

Iran calls Israel 'flag of Satan'

AFP, Tehran

Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on Saturday described arch-foe Israel as "the flag of Satan" and said the Jewish state was destined to fall apart, the official IRNA news agency reported.

"The Zionist regime is the flag bearer of violation and occupation and this regime is the flag of Satan," Ahmadinejad told an international religious conference in Tehran.

"It is not unlikely that this regime be on the path to dissolution and deterioration when the philosophy behind its creation and survival is invalid," he said.

His comments came in the wake of a 30-billion-dollar arms deal between Israel and the United States which explicitly mentioned the threat of a "resurgent" Iran.

Washington and Israel, which is widely considered to be the Middle East's sole if undeclared nuclear power, are increasingly alarmed by Iran's nuclear programme, which they suspect is a cover to develop atomic weapons.

Tehran insists the programme is for peaceful, civilian energy purposes.

"The United States understands that Israel lives in an increasingly dangerous region... where Iran is resurgent, where Iran is seeking a nuclear capability, where it is seeking to expand its conventional power," US Under Secretary of State Nicholas Burns said before signing the memorandum of understanding for the aid package in Jerusalem on Thursday.

"There is now a nexus of cooperation between Iran, Syria, Hezbollah... and other groups that are responsible for conflict in this region," including the Palestinian Islamist movement Hamas, Burns said.

With current US defence aid to

Israel standing at 2.4 billion dollars a year, the new package will raise the value of assistance by 600 million dollars annually on average, officials said.

Iran is also the ostensible reason for Washington's controversial plans to install a missile defence system in eastern Europe, a move which has sparked fierce condemnation from Russia.

The US military wants to build a radar station in the Czech Republic and a launching site in Poland with 10 long-range interceptors capable of shooting down missiles.

It claims the system would defend Europe against attack from limited missile strikes by smaller military powers such as Iran.

Ahmadinejad claimed on Thursday that if deployed, the US system would threaten all of Asia.

"Such a plan goes beyond threatening one country. It concerns most of the continent, Asia," he said at a summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), according to a translation by organisers.

Iran has observer status in the SCO, which comprises China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

Iran consistently refuses to recognise Israel's right to exist in the Middle East, and Ahmadinejad sparked outrage in the international community when he said Israel should be "wiped off the map" shortly after coming to power in 2005.

In June he said a "countdown" had begun that would end with Lebanese and Palestinian militants destroying Israel. His government last year hosted a conference on the Holocaust, questioning the German Nazi genocide of the Jews during World War II.

Community-based

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indicates a fall of the same length. At the household level, volunteers receive SMS daily which they communicate to their neighbours for early flood warning.

Billboards have been put up, and leaflets distributed, in schools, haats/bazars, and other public places in the area, to make people aware of how to interpret the early flood warnings.

"The approach is totally people-centred and locally based. Villagers themselves have defined the signs and symbols, through Focus Group Discussions (FGD)," said Mollah Md Awlad Hossain.

"The home-grown, community-based early warning strategies have helped save a lot of lives in cyclone prone areas in Bangladesh, but this is the first time they are being applied to flood plains in our country. In many other countries of the world, such as England, the Philippines, China, and the Lower Mekong Basin, they have been successfully applied over much larger regions than our pilot area, and have saved a lot of lives," Hassan added.

The CFIS project has been

funded by the Office of US Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA), but CEGIS is currently searching for donors to fund the continuation of the project once the OFDA funding ends next year.

According to CEGIS studies, CFIS is suitable for exact replication in 200 out of a total 640 upazilas in the country, of which more than 60 per cent are highly vulnerable to riverine floods. The estimates show that for the first three years of project implementation, a one-time investment of about \$10,000-20,000 per upazila will be required.

"It is entirely feasible on a national level, provided the necessary funds and government support are available. In fact, we are hoping that eventually some designated government body will take over the monitoring and implementation of the project. This sort of approach to early flood warning has the potential to significantly reduce loss of lives and properties in the event of floods," said Giasuddin Ahmed Choudhury, executive director of CEGIS.

Businesspeople

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Bangladesh at its auditorium in Dhaka.

It is not possible to lower prices of essentials by imposing strict measures only, he said adding that for the grater interest of the nation, everyone should make sacrifices.

The BB is yet to implement its cautionary measures of its monetary policy and from time to time, it relaxes the policy and directs all banks to cut interest rates for a temporary period of time to encourage import of a few essential commodities, explained the BB governor.

He said the BB directive for setting 12 percent interest rate on bank loans for importing 10 essential items will not have any negative impact on the banking sector as the banks disburse only 2 to 3 percent of their total loan for import of these items.

