

JCC meeting later this month

Foreign minister speaks to his Indian counterpart over phone

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Bangladesh and India will hold the foreign ministerial-level sixth Joint Consultative Commission meeting later this month to review the relationship between the two neighbours.

Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen told The Daily Star yesterday after a telephone conversation with Indian External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar.

The meeting comes after an unscheduled Dhaka visit by Indian Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla on August 18-19, which gave rise to a lot of curiosity among the public amid rising tensions between India and China since 20 Indian soldiers were killed in mid-June over border issues at Galwan Valley.

The fifth JCC was held in Delhi in February last year.

"We had a good discussion... talked about holding the Joint Consultative Commission meeting at a convenient time for both of us. We hope to hold the meeting virtually sometime this month," the foreign minister said.

Asked on the issues to be discussed in the meeting, he said the officials concerned would work out and finalise the agenda before the meeting.

"We will raise our major issues and they will do theirs," Momen said.

After the telephone conversation, Indian Foreign Minister S Jaishankar tweeted, "Warm conversation with FM Dr AK Abdul Momen of Bangladesh. Agreed to hold our Joint Consultative

Commission [meeting] very soon.

"Will continue to work closely to reach the ambitious goals set by our leaders."

An official at the Bangladesh High Commission in India said Foreign Secretary Masud Bin Momen was supposed to visit New Delhi preparatory to the JCC meeting, but that is unlikely.

"Indian High Commissioner [to Bangladesh] Riva Ganguly Das had wanted the secretary-level meeting before the JCC, but time would be a factor as she will also leave Dhaka soon," he said.

New Indian High Commissioner to Bangladesh Vikram Doraiswami is likely to arrive in Dhaka soon, although the date is not yet known.

According to foreign ministry officials, the JCC will discuss the whole range of issues concerning the Bangladesh-India relations. These would include Indian Line of Credit, power and energy, connectivity and trade.

The issues of vaccine, air travel bubble (which allows flights only between Bangladesh and India) during the pandemic and the Covid-19 recovery plan may also come up as important aspects in the meeting, an official said.

The rising trend of border killings by Indian Border Security Force, trade gaps, and the Teesta water sharing deal are some of the burning issues for Bangladesh, he said.

Bangladesh also wants an active role of India in the repatriation of Rohingya refugees, the official added.



PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

Three children -- Sabih, Sabina and Mouri -- play with toy kitchen utensils near their home in the capital's Hatirjheel area. With their schools closed for months amid the pandemic, children are finding it difficult to stay indoors all the time, unable to spend time with their friends. The three, however, managed to meet and play yesterday.

Muddled response marks 6 months

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But the government has already lifted all restrictions on public movement and activities, which were imposed to contain the spread of coronavirus, on September 1, despite Covid-19 showing no sign of abatement anytime soon.

On the other hand, it has not yet launched the much-needed antigen-based rapid testing to effectively identify and isolate infected persons. Neither did it give nod to the antibody-based rapid testing.

Against the backdrop, experts said Bangladesh is now heading towards an "unpredictable destination" due to a lack of coordination among those handling the crisis, bureaucratic tangles, corruption, untimely and unscientific steps in tackling the virus outbreak from the very beginning.

"We have done well in tackling Covid-19 outbreak. But there has been a problem in command and control from the beginning," Dr Mushtaq Hussain, consultant at the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR), told The Daily Star.

HANDLING OF COVID-19
The government's response to the coronavirus outbreak has been plagued by wrong decisions, delayed actions, and muddled thinking right from the beginning even though it got three months' time to take preparation.

The authorities trailed behind in taking decisions like closing airports, sending expats to compulsory quarantine, and imposing total shutdown.

And there was a clear lack of coordination among the government organisations everywhere.

Internal feud among different government entities also caused delays for the authorities in preparing the emergency response plan on Covid-19, say experts.

Initially, the IEDCR, the government's disease control agency, was dealing with the pandemic, but then a feud between the high-ups of IEDCR and DGHS delayed the finalisation of the emergency response plan.

