

AQMP bogged in bureaucracy

Recruitment for US\$ 4.75m project still not done

SHEHAB AHMED

There has been very little progress in the much-vaunted Air Quality Monitoring Project (AQMP) five months on since its launch late last year, thanks to bureaucratic tangles.

The Department of Environment (DoE), watchdog of the Ministry of Environment and Forest, has not yet completed recruitment for the US\$ 4.75 million project, financed by the World Bank. The recruitment process began a month before the AQMP was formally launched in last November.

Earlier, slow-go preparation of project pro forma delayed signing of the final contract with the World Bank by a year. It was preceded by a wrangle over a lucrative contract for installation of 20 stations in the capital to monitor air quality. Besides, charges of nepotism in appointment of people at key positions, termination and transfers of mid-level officials too had contributed to the delay, according to sources.

"I give you an example on how chaotic the situation at the DoE is these days. Last week, a World Bank team from Washington didn't even get an appointment with DoE officials, including the Director General," said a WB official on condition of anonymity.

Against such a backdrop, the AQMP is struggling to take off and the fate of key issues like phasing out of two-stroke auto-rickshaws by the year 2003 remains a far cry.

Besides, the DoE is also not getting backup support from organisations like the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA), the Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP), etc.

A DOE official admitted that actions to have the city's air clean have still remains on the drawing board.

"We cannot take any decisive measure against polluters in time. For example, the Environment Court is

yet to become functional although the parliament passed necessary legislation early last year to set up the court at all the divisional headquarters," he said.

The idea behind the environment court was to speed up the legal process against polluters. But these are yet to be set up for reasons best known to the high-ups in the establishment, environment and law ministries.

Apart from legal failures, much of the problem boils down to lack of co-ordination between the DoE, BRTA and DMP.

The BRTA are the sole authority for issuing fitness certificates to vehicles. However, it is alleged that the certificate can be easily obtained by bribing inspectors.

The police, for their part, are doing the same with officers and constables regularly setting free defective automobiles after receiving bribe.

Although petrol have been freed from the dreaded lead from July last year, there has been little relief for the people from carbon and sulphur which has kept oozing out from the petrol driven auto-rickshaws and other automobiles.

Meanwhile, a new phenomenon has developed recently which is sure to further worsen the air pollution level. To counter frequent load-shedding, apartments, clinics, hospitals, business houses, factories, posh restaurants, etc are using generators.

Violating the rules, exhaust pipes of these machines, which belch out smoke laden with sulphur from diesel fuel, are often kept very low and close to the ground.

No one knows for sure how long it will take for the AQMP to really start delivering fruit.

It is anybody's guess on when Dhaka's 65,000-strong fleet of air polluting auto-rickshaws - considered to be the main reason behind the terrible contamination - would be phased out, low-sulphur diesel would be introduced or BRTA tighten its control over the fitness of vehicles.

BNP may take action against wayward leaders

Secret relations with Ershad, anti-party activities, 'arrogant' remarks irk Khaleda

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

BNP is likely to take action against some of its leaders for carrying out anti-party activities, maintaining relations with Jatiya Party chief HM Ershad and making "arrogant" statements and remarks against the party leadership.

Party sources said a section of BNP leaders, who either held position in Ershad's cabinet during his nine-year dictatorial rule or were rewarded by him, were secretly keeping in touch with him although the deposed President quit the BNP-led opposition alliance nearly a month ago.

They said the party leadership had learnt from reliable sources that a few leaders known to be hardliners had met Ershad secretly after he

was released from jail.

After meeting Ershad, according to the BNP insiders, the leaders engaged in anti-party activities and disseminated misleading information among the party men. Recently, they published posters in the name of "Tareque Zia Supporters Group" and distributed leaflets that apparently confused the party leaders and activists.

Convinced that the hardliners published the posters and leaflets, BNP leaders and activists demanded that these people be removed immediately.

Meanwhile, a speech delivered by party MP Salahuddin Qader Chowdhury at a discussion at Jatiya Press Club on Sunday has drawn flak from the rank and file of BNP and its different front organisations.

The leaders said that Chowdhury had attacked Khaleda, her son Tareque Rahman and Secretary General Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan in uncivilised language.

They said the party chief had read Chowdhury's remarks published in the press on Monday on her way to Sylhet and reacted sharply. Leaders who accompanied her said that she had told them that there was no confusion left in her mind about leaders like Chowdhury. Sources said Khaleda would sit with her policymakers in a couple of days and might take disciplinary action against such leaders.

