

Follow building code to avert quake risks

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Housing and Public Works Minister Mirza Abbas has advised the city dwellers to comply with the 'building code' while constructing multi-storey structures to avert earthquake risks.

Abbas was talking to newsmen at a Meet-the-Reporters programme on 'Urbanisation and risk of earthquake in Bangladesh', organised by Dhaka Reporters Unity at its auditorium yesterday. The minister also said the government is fully prepared to tackle any post-earthquake situation.

"The government is fully aware of destruction during earthquake as the country is located in a tremor zone now," he said during an hour-long question-answer session. It was the first such programme since the new executive committee took charge of the organisation on December 7.

Referring to the recent tremor that jolted the country, Abbas said the recent quake has sounded an alarming bell and the nations needs to be prepared to save life and property of the people. "The government would launch a massive campaign to create awareness among the people through print and electronic media," the minister announced.

DRU President Shahjahan Sarder and its Secretary General Motaheer Hossain Masum moderated the session where the housing minister, also a joint-secretary of the ruling BNP, replied to a series of questions on different issues including the latest political developments.

Asked whether the new government has outlined any long-term integrated programme for sound urbanisation, the minister appeared

to have been taken aback by the question. "Integration with whom?" was his first reaction. However, when told about the authorities with whom the public works ministry can work through a co-ordinated approach, he assured the newsmen that he would think about such a proposal.

Giving an account of corruption in the Public Works Department (PWD) and Rajdhani Unnayan Katripaksha (RAJUK), the minister said that he was tired to see the corruption by a section of officials and employees. "We would take measures to eliminate those elements and replace them with worthy ones."

Abbas blamed a section of property developers for upsetting the ecological balance of the capital city leading to severe water logging. "As the developers grabbed the low-lying land around the city, the drainage system clogged and water-logging has now become a common phenomenon."

He said that he had directed the authorities concerned to maintain the ecological balance of the city. "I would be a party to the damaging of the city's ecology further."

Regarding the century-old buildings in the city's old part and unplanned constructions at different parts of the city, the minister said that the people themselves should understand the risk. "Can I refrain someone from committing suicide if he wants to do so?"

Abbas, a former mayor of the Dhaka City Corporation, wants to run for the ensuing mayoral polls, tentatively scheduled in late March next year, if picked by his party for the race. "I love the city very much and am sure that given the chance I would be able to build the city into a modern one."

Blair

FROM PAGE 1
Asian tour.

Both the foreign ministry and the British High Commission were tight lipped about the details of the trip, however.

"We know nothing about this visit," said a spokesman of the British High Commission, apparently speaking under very stringent rules of security imposed following the September 11 attacks.

The itinerary of the British premier will include official talks with his counterpart Khaleda Zia and a courtesy call on President AQM Badruddoza Chowdhury.

It is expected that the visit of the British prime minister will help strengthen the bilateral ties. Both the countries have major bilateral interests in trade and investment.

In 1996, the then British prime minister John Major also paid an official visit to Dhaka. Several years earlier, former premier James Callaghan also visited Bangladesh.

Police informant

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him dead. The body was sent to the hospital morgue for autopsy.

The duty officer of Mirpur police station said last night that they were aware of the killing. No case was filed in this connection till filing of this report last night.

With the killing, two police informants were murdered in the city in last three days. Police informant, Parvez Alam alias Pharma Jahangir, 45, was shot dead by hoodlums at Aga Sadek Lane in the city's Kotwali area on Sunday.

Trade gap

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participating in an Industrial Trade Fair in Kolkata through its distributors in the West Bengal capital and is attracting huge crowd.

Senior Marketing Executive of Micro Electronics Delwar Hossain told The Daily Star that the new duty would throw a spanner in the company's marketing endeavour.

Enayet Hossain of Bangladesh Electrical Association and also Director of the Federation of Bangladesh Chamber of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI) said the Indian attitude towards Bangladesh is very conservative and the neighbouring country always tries to discourage Bangladeshi exports through posing tariff and non-tariff barriers.

