

PM tells int'l meet on arsenic menace Identify nature of hazards, find ways to fight them

UNB, Dhaka

Prime Minister Khaleda Zia yesterday asked experts to correctly identify the nature of arsenic hazards and sought help of all in dealing with the biggest public health problem posed by mass chemical poisoning of groundwater.

"It is not possible for the government alone to solve the arsenic problem of Bangladesh. It needs concerted initiative to lead a combined drive against the menace as it is not a small task," she said inaugurating the three-day international workshop on Arsenic Mitigation in Bangladesh at Osmani Memorial Auditorium yesterday noon.

Termining the struggle for preventing arsenic contamination a "social movement", she said all concerned, including NGOs, International Aid Organisations and private sector, should join the combat mobilising all their resources.

Khaleda Zia asked all concerned to shun their

indifference and work effectively to free the countrymen from the toxic effect of arsenic, a trace element.

She said the international workshop was one of the priority programmes of her government's first 100-day agenda.

LGRD and Cooperatives Ministry organised the workshop. Out of an expected 15 countries, experts from nine so far, including India, Nepal, Australia, Japan, UK and USA, are participating in the international workshop.

The Prime Minister said arsenic has become an issue of grave concern as existence of arsenic in country's groundwater is 'excessive' and contaminated water was found in tubewells of more than 50 per cent of the upazilas.

Citing the findings of a preliminary survey she said about 3.5 crore people of the country are drinking arsenic-contaminated water and a great many are at risk.

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US Congressman Joseph Crowley called on Leader of the Opposition in Jatiya Sangsad Sheikh Hasina yesterday at the Sudha Sadan.

Free access of RM not linked to any condition

US Congressmen tell newsmen

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

Two leaders of Bangladesh caucus in the United States Congress yesterday said they would take up the case of duty- and quota-free entry of Bangladeshi garments into the US.

At a press conference at the state guesthouse Padma, Congressman Joseph Crowley and Congressman Jim McDermott also denied that the issue of allowing the entry was linked to gas exports or any other trade-off.

Crowley is the Chairman of the Bangladesh Caucus while McDermott is a member of the 19-member group, which was formed last year to promote Bangladesh's interests in the US.

The two arrived here on a four-day visit, their first to Bangladesh, to get familiarised with the country.

Crowley said they are aware of the problem Bangladesh is facing following the slump in readymade apparel export to the US.

The US is the biggest importer of the country's main export earner.

But Bangladesh has lost its competitive edge over the exports from certain Caribbean and African nations, whose garments were given duty- and quota-free access to the US market.

But Crowley said it would take time to mobilise support and move a broader bill in the Congress for Bangladeshi apparel's duty- and quota-free access. McDermott added that since September 11 terrorist attack on the US, the economy was plunging.

They met with Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, Commerce Minister Amir Khasru Mahmud Chowdhury, Home Minister Altaf Hossain Chowdhury, Leader of the Opposition Sheikh Hasina, and officials and leaders of the Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) during the visit.

They also visited some schools where former child labourers from the garment industry were enrolled.

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Hemingway's 'Old Man' is no more

REUTERS, Cojimar

Gregorio Fuentes, the former captain of US novelist Ernest Hemingway's boat in Cuba and his inspiration for "The Old Man And The Sea," died on Sunday at the age of 104 in the fishing village of Cojimar, friends said.

"He was a symbol of Cuban fishing and of human brotherhood, thanks to all of his years of friendship with Hemingway," a friend, Jose Miguel Diaz Escrich, who runs Havana's Hemingway International Nautical Club, told Reuters.

Fuentes, born on July 11, 1897, captained Hemingway's boat "Pilar" in the years the US author lived on the Caribbean island. In recent times, he had become something of a tourist magnet in Cojimar, just east of Havana, where he lived.

Hasina's deputies may attend JS body meets

UNB, Dhaka

Opposition leader Sheikh Hasina yesterday said the absence of a congenial atmosphere holds back her party from joining parliament, but said her deputies might attend parliamentary committee meetings.

"What is the use of going to parliament? There is no environment over there for us to go... Even the MPs of the alliance that has grabbed two-thirds majority do not attend the House," she told US Congressman Joseph Crowley at a meeting at her Dhanmondi residence.

US Ambassador Mary Ann Peters, ex-state minister for foreign affairs Abul Hasan Chowdhury, ex-deputy minister and Hasina's Political Secretary Saber Hossain Chowdhury and Press Secretary Jawadul Karim were present.

The one-and-a-half-hour meeting touched upon domestic politico-economic issues, including the last parliament election and its aftermath, "terrorism by the ruling BNP and extremist religious groups", and duty-and-quota-free access of garment.

Emerging from the talks, Crowley told reporters that they discussed

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Dhaka-Oslo jt study indicates 41 TCF gas reserve possibility

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The joint study by Hydrocarbon Unit (HCU) of the Energy Ministry and Norway Petroleum Directorate (NPD) has strongly recommended undertaking scientific study by conducting new drilling and seismic activities for removing all confusion regarding gas reserve in the country.

