

AL, allies plan

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alliance, JSD and NAP will launch a joint movement," Hasina told reporters at Zia International Airport before leaving for London.

She urged people to participate in the movement to be conducted in phases to realise the demands for reforms of the caretaker government system, the Election Commission (EC) and some electoral laws and regulations.

Hasina, also the president of the main opposition AL, said the government has to accept the reform proposals if it wants to ensure free and fair elections.

"The BNP realised what is people's power in 1996 and that they had to agree to the proposal of caretaker government," the AL chief said referring the opposition's mass upsurge against the previous BNP government.

Meanwhile, at a one-hour meeting yesterday, Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs Minister Barrister Moudud Ahmed discussed the opposition's reform proposals with Prime Minister Khaleda Zia at her office.

Talking to reporters at his office after the meeting, Moudud termed the opposition-placed proposals self-contradictory, unconstitutional, unrealistic, unnecessary, irrelevant, meaningless and intentional, among other epithets.

Considering the ruling party's attitude, opposition leaders said they have no alternative to launching a vigorous movement to force the government into accepting the proposals.

However, they are yet to chalk out the strategy and the programmes of the movement, as they have been busy for the last few months in drafting and finalising the reform agenda. But they already have started to discuss among them on the possible road map and hinted at beginning with a slow-space street agitation including mass contact to drum up popular support for the reform agenda.

"We will sit together soon to fix the strategy for realising our demands. We will launch agitation programmes taking people along with us," Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD) President Hasanul Haque Inu told The Daily Star yesterday.

AL General Secretary Abdul Jaiil said, "We will launch full-throated mass contact programme across the country to make our reform proposals credible to people."

From the very beginning, the ruling coalition has been rejecting of the opposition combine's demands for reforms of electoral system and the caretaker government system, terming them illogical and aimed at creating anarchy in the country.

On Friday, immediate after the mainstream opposition bloc formally announced its reform agenda, BNP Secretary General and LGRD and Co-operatives Minister Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan rejected it, saying it is aimed at hindering the smooth process of election.

Bitterly criticising the government attitude, the AL general secretary said it has become a custom for them to outright reject any opposition initiative, but finally they have to accept it.

"This time, people will also force the government to adopt the agenda and the next elections will be held after carrying out those reforms," he said with apparent conviction.

The JSD president also lambasted the government and said they [the ruling coalition] are behaving like an autocratic government, without considering the opposition's proposals.

11-PARTY DISCUSSES PRO-REFORM PROGRAMME
The left 11-party alliance yesterday at a meeting decided in principle to start a vigorous mass contact programme across the country to popularise the reform agenda. The alliance will hold rallies at district level and exchange opinion with the cross-section people, meeting sources said.

"We have just discussed on the various possible modes of the programme. We will finalise the decision later, after consulting with the other members of the opposition combine," Bimal Biswas, convenor of the alliance, told The Daily Star yesterday. The meeting was held at the Workers Party office.

He also said the left alliance will continue with its own programmes simultaneously.

The Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB), a component of the alliance, did not attend the meeting, protesting the alliance's decision to join with the AL in the movement for electoral reforms.

Two intl experts

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According to sources, the experts also recommended removing the drilling pad to a point far west from the endangered present location.

Earlier, the Canadian operator had submitted a design to conduct a new relief well drilling 250 metres off the present relief well that itself blew off before the operators could proceed anywhere near relieving the gas mine of a previous blowout.

The two international experts, one from the USA and another from Australia, gave their opinions recently when the Niko and the Bapex approached them for examining the drilling design.

The Niko first submitted the design on July 5 to the energy ministry seeking its approval to proceed for conducting a fresh drilling for a relief well to bring the flames at the gas field under control.

But the energy ministry had asked both the Niko and the Bapex to go for a third-party vetting of the design and work-plan before going for drilling a new relief well.

Other stakeholders, especially the locals who have to bear the brunt of the blaze—twice within six months—were skeptical about the fresh drilling before thoroughly checking its viability.

Advisor of the energy ministry Mahmudur Rahman yesterday confirmed that the experts made the new suggestion.

The latest blowout at the Tengratilla gas field occurred on June 24 during the drilling for a second well near the original production well that had exploded early January.

Mahmud said the government sought the third-party vetting since it wants to remove all sorts of uncertainty and skepticism over the fresh bid for drilling a third well in order to avert any further accident.

Sources said the Niko will now relocate its drilling pad from the present location in compliance with the opinion of the foreign experts. "This will delay the start of drilling for a fresh relief well, scheduled to be launched on July 24," said one of them.