India's repeated rejection to Bangladesh's long-standing demand for zero-tariff access of its 25-category products only reflects its attitude.

He said Bangladeshi entrepreneurs have already asked the commerce ministry to take up such issues prior to a secretary-level trade meeting.

AL: No move

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parliament.

"Though I had informal talks with my Treasury Bench counterpart on the issue, no formal dialogue was held."

Abdus Shahid had talks with Treasury Bench Chief Whip Khondakar Delwar Hossain on the sidelines of a parliamentary programme in the Philippines recently.

He said AL has nominated members to various House committees formed in recent weeks.

"Parliamentary standing committees on various ministries have not yet been formed. If the process begins, we will nominate our representatives to those committees," he said.

Meanwhile, as AL chief Sheikh Hasina is now in the US, senior party leaders are having consultations among themselves about possible response of the party to fresh acts of violence against AL men allegedly perpetrated by the ruling alliance' men in different areas of the country.

AL will project some recent incidents of violence at a press conference in the city today, party sources said.

Hasina is scheduled to return home on January 8.

India moves air force, missiles

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buildup on the other side of the border and the cease-fire line that divides the disputed Kashmir province between the two countries.

Indian soldiers and Pakistani troops exchanged heavy fire and shelled each other through a second night Monday in the Jammu region of Kashmir, an army official said on condition of anonymity.

Three Indians were killed yesterday in the cross-border firing.

Security officials in New Delhi said two soldiers and a woman died when Pakistani troops targeted Indian military posts in Poonch sector. They also reported sporadic cross-border exchanges of fire.

The Press Trust of India, meanwhile, said more than 3,000 civilians have fled their homes in frontier districts of Kashmir since the start of the recent border clashes.

The Star TV network said the situation along the India-Pakistan frontiers was "volatile" and reported sporadic cross-border artillery and small arm duels between the two rival armies.

Military tensions between the two neighbours have spiralled since the December 13 strike on India's



Water overflowing city roads, Mirpur Road in front of Dhaka College, a case in point, because of leakage from WASA pipes is an all too familiar sight.

War clouds: What's really going to happen?

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

Clouds of a military stand-off between India and Pakistan appear to be hovering over the skies of the two countries following military build-up on both sides of the border. But no one is really publicly talking about a "war", at least in India.

India has signalled it will explore all diplomatic options to respond to the situation arising out of the December 13 attack on Parliament here by Pakistan-based terrorist groups Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammad but did not rule out the military option.

Both the countries have moved the strike formations of their army and air force, including missiles, to forward areas along the border. But what will actually happen?

India is watching what action, if any, is taken by Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf against Lashkar and Jaish and New Delhi's response in the coming days will shape its response.

India has already recalled its envoy to Pakistan and snapped roa and rail links with Pakistan protesting Pakistan's refusal to act against the terrorist groups responsible for the attack on Indian Parliament.

Highly-placed government sources here said the United States and Britain have in a joint demarche submitted to Pakistan Foreign Minister Abdul Sattar last week asked Islamabad to take decisive action against the terrorist outfits in that country.

The sources said Musharraf's remarks at a press conference in China a few days back that he might

be willing to act against terror groups—even though it comes with the rider of "credible evidence" may have provided him with the leverage he needs in his domestic constituency to do a turn-around in policy after the reversal of Pakistan's policy of backing the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Pakistan has ordered the freezing of assets of Lashkar and the NGO Ummah Tameer-e-Nau set up by retired Pakistani nuclear scientists who are suspected to have supplied nuclear secrets to Osama bin Laden.

But Indian High Commissioner to Pakistan Vijay K Nambiar has made it clear this is not enough to meet India's set of demands. If Pakistan declines to act against the terrorist groups, India is likely to step up the diplomatic offensive through another set of measures including discontinuing over-flight facility to Pakistan International Airlines (PIA), downsizing its mission in Islamabad and asking Pakistan to scale down its diplomatic presence in New Delhi, the source said.

