

'Delhi must not miss nuclear energy bus'

Manmohan dismisses fear of dependence on 'one country'

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

Locked in a showdown with his Left allies on a landmark nuclear deal with the United States, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh yesterday said India's cooperation with the world in atomic energy field would not be dependent on any one country and strongly advocated the need to push ahead with the deal for energy security of the country.

Speaking after dedicating to the nation two units of an atomic power plant near Mumbai, Manmohan said India's proven reserves of oil, gas, coal and hydro power were insufficient to meet the country's growing energy requirement of a fast-growing economy and nuclear power is recognised as an "important and environmental benign constituent of the overall energy mix".

He said India "needs to benefit from nuclear commerce without restrictions as we need to enable our industries to gain access to cutting edge technology and create opportunities for our scientists and technologists to participate in international exchange of scientific and technological know-how".

Pointing out that India has set a modest target of 20,000 MW of nuclear power generation by the year 2020, the prime minister said this can be doubled with the opening up of international cooperation in nuclear field.

"This cooperation will not be dependent on any one country and we will source supplies (of nuclear material) from many of the countries in the Nuclear Suppliers Group including the United States, Russia, France and Japan", he said.

However, India's international cooperation with these and other countries cannot become effective until the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) adapts its guidelines to enable nuclear commerce with India, Manmohan said.

The NSG itself has made it clear that they will not do so till the India-specific Safeguards Agreement with the IAEA is finalised, he said adding once these and other 'steps' are taken, "India can commence civil nuclear cooperation with all the 45 members of the Nuclear Suppliers Group."

"This will signal the end of our

international isolation of the past few decades. India is now too important a country to remain outside the international mainstream in this critical area", Manmohan remarked.

He said there is today talk the world over of a nuclear renaissance and India cannot afford to miss the bus or lag behind those global developments.

The prime minister's remarks assume significance as they come against the backdrop of his communist allies' insistence that government should not go ahead with talks with IAEA and NSG as part of measures to implement the Indo-US nuclear deal.

Manmohan said since India's uranium resource base was limited it needed to supplement uranium supplies from elsewhere. "We must take, therefore, decisive steps to remove the uncertainties that result from shortfall in fuel supplies to avoid disruptions in our nuclear power production programme", he added.

He said sustainability of India's long-term economic growth was critically dependent on its ability to meet energy requirements of the future. When a country of the size of India of one billion people begins to grow at the rate of 9-10% per annum, with the prospect of even higher rates of growth then energy does become a critical issue, he pointed out.

The prime minister said removal of "iniquitous restrictions and shackles" on India's nuclear power programme will enhance its indigenous capabilities, he assured the critics of Indo-US nuclear deal that the government would "do nothing to hurt our capacity to solve a problem with our own effort, pursuit of maximum possible self-reliance and will continue to be a kingpin of our development strategy".

The critics at home contend that the deal would curtail India's nuclear programme and impinge on its independent foreign policy. "A strong energy programme is in our vital interest and is important for our scientific development, important for meeting our energy needs and important for our national security", Manmohan said.

Zillur, Amu

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within a few months, the insiders say.

Contradicting Amu's views, another AL presidium member Motia Chowdhury said they would continue legal battle to free Hasina. The party will chalk out a final strategy to free her when political activities resume, she added.

Motia also differed with Amu over talks with the EC, saying party leaders would have to sit to take a decision in this regard. And for this the ban on indoor politics should go, she told this correspondent.

No individual could take a decision for the party, Motia said.

AMU'S BRIEFING
Talking to newsmen yesterday at his Eskaton residence in the capital, Amu said the AL must go to power to free Sheikh Hasina, and election is the only means to assume power. So, they have to engage themselves in the electoral process.

Differing with Zillur Rahman's views that the AL will not sit with the EC unless the party chief is released, Amu termed this a 'point of no return'.

"It is an emotional statement (by Zillur). If it happens, Awami League will not survive as a party. So, we must go by reality," observed the senior AL leader.

The post 1/11 situation (state of emergency) has come to their (AL) favour, Amu said. "There is no confusion within the party over sitting with the Election Commission and I hope the party will participate in the dialogue on consensus," he said.

The reformist AL leader also said all political parties should sit with the EC. It would not be proper to keep off dialogue with the EC on the excuse of the ban on indoor politics. Amu said the EC has been reconstituted as an outcome of their (parties) demonstrations. So, they

could sit with the EC to discuss reforms which the AL was demanding for the last few years, he added.

The AL leader demanded immediate action against Jamaat-e-Islami leaders on specific allegations against them. The allegations, known nationally and internationally, include repression on women, looting, patronising militants and war crimes during the Liberation War, he said.

On the fresh remand of two detained Dhaka University teachers in a second case, Amu said it was not proper. "I think the government should sit with the teachers to find a solution," he added.

