

Indo-Bangla think tanks hold sideline diplomacy

Proposals to be taken up at Saarc meet

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

Shutting out the media, leading members of unofficial policy think tanks of India and Bangladesh wrapped up a two-day brainstorming session on bilateral economic issues in New Delhi yesterday.

The session viewed as 'Track Two' diplomacy was held at the India International Centre. Former Indian prime minister I K Gujral inaugurated the programme attended among others by Ziaur Rahman, chairman of Bangladesh Jatiya Sangsad's standing committee on foreign affairs, senior Awami League lawmaker Tofail Ahmed, Rehman Sobhan of Bangladesh's Centre for Policy Dialogue and former Indian high commissioners to Bangladesh Deb Mukherjee and Muchkund Dubey.

The Track Two talks are understood to have come up with a slew of concrete proposals that could be taken up at the meetings of officials in the run-up to the 13th South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc) summit in Dhaka next month.

The relations between New Delhi and Dhaka had remained mired in polemics on each other's security concerns until recently when they gained some silver lining with Bangladesh's consent to the proposal to ferry natural gas from Myanmar to India through a transnational pipeline cutting across its territory. India in turn indicated its willingness to consider positively Bangladesh's request for trade transit route to

Nepal and Bhutan and securing electricity from those two countries through Indian power grid.

A senior official of Tata Group of Industries, which is keen on investing two billion dollars for gas-based fertiliser, steel and power plants in Bangladesh, took part in the discussion. Diplomatic sources described Tata's presence as significant.

Sources said some of the proposals aired at the two-day session may figure at the proposed meeting between Bangladesh Prime Minister Khaleda Zia and her Indian counterpart on the sidelines of the Dhaka summit.

Even as the Track Two talks were on, India's External Affairs Minister Natwar Singh told a meeting of leading oil companies from across the world on Wednesday that Myanmar-Bangladesh-India gas pipeline could prove to be 'vibrant arteries' of development in the region and set a new paradigm of regional cooperation.

India has before it three pipeline proposals -- Myanmar-Bangladesh-India project, Iran-Pakistan-India pipeline and Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India pipeline -- all of which are attractive technoeconomic proposals and can meet the pressing energy requirements of all the countries concerned, he said.

"These pipeline proposals have in them the ability to qualitatively transform the relationships among the countries of the region," Singh said and singled out for commendation the recent progress made in Myanmar-Bangladesh-India pipeline.

Five killed in crossfire

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When the muggers were fleeing, the victims raised an alarm and a team of patrol police chased the two. Police said mugger Mohammad Hanif, 36, and his accomplice opened fire as the cops surrounded them at Pir Shaheber Goli (Jane).

A shootout ensued when the policemen retaliated and both the muggers sustained bullet injuries. The policemen took them to Dhaka Medical College and Hospital (DMCH) where doctors declared Hanif dead, police sources said.

Hanif received two bullets in the chest and his accomplice, who is undergoing treatment at the DMCH under police guard, received two in the legs.

The police said two sub-inspectors, Mahbub Morshed and Harun, and constable Jafar were wounded in the shootout. They recovered one revolver, three bullets, two spent bullets and the looted money from Hanif's possession.

But locals said the policemen beat up the two muggers after arresting them at Pir Shaheber Goli. "I heard a couple of gunshots a few minutes later," said a local shopkeeper.

KUSHTIA

Our Kushtia correspondent reports: The police arrested BCP cadres Raj Ali, 40, and Laltu Biswas, 32, at Berbaradi village in Sadar upazila at around 5:00pm on Tuesday. During interrogation, they told the police about firearms hidden in Shibpur village.

The police said when they started for Shibpur at around 4:00am to seize the firearms, the BCP cadres ambushed them in a betel-leaf garden. "The policemen also opened fire to save their life," said a local police officer.

He said Raj and Laltu were caught in crossfire when they tried to flee jumping from the police van. Both died on the spot receiving several bullets. Two police personnel were also injured in the incident, police claimed.