Then came the quarantine fiasco. More than 2 lakh people entered

Bangladesh since March when the virus was spreading across the world, prompting countries to shut their airports.

But as the Bangladeshi expatriates started coming in, the government let them come in and go home, without putting them into mandatory quarantine.

On March 23, the government announced a shutdown effective from March 26, but kept the public transport running. As a result, tens of thousands of people left Dhaka in crammed buses and other modes of transports having been exposed to the virus.

The government then extended shutdown in phases, which had a substantial impact on the country's economy.

For the first few months, cases were restricted to Dhaka and cities like Narayanganj and Gazipur. But there was no mechanism to control the exodus of the people leaving Dhaka city centring the Eid-ul-Azha.

This, according to experts, resulted in the spread of the virus across the country. Then came the influx of hundreds of thousands of garment workers to Dhaka with no safety guideline followed.

As the virus raged on, patients were let down as many of them couldn't get themselves tested, nor could they find beds despite the fact that the authorities had extended treatment facilities.

Also, the pandemic exposed the poor medical infrastructure in the country. Doctors and other medical staffs, leading the battle against the invisible enemy, were forced to treat patients without proper safety equipment.

So far, 44 different committees were formed -- mostly on behalf of the DGHS and the health ministry. But only a few are functioning currently and many of the committees never had any meetings.

Among all, the National Technical Advisory Committee (NTAC) made important recommendations from the beginning, but a very few of those were implemented.

On July 26, the health ministry formed a taskforce to coordinate

the activities of the committees and make sure the implementation of recommendations.

"In the beginning, we had no preparation but we said we have. This gave all a wrong message. And we had to pay for this," Prof Nazrul Islam, member of NTAC on Covid-19, told The Daily Star yesterday.

He thinks the transmission is slowing down in the country.

"It is, however, clear that we could not contain the transmission [of the virus]. We cannot be satisfied considering the current situation," said this noted virologist.

Amid various mismanagement, there were allegations of corruption from the beginning of the outbreak.

Healthcare staffers raised questions about the quality of their personal protective equipment (PPE) and N-95 masks, leading to the removal of the then director of Central Medicine Store Depot.

Then came the fake Covid-19 certificate and test report scams involving Regent Hospital and JKG Health Care. The issue of Regent Hospital's fraudulence resulted in the resignation of the DGHS's DG Prof Abul Kalam Azad.

"Corruption is the major problem that hindered government efforts," said Prof Nazrul Islam.

Amid everything so gloomy, there is one thing that gives hope.

The country has a respectable recovery rate. Till yesterday, as many as 2,24,573 people defeated the virus, taking the recovery rate to 68.60 percent, which is one of the best globally.

Although there was no countrywide scientific survey to know the severity of the virus transmission, an IEDCR-icddr survey revealed last month that one in every 10 people in Dhaka city was infected with Covid-19.

The virus' mutation rate was recorded at 12.6 percent in a recent study by Bangladesh Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (BCSIR), nearly double compared to the global average of 7.23 percent.

Experts assume this may be one of the natural reasons why the virus has not been so deadly here. But it might turn worse any time, they warned.

Probe body submits report on Sinha killing

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The probe committee conducting the inquiry into the killing of Major (ret'd) Sinha Md Rashed Khan submitted its report to Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal yesterday, but the ministry is yet to make the committee's findings public as another investigation, following a court order, is ongoing.

Mizanur Rahman, the chief of the four-member committee, handed over the probe report and supplementary documents to the minister at the home ministry yesterday.

"They [probe committee members] have come with a full report before us. We haven't seen it yet. Later, our secretary will analyse it and take necessary actions [on the basis of the report]," the minister said.

As the police are currently conducting another investigation, following a court order, the minister said they will not be able to publicly reveal the findings of the report, adding that they will inform the court about the report and if the court deems it necessary, can formally collect it from the ministry.