They said there was a strong demand for immediate punitive action against Salahuddin Qader Chowdhury and some others who

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A musical evening was organised by the Bangladesh Rabindra Sangeet Shilpi Sangstha at the Bangladesh Shishu Academy yesterday.

No police at ZIA

Sequel to dispute with CAAB

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Police was withdrawn from the Zia International Airport (ZIA) yesterday following their dispute with the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh (CAAB).

Airport Sources said CAAB yesterday morning cut off gas, water and electricity to the police camp adjacent to ZIA as it was not removed despite repeated requests by the airport authorities.

CAAB had asked the police to take their camp elsewhere due to renovation and extension of the terminal building. The camp housed 45 police constables under a sub-inspector.

Cantonment thana informed the Home Ministry about the situation in their airport based sub-camp and withdrew it later in the afternoon.

Duty officer of Cantonment thana confirmed the matter. The OC was however not available for comment.

Airport chief security officer Nurul Islam Majumdar told The Daily Star last night that they had repeatedly requested the police to move the camp which was greatly hampering the extension work of the terminal building. "But they did not pay any heed."

Sources also said that a plan to turn the police camp into a police station never saw daylight due to 'misunderstanding' between the Ministry of Civil Aviation and Tourism (MCAT) and the Home Ministry.

Meanwhile, CAAB chairman Iqbal Hossain sent a letter to the MCAT yesterday to inform about the sudden withdrawal of police from ZIA. He also requested the ministry to take immediate measures to ensure security at the airport.

Criminal activities in the neighborhood are on the rise, sources said.

FBCCI for embargo on hartal

UNB, DHAKA

Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI) president Yussuf Abdullah Haroon yesterday sought embargo on hartal saying current economic indicators still showed an upturn but feared slowdown in case of fresh political disturbances.

"We'll have to sustain the present growth rate in every discipline of the economy . . . but politicians must resolve their problems through discussion and allow us to keep going with enhanced economic growth," Haroon told newsmen at a briefing sponsored by OCAB at Dhaka Club.

Haroon said last two month opposition-sponsored shutdowns cut down 5.5 per cent export growth and apprehended if the political troubles persist, the overall economy would not sustain the current growth rate.

Replying to a question, he said a business delegation would meet Leader of the Opposition Khaleda Zia with a request of no-hartal programme and incorporating it in her party's election manifesto as the Prime Minister had already made a promise that she won't call hartal even if she returned to the opposition.

They have already met President Shahabuddin Ahmed as part of their campaign against hartal and political unrest and would also meet Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

In response to a question, the business leader said they were preparing to seek legal redress against shutting down businesses. "We'll go to the High Court," he told the questioner.

The FBCCI leader said the present state of economy looks good with a 20-22 per cent export growth, 11 per cent industrial growth and inflation below 2 per cent. Purchasing capacity also has gone up with successive bumper crops while devaluation encouraged exporters, he observed.

Responding to queries about Bangladesh's trade and economic relations with SAARC countries, including India, Haroon said progress is very slow about realising India's commitment to withdraw duty on 25 categories of Bangladeshi items.

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Will journalist Tipu remain disabled?



The Daily Star - প্রথম আলো

Tipu Treatment Fund

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Taliban turn down UNHCR's six-month ceasefire proposal

It could further lengthen the crisis, Lubbers told

AFP, Kabul

Afghanistan's ruling Taliban Thursday rejected a six-month ceasefire proposed by UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Ruud Lubbers, saying it would only prolong the conflict.

Foreign Minister Wakil Ahmad Mutawakel told reporters the Taliban could not trust the northern-based opposition groups to observe the ceasefire.

"We think this ceasefire will further lengthen the conflict," Mutawakel said, after long talks here with Lubbers.

He accused the opposition forces headed by ex-president Burhanuddin Rabbani of violating a three-day ceasefire called last month for a UN-backed polio vaccination campaign.

"How can we expect them to observe such a long-term ceasefire?" he asked.

Mutawakel said the opposition fighters under military commander Ahmad Shah Masood should surrender to the Taliban holding most of the country.

"They should surrender themselves to the interests of the people, not the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan," he said, adding that it was possible to discuss some power-sharing formula later on.

Lubbers said he was not happy with the Taliban's response that a lengthy ceasefire was "risky for them".

"I said to him: 'I have to be honest with you I am not happy with this,'" he told a press conference before leaving for Pakistan.

Lubbers in his talks with Rabbani on Wednesday

proposed a possible truce to help 800,000 Afghans uprooted by drought and war.