The central bank governor's topic of speech at the programme was titled The Roadmap to Financial System Standards for Middle Income Bangladesh.

In his speech, he hoped that Bangladesh could become a middle-income country by 2015 if it maintains the present economic growth.

Restructuring, corporatisation and eventual privatisation as appropriate will relieve the public sector of draining out of its scarce resources, which should allow it to invest prudently on urgent infrastructures for an accelerated growth, he said.

The policy strategy that has

been initiated by the present caretaker government will not only help the economy to grow by 7 percent, but also will pave the way for Bangladesh to become a middle income country by 2015.

He, however, said faster GDP (Gross Domestic product) growth consistent with the poverty reduction goals would not be met unless the extent and quality of financial intermediates in Bangladesh advance significantly.

"In particular, this would require more competitive banking and non-banking sectors -- capable of reaching out to all sections of the community, rural and urban, catering to all types of marketable financial services," Ahmed advised, adding, to become a middle-income country, Bangladesh's financial sector must follow the internationally accepted norms and standards more effectively.

He observed that the Bangladesh financial sector is still lagging behind in comparison with many emerging economies in terms of several indicators such as financial deepening, accounting and auditing standards.

Prof Sirajul Islam, chief editor of Bangladesh, chaired the programme. Prof Sufia Ahmed, wife of late Barrister Syed Ishtiaq Ahmed, Prof Dulal Bhoumik, secretary of Asiatic Society of Bangladesh were present among others.

Ramadan price

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international and domestic reasons for the rising price of essentials. They referred to rising international prices of rice (15.92 per cent in FY06-07), wheat (35.4 per cent) and palm oil (28.09 per cent), while domestically rice prices went up by 9 per cent, wheat by 19.6 per cent, and palm oil by 33 per cent in the corresponding period.

FAO's prediction of a continuous fall in production, complete halt or a temporary stop to wheat and lentil also contributed to the price rise, said the chief adviser's press secretary.

The government has taken a number of measures to rein in prices like selectively cutting tariffs and proposed the introduction of OMS and opening up of five new wholesale markets. It has also planned opening of 200 BDR-run 'fair price' outlets in 32 districts throughout the country, he said.

Munaim, however, dismissed the possibility of a food crisis or a famine, saying that the government has adequate food storage to prevent such a situation.

Flood to worsen

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swelled further, the water levels of the Brahmaputra, Jamuna and the Padma rose again."

He, however, added that during the last two days the water level rose by 24-25cm but yesterday the water level rose only 6cm. The FFWC said it would be able to say in 24 hours when the flood situation would improve.

Meanwhile, Indian Meteorological Department forecasts that the ongoing rainfall is likely to subside from today (Sunday).

The diarrhoea situation remains grim in the country with around 3,400 people newly infected with the water-borne disease yesterday. With these fresh cases, the number of diarrhoea patients now stands at 58,364 since July 30. Besides, 1,074 were infected with respiratory tract infections, 1,301 with skin diseases, 398 with eye infection.

At least 17 drowned in floodwaters across the country yesterday raising the death toll to 554 since July 30. Diarrhoea Monitoring Cell reported. A child died of diarrhoea in Faridpur Friday night, our Faridpur correspondent reported.

Six people suffered snakebites across the country yesterday.

Govt asked

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has expanded its agenda, I think the next election will not be held in 2008 and even in 2010."

Awami League Advisory Council Member ASHK Sadique said due to the government's policy, one (Khaleda) has been allowed to hold teleconferences and others are allowed to hold motorcycle rallies during the emergency while another (Hasina) is not getting such opportunities.

President of Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce and Industry Latifur Rahman said, "As a citizen of the country I think the government should treat all in a balanced way."

He however believed that the election would be held within the government's announced schedule.

General Secretary of Communist Party of Bangladesh Mujahidul Islam Salim demanded withdrawal of ban on political activities.

The speakers also suggested that the government check whether national interest is compromised before taking loans from the World Bank and the IMF.

BBC Bangla Service in association with the BBC World Service Trust organised the programme at Bangladesh-China Friendship Conference Centre. BBC's Masud Hasan Khan moderated the event produced by Waliur Rahman Miraz.

Frozen food

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Of the 16 defaulters, four belong to the Sonali Bank. They are Bangladesh Seafood Ltd (Tk 6.45 crore), Lockpur Fish Processing Co (Tk 18.18 crore), Star Seafood Ind (Tk 5.32 crore) and Coastal Seafood Ltd (Tk 8.90 crore).

