

Blasts to harm Bangladesh's, image, says US diplomat

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

US Charge d'affaires in Dhaka Judith Chammas yesterday said the August 17 serial blasts in Bangladesh will call into question Bangladesh's image as a moderate Muslim-majority nation and suggested the government should seriously address the matter.

Judith Chammas, who now heads the US embassy in Dhaka, made these remarks emerging from a meeting with Foreign Minister M Morshed Khan at his office.

Chammas said they discussed the possibility of US assistance in the investigation of the August 17 bombings. "It is a very serious situation and I believe the Bangladesh government should address it in a serious way," she added.

When asked if the US would send FBI agents to investigate the

AUSTERITY MEASURES FOR GOVT OFFICIALS

Entertainment, fuel money to be halved

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The government will halve entertainment and fuel allowances of government officials, including ministers, as part of its austerity measures to ease pressure on the national economy due to the recent petroleum price spike in the global market.

Finance Minister M Saifur Rahman was supposed to discuss the issue with the prime minister (PM) yesterday evening, Saifur told reporters after a meeting of the cabinet committee on economic affairs yesterday. If the PM approves, the decision will be implemented soon, he added.

The committee also decided to hand over the Food Department's

land and store in Halishahar, Chittagong, to the Bangladesh Export Processing Zones Authority (Bepza). The Bepza will have to pay the government Tk 340 crore in four installments for this.

Measures, including cutting foreign trips of ministers and government officials to bring down government expenditure and shutting down shops and commercial complexes after 8:00pm, to offset pressure on the national economy were proposed to the PM.

Rejecting outright the proposal of the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industries (FBCCI) to make Sunday the weekly holiday, Saifur said if offices are kept open on Fridays, weekly holidays will in fact rise to

three days.

"On Fridays government officials will start taking preparations for the Juma payers at 12, have lunch and then will tell others, 'Let's go home'. There will be no work," he explained.

In support of the government decision for Friday and Saturday as weekly holidays, he said, "It is the era of fax, Internet and dot com, so, even when the international market is closed it is possible to place and receive orders."

On business people's opposition to the government decision, Saifur said, "In a democratic society, I will assent while you will dissent. Without this, we will go back to the Baksal regime."

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Uncertainty goes as Sri Lanka reaffirms joining

REZAUL KARIM

Uncertainty over holding of the 13th Saarc summit in Dhaka scheduled for November 12-13 has been removed with Sri Lanka reaffirming participation in the summit despite its presidential election around that time.

The August 17 bomb blasts across the country, assassination of Sri Lankan foreign minister Lakshman Kadirgamar and presidential election in that country had made the twice-postponed summit somewhat uncertain.

Diplomatic sources in Dhaka told The Daily Star the Sri Lankan government yesterday reaffirmed that President Chandrika Kumaratunga would attend the summit.

Kumaratunga's participation was confirmed by Sri Lankan Foreign Secretary HMGS Palihakkara in telephonic talks with

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SAARC MEET

List of suspected people sought from members

Border security upped to block terrorists

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The government has sought lists from the Saarc states of people or groups posing threat to their leaders scheduled to attend the 13th summit of the South Asian regional body in Dhaka in November.

The home ministry yesterday ordered strengthening border security to check infiltration by foreign criminals or terrorists into Bangladesh to avoid security-related disturbance during the summit, which was postponed twice, lastly in February on security grounds.

Activities of foreigners, especially those from the Saarc nations, who are now in Bangladesh or will arrive

during the summit on November 12-13, will also come under close watch.

Although the August 17 country-wide blasts have brought the security issue into sharp focus, the government says it sees no security threat.

"No, I don't think there is any threat," State Minister for Home Affairs Lutfozzaman Babar said yesterday, emerging out of a home ministry meeting on Saarc (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) security.

But he continued, "And if there is any (threat), we're preparing ourselves accordingly."

Asked about security measures during the summit, Babar denied to detail fresh steps, but said, "In fact,

we're preparing ourselves in order to face any kind of situation."

Babar also ruled out any threat by banned Islamist militant outfit Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), held responsible for the August 17 blasts, and outlawed Janajuddha. He claimed a few days ago both the organisations have joined hands to carry out attacks on important establishments.

The minister however said, "We're working on it."

The Saarc security meeting attended by the chiefs of different security and law enforcement agencies and forces also discussed detailed security arrangements to make it foolproof.

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AUG 17 BLASTS

Investigators still grope for masterminds

SHARIFUL ISLAM

The probe into the August 17 country-wide blasts seems to stall as investigators are finding it almost impossible to get significant clues which may reveal the motive and detect the masterminds of the attacks.

Some of the 300 suspects arrested in connection with the explosions have confessed to having links to the attacks. But they barely can name the leaders of their

immediate upper tier, leave alone the masterminds, sources in the intelligence agencies said.

"We need to arrest the leaders of the next tier for further developments. But it seems very tough as the arrestees can hardly identify their immediate senior leaders," said an investigator asking not to be named.

Those who have admitted to having links to the blasts, which killed three people and wounded over 100, are members of the

banned Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) and Jagrata Muslim Janata, Bangladesh (JMJB). According to the confessions, they carried out the attacks at the call of JMB chief Abdur Rahman.

The home ministry at a recent meeting has discussed intelligence agency reports that said JMB and outlawed Janajuddha were involved in the blasts.

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14-party calls hartal for Sept 18

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The main opposition Awami League (AL), 11-Party alliance, Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD-Inu) and National Awami Party yesterday announced a countrywide dawn-to-dusk hartal for September 18 demanding withdrawal of the increased price of fuel and protesting price hike of essentials.

In a press release signed by AL General Secretary Abdul Jaill, the combined opposition also announced programmes of rallies

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HUMAN DEVELOPMENT INDEX

Dhaka slips one notch down, last in S Asia

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Bangladesh has ranked 139th among 177 countries in the Human Development Index (HDI) prepared by United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) with success in reducing child mortality and creating scope of education.

Although the UNDP report appreciated Bangladesh for its success in some social areas,

including expansion of health facilities and income generation for women, the country still ranks the lowest among the seven countries of South Asia, slipping from the 138th position of last year.

The report said active partnership of civil society, proper utilisation of foreign aid, expansion of health facilities and creating scope for education have put Bangladesh

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Bus fare set to go up 18pc

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A government committee tasked with re-fixing bus fares yesterday recommended around 18 percent rise in the wake of fuel price hike and threats of strike by transport owners' bodies.

The committee at a meeting at Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) office recom-

mended increasing the 72-paisa bus fare per kilometre to 85 paisa and 75-paisa minibus fare to 88 paisa per kilometre.

Chaired by BRTA Chairman MA Momen, the meeting sent its recommendation to the communications ministry, which would submit it to the cabinet for approval.

The transport owners and

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PHOTO: STAR

Plying of heavy vehicles has left Kantasar Road in the city's Mohammadpur in a dilapidated condition, creating tremendous hazard to the locals' life.