

EU releases €31m to address Rohingya crisis

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

The European Commission yesterday announced releasing €31 million in humanitarian aid to address the Rohingya crisis in Bangladesh and Myanmar.

The announcement came after the UN agencies and NGOs launched the 2020 Joint Response Plan (JRP) in Geneva.

The JRP seeks to raise \$877 million to respond to the needs of some 855,000 Rohingya refugees and 444,000 vulnerable Bangladeshis in Cox's Bazar.

EU Commissioner for Crisis Management Janez Lenarcic in a statement said, "The Rohingya crisis is in its third year. It is more important than ever to maintain our support and not forget those that remain dependent on humanitarian aid to survive."

The European Union was committed to supporting both refugees and host communities in Cox's Bazar, as well as to the vulnerable Rohingya in Myanmar, he added.

Speaking at the launching event in Geneva, UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi said support of the 2020 JRP was essential to safeguard the wellbeing of Rohingya refugees -- both now in Bangladesh and once it is safe and sustainable for them to return home to Myanmar.

"Until then, the world must stand by the Rohingya and by the government and people of Bangladesh who continue to host them. Most important will be engaging refugees and hearing their voices and understanding their hopes and vision for the future."

This year marks the third year of exile for most Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, following their flight from Myanmar in 2017.

IOM Director General António Vitorino said, "From the moment the international community responded to the crisis in August 2017, we committed ourselves to a long-term investment working with the government to create sustainable, dignified living arrangements for all until such time as they could safely return home, and to provide meaningful support to host communities."

He said the 2020 JRP's focus on infrastructure, livelihoods, protection and the environment were extensions of the work completed to date.

The 2019 JRP was funded at just over 70 percent, or \$650 million received against \$921 million requested, the UNHCR said.

Addressing the event, Bangladesh State Minister for Foreign Affairs Shahriar Alam said the international community, including the UN agencies, must work towards meaningfully and vigorously engage with Myanmar to create an environment that would be conducive to voluntary, safe, dignified and sustainable return.

He said Bangladesh was revisiting the decision on the suspension of the mobile and internet network in the Rohingya camps.

Meanwhile, Save the Children, International Rescue Committee, Handicap International, Norwegian Refugee Council, Oxfam and Danish Refugee Council in a statement have urged donor governments to contribute generously to the 2020 JRP.

China threatens retaliation over US 'bullying' of state media

AFP, Beijing

China yesterday threatened to retaliate against US "bullying" after Washington imposed staff cuts on Chinese state media, two weeks after expelling three Wall Street Journal reporters.

The US said its decision Monday to require Beijing's state-run media to cut the number of Chinese nationals employed in the US was based on levelling numbers between the countries rather than hitting back over content.

Foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian said China "strongly opposes and condemns" the US announcement, adding that it effectively means the expulsion of Chinese journalists.

"Out of a Cold War mindset and ideological bias, the US State Department uses groundless reasons to politically oppress Chinese media organisations based in the US," Zhao said at a regular press briefing.

He said the move exposes "the hypocrisy of the United States' so-called freedom of the press as blatant double standard and hegemonic bullying".

Saying China reserves the right to react and take further action, Zhao added: "It was the US who broke the rules of the game first, China can only follow suit."

China on February 19 ordered three reporters from The Wall Street Journal -- two US nationals and an Australian -- out of the country in its harshest move against international media in years.

China said it took action because

the newspaper had not apologised for a "racially discriminatory" headline that read "China is the Real Sick Man of Asia" and appeared on an opinion column about the nation's fight against the coronavirus.

The three journalists were not involved in writing the opinion piece.

Two of them left the country last week, but the third has been reporting in Wuhan, the central Chinese city that has been under quarantine since late January to contain the deadly coronavirus epidemic.

In its annual report released Monday, the Foreign Correspondents' Club of China said Beijing was using visas as a weapon to intimidate foreign press "like never before" and feared it was preparing to kick out more reporters.

It said China had also been reducing the time journalists can stay, with at least 12 correspondents issued credentials for half a year or less -- more than double the number from a year earlier.

A US State Department official said five Chinese media outlets, which last month were reclassified by the United States as foreign missions, would be allowed to employ a maximum 100 Chinese nationals as of March 13, down from around 160 now.

The organisation most affected by the new restriction will be the state news agency Xinhua, which will be allowed to keep 59 Chinese staff in the US, according to the official.

Tamim's best seals series

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The 30-year-old also became the only Bangladesh batsman to reach 7,000 ODI runs yesterday and, more importantly, Tamim brushed aside all the criticism against his batting approach in recent times.

Bangladesh made two changes from the first ODI, with all-rounder Mohammad Saifuddin and pacer Mustafizur Rahman being rested and pacers Al-Amin and Shafiqul Islam taking their place as the hosts opted to bat on a flat track.

Tamim, who has been under a lot of pressure due to indifferent form since the start of last summer's World Cup, showed encouraging signs of a return to normalcy and started off confidently.

Bangladesh got off to a decent start as the openers added 38 runs before the centurion of the last match, Liton Das, departed for nine after a rather unlucky run out when Tamim's straight drive deflected off bowler Carl Mumba's hand and hit the stumps at the non-striker's end with Liton outside the crease.

Nazmul Hossain Shanto was also run out after a mix-up with Tamim but even that could not hold back the experienced batsman as he added 87 for the third wicket with Mushfiqur Rahim.

Tamim reached his fifty off 42

deliveries and was all set to score a big knock, but Mushfiqur -- who also scored a fifty -- departed after going for a six against off-spinner Wesley Madheveru.

The left-handed batsman, who was watchful in the nineties, eventually reached his century off 106 deliveries. Mahmudullah Riyad at the other end departed after scoring 41 after a 106-runs fourth-wicket stand.

The cricketer from Chattogram, opened up further after reaching his hundred and smashed the Zimbabwean bowlers all over the park before holing out in the deep after a magnificent knock.

Bangladesh were all set to post over 350 but the absence of a big hitter like Saifuddin in the end cost the hosts as they added just 25 runs in the last four overs. Mohammad Mithun added a quick 32 off 18 deliveries and remained unbeaten.

Zimbabwe, in reply, once again failed to provide a solid start, lost early wickets and were struggling on 102 for four after opener Tinashe Kamunhukamwe departed for fifty.

Fifties from Wesley Madheveru and Sikandar Raza in the middle kept Zimbabwe in the hunt before Tiripano blasted a 28-ball 55 and, along with Mutombodzi's quick 34, took the game to the wire.



People block Gomti-Matiranga road in Gazinagar area of Khagrachhari's Matiranga upazila yesterday protesting deaths during a clash between Border Guard Bangladesh and locals.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

Cost revised, goes up by 72pc

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The bridge would improve capacity of Bangladesh Railway in operating more trains between the capital and western part of the country.

It would also help reduce the train delays, which have become a common phenomenon.

March 14 was fixed as the tentative date for the inauguration of the project by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, said Mofazzel Hossain, senior secretary at the railway ministry.

"If the prime minister gives consent, the inaugural ceremony would be held within this month," he told The Daily Star yesterday.

As per the project documents, the construction work of the bridge would commence next month.

The main bridge would be constructed under two packages. Japan will fund the lion's share (72%) of the cost as soft loans.

A joint venture of the Obayashi Corporation, TOA Corporation and JFE would construct the eastern part of the bridge at a cost of Tk 6,801 crore while another joint venture of the IHI and SMCC will work on the western part which will cost Tk 6,148 crore, officials said. All the companies are from Japan.

REASON BEHIND THE RISE

In early January, when the project was placed before the cabinet committee on government purchase, it gave a "conditional approval" which means it would require an approval from the Ecnc.

About the cost escalation, Planning Minister MA Mannan, after the Ecnc meeting yesterday, said the Jica carried out a supplementary study that recommended some changes in the project and added some new

elements.

Mofazzel said the Development Project Plan (DPP) was approved for starting the project soon but it was mentioned in the DPP that it would be revised after the detailed design was prepared.

While the cost of the main two packages of the bridge was Tk 7,911.2 crore in the original DPP, it shot up to Tk 12,950 crore in the new DPP.

The Jica's supplementary survey, on which the initial DPP cost was based, recommended 41 piers with a span size of 120 metres.

But in the detailed design, the span size was changed to 100 metres to keep the span arrangement similar to that of Bangabandhu Bridge.

It would ensure better horizontal navigability and streamline the flow of the river.

As a result, number of piers rose to 50, which would also increase the construction cost.

Moreover, the rates of income tax and VAT were 5 percent and 5.5 percent respectively when the original DPP was made. But now both the rates are 7.5 percent, causing a further increase of about Tk 826 crore in project cost, documents show.

In addition, no fund was allocated for land acquisition in the original DPP as Bangladesh Bridge Authority, owner of required land, was supposed to hand over the land for free.

But as per the decision of an inter-ministerial meeting, Bangladesh Railway will pay Tk 334.80 crore for buying 170 acres of land and Tk 11.86 crore for renting 263 acres as project sites.

A museum would be built at the bridge site for Tk 69.71 crore "to keep alive the history of the massive

construction operations and to establish a symbol of friendship between Japan and Bangladesh," the documents read.

The project authority has cited several other reasons for the cost escalation.

WHY A NEW BRIDGE?

The delay in schedules of trains that travel between the capital and north-western and southern regions mainly occurs due to the restrictions on load and speed on the existing bridge.

With the highest permitted speed of 20 kmph, it takes about half an hour for a train to travel from the station on the east side of the bridge to the one on the west, officials said.

Railways Minister Nurul Islam Sujan on several occasions said the problems could not be solved until the rail bridge and the dual-gauge double lines between Joydebpur and Ishwardi were constructed.

There is a single line from Joydebpur to Ishwardi. The railway operates 42 trains on this 174-km stretch that connects Dhaka with the western region via Bangabandhu bridge.

Officials said a maximum of 22 trains could travel smoothly on this route.

Besides, the opportunity of freight transport with the neighbouring countries cannot be availed due to this constraint, so a dedicated rail bridge is required to meet the national and sub-regional demands, they added.

Considering all these factors, Bangladesh Railway has taken the projects of constructing the rail bridge and a dual-gauge double line from Joydebpur to Ishwardi, the officials added.

Air pollution cuts lives by three years

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energy."

Compared to other causes of premature death, air pollution kills 19 times more people each year than malaria, nine times more than HIV/AIDS, and three times more than alcohol, the study found.

Coronary heart disease and stroke account for almost half of those deaths, with lung diseases and other non-communicable diseases such as diabetes and high blood pressure accounting for most of the rest.

Only six percent of mortality stemming from polluted air is due to lung cancer.

"Our results show there is an air pollution pandemic," said senior author Thomas Munzel of the Max Planck Institute's departments of chemistry and cardiology.

"Both air pollution and smoking are preventable, but over the past decades much less attention has been paid to air pollution than to smoking, especially among cardiologists."

The worst-hit region is Asia, where average lifespan is cut 4.1 years in China, 3.9 years in India, and 3.8 years in Pakistan.

In some parts of these countries, toxic air takes an even steeper toll, other research has shown.

In India's Uttar Pradesh -- home to 200 million -- small particle pollution by itself slashes life expectancy by 8.5 years, while in China's Hebei Province (population 74 million) the shortfall

is nearly six years, according to the Air Quality Life Index, developed by researchers at the Energy Policy Institute of Chicago.

African lives are also foreshortened by 3.1 years on average, with people in some nations -- Chad, Sierra Leone, Central African Republic, Nigeria and Cote d'Ivoire -- losing 4.5 to 7.3 years.

Among wealthier nations, the Soviet Union's former satellite states have the deadliest pollution, especially in Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania.

"We show that about two-thirds of premature deaths are attributable to human-made pollution, mainly from fossil fuel use," Munzel said.

"This goes up to 80 percent in high-income countries," he added.

"5.5 million deaths worldwide a year are potentially avoidable."

IMPACT 'SIGNIFICANTLY UNDERESTIMATED'
Unavoidable excess mortality stems from natural dust storms, such as in central Asia and northern Africa, along with forest fires, though both phenomena are being amplified by manmade climate change, according to climate scientists.

The least-impacted regions of the world are the Americas, western and northern Europe, and small island states.

The figure of 8.8 million premature deaths from outdoor air pollution each year is double estimates from

World Health Organization (WHO).

"The impact of air pollution on cardiovascular and other non-communicable diseases was significantly underestimated," Lelieveld explained, echoing a conclusion from other recent research.