On July 31, the ex-army major was shot dead by police at Shamlapur checkpoint on Marine Drive in Teknaf, triggering a firestorm of criticism across the country.

Several police officials, including the then officer-in-charge of Teknaf Police Station Pradeep Kumar Das and sub-inspector Liaqat Ali, who shot Sinha, were arrested and are now facing interrogation.

The probe committee, formed by the home ministry on August 2, was supposed to give its report within seven working days, but had its deadline extended three times.

While submitting the probe report, Mizanur Rahman, also an additional divisional commissioner of Chattogram, said the committee members have spoken to 68 people related to the killing incident and recorded their statements.

"We have analysed [their statements and relevant facts] to find out the source and reason [of the killing] and gave recommendations [to stop recurrence of such incidents]," he said.

Without revealing the specific contents of the report, he also said, "This incident will not diminish the role of our police force in maintaining law and order in the country."

Sources said the committee placed 13 such recommendations in its 80-page main probe report, which includes photos and statements of the people they spoke with.

Earlier, The Daily Star reported that the committee was unable to obtain the call recordings of around 30 people related to the incident, and would mention this as a "limitation" of the investigation when submitting its findings to the home ministry.

Despite having on hand the call lists of people, including Pradeep and Liaqat, the committee was unable to obtain the call recordings of those 30 people from the authorities concerned.

The other members of the committee are Shahjahan Ali, additional district magistrate of Cox's Bazar; Lt Col SM Sazzad Hossain, representative of the armed forces division of Bangladesh Army; and Zakir Hossain Khan, additional deputy inspector general of Chattogram range.

Replying to another question yesterday, the home minister said they would work so that such unfortunate incidents do not recur.

He said the army and police maintain a cordial relationship and both forces are working for the country.

When his attention was drawn to a video clip which has been doing the rounds on social media, showing Pradeep and Liaqat telling someone that they had been tortured in remand, the minister said they do not care about such videos, they work on fact-based news.

Meanwhile, two more murder cases were filed against Pradeep and a few others including policemen with a court in Cox's Bazar yesterday.

ATTACK ON UNO

Two more detained for quizzing

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Dinajpur

Police of Ghoraghat detained the domestic help of Wahida Khanam, UNO of Dinajpur's Ghoraghat upazila, on Sunday night for interrogation, said police.

Jobaida Begum, 37, is the wife of Mahabub Hossain of the upazila's Chawkramunia village.

Police detained her from her home late on Sunday night.

Police sources said she is being interrogated after she was brought to the office of the SP in Dinajpur town yesterday afternoon. Another woman named Orsoba Hembram, 38, the house cleaner at Wahida's residence, was also detained by police.

From Saturday night to Sunday night, police held at least eight persons from different places in Ghoraghat upazila. They are being interrogated, said a police official.

Police have so far arrested three people in connection with the attack on UNO Wahida and her father in the early hours of September 2 at her official residence.

They are Asadul Haque, Nabirul Islam and Santu Das. They have been placed on seven days' remand.

He sang for freedom

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following a namaz-e-janaza after the Asr prayer.

He left behind his wife, a son and a daughter, and a host of relatives and well-wishers to mourn his death.

Before burial, his body was taken to the Liberation War Museum premises where people from all walks of life paid tributes to him.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, ministers, and distinguished personalities, expressed deep shock and sorrow at the demise of Tariq.

In her message, the PM recalled the contribution of valiant freedom fighter Tariq in upholding the spirit of the Liberation War.

His compatriots said he relentlessly upheld the spirit of the liberation war and democracy and worked for establishing the rights of ethnic and religious minorities.

In 1994, Tariq Ali, along with several other freedom fighters, decided to set up a museum on the Liberation War.

The Liberation War Museum opened in 1996 in Dhaka's Segunbagicha. He later coordinated the relocation of the museum to the Agargaon area.

Over the years, Tariq and others developed an impressive collection of documents, official letters, and photographs relating to the war.

In a write-up for The Daily Star, Tariq mentioned, "The museum has played a very important role in the trial of those charged with crimes against humanity by the International Crimes Tribunal, 1973 by providing documents related to the war."

During the Liberation War, Tariq, as a

member of cultural troupe Bangladesh Mukti Sangrami Shilpi Sangstha, used to travel to refugee camps and different parts of free areas, performing patriotic songs to inspire freedom fighters and people with the spirit of war, said Sarwar.

"He [Tariq] was the main character of 'Muktir Gaan'," Sarwar said.

"Muktir Gaan" is an acclaimed feature-length documentary film on the Liberation War, directed by the late Tareque Masud and Catherine Masud.

Tariq, an engineer by profession, was devoted to music. He was a student of Bulbul Lailitakala Academy. He was also an executive committee member of Chhayanut and Rabindra Sangeet Sammilan Parishad, said Sarwar.

Mofidul Hoque, another trustee of the Liberation War Museum, said Tariq fought the Liberation War through his music.

"Tariq Ali was a champion activist for making Bangladesh a non-communal and Liberation War-spirited country. He relentlessly worked towards making Bangladesh a non-communal country. It was his lifelong passion and commitment," he said.

Tariq, a pivotal figure in Sammilito Samajik Andolan in 1997, was made president of the organisation in 2018.

Sammilito Samajik Andolan General Secretary Saleh Ahmed said, he was a "towering figure" and that with his death, the country lost an open-minded and humble social and cultural activist.

Road Transport and Bridges Minister Obaidul Quader, and Liberation War Affairs Minister AKM Mozammel Haque, among others, expressed deep shock at the demise of Tariq.

Halder wants to return home

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embezzled crores of taka are People's Leasing and Financial Services, FAS Finance and Investment, and Bangladesh Industrial Finance Company.

In an investigation, the central bank found that Tk 1,596 crore was transferred from ILFSL in violation of the rules through 48 accounts of various organisations related to the directors and shareholders of the firm, according to BB officials.

Halder came under the limelight during the anti-casino drives last year. The ACC opened investigation into the involvement of 43 people, including Halder, in the illegal casino business.

The government issued a travel ban on him on October 3 last year. But he managed to flee the country.

The ACC on January 8 this year filed

a case against Halder on charges of illegally amassing wealth worth Tk 275 crore.

Following a petition filed by two depositors, the HC on January 21 directed the BB and all private banks to freeze the accounts of Halder, his five relatives, Bank Asia's former managing director Erfanuddin Ahmed and Halder's aide Uzzal Kumar Nondi for allegedly misappropriating funds.

The HC ordered the government to seize the passports of 20 people, including Halder, his wife Susmita Saha and his brother Prithvi Kumar Halder.

The court also directed the authorities not to allow transfer of any of their movable and immovable properties, including stock, cash and cars, to any persons or entities until the disposal of the case.

Fire lasted just seconds

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comes out of gas explosions", the report said.

There is no evidence suggesting that any of the six units of air conditioners at the mosque had exploded.

The report further notes that the victims and the people in the vicinity had not heard any explosion or loud noise which could be an indication of an exploding AC.

"The mosque turned into a gas chamber, because of the leaky pipe," bomb disposal unit In-charge Rahmatullah Chowdhury told The Daily Star yesterday.

"When the air conditions were turned on after a power cut, sparks from the circuit board ignited the gas and resulted in the tragedy," he added.

Rahmatullah said his unit will undertake shadow investigation of any incident of similar nature that might happen in the future. This would help identify those responsible.

The unit used to give opinions in investigations of arson, bomb attacks and accidental blasts.

A ten-member team has already been formed by the unit to investigate such incidents and fact-check claims made by others.

They will also check building-layout, ventilation, electric lines, and gas connections to specifically identify those responsible for such occurrences and then bring them to book, officers said.

The team of bomb disposal officers has contacted expert teams in the UK who are likely to visit Bangladesh after the Covid-19 pandemic, added the officials.