India needs to be convinced about the sincerity of Musharraf's steps, if any, against the terrorist outfits and they should not be mere cosmetic, according to the sources.

Pakistan's possible measures against the terrorist groups will be discussed at a meeting of the Cabinet Committee on Security lined up here tomorrow.

If India's diplomatic efforts to pressure Pakistan to act against the terrorist groups reach a dead-end, New Delhi may run out of non-military options, they said.

Price hike protested

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remain their competitiveness not only in the global market but also in the domestic market, they said.

Talking to The Daily Star, Kutubuddin Ahmed, President of Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), said, "Readymade garments sector is already in deep crisis. The government decision will aggravate the situation."

The cost of production will now go up. Reducing the system loss would have been a better option, he said.

Benajir Ahmed, President of Dhaka Chamber of Commerce and Industries (DCCI) said, Bangladesh's economy is already hit by a global recession and local industries are already facing an uneven competition from cheap smuggled goods. Further increase in cost of production will lead those to closure.

R Maksud Khan, former president of DCCI and Chairman of Bengal Fine Ceramics Ltd, said ceramic is a gas-based industry. It became a prospective export item but production cost has gone up substantially due to devaluation earlier.

Increase in prices of gas and electricity this time will push the cost further and reduce its competitiveness in the world market, he said.

Executive President of Bangladesh Truck Owners Association Hazi Sayedul Haque and its General Secretary Md Rustom Ali Khan in a joint statement said the road transport sector will face a disastrous situation if the decision to increase diesel price by Tk. 1.5 per litre is implemented.

The Dhaka city unit of Jatiya Ganotantrik Front (JGF) held a rally in front of its office and brought out a procession in the city protesting the decisions.

BPC move

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move. Strangely enough, the BPC did not make profits during such times.

Yet, when the BPC purchased crude for 17-18 dollars between 1991 and 1997, and sold petrol in the domestic market at Tk 13 per litre, it made an astonishing profit of Tk 900 crore in one year and around Tk 400 crore per year in other times.

But as the government steadied its oil import tariff at around 70 per cent when oil prices in international market shot up, the BPC could not make profit although price of petrol increased to Tk 23 per litre in 1997.

Ever since, the BPC came up with recommendations to increase oil prices further as it ran into severe liquidity crisis. The BPC argued that as per its analysis oil prices would shoot up again and it would incur more losses.

But according to international analysis published in the Houston Chronicle on December 21, Oil prices are likely to be lower, but more volatile than ever, over the next three years. This assessment comes from a survey of energy industry executives who attended the annual Arthur Andersen Energy Symposium held in Houston this month.

The Houston Chronicle report further says that demand for oil would increase in the coming years. The newspaper quoted Victor Burk, managing partner of Andersen's Houston-based energy and utility practice as saying, "This implies an expectation that economies in many countries will recover from the current recession relatively early, with a resulting increase in demand."

Meanwhile, price of Brent crude - which is considered the benchmark for oil prices - remains at around \$19.32 a barrel. The country consumes more than 16 lakh tonnes of diesel, 4.5 lakh tonnes of kerosene, two lakh tonnes of petrol and one-lakh tonnes of octane.

The BPC imports about 1.2 million tonnes of crude oil and refines it at its processing plant to produce diesel and the likes. It also imports 1.8 million tonnes of petrol and diesel and other petroleum products. The country usually spends around Tk 3,500 crore for these imports.

Bad loans

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denting their image abroad. As a result, those loans which have been dubbed bad for six years could be written off.

BB sources said such a move could be a double edged sword. On one-hand, the banks would have a healthier balance sheet as their non-performing loan amount would reduce. But on the other, the real problem of pursuing the defaulters and punishing the officials responsible would remain a nagging problem.

Afghan commander held for alleged ties to al Qaida

AP, Jalalabad

Anti-Taliban forces have arrested an Afghan commander in eastern Afghanistan for alleged ties to Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida network, officials said yesterday.

