

Macron backs Iraq ‘sovereignty’ on first Baghdad visit

AFP, Baghdad

French President Emmanuel Macron met his Iraqi counterpart yesterday on his first official visit to Baghdad, where he insisted the war-scarred country should reassert its “sovereignty” despite simmering US-Iran tensions.

Coming straight from a two-day trip to crisis-hit Lebanon, Macron is the most prominent world leader to visit Iraq since Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhemi came to power in May.

The trip aims to “launch an initiative alongside the United Nations to support a process of sovereignty,” Macron announced on his final night in Beirut.

In Baghdad, he voiced his support for his Iraqi counterpart Barham Saleh to help Iraq fight Islamic State group sleeper cells and resist foreign interference.

“Iraq has been going through a challenging time for several years, with war and terrorism,” Macron said.

“You have a transition to lead. France will be by your side so the international community can help,” he added.

But there were few details on the much-vaunted “sovereignty” initiative,

and Iraqi officials told AFP they were not expecting announcements of new financial or military aid.

Saleh thanked Macron for France’s support in the anti-IS fight and said he hoped Macron would pay a longer visit to Iraq in 2021.

After dictator Saddam Hussein was toppled by a 2003 US-led invasion -- in which France did not take part -- Iraq was ravaged by waves of sectarian conflict.

That culminated in IS capturing swathes of the country six years ago, before the jihadists were beaten back with international support including a US-led coalition that did include French forces.

Iraq has been caught for years between its two main allies Iran and the US, a balancing act that has become increasingly tortured since Washington’s withdrawal in 2018 from a multilateral nuclear deal with Tehran.

France, one of the key remaining backers of the 2015 agreement, called for de-escalation after a US strike on Baghdad in January killed top Iranian general Qasem Soleimani and prompted Iran to launch missiles against US troops in Iraq.

Health watchdog

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Sources said there was no effort in arranging any meeting or discussion online when virtual meetings have now become a norm amid the pandemic.

The number of the meeting slightly increased only last month when life in the capital and other major cities started to return to normalcy. As many as 11 meetings took place in August.

Announcements on holding at least eight meetings in September was available on the website on Tuesday, but members of the standing committee on health could not say when they would meet again.

Speaking about the matter, Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) Executive Director Iftekharuzzaman said, “In Bangladesh, it is regrettably no news any more that standing committees are in general inactive and ineffective.

“But that the committee on the health ministry can be so indifferent at a time of a national crisis centring the health sector and when allegations of corruption have been galloping by leaps and bounds is truly and exceptionally embarrassing.”

“This shows that they are least bothered about accountability of those involved in abuses and irregularities. But more so, it begs the question whether the lack of any initiatives is due to their conflict of interest, and indeed if they have vested interests in facilitating protection of the corrupt and prevalence of impunity,” he told The Daily Star on Tuesday.

Right from the beginning, the government’s response to the coronavirus outbreak has been plagued by inappropriate decisions, delayed actions and muddled thinking.

In the first phase, it was very difficult for Covid-19 patients to get beds, especially at ICUs, in hospitals, as a handful of those provide treatment to such patients.

Many with Covid-19 symptoms died without treatment.

More and more frontline healthcare workers got infected with Covid-19 due to a lack of proper safety gear, making the battle against the viral disease more difficult. Reports of misappropriation of money in the

name of procuring medical equipment were also rampant.

Fraudulent activities by Regent Hospital and JKG Health Care over Covid-19 testing coupled with reports of irregularities and mishandling of the pandemic by the Directorate General of Health Services added fuel to the fire.

This was followed by the resignation of embattled director general of DGHS, Prof Abul Kalam Azad, with the government making some changes in the top tier of the directorate and even at the health ministry.

But all these incidents apparently could not draw the attention of the health watchdog.

Contacted, former health minister AFM Ruhul Haque, also a member of the standing committee, said it would have been better had a meeting of the JS body taken place as it could monitor the ministry’s activities and play its watchdog role.