Journos, staff observe 4hr token strike today

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Journalists and employees of all the newspapers and news agencies of the country observe today a four-hour symbolic strike from 11:00am to 3:00pm.

They will also hold a grand rally at the Jatiya Press Club and take out a procession to press home their seven-point demand.

The demands include immediate formation of the sixth wage board for the newspaper industry, declaration of 60 percent dearness allowance and full implementation of the fifth wage board award, said a press release yesterday.

A united forum of the journalists and employees, Sangbadik-Sramik-Karmachari Oikya Parishad has asked all colleagues to join the rally at 11:00am.

4 Indians

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hand grenades recovered from their possession.

Lt Colonel Mirza Monwar Reza, commanding officer of the 21 Battalion of Bangladesh Rifles (BDR), said yesterday a GrameenPhone (GP) cell phone was also recovered from the possession of Robin, apparently the leader of the group. The phone bearing number 0171-232106 received three messages just after their intrusion into Bangladesh, he said.

The messages were from separate GP numbers and in coded Khasi language, Reza said, adding that the army so far decoded the messages as simple instructions like "Leave the place/Come later to the Kalapahar/X is here/B alert," etc.

Meanwhile, following Friday's incident the BDR has beefed up its strength along the borders with Meghalaya, Tripura and Assam in Sylhet region.

Three cases were filed against the four on charges of illegally entering Bangladesh territory, possessing illegal firearms and grenades.

The arrested were sent to the Sylhet Central Jail yesterday evening.

2 more bodies

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Police have identified them as Kabir, 40, helper of the bus, of Burimari and Raquiful Islam, 32, of Aditmari in Lalmonirhat.

The derailed engine and coaches are yet to be lifted back on tracks despite efforts by Bangladesh Railway (BR).

The relief train that reached the spot at Mondolherat on Friday noon was continuing its rescue operation until yesterday evening.

Road links between Lalmonirhat and other parts of the country resumed on Friday evening, but railway communications remained suspended until yesterday afternoon.

No test needed

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Country's 2,425 government and non-government colleges have some 3 lakh 60 thousand seats for enrolment in class XI while the number of successful candidates in this year's SSC examination stood at 3 lakh 94 thousand and 993.

Additional Secretary of the Education Ministry Ashabur Rahman, chairman of Dhaka, Chittagong, Rajshahi, Barisal, Madrasah and technical education boards, principals of different colleges of the capital, officials of education ministry and the Directorate of Secondary and Higher Secondary Education, among others, attended the meeting.

Forex reserves

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increased by Tk .10 from the previous day, standing at Tk 64.40.

Due to this scarcity and dearthness of dollar many a bank has been failing to meet their letter of credit (LC) obligations, causing serious damage to the country's reputation and ability for securing future import contracts. The situation prompted a leading business chamber last week to request the BB to release foreign currency quickly before the current dollar crisis further dents the country's image abroad.

A central bank high official said the coalition government started with around \$1 billion foreign forex reserve, which now stands around \$3 billion. But, he said, the amount is not enough to meet the requirements and demands.

On the other hand, under the present circumstances, there is not much scope for the reserve level to rise further, the official said.

During the previous BNP regime, in 1994-95, the forex reserve was around \$3.5 billion, which was quite adequate for that time, said the BB official, adding, to gain that adequacy now we need at least \$7 to 8 billion.

It is the reason why the central bank is exercising caution in releasing foreign currency and why the finance minister rejected the business community's plea to bail out the banks by providing forex to them, he explained.

5 AK47s

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The security forces arrested 30 criminals, mostly intruders, in Bandarban this year. They have launched a month-long combing operation against arms smuggling in the frontier areas. "The operation will continue," said an army source.

Disqualified firm

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for the power deals while some PDB and ministry officials bagged several million.

In November last year, the PDB floated a two-stage bidding process for the Chandpur plant in which five companies participated with technical proposals. Three bidders, including Harbin, were found responsive at the first stage although PDB's bid criterion was supposed to disqualify Harbin.

The criterion asked the bidder to have 10 years' experience in the power sector and experience as a lead contractor of having successfully designed, inspected, supplied, tested, built and commissioned at least one 90MW combined cycle power plant outside its country of origin.

Harbin's bid documents show that it has worked as a consortium partner with the General Electric (GE) of USA in the Uch power plant in Pakistan. GE designed and supplied the main plant as the lead contractor while Harbin worked as a sub-contractor.