Awal Gul, a mid-level commander who played a key role in persuading Taliban commanders to surrender Nangarhar province to council of tribal leaders, was arrested Sunday, Mohammed Zaman, the province's defence chief said.

"We have arrested Awal Gul because he was in contact with al-Qaida forces," Zaman said, refusing to elaborate.

Gul had helped the Taliban when its forces moved into Nangarhar in 1996 and had established close links with Osama bin Laden and his terrorist network, said Atiqullah Racham, a military aide to provincial governor Abdul Qadir.

This month, anti-Taliban troops backed by US bombing overran the Tora Bora cave complex, a major hideout of al-Qaida fighters in Nangarhar. Many al-Qaida members are still believed to be on the run, with some trying to flee east into Pakistan.

"We didn't want to arrest him the first day we took over Jalalabad. We wanted to first capture Tora Bora, then arrest Awal Gul," Racham said. "He thought he might get a big position in the new government, but the (governing council) wants to arrest anyone who had contact with al-Qaida."

Racham said he didn't believe Gul's arrest would have any impact on the stability of Nangarhar province, which borders Pakistan.

Gul commanded a small militia loyal to Yunnis Khalis, a conservative Pashtun tribal elder who was an important leader in the war against the Soviet occupation in the 1980s.

Cabinet reshuffle

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The 'Hawa Bhaban', set up ahead of the eighth parliamentary polls to conduct the party's election activities, has now emerged as the most important establishment after the Prime Minister's Office.

Tareque Rahman, eldest son of Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, is now the supreme authority of the 'Hawa Bhaban'. He is flanked by a group of young politicians, businessmen and administrative officials.

As a result of such lobbying, a stagnation has been prevailing in the administration. Fear of losing jobs or getting undesired transfers among the government officials has also slowed down governance.

Rivalry among the ministers over distribution of responsibilities has also caused lack of coordination in the government's 100-day programme.

A number of state ministers have

Khalis, an Egypt-educated expert on Islamic law, welcomed the rise of the Taliban in 1996.

Today, Khalis is elderly and too ill to leave his home. And while he maintains a small militia, his role in eastern Afghan politics is limited to elder statesman and he holds no formal title in the new government.

SAARC summit Deuba to head Nepal's team

AFP, Kathmandu

Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba is set to head the Nepalese delegation to the forthcoming 11th SAARC summit being held in Kathmandu from January 4 to 6, state-run radio said yesterday.

Other members of the Nepalese team are minister of state for foreign affairs Arjun Jung Bahadur Singh, Nepalese ambassadors to India and Sri Lanka Bhesh Bahadur Thapa and Bal Bahadur Kunwar respectively, National Planning Commission member Shankar Sharma, chief secretary Thirha Man Sakya and secretaries at the finance, industry and commerce and supplies.

The acting foreign secretary is also among the delegates for the SAARC Nepalese team.

Finance minister Ram Sharan Mahat is scheduled to lead the delegation to the 22nd meeting of the SAARC council of ministers slated for January 2 to 3.

Mahat will be attending the council meeting on behalf of Deuba who also holds the foreign ministry portfolio.

Normally, foreign ministers are council members.

Lashkar-e-Taiba

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In August, they were barred from collecting donations and displaying billboards in southern Sindh province. The drive became more aggressive after Sept. 11.

On Monday, Pakistan froze the financial assets of Lashkar-e-Taiba and Ummah Tameer-e-Nau, based in Kashmir, at the urging of US President George W Bush.

Bush accused Lashkar-e-Taiba of sponsoring terrorism following a Dec. 13 suicide attack on the Indian Parliament.

Jaish-e-Mohammed was added to the US list of terrorist groups in November because of alleged ties to the Afghan Taliban and Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida network. Indian officials blame Jaish-e-Mohammed for the Parliament attack.

Both groups have denied involvement, saying the accusa-

tions are designed to malign what they call a legitimate secessionist war in the section of Kashmir controlled by India.