Bangladesh Krishi Bank is dealing with four defaulters. They are Amin Fish Farms and Industries (Tk 10.51 crore), Frozen Food Ltd (Tk 10.56 crore), Bangladesh Frozen Fish and Frog legs Ltd (Tk 1.27 crore) and Sundarban Sea Food Industry (Tk 3.09 crore).

Five exporters-- Conception Seafood (Tk 12.42 crore), International Frozen Ltd (Tk 0.39 crore), International Sea Food Ltd (Tk 7.36 crore), Mahi Fish Processing Ltd (Tk 22.27 crore) and Salkhira Foods Ltd (Tk 7 crore)-- are defaulters of Agrani Bank.

Aqua Foods Ltd (Tk 7.38 crore) and Bionic Seafood Export (Tk 0.45 crore) are two defaulters of Rupali Bank.

Janata Bank is dealing with a Tk 4.44 crore loan against Prince Sea Foods.

While the finance ministry is so accommodative about waiving large-scale loans, a few weeks ago an 85-year old poor farmer in Nilphamari was being taken to jail for not being able to pay back his paltly bank loan of Tk 9,000.

The army chief later paid off the loan to leave the farmer.

City roads or moon

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Highways Department (RHD) about the death traps lurking along the Dhaka-Tongi highway.

The Daily Star also published several pictures of the rundown Dhaka-Tongi highway, but the RHD paid no heed. The potholes on the waterlogged road near Abdullahpur crossing at Uttara have grown larger by now and taken the shape of a ditch as hundreds of heavy vehicles continue to ply on it.

A bus driver said it is getting more and more difficult to drive on the highway while trying to get around the huge craters -- evidently resulting in huge traffic congestion.

Dhaka City Corporation has recorded numerous reports of washed away roads. In Zone 7, potholes have been reported on the part of road stretching from Mirpur Mazar Road to Selina General Hospital, road from SOS Shishu Polli to Shyamoli No 2, intersection of Darussalam Road and Mirpur road, Ibrahimpur main road, and road from Kazipara via Shewrapara to Kafrul.

In Zone 3, many roads including Pilkhana Road, Orphanage Road, Shayesta Khan Road, Chawk Circular, Haranath Ghosh Road and Bakhshibazar Road are severely damaged.

Damaged roads in Zone 6 include Nurjahan Road, Jakir Hossain Road, Mirpur Road, Indira Road, Baitul Aman main road, Pisciculture main road and roads in Lalmatia Block D.

Many areas in Zone 1 including Swamibagh, Joy kali Mondir, Jatrabari, Doyaganj, Narinda, Sayedabad, Gandaria, Wari, are full of roads with potholes. Tipu Sultan Road and the road stretching from Maniknagar crossing via Janapath Road to Dhalpur are also in a terrible state.

Poorly maintained roads in Zone 4 include the road from Mugda to Titipara stadium, Kamapur main road stretching from rail terminal to Titipara stadium, VIP roads of Motijheel, road from Malibagh crossing to Kamapur rail terminal, and roads of Basabo, Madartek and Khilgaon.

In Zone 9, numerous roads in Gulshan, Banani, Tejgaon and Badda, especially Gulshan-Badda Link Road developed deep craters.

Currently Dhaka City Corporation is responsible for maintaining a road network of 1860 kilometres in the city while RHD is the responsible for inter-city roads. In an ideal situation, roads should add upto 25 percent of a city area. For over one crore commuters of Dhaka, only 6 percent of its area is paved with roads.

Both engineers and contractors working under DCC admitted that the quality is compromised during road construction to minimise a contractor's loss. The DCC rates are simply ridiculous, said a DCC contractor, adding, "DCC has no idea of market price for bitumen or bricks."

Another DCC contractor on condition of anonymity told The Daily Star that apart from DCC's absurd 'rate quote', Public Procurement Regulation has also become an obstacle to building quality roads.

Get closer fast

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Tissa Vituarana, Bangladesh High Commissioner to Sri Lanka Shahadat Hossain were, among others, present at the opening function.

Termining South Asia home of poverty, Prof Yunus pointed out a shocking income disparity in the present world order-- a divide that many pundits see as a major cause of conflicts. He said some 60 percent of global population get only 6 percent of total global income. In Asia, he said, India, China and Indonesia constitute 45 percent of the global population but get only 9 percent of total income.

He said the poor people are not responsible for creating poverty but it is the system and policy that are to blame for this curse.

"The system that creates poverty cannot remove poverty... We've to go back to system and take up seeds from the system responsible for poverty," he told the media conference.

Yunus, who won the Nobel for Peace for his micro-credit scheme, said micro-credit cannot work successfully under political government or its policy as he observed the political government system and micro-credit have got "bad chemistry".