The newly-appointed UNHCR chief also said the foreign minister told him that a six-month truce did not make any sense for the Taliban.

Lubbers, who arrived in Afghanistan on Sunday to assess the humanitarian situation of Afghanistan's internally displaced population, talked with the ousted Rabbani on Wednesday in Badakhshan, the only major province under full control of the opposition.

"I made it clear that I do not see a political solution coming quickly and therefore if we have to be really productive with humanitarian efforts, we really need a break of six months or a year in the fighting," Lubbers said.

Rabbani, for his part, said, "There should be a ceasefire not only for six months but the war should be stopped for all time."

The UNHCR chief however said he was "cautious" with the promises made by Rabbani as his military strongman Masood was not present during the talks.

Rabbani told Lubbers he was always ready for peace but vowed to continue to "defend" his territory against attacks from the Taliban.

Opposition officials said the Taliban had launched a pre-dawn offensive Thursday on opposition positions near Dara-e-Shahidan pass, 25 kilometres (15 miles) west of Bamiyan city.

The fighting was intense in the Surkh Dara area close to the city, they said, adding that the frontlines remained unchanged.



UN High Commissioner for Refugees Ruud Lubbers (L) shakes hands with an Afghan child yesterday in Khaki-Jabar, some 40 kilometres (25 miles) south of Kabul.

Indian chief negotiator claims progress in Kashmir talks

AFP, New Delhi

India's chief negotiator in Kashmir said on Thursday he was making good progress in efforts to establish contact with separatist groups in Kashmir to launch peace talks.

An upbeat Krishna Chandra Pant, who is also heads the policy-making Planning Commission, in addition said he was hopeful of a "meaningful solution" to the insurgency in the Himalayan region.

Pant said he received a letter from influential Kashmiri Muslim separatist leader Shabir Shah, chief of the Jammu and Kashmir Freedom Party, seeking clarifications on his invitation for a dialogue.

"Certainly it is a good step forward, a positive step forward. A window of opportunity is there. We can use it towards a meaningful solution," he said after meeting Shah's aides Salem Geelani and Abdullah Tari, who flew to New Delhi on Wednesday from Srinagar.

The pair arrived here despite death threats from Kashmiri Muslim militant groups opposed to the talks. Shabir Shah, who has spent more than two decades in Indian jails because of his separatist campaign, has sought clarifications on certain "ambiguities" in Pant's invitation, officials said.

These include India treating the rebellion in Kashmir as a mere "law and order problem" and not as a Muslim uprising against Indian rule.

"If any solution has to be found, it (the Kashmir issue) has to be treated as a core dispute," aide Geelani said after meeting Pant. "Secondly, we have seen 53 years of bilateral talks between India and Pakistan with no results. We feel that without involving Pakistan, there can be no solution."

"The government also has to make direct or indirect contact with the militants. And lastly, the government must also talk to those who do not agree with their policies," he added.

Pant has said New Delhi would look with an "open mind" at all objections or queries raised by individuals or groups who respond

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News Analysis

How Indian media covered the border incident

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

The recent border tension between India and Bangladesh and the killing of 16 Border Security Force (BSF) personnel had the potential of whipping up jingoism. But the Indian print media responded with restraint and reason.

The manner in which the BSF men were killed no doubt set off a deep sense of indignation across India and this was reflected in editorials and commentaries in mainline newspapers. But the print media in general never indulged in Bangladesh-bashing.

True, there were a few who advocated a tougher line of response by Indian government to Bangladesh. But majority of editorial

writers and commentators are of the view that the canvass of Indo-Bangladesh relations is much broader and the strategic and economic content of the bilateral ties too deep to be allowed to be obfuscated by the unfortunate developments at the border.

The editorials and commentaries in general strongly argued for exercising restraint by India. Prestigious national daily The Times of India, for example, says, in its editorial, "For the two countries, so closely intertwined by history, geography and indeed ethnicity, a resort to arms is the worst of all possible options." Referring to the torture of the BSF men, the editorial in the newspaper says, "This gross provocation makes even

more imperative the need for restraint." In fact, leading commentators have flayed the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), its spiritual mentor RSS and its affiliate fronts and Shiv Sena for advocating a tough response, including retribution, by India against Bangladesh following the border developments.

Several newspapers, in their reports as well as editorials, suggested that, besides the "criminal adventurism" by BDR, the BSF might also have erred.

International relations expert C Raja Mohan, in a post-editorial in The Hindu, writes, "The inhuman

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