The law-enforcers retrieved a shutter gun and seven bullets from the spot.

Raj was accused in 11 cases including seven for murder and Laltu in seven cases with two for murder, the police said.

SATKHIRA

Abdusking Janajuddho operative Kartik Chandra Rishi, 40, was killed in 'crossfire' between his accomplices

and the police in Tala upazila at 3:40am yesterday.

Our Satkhira correspondent said the police had arrested him from his house at Amanullahpur in the upazila on Wednesday.

The police said Kartik admitted that his accomplices were hiding in a bush near Zila Natta with several illegal firearms. Following the tip-off, the police rushed to the village in the early hours yesterday to arrest the gang.

When the police team reached the spot, Kartik's accomplices opened fire to free him from the custody. "Police also opened fire and Kartik fell in the line of fire," said Shah Mashiur Rahman, officer-in-charge of Tala Police Station.

Kartik sustained several bullets and died on the spot, he added.

The OC claimed that police constables Humayun Kabir and Nazrul Islam were injured during the shootout and they seized a pipe-gun and three cartridges from the spot.

Superintendent of Police at Satkhira Abdur Rahim said Kartik was released on bail recently after serving in jail for the murder of freedom fighters Sheikh Nurul Islam and Alauddin on October 4, 1995. He was also accused of three other criminal charges.

Bogra
Alleged criminal Sayed Ali, 42, was killed in 'crossfire' between his accomplices and the police at Borochappa village in Dupchanchia upazila yesterday morning.

Dupchanchia police arrested Sayed, a convicted criminal, in Naruli bus stand area of Bogra town at 11:45pm on Wednesday.

Acting on his information, the police went to the house of Abdur Rahman Rana alias Rana Dacot, a former leader of Jatiyatibadi Chhattr Dal, at Barochappa on Talor-Alfagar Road, to recover illegal firearms.

As they reached there at 2:30am, the armed accomplices of Sayed opened fire on the police who retaliated in self-defence. Sayed, hit by several bullets in the head, chest and back while trying to escape with handcuff, died on the spot, the police said.

Police constables Abdul Kader and Zakir also sustained injury during the gunfight and the police seized one gun, one shutter gun, eight bullets, five cartridges, one axe and three swords the criminals left at the spot before fleeing.

Dhaka dubbed

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preparedness and response department of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

"What we need are volunteers and sirens," she said.

Von Oelreich said a model of an early warning system came not from high-tech industrialised countries but Bangladesh.

A center in the capital Dhaka receives news of dangerous weather and has a system in place to spread the word to some 135 branches across Bangladesh which in turn deploy thousands of people on bicycles to warn people to take safety precautions.

"We're really holding up Bangladesh as a model as low-tech measures such as bicycles can be incredibly effective," said John Sparrow of the Red Cross Federation's Beijing office.

The World Conference on Disaster Reduction here is working to get an early warning system off the ground amid shock that Indian

Ocean countries had no alert when their coasts were battered by tsunamis caused by an earthquake on December 26. Nearly 220,000 people were killed.

"We have very accurate means to predict disasters. What we lack is the means to tell the people concerned," said Jan Egeland, the UN relief coordinator.

The UN science agency Unesco has said it would meet within 60 days to figure out which technology to use in the Indian Ocean amid a rush of offers by donor countries that want to contribute their know-how.

One proposal made in Kobe was from Germany, which said it would soon send buoys fitted with the satellite Global Positioning System to the Indian Ocean so its system could be used quickly, if chosen.

Some 95 percent of people who died in natural disasters between 1994 and 2003 lived outside the industrialised world, according to a UN study.

2 boys killed in Ctg landslide

BSS, Chittagong

Two boys were killed in a landslide in Lohagara upazila of the district yesterday.

