

US wants Bangladesh to be its key Indo-Pacific partner

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

The US wants Bangladesh to be its key Indo-Pacific partner, considering it a development success story that also serves as a bridge for commerce and an anchor for regional stability, US officials have said.

"The United States and Bangladesh have a long, shared history of cooperation, and we continue to support a tolerant, democratic Bangladesh that serves as a bridge for commerce and an anchor for stability and prosperity in the region," said Laura Stone, US deputy assistant secretary of state at the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs.

She said Bangladesh is strategically located at a crossroads between South and Southeast Asia, and plays an important role in the US Indo-Pacific vision. The country also has a good workforce, manufacture base and holds enormous potential for development.

"With a dynamic and, as you know, fast-growing economy in normal times, Bangladesh is a development success story. Future success will be fuelled by deepening its democratic institutions and governing structures," Stone said at a special virtual press briefing on Tuesday night.

JoAnne Wagner, deputy chief of mission, US Embassy in Dhaka, also spoke at the briefing where they stressed that Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) principles are based on free navigation and trade, good governance, rule of law, transparency, and not to counter the Chinese-led Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

They spoke of huge investment opportunities in the Indo-Pacific region, particularly Bangladesh, in energy, infrastructure, supply chain and digital economy.

Stone said even during the pandemic, the US-Bangladesh relationship is growing, noting that US clothing giant Hanes is buying PPEs manufactured by Bangladeshi company Beximco.

Stating that the coronavirus pandemic has reinforced the common interest in working together with

Bangladesh and other partners for economic recovery, she said this is going to be a big focus as they go forward with Bangladesh.

The US is also ready to support the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and Bangladesh in South Asia's regional integration and connectivity, she said.

Stone said the Asian Development Bank estimates that the Indo-Pacific region is going to need 26 trillion USD investment by 2030 in order to properly and appropriately develop its infrastructure, but no one country can provide such funding. So, the private sector has to play a very key role in that.

"Through the IPS, we are focused on helping the US private sector do what it does best, and that is sparking innovation, sparking growth, and sparking long-lasting prosperity. And here in Bangladesh we've launched a number of initiatives to accelerate private investment to help improve market access and open the investment environment."

However, JoAnne Wagner said when companies see weak institutions, corruption or poor human rights conditions, they look elsewhere. Therefore, they are working very closely with Bangladesh to promote worker safety, legal aid organisations and vulnerable groups to improve legal services.

Asked how regional development and stability is possible without addressing the Rohingya crisis, Stone said the US is acutely aware of the need for a long-term, durable, sustainable solution to the crisis.

"The current situation is not one that can be allowed to perpetuate indefinitely. And so we are in communication with the governments involved to push forward a long-term, sustainable solution that does maintain the basic principles of the humanitarian relief, but also the need for a voluntary and safe return of the Rohingyas to their place of origin."

Collusion still key in winning

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was "unsatisfactory" in terms of their institutional capacity, dealing with e-GP process, e-GP Management, and ensuring transparency, accountability and effectiveness, said the report.

Particularly, the situation was "worrisome" with regards to dealing with e-GP management and ensuring transparency, accountability and effectiveness, it said.

The e-GP portal of Central Procurement Technical Unit (CPTU) was launched on June 2, 2011 to ensure transparency and efficiency in public procurement.

As many as 47 ministries, 27 divisions, 1,362 public agencies, and 61,417 tender bidders have got registered under the e-GP system as of April last year, said TIB.

TIB Executive Director Iftekharuzzaman said the goal of introducing e-GP could have been achieved effectively if the political leaders stayed away from getting involved in public procurement.

The key challenge to implementing e-GP in the country is use of political influence and the problem needs to be addressed politically, he told the press conference.

Besides, there is collusion between local influential people and also there is a kind of syndicate, added Iftekharuzzaman.

The report said no officials of the procuring entities disclosed information on their assets to their high ups despite a law stipulates that they have to submit statements of assets to their senior officials in every five years.

The TIB study found that works of public procurement of the four government institutions were under control of local political leaders.

In some areas, political leaders, especially local lawmakers, decide who will submit tenders for a particular project, the report said.

It states that officials at some procurement offices take bribes for awarding contracts.