Wishing anonymity, another member of the committee said he personally requested Sheikh Fazlul Karim Selim, chief of the JS body, to call a meeting. “But he didn’t show any interest in doing so,” he said.

“I told him [the chief] that as members of a watchdog it is our responsibility towards the nation to hold discussions on various irregularities and corruption taking place during Covid-19 period and give directives to the relevant ministry to take measures to stop those,” the ruling Awami League MP said.

The Daily Star could not reach Fazlul Karim Selim for comments despite repeated attempts.

According to the rules of procedure of parliament, the functions of a committee shall be to examine any bill or other matter referred to it by parliament, to review the works relating to a ministry which falls within its jurisdiction, to inquire into any activity or irregularity and serious complaint in respect of the ministry and to examine, if it deems fit, any such other matter as may fall within its jurisdiction and to make recommendations.

One of these correspondents called Speaker Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury over the phone for her comments, but she did not pick up the call.

India secures its east

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China in 1962, and security analysts have warned that it could become a flash-point again.

But an Indian military spokesman, Lieutenant Colonel Harsh Wardhan Pande, said there was no cause for concern and the troops arriving in the area were part of regular rotation.

“Basically, it’s units changing. That’s happening as it happens every time, nothing much,” Pande told Reuters from near Guwahati, the largest city in northeastern India.

“As of now, there’s nothing to worry about on that front.”

But Tapir Gao, a member of parliament from Arunachal, told Reuters that Chinese troops had been regularly crossing into Indian territory.

“It’s a regular phenomenon, it’s nothing new,” he said, identifying the Walong and Chaglagam areas in Anjaw as the most vulnerable.

In the 1962 war, India says its outnumbered forces “blocked the thrust of the invading Chinese” in Walong, and the area of mountains, meadows and fast-flowing rivers is now a government focus for settlement and road-building.

“What we’re trying to do is create more possibilities and opportunities for villagers,” said Sudan, referring to plans for clusters of villages in the disputed area.

“It’s a push to resettle people.”

RAJNATH LEAVES FOR RUSSIA

Amidst escalation of the fresh round of border faceoff with China, Indian

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh yesterday left for Moscow on a three-day visit during which he is expected to discuss expediting Russia’s supply of several defence hardware, including missile defence shield.

Singh is visiting Moscow primarily for attending a meeting of the Russia-China led security grouping Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) which is expected to deliberate on regional security scenario, the Indian Defence Ministry said.

Meanwhile, Namghyal Dolkar Lhagvari, a member of the Tibetan parliament in exile, told AFP that a Tibetan-origin soldier with India’s special forces was “martyred during the clash” on Saturday night.

However, China’s foreign ministry said yesterday no Indian troops had died along the countries’ shared border.

The two sides blamed each other for the latest incidents.

India’s defence ministry said Chinese troops “carried out provocative military movements to change the status quo” at the border on Saturday.

China’s People’s Liberation Army said that India was “seriously violating China’s territorial sovereignty” with its operation staged Monday and demanded that Indian troops withdraw.

India’s foreign ministry said Tuesday that China had caused the latest incident “even as ground commanders of the two sides were in discussions to de-escalate the situation.”



Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina looks at dioramas of a 20-storey building for Bangladesh Public Administration Training Centre in Savar and a complex for Mymensingh Divisional Headquarters. The photo was taken at the Gono Bhaban after the PM watched presentations on the plans for the projects yesterday.

PHOTO: PTD

AL decides to come out of Covid hiatus

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person like Mohammad Shahed should be included in any committee.

Shahed, chairman of Regent Hospital, is claimed to be a member of the AL international affairs sub-committee. He is now behind bars on charges of issuing fake Covid-19 testing certificates and illegally collecting money from coronavirus patients.

The two leaders said the sub-committee chairman and member secretary would be held responsible if they included any such person in the committee, said meeting sources.

The meeting also decided that no meeting of any sub-committee would be held and none could claim himself to be a sub-committee member before the committee concerned got approval.