The boys were identified as Mizanur Rahman, 9, son of Ali Ahmed and Jahangir Alam, 6, son of Amir Khasru, of Munshipara village under Charamba Union of the upazila.

Police said a chunk of soil from a hill fell on the boys while they were playing at the foot of it at about 3:00pm. They died on the spot.

A case was registered with Lohagara police.

BSF abducts youth from village

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Lalmonirhat

Indian Border Security Force (BSF) abducted a Bangladeshi youth from the frontier village of Hosnabad under Patgram upazila of Lalmonirhat district on Wednesday.

The victim, Mitu, 22, son of Abdul Mannan of the village, was picked up by the Indian border guards while working in the field near pillar no 885at about 5:00pm.

The BDR (Bangladesh Rifles) has strongly protested the incident and sent a letter, asking its Indian counterpart to hand over the abducted Bangladeshi.

Meanwhile, the paramilitary BDR force has been put on alert on Lalmonirhat border, fearing fresh push-in bid by the BSF.

On Tuesday night, the BSF pushed eight Bangla-speaking Indian Muslims into Bangladesh territory through Hatibandha border of the district.

On information, BDR personnel of Dolkhawa outpost reached the spot and pushed the Indians back through Mogolhat border.

Tk 60 lakh

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at the ZIA at 12:50pm.

Later when the customs men scanned the luggage of the other passenger, they found 560 mobile phone sets of different brands and models, a number of calculators, a video camera and gold ornaments weighing 281 grams.

Forty more

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alarming rise in the number of people hospitalised after being rendered unconscious and mugged. In last three days over 100 such victims were admitted to the hospital.

DMCH authorities said they are facing acute crisis of water for stomach wash. "We've not seen so many drugged people getting admission here," said a washroom employee.

Finance ministry

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following the price hike of diesel, the agricultural ministry on Tuesday made the proposal with a view to help the farmers needing irrigation for boro crops against the backdrop of flood-induced losses in aman output.

But top finance ministry officials have expressed their negative attitude towards subsidising any sector.

"We have fund constraints and we can't give subsidy frequently," a top official of the finance ministry said while talking to The Daily Star.

He said in the past the government gave subsidy only on urea, but now other types of fertilisers imported by private dealers also get the subsidy so that the farmers' production cost can be kept low. "We also give subsidy on other agricultural inputs," he said.

"Tk 1,777 crore has been allocated against the agriculture ministry in the current fiscal year which is Tk 867 crore more than the previous year's allocation," the official said. "Moreover, the government has given Tk 600 crore farm subsidy this year."

The finance ministry official said the ministry will not make any delay with the agriculture ministry proposal and a decision will come shortly.

Meanwhile, economists have supported the agriculture ministry proposal saying irrigation costs must be lowered for upcoming boro crops as the government last year failed to achieve its production target of aman due to the devastating floods.

They observed farmers can offset the crop losses only through massive production of boro and it will not be possible if diesel remains costlier.

The government has targeted boro cultivation on 40,20,000 hectares this season that needs about 12 lakh tonnes of diesel to run the irrigation pumps. Thirty percent of the diesel will be needed in February, 25 percent in March and 20 percent in April.

Sources said if the government decides to give subsidy, the farmers will get low-cost irrigation facilities as 85 percent of the irrigation pumps are run by diesel. The farmers operate some 30,000 deep tube-wells, 8,00,000 shallow tube-wells and 73,000 other pumps for irrigating their lands.

Jatra attacks instil

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The Inspector General of Police Ashraf Huda yesterday told The Daily Star that the investigations are on and it still cannot be said who were behind the blasts.

Bogra police on January 17 arrested Shafiqullah with bomb-making materials at the house of alleged Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh follower Joyal in Gabtoli upazila. He admitted to be a member of Jama'atul Mujahidin. He denied his involvement but said his fellow cadres carried out Saturday's bomb attack in Bogra.