He said if a political government tries to implement micro-credit scheme to reduce poverty, then political issue overrides the poverty issue. He cited examples from some South Asian countries where the political government wanted to do it but the level of achievement is not encouraging.

Citing the rate of poverty reduction in Bangladesh, the Nobel laureate said his Grameen Bank is providing small credits to 80 percent of the poor families and the figure can reach 100 percent over the next four years if his bank and NGOs work together.

Under the previous guideline, DCC contractors used to follow 'Form 2911' and they were required to deposit 2.5 percent of the earnest money. Whereas, now, under the Public Procurement Regulation, not only 3 percent security money is required, another 10 percent performance guarantee fee is required for a contractor prior to starting any construction work.

In most cases, the contractors end up compromising the quality of work by using sub-standard materials.

In developed countries, MS rods, cement and stone chips are used to build roads in a method called "rigid pavement". However, "flexible pavement" method is still being used in road construction in Bangladesh where bitumen, sand and macadam are used. The "rigid pavement" is expensive, but can withstand heavy rainfall, explained a number of DCC engineers.

One square metre of bituminous "flexible pavement" costs Tk 382 as opposed to Tk 3,000 for a square metre of "rigid pavement".

EC's move

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they are to contest the general election, stipulates the roadmap that came in the wake of political parties, civil society and the donor agencies calling for some kind of timeframe for the polls.

Once the electoral system is reformed, the political parties will have to go through a massive overhaul to register with the EC.

The commission on April 5 came up with a set of proposals for electoral reforms. The previous day, the CEC met the law adviser and asked for withdrawal of the ban on indoor politics. But the government did not respond to the request.

Reform talks

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reforms issue," he said.

Replying a question, Hannan said Khaleda Zia is not afraid of arrest. Those who are in government can take any action in any situation. Quoting Khaleda, her adviser also said she will face everything in a legal way.

Criticising the government, Hannan said the BNP chief wanted to visit Lalbagh and Kamrangir Char to distribute relief goods but the government did not allow her to do so.

"Khaleda Zia is still hopeful that she will be allowed to visit other areas to stand by the flood victims."

Earlier on Friday, BNP Secretary General Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan demanded withdrawal of the ban on indoor politics before holding talks with political parties, and said the EC should make all efforts for preparing a complete voter list.

"The commission (EC) should mainly focus on preparing the voter list so that its roadmap could be followed properly," Bhuiyan told reporters at his Gulshan residence.

No talks

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"Since matters relating to the elections concern the 14 crore people of the country, we two [president and general secretary] alone cannot decide on it," said the acting head of the AL.

He added that before entering into discussions with the commission, the party's strategy and position should be settled at its working committee, and for that to happen the ban on indoor politics must go.

The commission would better hold dialogue before completing the voter list, he noted adding that without involvement of the local political leaders and workers, it would not be possible to have a complete voter roll.

Turkish plane

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Arabic to each other and promised not to harm the passengers. "We are Muslims," the passengers quoted one of the hijackers as saying.

Once on the ground in Antalya, the hijackers allowed one of the doors on the side of the plane to be opened for fresh air after the air conditioner of the plane was switched off and some passengers fainted.

There have been several hijackings of Turkish airplanes in recent years despite increased security measures at the airports. In most cases, the hijackers surrendered and the passengers were safely evacuated.

UN fears food

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flood-affected states of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Assam account for roughly a quarter of the nation's total rice production, preliminary reports indicate about one million hectares (2.47 million acres) of cereal land have been submerged in Bihar alone, the FAO said.

The statements came in the FAO's latest update on the flood situation.

Meanwhile, the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) expressed "deep concern" about the continuing threat from hunger, disease and malnutrition for millions of children and women affected by the flooding which has killed almost 2,800 people in the three countries and Pakistan.

While this year's cereal production is likely to be reduced in these three northeastern states, output at the national level will depend on weather conditions in the coming months, the FAO reported.

Nepal's Terai plains which serve as the country's grain basket -- accounting for over 70 per cent of rice production -- have also been hard hit.

Although water levels have receded from the second week of August, thousands of hectares of agricultural land have been destroyed at the peak of the planting season and the outlook for production has worsened, the FAO said.

Food shortages in the Terai, which was also affected by drought and floods in 2006, are likely to worsen, the food agency added.

Car bomb

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Police and troops responded with small arms and artillery fire.

"As insurgents attempted to flee, the combined force successfully cut off their escape route. Nearly a dozen insurgents were killed during the battle," the statement added.