The study found collusion between contractors, political leaders and officials of offices concerned in some areas, selling or subcontracting contracts illegally, and securing contracts by using others' certificates and licences.

Also, contractors were forced to pay extra money to political leaders in project areas, said the report.

It said there were some limitations in

21 more die

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of a total of 13,360 tests in the same 24 hours, while the overall positivity rate stands at 19.36 percent.

With the new cases, the total number of confirmed cases rose to 3,42,671 -- the 15th highest number of confirmed cases in the world, according to the reference website worldometers.info.

As 2,375 people were added to the recovery list in those 24 hours, the total number of recoveries rose to 2,47,969.

This is more than 72 percent of all confirmed cases, according to the DGHS.

Five of the dead yesterday were female and 16 were male. One of them died at home while the other died in different hospitals.

The ages of the dead ranged from 21 to over 60, with more than half of them being older end of the scale, according to the DGHS.

Of the dead, 10 were from Dhaka, four from Khulna, five from Chattogram and one each from from Sylhet and Rajshahi divisions.

As of yesterday noon, 3,110 Covid-19 patients were undergoing treatment in general wards and 301 were in ICUs of Covid-19 designated hospitals across the country.

Bangladesh economy

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step back. We have placed our budget to keep our economy moving," she said.

The premier was addressing a meeting of the Awami League presidium members at the Gono Bhaban yesterday.

Hasina said Bangladeshi expatriates were facing some difficulties due to the Covid-19 and some of them had to return home.

She said many expressed fear that inflow of remittances would experience a setback during the pandemic, but it showed the opposite trend.

"Our remittance inflow has increased. It's now \$39.4 billion. We are giving two percent special incentive for sending remittance...and our foreign currency reserve is now in a good shape as well."

In the national budget, Hasina said, the government fixed its deficit at 6 percent. In the last few years, the budget deficit was fixed at five percent. "We would have made it 10 percent had it been needed. But it was not required"

From the very beginning of this crisis, the government wanted to keep the

country's economy moving facing all the challenges, the PM said, adding that the government also declared stimulus packages for keeping the trade and commerce operative on a limited scale.

Apart from the Covid-19 pandemic, the government has to face some other natural calamities, she said. "We have been able to face these challenges due to some timely and effective measures."

Hasina, also the Awami League president, said efforts of the government and her party are aimed at serving the people of the country.

She thanked the leaders and activists of the AL, Jubo League, Chhatra League and Krishak League, government officials and members of law enforcement agencies for their all-out efforts for helping people during this crisis period.

About suspending all celebration programmes marking the birth centenary of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the premier said the safety and lives of people come first and that is why the government is holding events virtually.



Teachers of non-government primary schools demonstrating in front of the Jatiya Press Club in the capital yesterday, demanding that every primary school in the country be nationalised.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

Walled in by uncertainties

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educational institutions. The long closure has led to the cancellation of exams and left academic calendars in disarray.

Probably most importantly, the closure drastically changed the daily lives of thousands of students. It also put considerable psychological effect on them.

Azizur Rahman, an honorary professor at Dhaka University's psychology department, said, "Due to the closure, many of the students are feeling suffocated, which is stressing them out."

"These students have become restless, uncontrollable, reactive and cannot concentrate on anything... This will negatively affect their mental and physical development," he said, adding that many of these children might not be able to forget the miserable memories.

Parents are also faced with the challenge of having to take care of the children at home all the time and manage their work.

LOSS OF LEARNING

School is not just for learning lessons, it is a source of social activities and human interaction, said educationists.

The learning gap will have long-term effects on children's future education, they added.

When schools are closed, many children and youth miss out on social contact that is essential to learning and development, according to UNESCO.

Despite the shutdown, schooling hasn't stopped completely. The school authorities, teachers and parents are working hard to impart lessons online, but the efforts are not likely to provide anything close to the quality of education delivered in classrooms, experts said.

The students in urban areas have access to learning through the internet, but the digital divide has so far proved to be a great disadvantage for the underprivileged learners as they face the prospect of dropping out, they added.

The annual school contact hours

in Bangladesh has mostly been lower than the global average. But the shutdown has brought the contact hours further down.

Primary students lost between 320 and 680 school contact hours in the last six months and learning time at secondary schools also came down as they lost 109 days of class activities.