In the last two months six incidents of bomb blasts in village fairs, cultural functions and jattras in Bogra, Natore, Jamalpur, Sherpur and Pabna districts had left two people dead and 145 injured.

Members of intelligence agencies investigating the blasts said two attacks in Bogra and one each in Pabna and Natore districts bore the hallmarks of Islamist militant attacks.

"Islamic zealots, who express strong opposition to traditional cultural shows, are very much likely to have made the attacks," said a top official of an intelligence agency on condition of anonymity.

He said a number of people arrested recently with explosives in the northern regions admitted to having links to Islamist militant groups and these confessions have only strengthened the belief that religious extremists might have orchestrated the violence. "However, we are yet to find out exactly which organisation was involved and who were the masterminds," he said.

He said followers of Bangla Bhai, the self-styled operation commander of JMJB, could have something to do with the recent attacks in Bogra, Natore, and Pabna. Members of Jama'atul Mujahidin, which once used to be led by Bangla Bhai, and operatives of Harkatul Jihad might also have link to the explosions.

Bangla Bhai, who reportedly killed at least 25 people including a retired army personnel in the northern districts, meanwhile, has been evading capture since the prime minister ordered the law enforcers last year for his arrest.

A top police official tasked with the investigation of the bomb attacks in Jamalpur and Sherpur said they could not yet find any clue to the attacks. They, however, are probing whether there is any link between the attacks in Bogra and Natore and those in Jamalpur and Sherpur.

Biswas Afzal Hossain, superintendent of police in Jamalpur, said, "Besides the religious extremists' suspected involvement, we are investigating the possibilities of internal conflict among the jatra organisers leading to the attacks."

MPs for changes

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The bills are aimed at checking frequent House boycott and 'embarrassment' of the Supreme Court judges, ensuring individual freedom of party lawmakers and consolidating the positions of the speaker and the deputy speaker.

The sources said Speaker Jamir Uddin Sircar has agreed to allow 11 of the new bills for placing in the House in the wake of resentment among the lawmakers.

Members of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Private Members' Bills and Resolutions at a meeting on January 4 threatened to resign in protest against what they said was the speaker's negative attitude towards the bills.

After the Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs consented to the bills, the speaker had asked the Parliament Secretariat to send the bills back to the law ministry for further scrutiny that delayed the process of placing the bills.

The speaker, however, later gave the go-ahead to the 11 bills.

BNP lawmakers Abdul Mannan, Rustam Ali Farazi and Ali Newaz Mahmud Khaiyam, Jamaat-e-Islami lawmaker Shah Mohammad Ruhul Quddus and Jatiya Party lawmaker GM Quader have piloted the 14 bills.

Sources said the bills are now ready to be tabled in the House as the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Private Members' Bills and Resolutions has scrutinised the bills and recommended placing those in parliament.

The Jatiya Sangsad so far passed 14 constitution amendment bills. The last one was passed last year regarding women's reserved seats in parliament, age limit of judges and display of the portraits of the president and the prime minister.

However, there has been no precedent of the passage of a constitution amendment bill piloted by any private member in the history of the Jatiya Sangsad. Only three general bills of the private members were passed from the fifth to the current parliament.

When asked, Mozammel Haque, chairman of the parliamentary standing committee on private members bills, told The Daily Star that it does not matter if the bills are not passed. "At least people will know the lawmakers are thinking about the necessity of amending some provisions of the constitution,"

BNP lawmaker Abdul Mannan and JP deputy GM Quader have piloted two separate bills regarding the amendment of Article 70 of the constitution that prevents the lawmakers from floor-crossing and forces them not to speak against party decisions.

Article 70 discourages the lawmakers to criticise party's decision in parliament, even if he or she thinks it is wrong. A lawmaker loses member-

ship in the first week of December last year police arrested three people at Goarpara in Gaibandha and seized 24 India-made gel bombs, 124 detonators, over 100 other bombs of various sizes and weights.