Bahauddin Nasim and AL International Affairs Secretary Shammi Ahmed at the meeting locked into an altercation over the inclusion of Shahed in the International Affairs Sub-committee. Shammi later shifted blame onto committee Chairman

Muhammad Zamir, a former ambassador, said meeting sources.

DMCH, TSC WILL BE REBUILT: PM Addressing the meeting, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina said her government would rebuild Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH), Teacher-Student Centre of Dhaka University, Sufia Kamal National Public Library and the National Museum.

Hasina, also the AL president, joined the meeting from the Gono Bhaban through videoconferencing.

The PM gave some directives to her party colleagues about its organisational activities, said sources.

About TSC, she said she and her father had studied at Dhaka University and she has a feeling for it. She said she wants to see the TSC restructured and the worn down dormitories of the university repaired soon.

About the DMCH, Hasina said the hospital is the reminiscence of the Language Movement. She said her government would rebuild the hospital keeping its front intact and it would be a 5,000-bed hospital, said

meeting sources.

About the Public Library and the National Museum, the premier said the two institutions would be digitalised with modern technology for the young generation.

“The Public Library has become old enough and it should have a better shape,” Hasina was quoted by a party leader as saying.

The AL president also asked her party colleagues to get united and give their best to strengthen the party, to work to fulfill the pledges of her party manifesto and finalise its next course of action.

Recalling the memories of former Indian president Pranab Mukherjee, she said Bangladesh has lost a true friend.

Pranab, 84, breathed his last at a hospital in New Delhi on Monday.

At the beginning of the meeting yesterday, the AL general secretary expressed willingness to celebrate the party chief’s birthday on September 28 on a limited scale, but Hasina turned down the proposal saying there would be no celebration on that day.

Untimely, risky

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In the first phase of Covid-19 transmission, the government implemented only a portion of its containment strategy as it experimented with marking and “locking down” zones in two areas in the capital and in several districts.

And the last visible step to contain the coronavirus was seen in July.

In the absence of any strict containment strategy, the country has been witnessing a high number of deaths since last month.

Twenty-two people died from the virus on August 2 and the number was 35 on Tuesday.

The overall positivity rate came down to 20.16 percent from 24.05 percent on August 2. But the rate was still much higher than the global average.

Despite the alarming numbers, the need for controlling the virus apparently became a secondary concern for the government as most of its activities revolved around reviving the battered economy.

HAS THE SITUATION IMPROVED?

According to a report the health ministry sent to the Prime Minister’s Office on Tuesday, a total of 43 Covid-19-dedicated hospitals had

14,847 general beds and 550 ICU ones.

A total of 3,749 Covid-19 patients were in general beds and 300 others in ICU ones on Tuesday, according to the report.

Of the patients at general beds, the highest, 2,306, are from Dhaka division, including 2,079 from Dhaka city alone. In Chattogram division, there were 637 hospitalised patients.

A total of 427 patients got admitted to the hospitals on Tuesday and 516 got released, according to the report.

Prof Nazrul Islam, also a member of the National Technical Advisory Committee on Covid-19, said the government did not take the committee’s suggestions into consideration before making decision to normalise public transport operations.

The government must have taken the decision to ease people’s woes, but the health safety guidelines were ignored.

“So, there is a likelihood for further transmission of the virus, because it is not possible to maintain physical distancing on public transport,” said the former vice chancellor of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University.

The government should have

taken steps while keeping in mind that people tend to violate health safety rules. “The government’s duty does not end with issuing guidelines. It has to monitor whether the guidelines are being followed.”

On the decline in positivity rate, he said, “We have to wait for some more days to know whether the positivity rate has declined actually or it is because of the low number of tests.”

The desired rate of under-5 percent is still a long way to go, he added.

Prof Muzaherul Huq, a former adviser of World Health Organization’s South East Asia region, said Bangladesh is still among the countries where the transmission rate is high.