The international annual average of school contact hours is around 1,000.

"The students are being subjected to a learning gap as the government efforts to cover the loss through TV and internet falls short of meeting the need," said Prof Siddiqui Rahman, former director of the Institute of Education and Research at DU.

"These interim efforts are not likely to provide the quality of education that's delivered in classrooms. The students can hardly ask questions or participate in the classes."

While the precise learning losses are not known yet, existing research findings suggest that the students in grades 1-12 affected by the closures might expect about 3 percent lower income over their entire lifetimes, according to study by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

For nations, the lower long-term growth related to such losses might yield an average of 1.5 percent lower annual GDP for the century, said the study.

As of today, students of grade I and II of double-shift primary schools lost around 325 school contact hours due to the shutdown, according to data from the Directorate of Primary Education (DPE).

Students of grade III, IV and V of the same types of schools lost 362 contact hours.

The secondary students are supposed to attend classes on about 228 days a year.

But many secondary institutions are used as centres for public examinations. Students of these institutions lose classroom learning in about 47 days as a result, said Belal Hossain, director of Directorate of

Secondary and Higher Education.

"We cannot exactly say how many contact hours a secondary student lost. But they attend schools for five hours a day," he said.

Teachers said that on an average, a student attends five to six classes a day. Duration of each class is 50 minutes. So, the students' learning time at school is just over 4 hours a day.

After the school closure, the government started TV education through Sangsad TV for secondary and primary students.

But according to the government's Covid-19 Response Plan for the Education Sector, only 44 percent of the children aged between 5 and 11 in rural areas have a TV at home. In urban areas, it is 75 percent.

"This interim arrangement only partially fulfills the objective as many underprivileged and poor people do not have access to a TV and internet," said Prof Siddiqui Rahman.

Senior Secretary Akram-Al-Hossain of primary and mass education ministry said various steps have been taken to lessen the learning gap.

The ministry will study 20,000 schools to assess how much learning gap was created. "We will have a special plan to cover the gaps," he added.

DSHE Director General Prof Md Syed Golam Faruk said students who do not have access to digital devices and internet connections will suffer more losses.

The government is uploading all digital content at a platform so that students can take a look whenever they need, he said.

Education of university students across the country has also been affected due to the pandemic.

Many students are fearing session jams if the situation continues for a few more months.

The pandemic also left many teachers with reduced or no income. A number of schools, including the unregistered kindergartens, have faced closure, forcing many teachers to move to other professions.

tests one by one.

"The tests will start on September 18 and will continue one after another. At first, there will be exams with fewer candidates and then tests for more candidates," he told The Daily Star.

He said they want to take all the recruitment tests for nearly 5,000 posts this year.

"Therefore, the candidates will get jobs and the manpower crisis of the banks will also be resolved," Arif Hossain noted.

Besides, they have also asked for the number of new vacancies in all state-owned banks in 2019.

"Once we get it, new circulars will be issued."

'A HUGE TASK'

Jobs recruited through the BCS exams are the first choice of youths. Since various non-cadre posts are also filled up from the waiting list of a BCS exam, interest for the civil service is increasing day by day.

For the 41st BCS examinations, a record number of 4.75 lakh applied after the PSC issued the circular of this BCS on November 26 last year.

PSC Chairman Mohammad Sadiq said hundreds of educational institutions in eight divisions will be required to hold the BCS exams and accommodate this volume of candidates.

"This is a huge task," he told The Daily Star.

Since educational institutions are closed, it is not possible to take the BCS exams unless those are opened and adequate preparation is taken, he said.

The PSC Chairman also said a few exams for non-cadre posts have been started. Besides, the viva-voce for different exams is also taking place on a small scale.

The writer is a freelance journalist.

Govt insists stock

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banker, said he usually buys three kgs for his family. "Since the price is shooting up. I've bought 5-kg before it rises further," he added.

About government's claim of enough stock, he said, "They had said many things last year too but their promises could not stop the market from getting worse."

YEARLY ONION PRODUCTION AND DEMAND

Officials said the total yearly demand for onion in Bangladesh is 25 lakh tonnes and the country's production was 25.57 lakh tonnes last year.