Explosive carriers Anisur Tahman, Amzad and Sabuj while being grilled at first claimed themselves to be members of Jama'atul Mujahidin, but later said they belong to Harkatul Jihad.

They, however, confessed to carrying the explosives with intent to attack a concert of singer Momtaz, slated for December at Bogra Stadium last year. Police retrieved a bomb on December 22 from Sonatola Pilot High School field where too a programme of Momtaz was scheduled.

The first blast in the series of explosions took place on November 22 when a powerful bomb went off amidst a horse race gathering in Sariakandi upazila of Bogra leaving at least 20 people injured. Nearly a month later, on December 15, a string of similar attacks was carried out at different stages erected for drama, music, and gambling at Kamalpur village of the same upazila. It left 15 people wounded.

On January 12, bombs exploded in two separate cultural functions in Jamalpur and neighbouring Sherpur. Twenty-five people were injured in Jamalpur while at least 10 others, two critically, in Sherpur sadar upazila. On both occasions, cultural functions, in Jamalpur a variety show featuring gambling and in Sherpur a drama festival, were underway when the attacks were carried out.

The latest in the spate was on January 15 in jatra shows in Bogra and Natore where two people died and 70 others injured. Witnesses said in Bogra the bombs were hurled when a female artiste was dancing on stage.

Brisk sales

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have to purchase a bag of rice bran at Tk 250 against Tk 150 previously and a quintal (100kg) broken rice (khoo) at Tk 1400 against Tk 600 previously."

Besides, they have paid higher truck fare this time due to increased price of diesel, he added.

M Zafar Ali, a buyer at Golapbazar market, said, "I have visited several markets but I could not buy as yet any cattle at a reasonable price."

Trader Abdul Hye Mridha from Faridpur said, "I might suffer a loss of at least Tk 20,000 from the sale of six bulls as the buyers offer prices that do not cover my investment."

At Kamalapur market, a trader however said, "I have sold some of my bulls and goats making a good profit."

ship in parliament if he or she is expelled by the party for going against a party decision.

Both Mannan and Quader have proposed to amend Article 70 to ensure individual freedom of the lawmakers for the greater interest of parliamentary democracy, sources said.

They proposed that a Member of Parliament, elected as a candidate from a political party, shall vacate his seat if he voluntarily resigns from the party or votes in a motion of no-confidence in the cabinet in parliament against his party.

A lawmaker's seat cannot be vacated if he is expelled from the party, which nominated him in the election, said both the lawmakers.

Lawmakers Mannan, Farazi and Quddus have moved three separate bills aiming at tightening the relevant rules to prevent the lawmakers and political parties from boycotting the House frequently, which is commonplace in Bangladesh.

The existing constitutional provision says a lawmaker will lose their seat in parliament if they remain absent from the House proceedings for 90 consecutive days. The three lawmakers have proposed to cut the time to 60 days.

Another BNP lawmaker Ali Newaz Mahmud Khaiyam however has proposed to fix it at 30 days through another constitution amendment bill.

Abdul Mannan has piloted another bill seeking amendment to the constitutional provisions for the election and removal of the speaker and the deputy speaker.

The existing provision says the speaker and the deputy speaker are elected through simple majority and they can be removed also by simple majority. But Mannan proposed two-thirds majority for both their election and removal.

He has moved another bill for constitutional amendment in order to discourage the tendency of 'feeling embarrassed' by the judges of the Supreme Court. He sought constitutional provisions for strengthening the oath of the judges.

GM Quader has piloted another bill in which he proposed fixing the tenure of the chief justice at five years from the date he assumes office. The existing provision says the chief justice can remain in office until he reaches the age of 67.

Another bill moved by Farazi seeks a constitutional provision barring the candidates from contesting the parliamentary election from more than two constituencies.

Although there is no specific constitutional provision on this matter, an ordinance promulgated during the Ershad regime barred a person from contesting from more than five seats.

Mannan has piloted another bill seeking amendment to Article 76 aiming at strengthening the parliamentary standing committees.

