

Discard 'martial law'

FROM PAGE 1

The prime minister said this while addressing a virtual meeting from her official Gono Bhaban residence this morning.

Sheikh Hasina said the armed forces were mostly affected due to the coups that took place after the August 15, 1975 carnage.

She reiterated her government's goal to further modernise the armed forces and make it time-befitting.

"Our armed forces, where our family members were honourable members, are the symbol of our independence and sovereignty... our aim is to make it more modern and time-befitting and we're working to attain this goal," she said.

In this connection, the prime minister spelled out various steps her government is taking to make the armed forces better equipped to safeguard the country's hard-earned independence and sovereignty.

PM's Security Adviser Major General (ret'd) Tarique Ahmed Siddique; Principal Secretary to PM, Dr Ahmad Kaikaus; Principal Staff Officer of the Armed Forces Division, Lieutenant General Mahfuzur Rahman; and PM's Press Secretary Ihsanul Karim were present at Gono Bhaban.

Chief of Army Staff General Aziz Ahmed was connected to the function from army headquarters, Chief of Naval Staff Admiral Mohammad Shaheen Iqbal was connected from Navy headquarters and Chief of Air Staff Air Chief Marshal Masihuzzaman Serniabat got connected from the Air Force headquarters.

Paying tribute to Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the prime minister said immediately after independence Bangabandhu had taken steps to establish modern and

time-befitting armed forces alongside rebuilding the war-ravaged country.

She said her government has adopted the Forces Goal-2030 on the basis of Bangabandhu's defence policy. The prime minister said her government after assuming office in 1996 established various military establishments including the NDC War College and purchased modern arms and ammunition for the three armed forces in line with Bangabandhu's footsteps.

"After coming to power for the second time, we took steps so that the armed forces are capable on all sides. We procured army infantry gadget including modern helicopters to increase army's operational capacity," she said.

Sheikh Hasina said her government first collected a modern frigate for the navy, as well as submarines and military helicopter. "We've turned the navy into a tri-dimensional force," she said.

Speaking on the development of the air force, Sheikh Hasina said her government first brought the MiG-29 fighter planes into the air force.

The premier also pointed out that her government always attaches priority to training. On digitisation of the armed forces, Sheikh Hasina said the government set up Army IT Support Organisation and Computer War Games Centre.

While talking about the country's development, Sheikh Hasina requested all concerned to suspend unnecessary and unimportant costs at this moment and keep in mind the amount of money that can be collected amid the coronavirus pandemic.

"We will only focus on the urgently needed expenditure and will suspend less important costs... We will cover those expenses once good days return," she said.



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 indoor all the time, unable to spend time with their friends. The three, however, managed to meet and play yesterday.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

He sang for freedom

FROM PAGE 1

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 Argaagana 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, as a member of a cultural troupe, Bangladesh Mukti

Shangrami Shilpi Shangtha, Tariq 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 Sammilon Parishad, said Sarwar.

Mofidul Hoque, another trustee of 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 and Awami League General Secretary Obaidul Quader, and Liberation War Affairs Minister AKM Mozammel Haque, among others, expressed deep shock at the demise of Tariq.

PK Halder wants to return home

FROM PAGE 1

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 Pritish 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

FROM PAGE 1

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.

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.

Muddled response marks 6 months

FROM PAGE 1

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 staffs 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,b 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 have 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 Hembra, 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.

Titas finds leaky gas pipes

FROM PAGE 1

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."

Putin, Saudi king discuss joint vaccine production: Kremlin

AFP, Moscow

Saudi King Salman and Russian President Vladimir Putin yesterday discussed the possible joint production of a Russian coronavirus vaccine, the Kremlin said.

In early August, Russia said it had developed the world's first vaccine against the virus and claimed that more than a billion doses had been pre-ordered by 20 countries, including Saudi Arabia.

Russia's sovereign wealth fund has provided much of the financing, and it has identified Saudi Arabia as one of the countries interested in the vaccine.

Putin and Salman discussed "collective efforts aimed at overcoming the negative impact of the coronavirus pandemic," a Kremlin statement said, while noting the call had come at the Saudi king's initiative.

"Particular attention was paid to the perspective of joint production of a vaccine that was developed by Russia," the statement added.

It also said that Russia and Saudi Arabia, two major producers of crude oil, would continue to "pursue close coordination" to ensure stable oil prices.

Crude prices have fallen over the past week as traders consider the outlook for long-term demand owing to fallout from the virus pandemic.