Harbin had submitted the same documents in its bid for the Fenchuganj 90MW power project.

Sources said, Harbin was declared technically qualified because of the role of a PDB executive engineer against whom a departmental action is being initiated for previously approving a low quality gas booster for Harbin's Tongji plant.

After technically qualifying Harbin, CMEC and BHEL, the PDB asked the bidders to submit both the technical and financial offers in one envelope by June 28, which BHEL and CMEC obliged but Harbin did not. In its cover letter, Harbin said the technical proposal provided at the first stage is still valid.

However, any offer made at the first stage stands legally obsolete at the second stage.

An inside source pointed out, "Harbin has tactfully offered less

than required spare parts worth about \$10-15 million in its technical offer. Without these parts, the plant cannot operate for even a year or two. It seems that Harbin plans to impose this cost on the PDB later on during the operation and maintenance period."

Another industry operator explains, "Because the technical offer stands legally invalid, Harbin may provide low quality equipment and grossly deviate from the standards sought by the PDB. Ultimately the PDB will be left with a junk plant that does not properly generate power."

Normally in power plant bids, the price differences between bidders are not very sharp. Again, price offers of two companies from the same country are supposed to be very close. But in the case of the Chandpur bid, the \$11 million price difference between the Chinese companies Harbin and CMEC raised questions among all power sector operators.

The CMEC in a protest to PDB said Regulation 31 under the procedures for implementation of the Public Procurement Regulation 2003 clearly states that there is no such provision for accommodating deviations from the norms prescribed under the two stage tendering process.

The CMEC urged the PDB to maintain transparency and to uphold the fairness of the bid evaluation process by disqualifying Harbin as it failed to meet the minimum required condition of the bid.

The CMEC noted, "Otherwise we will be left with no option but...protecting our legitimate business interest, including exercising available legal options to ensure a fair playing field for all the participating bidders."

Once awarded the power project will need 18-24 months to complete.

'Suicide' blast kills 4 in Turkey

REUTERS, Izmir

A suicide bomber is believed to have triggered a blast which ripped through a minibus in a western Turkish resort yesterday, killing four people and injuring 14, officials and news reports said.

Five British nationals were seriously injured in the minibus blast. There were no immediate claims of responsibility for the blast, the second in the region within a week. Kurdish militants said they carried out a bomb attack on July 10, which injured 20.

Television footage of the scene showed the top of the minibus had been blown off by the force of the blast, which occurred around 10.30 a.m. (0730 GMT) as the vehicle travelled past a square in the town of Kusadasi on the way to a beach, local officials said.

Kusadasi, some 70km from the port city of Izmir, is popular with Turkish and foreign tourists.

Britain's Foreign Office said five British nationals were seriously injured in the blast. Consular officials were with the injured in hospital and a senior honorary consul was on his way to Kusadasi from Izmir, a Foreign Office spokesman said.

State-run Anatolian news agency said five Britons were badly hurt in the explosion. It said two of the dead were women.

Authorities tightened security in the region following the blast, calling on police to look out for suspicious packages in crowded public areas.

Authorities a female suicide bomber was killed in the attack and police suspected plastic explosives were used, according to the NTV news channel said.

"There is a possibility of the explosives being in a package. We are also considering the possibility of a suicide bomber," local governor Mustafa Malay told Anatolian.

Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan sent his condolences and sympathy to the victims of the blast.

"This is always what we worried about. Our security forces are taking all measures but it is impossible to have 100 percent (security)," he told reporters.

Kurdish rebels, Islamist radicals and leftist militants have all carried out bomb attacks in Turkey in the past.

A Kurdish rebel group calling itself the Kurdistan Liberation Hawks (TAK) claimed responsibility for a bomb attack in the nearby resort of Cesme on July 10 in which 20 people were injured, including two foreign tourists.

Flood

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workers toiling to stop seepage of floodwater.

About 50,000 people were reported marooned in 10 unions in Lalmonirhat district as the Teesta, Dharala and Brahmaputra rivers swelled further at different points.

Five upazilas under Tangail district have been hard hit by the flash flood. The affected upazilas are Tangail sadar, Bhuapur, Delduar, Nagapur and Kalihati where some 20,000 people are marooned.

Over 200 families of the affected areas were forced to leave their houses as the floods engulfed more areas in the district.

Standing crops including aus and aman paddy on about 10,000 acres of land have gone under water. The floods also washed away fish from hundreds of ponds.

Our correspondent reports from Bogra: More areas in Sariakandi and Dhunat upazilas were inundated yesterday due to rise in the water levels of Jamuna and Ichhamati rivers amid incessant rain and onrush of water from the upstream side.

In Dhunat, a 30-metre portion of a grove was washed away yesterday, inundating houses and crop fields in the villages of Goshabari and Bhandarbari unions.

Meanwhile, flood situation has seen a little improvement in Sherpur district with water receding from Nalitabari and Jhinaigati upazilas. The flood caused damage to the flood control embankment in Vogai and Chelakhali.

Road communication between Sherpur and Jamalpur was restored yesterday after remaining snapped for two days.

Sources in the Department of Public Health and Engineering said about 25 percent of the tube-wells have gone under water in flood-hit areas, causing a great crisis of fresh water.

Health Directorate sources yesterday said 191 people, mostly children, died of diarrhoeal diseases across the country this year. About 4.73 lakh patients have also received treatment at different district and upazila hospitals and health complexes.

The government has so far deployed 4,180 medical teams in over 41 districts to provide medical treatment to the sick.

Diarrhoea has affected 128 people in Chandpur, 99 in Noakhali, 68 in Dinajpur, 66 in Jessore and 60 in Thakurgaon in the last 24 hours until 6:00pm yesterday.

Govt to import

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set up more driving training institutes and improve standard of passenger service were also discussed, meeting sources said.

The communications minister warned that if any BRTC officials or employees stole resources or embezzled money, they would be fired and their property confiscated for compensation.

The meeting observed that bus services on Dhaka-Agartala route has improved following issuance of multiple visas. It also proposed to increase the number of BRTC buses on Dhaka-Kolkata route.

PM's Japan visit very productive

Says Morshed Khan

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Foreign Minister (FM) M Morshed Khan yesterday termed Prime Minister (PM) Khaleda Zia's recent visit to Japan "very productive" and "a milestone" in the history of Bangladesh-Japan bilateral ties.

"I am confident that Japan, which is the single largest bilateral donor and investor, might come up in much bigger way for economic and infrastructure development in Bangladesh in the days to come," he said at a press briefing yesterday on the outcome of PM's July 11-15 Japan tour.

The prime minister's Bangladesh and Japan discussed bilateral issues, had fruitful discussion on sub-regional, regional and international affairs and agreed to work together on all these issues, he said.

Morshed Khan said the Japan government conveyed its intention to give due consideration to the construction of the Padma Bridge, underground railway, solid waste treatment plant, sewerage treatment plant, power sector development, improvement of ports and other major infrastructure.

The Japan government also agreed to enhance official develop-

ment assistance, trade and economic cooperation, he said, adding that signing agreement between Japan International Training Cooperation Organisation (JITCO) and the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment of Bangladesh is a remarkable achievement of this tour.

Japan will take Bangladesh trainees on payment basis for around 60 types of technical jobs in private companies and provide them one to five years' training for enhancing their expertise.

The FM said that around 250-300 top investors expressed their willingness to invest in auto-parts manufacturing, artificial fibre, leather and many other sectors in Bangladesh.

Around 20 top company executives who met Khaleda Zia offered to construct port and improve the facilities of existing ports in Bangladesh for easing export and import in Bangladesh, he added.

On a question about the reforms in the United Nations Security Council, Morshed Khan said, "We prefer UN reforms on consensus instead of voting."

Rohingya camps

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water. We do not know what will really happen to us," wailing Arafat added.

Like Arafat, nearly 12,000 Rohingyas who are not officially recognised as refugees, are now spending their days at the makeshift camp at Dordomdia Kerontoli in Teknaf.

Official statistics of the local authorities, however, shows that 6,032 people from 1,470 families are living there.

To escape repression by the Myanmar military junta, nearly 2,50,000 Rohingyas came to Bangladesh since 1991, among whom 2,36,490 were repatriated to Myanmar, according to official statistics.

Local authorities, however, claim that actual number of the refugees is two times higher while more than a lakh, who are apparently missing, have integrated themselves with the local community.

People who have entered into Bangladesh since 1994, are not registered as refugees according to the Geneva Convention, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) says.

They can not go back to their home while the Bangladesh government does not want them here anymore. The UN agency can not give them shelter in the two government administered camps—Nayapara camp in Teknaf and Kutupalong camp of Ukhia where around 20,000 people are still waiting for repatriation.

"Nobody looks after us. There is no government official, no United Nations staff. We are left alone," said Laiba Begum, 24, a widow and mother of two children. Her husband died of diarrhoea four years back.

The refugees who infiltrated during the last ten years have not stayed in official camps. Having no relief cards, they manage their daily meals by selling labour in the local market. Some have managed rickshaws, some turned into hawkers, and some others have become beggars while some female refugees are even forced to sell sex.

Quoting Marie Stopes, a clinic that works on HIV and AIDS across the country, the UNO said nearly 600 female refugees have become engaged in the sex trade, posing serious threat to public health.

Women at the unofficial camp said their area goes under water when it rains and they cannot cook food. Besides, there is no drinking

water and sanitation. Abdur Rahim, who entered Bangladesh in 1991 as single, has now ten children. "The birth rate as well as the maternal and infant mortality rate in the camp is very high," a government official said.

"The situation has to be dealt with on a very urgent basis because there is any humanitarian disaster. The health of children and women is very crucial at this camp. They have to be moved urgently to safer places," said Esko Kentrschynskyj, ambassador and head of the delegation of the European Commission (EC) to Bangladesh on his visit to the makeshift camp last Friday.

"They live in low-lying areas. As it is rainy season something needs to be done just now," said David Sproule, Canadian High Commissioner to Bangladesh who visited the spot along with five other diplomats from Italy, Norway, Australia and United States.

"The situation is really very bad. The area may be washed away any time and a large number of people will die. To save their lives we have to act soon," Christopher Beng Cha Lee, UNHCR representative in Bangladesh said.

But the local authorities, concerned over the law and order downside in the area for which the Rohingya refugees are largely blamed, show reluctance to give them shelter.

"The refugees are grabbing land in the area, destroying huge plantation. They shelter illegal outsiders and criminals and bring in arms through the hilly border areas. A good number of refugees are engaged in various criminal activities including drug business," said Shajahan Chowdhury, a ruling party lawmaker from Cox's Bazar.

"The presence of such a large number of refugees has become a grave threat to us," the lawmaker added.

With pledge to give financial support from the EC, Esko Kentrschynskyj said, "Repatriation of the refugees is the best solution and it has to be done on voluntary basis. If it does not work we have to look for durable solution like local integration or settlement."

Esko expressed optimism that Bangladesh will try to find a solution that is both effective and human.

3 'London bombers'

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appealed for new leads in a fast-moving investigation which has so far linked Britain, Egypt and Pakistan.

Mohammad Sidique Khan, 30, and Shehzad Tanweer, 22, came together in November 2004, arriving at Karachi Airport, and returned to Britain in early February, the officials said on condition of anonymity.

Hasib Hussain, 18, the youngest of the three Pakistani Britons, came separately on an undisclosed occasion last year, also to Karachi, and went back to Britain shortly afterwards, the officials added.

The officials said they had not been able to trace the three men's movements while they were in Pakistan.

Intelligence officials had earlier revealed that Shehzad Tanweer, one of the three British-born bombers of Pakistani origin, had visited Faisalabad and Lahore during his two trips to Pakistan over the past two years.

"We are interrogating whether these two people (detained in Lahore) had any links with Tanweer," an intelligence official told Reuters. But he gave no details.

The security agencies are probing Tanweer's links with militant groups and madrassas, or Islamic schools, in Pakistan.

Agents of two security agencies yesterday questioned teachers, students and other staff of Manzoor-ul-Islam, a madrasa in Lahore which

Tanweer was thought to have visited in 2004.

The madrasa is connected to al-Qaeda-linked Jaish-e-Mohammad (Army of Mohammad) group.

An intelligence official said security agents questioned people in the madrasa for several hours, but it was unknown whether it yielded any leads.

Officials at the madrasa were not immediately available for comment.

Pakistani intelligence officials say Tanweer met Osama Nazir, a member of the Jaish-e-Mohammad, in Faisalabad in 2003.

Nazir was arrested last December for the 2002 bombing of a church in Islamabad that killed two Americans among others.

The intelligence officials say Tanweer, 22, made a second visit to Pakistan in late 2004 and had stayed in Lahore from December until last February, during which time he visited several mosques and madrassas.

Meanwhile, British Prime Minister Tony Blair called yesterday for a hearts and minds struggle against the "evil ideology" of al-Qaeda as the death toll from last week's London suicide bombings rose to 55.

Blair called for a battle of ideas against what he called the fanatical beliefs and perversion of religion behind the London attacks and others around the world by the militant Islamist al-Qaeda network. (AFP, Reuters)