Ekushey Grantha Mela.

Wielding umbrellas, families, groups of friends and couples turned up at Suhrawardy Udyan since afternoon, some with to-buy lists, while others still browsing.

"The book fair comes once a year. Although it's drizzling, we don't really mind it. Nothing can dampen your spirit when you look forward to buying new books," said Sristi Akhter, a former Dhaka University student who came with her cousin Rehana to buy Anisul Haque's latest novel "Ekhan Themona".

Some fair goers actually appreciated the light rain and cloudy sky, saying it gave them a relief from the dust that usually

becomes a problem throughout the fair as crowd grows in the last week.

"I'm allergic to dust, and bringing children to such a crowded place sometimes is a hassle. But, as the day is cloudy and the rain helped clean up the air, my daughter and I can roam the fair freely" said Rakibul, with her five-year-old daughter Maisha on his lap.

Publishers were also prepared for possible rain, keeping plastic sheet covers.

Rumman Tarshfiq, publisher of Pendulum, said, "We knew it could rain today. Therefore, we had taken precautions. We had sheets to cover the books."

"However, if a heavy storm comes in, it might be difficult for small stalls to keep their books safe," the publisher added.

Salespersons also remained upbeat, saying the inclement weather did not affect their sales much.

Khairul, a stall attendant at Adarsha

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N'GANJ GAS EXPLOSION

Two more victims die

OUR CORRESPONDENT, N'ganj

Two more victims, who suffered burn injuries in a gas explosion at a house in Shiddhirganj of Narayanganj on February 17, died at Dhaka Medical College Hospital yesterday.

With this, death toll from the gas explosion rose to five.

The two are Apon (12), and his uncle Hiron Miah (23), said Bachchu Miah, inspector of DMCH police camp.



It drizzled on and off all day. But a mother always stays alert to protect her children. While travelling on a rickshaw, this woman quickly covered her daughter in a plastic sheet as soon as it started raining yesterday afternoon. The photo was taken in Dholaihal truck stand area.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN