

CLIMATE VULNERABLE FORUM Next confce to be held marking Mujib Borsho

Forum President Ban Ki-moon calls Hasina

BSS, Dhaka

The next conference of the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF) will be held in 2021 commemorating the "Mujib Borsho".

"CVF President and ex-UN secretary-general Ban Ki-moon informed this today [yesterday] when he phoned Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in the evening," PM's Press Secretary Ihsanul Karim told BSS.

The press secretary said Ban Ki-moon called the PM around 6:10pm and talked with her for nearly 12 minutes on different issues, including the CVF conference and the Global Centre on Adaptation conference.

Ihsanul said the Global Centre on Adaptation conference will be held in the second week of September next and the Bangladesh PM will inaugurate the event. Ban Ki-moon will join the programme virtually.

The press secretary said the former UN secretary-general highly

appreciated the PM's leadership in combating the novel coronavirus situation and Cyclone Amphan with courage.

Ban Ki-moon congratulated Hasina for being elected as the CVF chair for the second time.

He also congratulated Saima Wazed Hossain, chairperson of the National Advisory Committee on Neurodevelopmental Disorders and Autism, as she has been made a "Thematic Ambassador" by the CVF.

Hasina thanked Ban Ki-moon for calling her, Ihsanul added.

The CVF is a global partnership of 48 countries that are disproportionately affected by the consequences of global warming.

At the 25th Annual Conference of Parties (COP25), known as the UN Climate Change Conference, in Paris in December last year, Hasina accepted a proposal from Marshall Islands President Hilda Heine to take over the charge of the CVF chair from this year.

Crowds may help

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The consequence of these is likely to be seen by the second week of August, when there might be a surge in the number of infections, he said on Monday.

Experts said if movement was restricted during this Eid, the virus transmission could be stemmed.

In that case, the R value would come down further, allowing the outbreak to be contained.

"But the way we are behaving, it seems that the situation will deteriorate in the coming days," said Alamgir.

In Saudi Arabia, the transmission average R-naught went under 1 [0.93] so the authorities there relaxed preventive measures.

But within a few days, the transmission rate jumped above 1, forcing the authorities to reinforce the measures, added the experts.

Meanwhile, Mushtuq Husain, IEDCR consultant and epidemiologist, said since the number of Covid-19 tests carried out every day is not the same, the information obtained from test results is not stable.

"But one thing is clear -- the detection rate [the percentage of positive coronavirus cases out of the number of samples tested] is almost the same," he said on Monday.

Mushtuq said the stable detection rate could have been used to avert any untoward situation in the future. "But we are wasting this opportunity by a sense of complacency," he noted.

Since the country's first death from coronavirus on March 18, the total number of Covid-19 deaths reached the 3,000 mark on Tuesday.

The tally of the total cases was 2,32,194 till yesterday.

Higher rate of conviction

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Addressing the event, Head of Brac Migration Programme Shariful Hasan said exploitation of labourers and sexual exploitation of women have increased alarmingly in recent years.

He said a low conviction rate in human trafficking cases and denial of justice were not the problems only for Bangladesh, but for the whole world.

Shariful said compared to an increased number of human trafficking cases filed across the world in the last two years, the conviction rate was low and the number of victims rose day by day.

However, a positive trend was that many countries brought amendments to their existing laws related to human trafficking, he added.

He said poverty is one of the main reasons for human trafficking in Bangladesh.

Referring to statistics, Shariful said Bangladesh was one of the top 10 countries whose nationals attempted to enter Europe illegally through different sea and land routes between January and June this year.

Tariqul Islam, country director of NGO-based initiative Justice and Care, said effective coordination between special tribunal public prosecutors and investigation officers was required to ensure punishment of perpetrators through convictions in human trafficking cases. Additional Secretary of Home Ministry Abu Bakar Siddique said issues of irregular migration comes to the fore whenever human trafficking is discussed in Bangladesh, but this is not the case in other countries.

He said human trafficking could have been curbed significantly in Bangladesh if trafficking of labour migrants could

be stopped. Abu Bakar said creating enough employment opportunities and reducing poverty in the country can significantly help reduce trafficking of labour migrants.

INCIDIN Bangladesh Executive Director AKM Masud Ali said different surveys found that "dalals" (middlemen or brokers) were responsible for the high cost of labour migration from Bangladesh.

Masud said the government was making efforts to cut migration cost, but there is no mention of the word "dalal" in the country's related law.

Bringing them under the purview of law and under an accountability mechanism is crucial, he observed.

Addressing the programme as chief guest, Chairman of National Human Rights Commission Nasima Begum said providing proper skills training to migrant workers, especially the female ones, is essential to ensure their safety.

If workers go for overseas jobs after having proper training, it will significantly help reduce their exploitation and sexual harassment, she said.

Nasima said skilled workers earn more and remain cautious about their rights.

Presiding over the programme, NGO Foundation Chairman Hedayetullah Al Mamoon stressed the need for addressing poverty to curb human trafficking as it is the root cause of the crime.

Joint Secretary Muzaffar Ahmed of the expatriates' welfare ministry said many Bangladeshis who went abroad for jobs on tourist or visit visas fell victim to human traffickers.

Downsized hajj begins

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Pilgrims were brought in small batches, walking along paths marked on the floor, in sharp contrast to the hajj in previous years when a sea of humanity swirled around the Kaaba.

The tawaf, which involves walking around the structure seven times, was completed in "record time", a security commander told state media.

"This is an indescribable feeling," said Mohamed Ibrahim, a 43-year-old Egyptian electrician who was among the pilgrims chosen.

"It feels like a dream," the father-of-three, who resides in the city of Medina, told AFP before entering the mosque.

Pilgrims will be required to wear masks and observe social distancing during a series of rites that are completed over five days in the holy city of Makkah and its surroundings.

They said they were given ihram -- a seamless white garment worn by pilgrims -- made from a resistant material.

Those selected to take part were subject to temperature checks and placed in quarantine as they began trickling into Makkah at the weekend.

State media showed health workers sanitising their luggage, and some pilgrims reported being given electronic wristbands to allow authorities to monitor their whereabouts.

Workers, clutching brooms and disinfectant, were seen cleaning the area around the Kaaba. Using his bare hands, one worker was shown daubing its outer wall with perfume.

Authorities have cordoned off the Kaaba this year, saying pilgrims will not be allowed to touch it, to limit the chances of infection.

The foreign press are barred from this year's hajj, usually a huge global media event, as the government tightens access to Makkah.

'DANGER OF PANDEMIC' Saudi authorities also reported setting up multiple health facilities, mobile clinics and ambulances to cater to the pilgrims.

"There are no security-related concerns in this pilgrimage, but (downsizing) is to protect pilgrims from the danger of the pandemic," said Saudi Arabia's director of public security, Khalid bin Qarar Al-Harbi.

The pilgrims were set to travel to Mina later yesterday, where they will spend the night. A district of Makkah, it sits in a narrow valley surrounded by rocky mountains and is transformed each year into a vast encampment for pilgrims.

Worshippers will climb Mount Arafat, also known as the "Mount of Mercy", for hours of prayers and Quran recitals today.

After descending the following day, they will gather pebbles and perform the symbolic "stoning of the devil".

Saudi authorities initially said only around 1,000 pilgrims residing in the kingdom would be permitted for the hajj, but local media reports say as many as 10,000 will be allowed to take part.



The trucker picked up the young holiday makers by offering them a cheaper alternative to buses. Travelling like this not only puts the people on the flatbed at risk of getting hurt or killed in an accident, but also coronavirus infection. The photo was taken at Nayabazar in Chattogram city yesterday.

PHOTO: RAJIB RATHAN

Defrauded in Vietnam

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The issue came to light following the repatriation of 11 other Bangladeshis on July 3.

Since then, more than 60 Bangladeshis, including the 27, have demonstrated in front of the Bangladesh Embassy in Hanoi, complaining of labour exploitation and fraudulence.

The Vietnamese police and the embassy then arranged their accommodation before starting the process of repatriation. They are still in Hanoi as the operations of international flights are yet to begin due to Covid-19 outbreak.

The embassy said it repatriated more than 40 Bangladeshis, who were defrauded, over the last two years. However, in recent times it is finding Bangladeshis with BMET cards though the embassy never had any knowledge that Vietnam had labour demand from Bangladesh.

THE WAY IT EVOLVED

According to the group of 27, agents had promised lucrative job offers, including monthly basic salary of \$500-600 for daily eight-hour work plus \$1.5 per hour overtime.

Besides, they would get \$2.5 overtime per hour on weekly or other holidays, and free food and accommodation, health insurance, renewal of work permit after two years, air ticket for returning home on leave, etc. They were also assured of work permit in 45 days of arrival.

In exchange, they were charged Tk 4-5 lakh each for recruitment in sectors, including shipping, electrical and electronics, as regular employees.

"The agents asked us to come to Dhaka just the day before the flight. We were then asked to sign on blank stamps that they claimed were job contracts. Those who had prior experience of working abroad asked about the job contracts, but tactically the agents avoided it," read an application of the 27, emailed to the Bangladesh Embassy in Hanoi early June.

In the application, they said travel agency Mash Career Services and recruiting agency JK Overseas Ltd arranged their travel, while two of their partners -- Bangladeshi men Mostafa and Jabbar and a Chinese agent -- operated in Vietnam.

MEDIUM OF MONEY LAUNDERING A new dimension to this organised crime was that jobseekers were used for money laundering.

The Bangladeshis were forced to carry tens of thousands of dollars when they flew to Vietnam early January this year, and the whole thing happened in a very organised way.

"Before giving us our passports and air tickets, each of us was handed over 5,000 US dollars. The agency staff then took our photos with the dollars and asked us to give the money to the brokers in Vietnam," said the application.

Asked why they agreed to carry the

dollars, Shital told The Daily Star over the phone that they had spent high amounts for going to Vietnam and they had no way of avoiding it.

The agency staff threatened to cancel their flight when they expressed unwillingness to carry the money, he said.

Faridul Islam, victim from another group, said they too were forced to carry \$2,000-3,000 each to pass on to the brokers in Vietnam.

They all said after arriving in Ho Chi Minh City, Mostafa and Jabbar took the dollars and passports from them.

No officials of the two agencies could be found for comments.

MODERN DAY SLAVERY?

The Bangladeshis youths in Vietnam were not given any work permits even after 45 days. Also, their visas were not work visas but either tourist or enterprise visas.

"Our agents might have secured the BMET clearances through fake documents," Shital said.

"We shared our grievances repeatedly but Mostafa and Jabbar would not care. We then went to the police and filed complaints but nothing happened. We assumed the brokers managed the police."

He said there was no formal channel to remit money home from Ho Chi Minh. They gave some money to Mostafa and Jabbar for sending home, but that never reached their families.

They complained to the labour court, which then sent police to their camp and learnt about their complaints in detail.

Shital said they also contacted the Bangladesh Embassy early May. With no solution, they stopped working since mid-June.

"Meanwhile, we got to learn that Jabbar and Mostafa were planning to kidnap the Bangladeshi workers who led the protest against them," said Shital. Fearing for life, they decided to go to Bangladesh Embassy in Hanoi, some 1,100km away from Ho Chi Minh City, on July 2.

What Faridul Islam shared is even worse. He is one of 17 Bangladeshis who had been stranded in Vung Tau and later on July 20 went to Hanoi where they were provided shelter by the Bangladesh mission and Vietnam police.

He said in the last six months, they were taken to many companies in Vung Tau, but none could offer any job, except for a few days.

"I was appointed to work for a glass factory for 22 days and was paid money equal to only Tk 7,000," he told The Daily Star.

He said there could be several hundred Bangladeshis who got stranded in Vietnam and are facing a similar situation.

The Rapid Action Battalion identified at least eight Bangladeshi brokers based in Vietnam -- Abdul Jabbar, Mostafa, Golam Azam Sumon, Kalpana, Azmeer, Milon, Shovon and

Atik -- and six recruiting and travel agencies involved in human trafficking in the name of labour recruitment in Vietnam.

A preliminary investigation by Brac Migration Programme found links of six recruiting and five travel agencies to the human trafficking in Vietnam.

Also, it got to know of 37 Vietnamese companies linked to it.

BMET ROLE QUESTIONED

Experts are now questioning the role of the Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET) as to how the regulatory body issued emigration clearances to them without authenticating the jobs in Vietnam.

Noor Khan Liton, a migrant rights activist, said this seems to be an organised crime by illegal manpower brokers, travel and recruiting agents.

False promises, fraudulent job documents, using workers like slaves, low pays, exploitative living conditions, workers' indebtedness -- these all form the crime of human trafficking as defined in the Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act-2012.

"It is mysterious how such an organised crime has been happening. We need to question the role of the Bangladesh Embassy in Vietnam and the BMET in Dhaka," he told The Daily Star.

Bangladesh Ambassador to Vietnam, Samina Naz, said she repatriated 43 Bangladeshis, who were defrauded in the name of jobs, over the last two years.

"I wrote to the home and expatriates' ministries about such human trafficking several times in the last two years," she told The Daily Star.

Samina said the BMET never communicated with the embassy for verification of any companies in Vietnam before issuing emigration clearance. Bangladesh has no deal with Vietnam for labour recruitment.

She said Bangladeshis were sent to Vietnam with tourist and enterprise visas though they were allured with jobs.

Contacted, BMET Director General Shamsul Alam said sending people to Vietnam is nothing new though Bangladesh does not have any MoU with that country. At least 1,275 people had gone there in such a way since 2007.

Asked how the BMET issued immigration clearances, he said those who went to Vietnam should respond why they used an enterprise visa to go there.

"If they went for jobs, why did they take BMET cards as entrepreneurs? We gave them the cards as per their contract papers," he added.

Asked how BMET verified the job contracts presented to them by the recruiting agents, he avoided replying to the question.

Expatriates' Welfare Minister Imran Ahmad said, "We have formed a committee to probe how BMET issued cards for Vietnam-bound people when it is not a labour market."

Infection

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male and five female. Of all deceased, 2,388 were male and 647 female.

In the 24-hour period, 29 patients died at hospital while six died at home.

One was aged between 21 and 30, one between 31 and 40, six were aged between 41 and 50, seven between 51 and 60, 12 between 61 and 70, seven between 71 and 80 while another was aged between 81 and 90, said Dr Nasima.

Of the victims, 14 were from Dhaka, eight from Chattogram, four from Barishal, two each from Rajshahi, Khulna, Sylhet and Rangpur, and one from Mymensingh divisions.

Meanwhile, 827 people were put under isolation over that period, taking the number of people currently in isolation to 18,699.

On the other hand, 146 people were released from isolation, taking the total number of released people to 30,647.

Flood engulfs

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The state of some low-lying areas around the capital may slightly deteriorate today, said yesterday's bulletin of Flood Forecasting and Warning Centre (FFWC).

Water level of the rivers around the capital may rise today, while that of the Teesta and Dharala in the northern region may increase till tomorrow.

Seventeen rivers were flowing up to the danger marks yesterday, said the bulletin.

Our district correspondents report on the flood situation.

In Tangail, fresh areas have been flooded after a 30-metre portion of a flood protection dam collapsed at Naogaon in Sadar upazila yesterday.

"The embankment was in a bad state. We tried to protect it by dumping geobags for the last couple of days. But it finally collapsed, said Sirajul Islam, executive engineer of Water Development Board (WDB) in Tangail.

Although water has started receding from some areas, the flood situation still remains unchanged.

Premises of Kumudini Hospital in Mirzapur, founded by philanthropist Ranada Prasad Saha, have gone under knee-deep water, causing hardship for patients.

Around 5.41 lakh people were affected in 11 out of the district's 12 upazilas. Some 750 villages, 89 unions, and six municipalities were hit by the flood.

Three flash floods ravaged houses, farmland, and roads of low-lying areas of all upazilas and four municipalities in Sunamganj.

The Surma and Jadukata rivers have been flowing below the danger level for the last couple of days. But the river water started increasing from early yesterday.

Such triple strikes by flash floods in a month is a new experience for many people of the district -- even the elderly could not recall such a situation.

Torjud Ali, 80, of Jogairgaon village in Sunamganj Sadar upazila, said, "We saw prolonged floods several times, but never saw flash floods hit three times in a month."

Whid Miah, another elderly man of Sonapur village of the upazila, echoed similar views and said when the water would recede completely, it could be realised how destructive the floods were.

Meanwhile, road communications remain suspended between Chhatak and Doharabazar upazilas, Jamalganj and Tahirpur with Bishwambarpur upazilas, and Nabinagar and Dharargaon with Sadar upazila for around a month.

Over 900km of roads were washed away in the district.

In Sirajganj, water level of the Jamuna is slowly coming down. But many people are still waterlogged as the river was flowing above the danger mark.

About 3.38 lakh people have been affected in the district, according to the district relief and rehabilitation office.

The Brahmaputra was yesterday flowing above 30cm of the danger level and the Dharla above 5cm over the danger level in Kurigram.

The flood victims, who took shelter elsewhere, have started returning home since Tuesday afternoon as water is receding, said Ariful Islam, executive engineer of WDB in Kurigram.

[Our correspondents from Tangail, Sylhet, Pabna, and Lalmonirhat contributed to this report]

IS claims credit, police see no link to militants

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responsibility as it got poor media coverage, he said.

There were no casualties in Friday's blast.

Walid Hossain, DMP deputy commissioner (media), told reporters that there was information that the bomb was intended to be used against a local political leader.

He did not say which politician was the possible target.

"The issue arose from political rivalry between local leaders. An investigation is ongoing and things will be clear once it is complete," he said, adding that police had information that three suspects, who were arrested in possession of firearms and the "weighing machine" yesterday, were "hitmen".

DMP Additional Commissioner (Crime) Krishna Pada Roy said Pallabi police raided Kalsi area around 2:00am and arrested the suspects after learning about a possible "criminal act" by a gang.

The police team found two pistols, four bullets and something appearing to be a weighing machine in their possession, he told reporters in front of Pallabi Police Station.

Being suspicious as to why the



suspects would carry a weighing machine, the officers called DMP's bomb disposal unit. After going there and examining the device, the unit recommended further inspection by a more experienced squad.

But it exploded around 6:00am before the special team arrived, Krishna added.

Duty officer Aklima Akhter said the explosion was in the room of an inspector on the first floor of the five-storey building.

Inspector (operations) Imranul Islam, 48, and sub-inspectors Sajib Khan, 30, Angkush Kumar, 28, and Rumi Haider, 28, and support staff Mohammad Riaz, 28, were injured.

Rumi and Riaz were admitted to Dhaka Medical College Hospital and Angkush was taken to the National Eye Institute.

Riaz's left wrist was blown off and his right hand was wounded. He also suffered injuries to his stomach, said Resident Surgeon Mohammad Alauddin of DMCH.

The explosion happened at a time when there was intelligence on possible militant attacks by the IS-inspired "Neo-JMB" during Eid-ul-Azha.

The Police Headquarters had earlier alerted its units to a possible attack.

Krishna Pada Roy, however, said there was no evidence linking the incident to militancy.

"The arrestees are members of a criminal group. We are interrogating them," he said.

The arrestees, Shahidul Islam, 23, Mosharrif Hossain, 26, and Rafiqul Islam, 40, are members of a gang called Shahadat Bahini, said a high official of the DMP.

Locals said the explosion rocked the neighbourhood and caused panic. The blast shattered most of the glass windows on the first floor of the building.

Another high official, requesting anonymity, told this correspondent that the bomb exploded when one of the policemen of the station tried to check it out.

Additional Deputy Commissioner Rahmatullah Chowdhury, in-charge of the CTC's bomb disposal squad, said the bomb was powerful and was made by professionals.

"Inside the weighing machine, there were three pipes. One of the pipes had exploded before the bomb disposal team reached. Later, we defused the two other pipes," he added.

"Militant groups do not use this type of explosive. We usually see criminal groups using these explosives," he said. Earlier on February 28, an improvised explosive device went off at a traffic police box in Chattogram's Sholoshahar, injuring four people, including a child.

In September last year, a bomb exploded at an Awami League office in Khulna city. Before that, two people, including a female police officer, were injured when a bomb went off near a police pickup in the capital's Malibagh in May. Police claimed that all these attacks were carried out by "Neo JMB".