Twin blasts kill 14 in China

AFP, Beijing

Fourteen people were killed and 12 injured in two explosions yesterday in northwest China's Xinjiang region, which has been rocked by Muslim separatist violence in recent years.

The first blast happened at 1:30 pm (0530 GMT) when a bus travelling from the Dushanzi district of Karamay city to Uru city in northern Xinjiang exploded on a highway and killed 12 people, Xinhua news agency and officials said.

A police officer in Kuitun, the nearest city to the blast, said the cause was still under investigation but it did not appear to be a traffic accident.

"It's definitely not a regular accident," the official, who declined to be named, told AFP. "The provincial police department have sent people here."

Local authorities said it was not immediately clear whether separatists may have carried out an attack on the bus. The Kuitun officer, however, added: "We're at the frontline of anti-terrorism."

Eight of the victims were killed instantly while four died in hospital, Xinhua said. Two more were injured.

Most of the victims were ethnic minorities and not Han Chinese, said an official at the Kuitun city Prefecture Hospital.

"We're still trying to save the injured," said the hospital official.

Asked whether separatists may have caused the bus blast, a woman surnamed Chen at the Xinjiang provincial public security department said it was "hard to say."

"In the short-term, it won't be clear," Chen said.

About four hours later, a blast killed two people and injured 10 in the centre of Xinjiang's capital Urumqi, Xinhua said.

The blast left a nine square meter (97 square foot) hole in the ground and a piercing smell of natural gas, Xinhua quoted a Urumqi official as saying.

Eid celebrated

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day as Saudi Arabia as per the decision of the International Moon Sighting Committee."

"There is no reason to celebrate Eid in Bangladesh two days after Saudi Arabia whereas the time difference between the two countries is only three hours," he added.

Each year followers of the Shureswar Darbar Sharif celebrate both the Eid-ul-Fitr and the Eid-ul-Azha following Saudi Arabian time.

The IMSC said followers of the Shureswar Darbar Sharif elsewhere in the country too celebrated Eid yesterday.

Our Madaripur correspondent reports around four thousand people including followers of the Shureswar Darbar Sharif celebrated Eid-ul-Azha yesterday. They said they have been celebrating Eids in accordance with Saudi Arabian time for the last 135 years.

23 troops

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along a highway near Puwakhola east of the capital Kathmandu.

"The 23 security personnel included an army captain and armed policemen," an army official told AFP.

"The clashes took place while the army was trying to remove landmines planted by the rebels," the official said. "We're waiting for news of the missing 16 security personnel who have yet to contact their base."

A Maoist commander said the rebels killed 20 soldiers and abducted 20 others. The local rebel commander confirmed that six Maoists were killed in the clash which he said lasted more than two hours.

Maoist leader Prachanda warned the government Wednesday it would "pay a heavy price" if it went ahead with long-delayed general elections in the poverty-hit kingdom.

The Maoists have been fighting since 1996 to topple the monarchy and install a communist republic in a conflict that has claimed more than 11,000 lives.

Violence has been rising in recent months since a pledge by Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba to hold long-delayed elections if the Maoists failed to agree to resume peace talks by January 13.

The deadline passed with the Maoists rejecting the call to come back to the negotiating table.

But Deuba is facing a hard time persuading coalition allies that the polls should go ahead before talks with the rebels who have said they would sabotage the election process.

The rebels are holding out for talks with King Gyanendra under international mediation focusing on their demand for elections for an assembly that would draft a fresh constitution. The constitution is seen aimed at establishing a communist republic.

Authorities have rejected their demands.

Deuba was appointed last year by the monarch with orders to call elections and hold talks with the rebels.

Gyanendra has been under mounting domestic and international pressure to restore democracy after dismissing parliament in 2002 amid political turmoil and spiralling rebel violence.

Bush begins

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11, 2001 attacks that transformed his time in office.</