Earlier a German woman was kidnapped Saturday in the Afghan capital Kabul by unidentified armed men, interior ministry spokesman Zemarai Bashary told AFP.

"Today at 1:30 in the afternoon (0900 GMT), a German woman was abducted by unknown armed men in an alley," Bashary said.

Police have launched an investigation into the incident, he said.

Bashary could not immediately confirm where the abducted woman worked, and gave no further details.

The German embassy in Kabul was unable to immediately confirm the incident. In Berlin, the German foreign ministry said it could not immediately comment on the report.

Southern Afghanistan has been a hotbed of Taliban unrest since the US-led invasion of late 2001 ousted the hardline Islamic militia.

Backed by al-Qaeda fighters, the Taliban is waging an increasingly bloody campaign against Afghan officials and security forces as well as international troops.

Violence in Afghanistan has risen sharply during the last two months. More than 3,700 people have died so far this year, most of them militants, according to an Associated Press tally of casualty figures provided by Western and Afghan officials.

Depression

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message of the Met Office.

Under its influence, steep pressure gradient lies over North Bay. Squally weather may continue to affect the maritime ports. Sea will remain moderately rough.

Maritime ports of Chittagong, Cox's Bazar and Mongla have been advised to hoist local cautionary signal number three.

Under its influence the low-lying areas of the coastal districts of Chittagong, Cox's Bazar, Noakhali, Laxmipur, Bhola, Patuakhali, Barisal, Chandpur, Barguna, Pirojpur, Jhalakati, Bagerhat, Khulna, Satkhira are likely to be inundated.

Hurricane Dean

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errands at stores with fully stocked shelves, despite government advisories about heavy rains and possible flooding.

"Nothing's going to happen here a lot of water of nothing else," said Pedro Alvaraj, 61, as he sat in a doorway selling lottery tickets.

Dean killed three people and devastated banana and sugar crops a day earlier as it crossed small eastern Caribbean islands. The National Hurricane Center in Miami said its winds could surpass 155 mph as it approaches the Yucatan Peninsula and the Gulf of Mexico on Monday.

By Thursday, there is a chance Dean could threaten the U.S., though it is expected to lose some strength as it travels over the Yucatan.

NASA shortened the last spacewalk for astronauts aboard the shuttle Endeavour and scaled back the mission, to allow the spacecraft to return to Earth on Tuesday a day early if the storm appeared to threaten the Houston home of Mission Control.

In Jamaica, which expected to take a direct hit Sunday, tourists including Shante Morgan of Moor Park, Calif., began lining up outside the Montego Bay airport before dawn to book flights out ahead of the storm.

"People are freaking out because they're not getting answers at their hotel," said Morgan, a 38-year-old freelance editor who got a Saturday flight after waiting several hours. "They're really playing down the potential influence of the hurricane."

Haitian authorities issued an alert for coastal communities where thousands of people live in flimsy shacks. In 2004, Tropical Storm Jeanne brushed the impoverished and heavily deforested country, triggering massive floods that killed 1,900 people and left 900 others missing.

All flights from the capital, Port-au-Prince, to southern Haiti were canceled Saturday and small boats were prohibited from leaving shore, the country's disaster management agency said.

Prime Minister Portia Simpson-Miller of Jamaica where a direct hit is expected Sunday ordered shelters opened across the island and called for a halt to campaigning for the Aug. 27 elections. The country issued a hurricane warning.

"Let us band together and unite in the threat of this hurricane," Simpson-Miller said.

Dean passed near the tiny islands of St. Lucia and Martinique early Friday as a Category 2 storm.

In tiny St. Lucia, fierce winds tore corrugated metal roofs from dozens of homes and the pediatric ward of a hospital, whose patients had been evacuated hours earlier. Police spokeswoman Tamara Charles said a 62-year-old man drowned when he tried to retrieve a cow from a rain-swollen river.

In Dominica, a woman and her 7-year-old son were killed when a

Saddam's daughter

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director Major General Abdel Karim Khalaf told AFP.

"Her arrest would depend on Jordanian authorities as she is staying in Amman and the order of Interpol binds on all countries who are associated with it."

Hussein has lived in Jordan since July 2003 and since last year has been on a list of 41 people associated with her father's regime that the new Iraqi government is seeking to prosecute for allegedly inciting violence.

Her whereabouts at the time the notice was issued was not immediately clear.

Known to some as "Little Saddam" for her aggressive temperament, Raghda has taken a more public role in defending her father, who was executed on December 30 last year, than her sister Rana or her mother Sajida.

Sajida, Saddam's wife, is also subject to an Iraqi arrest warrant.