The unit In-charge Rahmatullah said they are working to make a guideline and suggestions that would help avert such accidents in the future.

Friday night's tragedy happened at Pashchim Talla Baitus Salam Masjid around 8:45pm.

Two people injured in the fire died yesterday at Sheikh Hasina National Institute of Burn and Plastic Surgery in the capital, raising the death toll to 27. They are Monir Farazi, 30, and Md Imran, 30, said Dr Samanta Lal Sen, coordinator of the institute.

The institute for the first time released a victim yesterday.

Md Mamun, 30, had suffered 12 percent burns, said Resident Surgeon Partha Shankar Pal.

"He had not suffered respiratory burns. We asked him to visit again after a week," he added.

Titas finds leaky gas pipes

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He again alleged yesterday that the mosque management committee had informed Titas officials weeks ago about possible leaks in the gas pipes, but the officials demanded Tk 50,000 for the repair work.

But the mosque committee member, who went to the Titas office, is now fighting for his life at the Sheikh Hasina National Institute of Burn and Plastic Surgery.

Asked about it, Titas official Mofizul said, "This is absurd. They never applied to us [for the repair work]."

After Friday night's fire, many people thought one of the air conditioners at the mosque had exploded.

MOSQUE MANAGEMENT ALSO BLAMED

Ziaul Haq, a resident of the area, said the building had an illegal electricity connection.

Mosque management committee president Gafur admitted, "Yes it was illegal."

But that line was cut after the last Ramadan, he added.

The mosque management committee members knew for at least over a month that there were leaky gas pipes, because they saw constant bubbling in the rainwater and often smelt gas in the air inside the mosque.

People of the neighbourhood said the committee should have pressed Titas officials harder.

Grocery store keeper Bazlur Rahman said, "Such matters were handled by the committee secretary. There is

a rift between the secretary and the president. If they worked together, the situation would have been different."

The development of the mosque used to be done with the assistance of people, and "the issue of a gas leakage is nothing big".

People said the 51-member management committee has been running the mosque for the last six years.

The mosque is a three-storey building on a 10-feet wide street. The ground floor still bears the marks from Friday's inferno. But the first floor is unscathed.

Titas officials yesterday deployed workers to dig the front and sides of the mosque to locate the pipes.

Firefighters and police have cordoned off the place and the gas connection to the neighbourhood had been suspended after the fire.

People of the highly congested neighbourhood of mostly working-class people are mourning the loss of lives and are also worried about legal harassment over illegal utility connections.

The mosque was built on eight decimals of land which was given by Mohammad Sardar and his brother Samsuddin Sardar and two others.

The foundation of the four-storey building was laid in 1991.

Asked about the building's design, 60-year-old Samsuddin said, "I don't know where the documents are. What I can recall is that the mosque was designed by an engineer."

Rice theft video goes viral

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Patuakhali

It is a way of stealing that many of you probably have never heard of. The whole process is quite simple -- insert a plastic pipe into a sack of rice and wait until a certain amount leaks out through it.

Using this method, a group of perpetrators led by Rabindranath Biswas, officer-in-charge of four food warehouses in Barguna's Amtali upazila, had allegedly been stealing rice from the government warehouses for a long time.

They used to steal three to four kilograms of rice from every 50kg sacks.

Nobody suspected anything in this regard until a video of stealing rice went viral on social media on Thursday night.

Sarwar Mahmud, director-general of the food department, came across the video and paid a surprise visit to one of the food warehouses in Amtali on Friday and formed a three-member committee, headed by Patuakhali District Food Controller Liaquat Hossain, to investigate the incident.

Four food warehouses in Amtali have been sealed to carry out a fair probe. The probe report will be submitted within this week.

Contacted, Rabindranath Biswas claimed that the video that went viral was not recorded in his warehouse.

He claimed that a vested quarter was trying to frame him in a conspiracy.

Sarwar said if the investigation proves the theft of rice, lawful action will be taken against those involved.