However, since onion is perishable, some 25 percent gets damaged. So, the actual consumable quantity of onion is 19.11 lakh tonnes in the country, they said, adding that the deficit of more than six lakh tonnes is imported to meet the demand. Of the deficit quantity, 90 percent is imported from India, they added.

An official of the Department of Agriculture Extension said last year about 6.45 lakh tonnes of onion were produced in Pabna. "Over 70,000 tonnes are now in stock," he said, adding that farmers have already started cultivating onion bulbs.

"It will hit market about two months later. I don't think there will be any shortage," he said.

In July and August this year, some 1.84 lakh tonnes of onion were imported and there was local stock in major onion growing areas like Faridpur, Pabna, Naogaon and Rajshahi.

Seasonal businessmen are trying to take advantage of the situation, which has created the problem, said Narayan Saha, a wholesaler of Shyambazar. He suggested the authorities monitor the stock at root level.

At a press conference in secretariat yesterday, Commerce Minister Tipu Munshi claimed that the current stock of onion in the markets is five lakh tonnes. So, there should not be any crisis now, the minister said.

Saying that his ministry was not aware about the sudden halt of onion import from India, he once again said there is nothing to be panicked about because of an adequate stock and supply of onions in the local markets.

"We will import onions from alternative markets like Turkey and Egypt like last year to reduce the prices," the minister told the journalists.

"Nevertheless, I talked with Indian High Commissioner in Bangladesh Riva Ganguly Das about the sudden suspension of onion export by India. The Indian High Commissioner assured me that a good number of onion-laden trucks will enter Bangladesh within a day or two," Munshi said at a jam-packed room of journalists while facing a barrage of questions from newsmen.

He suggested the consumers be patient for a month so that an adequate quantity of onion is imported to be sold in the domestic markets.

This year too, some domestic business conglomerates like City Group, Meghna Group and S Alam Group might also be engaged in importing onion in a hurried manner to ensure quick supply in the markets.

The Department of National Consumers Right Protection has fined 107 business to the tune of nearly Tk 10 lakh on Tuesday as they were selling onions at higher prices.

"We can punish the traders. But it is also true that if we go tough on them, they will make the onions vanish from the markets," the commerce minister said.

The state-owned Trading Corporation of Bangladesh has already opened a Letter of Credit to import a few hundred tonnes of onion from alternative countries. Munshi also said the TCB will import one lakh tonnes of onion to address the crisis up to March next year.

The TCB will import the onion through direct purchasing method because the conventional tendering method takes a lot of time. Last year, the TCB imported nearly 12,000 tonnes of onion on its own, he said adding that this year TCB has been empowered to import greater quantities of onion for the local markets. The ministry will also use e-commerce platforms to sell 12,000 tonnes of onion, he said.

Replying to a question, Munshi said Bangladesh asked the Indian government about why onion export to Bangladesh was stopped all of a sudden.

In another development, Finance Minister Mustafa Kamal yesterday said the government was considering a proposal on lowering tax on onion import.

He made the comment while talking to reporters after a meeting of National Purchase Committee.

Recently, the commerce ministry sent a proposal on lifting taxes on onion import to the finance ministry.

PREVIOUS DISCUSSIONS UNDERMINED

India's sudden ban on onion exports has undermined the earlier discussions regarding such restrictions over essential food items, Dhaka said in a letter to Delhi on Tuesday, as price of the spice skyrocketed immediately after Delhi's announcement a day before.

"The latest abrupt announcement of the government of India on September 14, 2020 undermines the discussion that took place in 2019 and 2020 between the two friendly countries on the matter and the understanding shared," said the letter.

The letter issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressed deep concern at the sudden announcement of the amendment in India's export policy of onion that directly impact the supply chain of the essential food items in Bangladesh market.

It referred the India-Bangladesh commerce secretary level meeting in January this year where the Bangladesh side requested the Indian side to consider not imposing export restrictions on essential food items required by Bangladesh.

The letter also said in case of any event that necessitated such restrictions, India was requested to inform the Bangladesh side ahead of time.

The matter was also raised by Honourable Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina of Bangladesh during the VVIP visit in October 2019, wherein the Bangladesh side requested Indian side to inform in advance about such measures being taken," said the foreign ministry letter.