The remaining organisation, Harakat-ul Mujahadeen, has been considered a terrorist operation by Washington for several years.

Pakistan-India relations have deteriorated further since the assault in New Delhi that killed 14, including the five attackers. Both countries have sent troops to Kashmir's borders, where they have frequently exchanged artillery and small-arms fire.

India has demanded the arrest of Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed leaders, but Pakistan says wants evidence of wrongdoing.

5 killed

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Mesbahuddin Tipu, 8, and Imon, 4, brother-in-law Ekramul Haq Bhutto, 18, and sister Ayesa Akhter Pankhi, 18.

Two other victims who were travelling in one of the buses were identified as Firoja Begum, 45, wife of Abul Bashir of Batia, Sudharam, Noakhali, and her daughter Roshana Begum, 12.

The injured were admitted to Comilla Medical College Hospital and Choudhagram Thana Health Complex.

Of the injured people, 17 were identified as Abul Bashir, 50, Jafar, 8, Kawser, 5, Abdul Halim, 35, Anwar Hossain, 25, Ibrahim Khalil, 26, Bachchu Mia, 30, Abdus Salam, 10, Badsha, Anamul Haq, 15, Jalal, 40, Kohinoor, 40, Ziaul Haq, Golam Kibria, 40, Marjina, Sabbir Hossain and Joybab Bibi.

The DC and the SP visited the spot. As per instruction of the DC, bodies of the eight victims were handed over to their families without autopsy.

The buses were seized, but the drivers and helpers managed to flee.

In Gaibandha, a woman was killed and five others were injured in a road accident at Matherhat on Palashbari-Gaibandha road yesterday.

Witnesses said a Gaibandha-bound truck hit Manjuri Begum, 23, at about 8.30 am, killing her on the spot.

While fleeing after the accident, the driver lost control over the steering and the speeding truck entered a roadside tea-stall injuring five other people.

Two of the injured were admitted to Gaibandha Sadar Hospital. The truck was seized but its driver and helper managed to escape.

Polybags to go by Feb

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"We would enact tougher legislation in the next parliamentary session, if necessary."

Referring to a hartal called by a section of polythene traders in the Old Dhaka protesting the government move, the environment minister noted that some 4,000 workers were now working at 300 factories producing thin polythene bags. "Country's 13 crore people should not suffer for such a small number of workers who can easily be rehabilitated."

The minister described how polythene bags were destroying soil, water and air, thus making the environment unlivable.

He blamed a section of businessmen for spreading misleading propaganda that the government had banned polythene of all kinds and plastic goods as well. "Right now, we have banned polythene bags up to only 20 microns."

On a note of firm determination to

go ahead with the ban on thin polythene bags, Siraj said: "We won't move an inch from our decision whatever obstruction we face. Crores of people are with us and our success is a must."

The minister urged housewives not to use polythene bags while preserving foods in refrigerators because polybags damage the quality of foods. "You (housewives) should also discourage others from using the harmful polythene bags for shopping."

Pointing to a notification by the Department of Environment banning marketing and use of polythene bags from January 1 2002, he said the notice had already been sent to all quarters concerned.

To a question, the environment minister said the stock of polythene bags already produced would be sent outside the capital. "But we want manufacturers and traders to damage their stocks."

expressed their dissatisfaction as their senior colleagues have been reportedly showing 'step-brotherly attitude' towards them and not giving them any responsibility.

Sources said the prime minister is closely watching the activities and performances of the ministers, getting feedback from different sources and is also discussing the new portfolio distribution with party policymakers. Speculations are now rife about the reshuffle.

Senior party leaders Oli Ahmed, Khandaker Mahbubuddin Ahmed, Ashraf Hossain, Mir Shawkat Ali and some others like Ali Asgar Loby and Nazimuddin Alam are also expected to get portfolios. Besides, Bangladesh Jatiya Party Chairman Nazir Rahman Manjur and one representative from the Islami Oikya Jote are also trying to make it to the council of ministers.

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