“Lifting of restrictions from public transport was a risky move,” he told The Daily Star on Monday.

He said the positivity rate in Bangladesh is still above 20 percent.

“Therefore, the health safety guidelines, particularly the physical distancing, applied for public transport should not be relaxed right now,” he said, adding, “If the physical distancing is relaxed in public transport, transmission would definitely rise.”

Muezzin hacked to death by ‘two masked men’ in Meherpur

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Kushtia

A muezzin was hacked to death in Gangni upazila of Meherpur yesterday.

The victim -- Sahir Uddin, 65, of the upazila’s Saheb nagar village -- was a caretaker for Saheb nagar Madrasa. He also worked as a muezzin at the mosque of the madrasa.

Locals said two masked men indiscriminately stabbed Sahir when he was working at the graveyard adjacent to the madrasa.

Obaidur Rahman, officer-in-charge of Gangni Police Station, said the incident happened around 9:30am.

On information, police recovered the body and sent it to Meherpur General Hospital, he further said, adding the old man had wounds on various parts of his body including head, chest, back, arms, and legs.

The reason behind the murder could not be known immediately.

Hindu widows

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revision petition filed by a Jyotindranath Mondal from Haliagram village in Khulna’s Batiaghata upazila challenging a lower court verdict.

On March 7, 2004, Khulna’s joint district judge delivered the judgement in a case filed by Jyotindranath Mondal and said that Gouri Dasi, widow of Jyotindranath’s elder brother Avimannu Mondal, will get right to the agricultural land of her late husband.

The land had been recorded in the name of Gouri after Avimannu died in 1996.

Jyotindranath had filed the case with the court of an assistant judge in Khulna challenging the record of the land in the name of Gouri Dasi in 1996.

After hearing the civil revision filed by Jyotindranath, the HC yesterday delivered the verdict.

Barrister Uzzal Bhowmick, an amicus curiae (friend of the court), told The Daily Star that yesterday’s HC verdict is an epoch-making judgement as it has removed the ambiguity of the laws regarding the rights of Hindu widows to their husbands’ lands.

Md Abdul Zabbar appeared for Jyotindranath while Nafili Islam argued for Gauri Dasi.

Three workers

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Md Saiful Islam, manager of Incontrade Limited, told The Daily Star, “Those killed in the blast worked under the mechanical department of the depot.

“The oil tanker of a long vehicle went off at the mechanical workshop when they unlocked the tanker from the lorry and started welding.”

A three-member committee was formed to investigate the case, he added.

Police handed over the bodies after completing the legal procedure.

Meanwhile, Mohammad Hasan, maternal uncle of one of the dead Muktar, said his nephew was the only wage-earner in the family.

“How could we bear such an incurable loss?” he lamented.

Covid tests

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Some 1,950 people had tested positive for the virus in 24 hours till 8:30am on Tuesday. With 12,209 samples tested, the infection rate was 15.97 percent.

Following the confirmation of the latest cases, the total number of novel coronavirus cases in the country rose to 317,528 yesterday.

This has put Bangladesh in the 14th position among the coronavirus-hit countries in the world in terms of total number of cases.

Of all confirmed Covid-19 patients in Bangladesh, more than 2.1 lakh have recovered till yesterday. The recovery rate is about 66 percent.

The rest of 106,512 patients are now undergoing treatment -- mostly at home. These are called active cases.

Of all active cases, only 3,845 were undergoing treatment in general beds of hospitals and 306 in intensive care units.

There are 14,474 general beds and 550 ICU beds in hospitals designated for Covid-19 patients across the country.

In the 24-hour till 8:30am yesterday, all the 35 people died in hospitals. Twelve of them were females and 23 males.

One of them was aged between 31 and 40, three were aged between 41 and 50, seven between 51 and 60, and the highest 24 were aged over 60, according to the DGHS press release.

In the same 24-hour period, 589 people were placed in institutional isolation. With them, the total number of people under institutional isolation now stands at 19,958.