Air pollution causes damage to the blood vessels through greater oxidative stress, leading to increases in blood pressure, diabetes, stroke, heart attacks and heart failure.

The revised number for China is 2.8 million premature deaths each year, two-and-a-half times the WHO estimates.

The researchers said there are signs in India, China and other emerging economies that people are growing intolerant of life-shortening toxic air.

"The realisation that air pollution is a major health risk can contribute to the willingness to phase-out fossil fuels -- with the co-benefit of reducing climate warming," Lelieveld said.

To assess the impact of air pollution on life expectancy, the researchers applied data on exposure to micro-particles (PM2.5) and ozone for the year 2015 to models that simulate how chemical processes in the atmosphere interact with natural and manmade pollutants, and data from the Global Burden of Disease.

Indoor pollution -- mainly from cook stoves fuelled by biomass or coal -- is also a major killer, but was not considered here.

Scientists study pesticide link to diplomats' 'Havana syndrome'

AFP, Havana

Cuban scientists are helping investigate whether pesticides caused mysterious health complaints from US and Canadian diplomats in Havana that were originally blamed on sonic attacks, a conference heard.

Dozens of embassy officials and their families first reported in 2016 suffering from what became known as "Havana syndrome," with symptoms including dizziness, fatigue and headaches, as well as hearing and vision complications.

US and Canadian authorities initially suspected an attack using some sort of acoustic weapon, which led to heightened diplomatic tensions between Washington and the Caribbean island nation.

But last year a Canadian study suggested the illnesses may have been caused by a neurotoxin in anti-mosquito spray.

Researchers in Cuba and Canada were now working together to study whether the symptoms mirrored those of people with exposure to pesticides, said Cuban Neuroscience Center director Mitchell Valdes-Sosa.

5 killed

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locals surrounded one of its patrol teams which confiscated the truck near Gazinagar Bazar. At one stage, they snatched firearms from the BGB personnel and opened fire indiscriminately, leaving BGB member Md Shaon and five civilians wounded.

BGB's Guimara sector commander Col GHM Selim Hasan said, "Wood smugglers attacked the BGB men when they were taking a seized truck to the forest office."

They snatched weapons from the BGB team and opened fire. The BGB personnel then returned fire in self-defence, he said.

Matiranga Police Station Officer-in-Charge Shamsuddin Bhuiyan also said both BGB men and locals suffered bullet wounds in the incident.

Meanwhile, the district administration has formed a three-member committee to investigate the matter.

The probe body, comprised of an additional district magistrate, additional superintendent of police and a forest official, was asked to submit its report in three working days.

As of yesterday evening, autopsy was carried out only on the body of the BGB man, said Mitun Chakma, civil surgeon (in charge) in the district.

"The body bore bullet marks on the chest," he added.

A police official said the bodies of all the deceased had marks of bullet wounds.

Panic has gripped the area since the clash.

Shahab Mia's wife Ranuja Begum fainted after she learnt her husband and two sons were no more.

ASP MM Salauddin said additional law enforcers were deployed in the area to avert further untoward incidents.

Suspend

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visa-on-arrival service for Chinese nationals as a precautionary measure to prevent the new virus from entering the country.

In the latest development, Iran confirmed 1,501 cases of the novel coronavirus with 66 deaths, while the number was 1,694 in Italy with 34 confirmed deaths, and 4,335 in South Korea with 26 deaths.

Meanwhile, the government has taken up a four-level preparedness plan to tackle the novel coronavirus.

US TV anchor retires on air after harassment claims

AFP, New York

Veteran US television anchor Chris Matthews announced his retirement live on air and apologized for his conduct after sexual harassment claims and a public backlash sparked by his election coverage.

Matthews spent decades grilling political leaders on his nightly political talk show "Hardball" but

found himself in the spotlight after a former guest accused him of regularly making inappropriate remarks.

The host's behavior had "undermined" political columnist Laura Bassett's ability to do her job, she wrote in a GQ magazine article last week.

Bassett chronicled several

harassment allegations leveled at Matthews over the years, including a reprimand issued by his employer MSNBC three years ago for inappropriate comments about a female colleague in 1999.

"I decided tonight will be my last Hardball," Matthews said in a monologue that opened his program Monday.