The study used existing data, put the proven gas reserve at 20.4 Trillion Cubic Feet (TCF) and indicated the 'mean possibility' of striking 41.6 TCF new gas. The report was formally released in Dhaka on Saturday.

The official estimate puts the proven gas reserve at around 11 TCF.

The HCU-NPD report showed the recovery rate in the four major gas fields in the country as 70 to 75 per cent while the previous estimate used by Petrobangla showed that the recovery rate ranged between 51 per cent and 69 per cent.

In other words, the latest study projects higher quantity of gas recoverable from the four fields than that showed in the estimate used by

Petrobangla.

HCU director AKM Shamsuddin at a press briefing on their report titled "Petroleum Potential and Resources Assessment 2001" in the city yesterday said the NPD, a government entity in Norway, does not have any commercial interest in Bangladesh. "In the home front, the Hydrocarbon Unit is in a neutral position without any conflict of interest in the domestic energy sector," he said.

Asked whether their study suggests export of gas, HCU officials said they were not supposed to make any comment on the this issue. A separate committee is working on it.

Comparing the latest report with that of the United States Geological Survey (USGS) and Petrobangla joint study presented in February last year in Dhaka, leader of the Norwegian team Ole Johan Ostvedt said, "This is our best estimate and we think we can defend it."

The USGS-Petrobangla study indicated the 'mean possibility' of striking 32.1 TCF new gas in Bangladesh.

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India, China agree to fight terrorism jointly

AP, New Delhi

India and China agreed yesterday to jointly fight terrorism and said their relationship is not dependent on how they view Pakistan, a rival to India and a friend to China.

At a banquet in honor of Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji, the prime minister of India, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, said cooperation against terrorism was at the top of the agenda of all peace-loving countries.

"I am happy that we have agreed today to jointly counter this menace," Vajpayee said.

He also said India and China had made good progress toward clarifying and confirming the Line of Actual Control that serves as a cease-fire line between them since their 1962 war.

India and China have set up a jointly working group, comprising officials of the foreign and defense ministries, to settle their 40-year-old boundary dispute.

Rongji's is the first state visit by a Chinese leader in more than a decade.

"We are aware that China and Pakistan have close relations... We continue to monitor such developments," said Nirupama Rao, the Indian foreign ministry

spokeswoman.

Indian Defence Minister George Fernandes played down recent Indian newspaper reports that China had stepped up military assistance and was dispatching more fighter planes to Pakistan while Indian and Pakistani troops are massed on the border, on war alert.

"China and Pakistan have had a relationship. This is not the first time that Pakistan is acquiring weaponry from China. I would not attach any significance to this," Fernandes told reporters.

Press Trust of India news agency reported yesterday that the chairman of Pakistan's joint chiefs of staff committee, Gen. Muhammad Aziz Khan, had arrived in Beijing for regular meeting of longtime allies. China is a key supplier of arms and military technology to Pakistan, now embroiled in a mutual military buildup with India, which accuses it of sponsoring terrorism.

Yesterday, China and India signed agreements on cooperation between tourism officials and hotel chains and the establishment of tourist offices. They also signed pacts on peaceful uses of outer space, sharing of data related to the mighty Brahmaputra River to prevent flooding in India, and the exchange of scientists.

Pakistan wants pullout of troops but India rules out

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan expects Indian troops to move back to peacetime positions to reduce tensions, military spokesman Major General Rashid Qureshi said yesterday.

"We expect India to move back to peacetime positions to reduce tensions," Qureshi told a briefing.

He said the massing of Indian troops had forced Pakistan to also keep sufficient troops on the defacto border in Kashmir, the Line of Control, to ensure its own defence and these moves had increased tensions between the two countries.

He was speaking after India ruled out yesterday any immediate military de-escalation on its border until Pakistan effectively stopped "cross-border terrorism."

The mobilisation is complete and any effort at de-escalation can come only, I repeat only, if and when the cross-border terrorism is effectively stopped," Indian Defence Minister George Fernandes told reporters on the eve of an official visit to the United States.

Pakistan foreign ministry spokesman Kamran Niaz said Pakistan would have preferred a warmer response

to President Pervez Musharraf's landmark address to the nation on Saturday when he announced a crackdown on extremism, including a ban on five extremist Muslim groups.

"We would have preferred a warmer response from India but the fact is that they have responded," Niaz said.

"We do not regard their response as negative and we continue to look to the future to hope that tensions will be reduced."

The groups banned by Musharraf included two -- Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammad -- accused by New Delhi of carrying out the deadly December 13 attack on the Indian parliament, which brought the two countries to the brink of war.

Niaz denied that the ban on the two had come as a result of international pressure from India or other countries.

No action was taken as a result of complaints, he said, but rather as a result of evidence.

"Complaints by New Delhi without evidence have not resulted in any action being taken," he said.