Jute prices

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Another contributing factor that is having a negative impact on the jute markets is that many jute traders, who used to purchase jute from farmers and supplied it to jute mills, are no longer able to continue jute trading this year. Many of them are out of funds as the jute mills still owe them the payment for the goods delivered last year.

Moktarur Rahman from Mahiganj, who supplies jute to Latif Bawani Jute Mills, said, "I did not receive my outstanding bill of about Tk 35 lakh from the mill. The condition is similar for other suppliers in the northern districts."

"They cannot purchase jute this year due to shortage of funds. And this has affected the market severely," he explained.

Some jute traders are simply not interested in jute anymore as they had incurred heavy losses last year. Jute dealer Abdul Awal from Rangpur is among those who had to sell jute last year at prices lower than the prices of procurement. That loss made him decide not to trade jute this year.

Abul Kashem, assistant director of Department of Jute in Rangpur, however, disagreed with the impression that jute farmers are not getting right price for their produce. He argued that superior quality jute is being sold from Tk 650 to Tk 800 at different markets including Pirgachha and Kaunia upazilas of Rangpur, Ulupur of Kurigram, and Kamarpura and Bamondanga of Gaibandha.

The government would soon pay off the outstanding bills of jute suppliers. Moreover, this year the jute mills will pay cash for jute, he added.

A jute supplier from Badarganj, Abdul Hye, showed his interest to supply jute to the mills this year to take advantage of cash payment, but he was not sure how he would arrange funds for the procurement.

According to Department of Agricultural Extension, around 70,000 hectares of land in greater Rangpur and Dinajpur districts have been brought under jute cultivation this year.

Taliban

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from going there.

But this was nothing new, raising questions as to whether there was another backroom deal.

A Japanese newspaper reported Friday that South Korea paid two million dollars to the hardliners after Afghan mediators had said a ransom was the only way out.

Taliban and Afghan officials have denied a ransom was involved.

In Seoul the end of the hostage drama that has gripped a nation for six weeks brought a flood of relief.

"Thank God. They are all freed now," said Je Mi-Sook after her brother Je Chang-Hee was released. "My mother is just sobbing, she can't say anything."

But the way the hostage crisis was resolved has also attracted criticism.

Afghan Foreign Minister Ranganee Dadfar Spanta said people might think South Korea had handed the hardline Islamic militia a propaganda victory.

He told Germany's RBB radio that Seoul had informed Afghan authorities months ago that it planned to withdraw its soldiers.

"But if the impression is created now that the international community and the Afghan government allow themselves to be blackmailed, then this sends a very dangerous message," he said.

German politicians also criticised South Korea's handling of the crisis, with Chancellor Angela Merkel indicating Berlin would stand firm in its refusal to negotiate with the militia over a German engineer captured more than six weeks ago.

Canadian Foreign Minister Maxime Bernier said such negotiations "only lead to further acts of terrorism".

In Kabul, a spokesman for President Hamid Karzai said the government only allowed South Korea to negotiate directly with the Taliban because the lives of the 19 were at risk.

"If the question of people's life is concerned, we allow this to happen under strict conditions...", spokesman Homayun Hamidzada told AFP.

"There is no victory for the Taliban," he added.

BNP plans

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Khaleda Zia in a message yesterday greeted leaders, workers as well as people of all walks of life on the occasion.

She urged all leaders and workers to remain united in respect for Zia.

"We will carry out our duties for the well-being of the country and the people," said the former prime minister calling on the partymen to stand by the flood victims.

Meanwhile, leader of the pro-reform camp and BNP Secretary General Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan yesterday paid homage to Ziaur Rahman and the party faithful who died since its formation in 1979.

Talking to reporters at his Gulshan residence, he asked the BNP units across the country to observe the anniversary in consultation with the local administration.

KHALEDA'S TELECONFERENCE
According to New York based agency News World, Khaleda Zia in a teleconference with leaders of the BNP US chapter Thursday said Tarique Rahman cannot indulge in corruption as a son of late president Zia.

"Nobody can prove the allegations against Tarique and he is in jail due to a political propaganda campaign against him," she claimed, saying that her elder son is the one who had initiated reforms in the country.

Terming him a 'reflection of Ziaur Rahman', the former premier said those who love Zia should wage a movement to get Tarique free.

Ex-Biman men

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about the new airline."

"Most of the retired 1,877 staffs have given verbal consent to joining the initiative to run a new airline," a member of the organising committee said.

"The seven-member sub-committee has started its ground-work," said Zahurul Haque, member secretary of the 25-member organising committee and also a member of the sub-committee.

The committee already sent leaflets and forms to all the retired employees seeking their consent in writing, sources said.

"After receiving consent letters from the retired staffs, we will get the idea about how much money we can collect from them for the new airline," Captain Nasimul Haque earlier told The Daily Star.

About the primary plan of the new airline, several members of the organising committee told The Daily Star that they would operate on those routes that were profitable but left suspended by Biman.

"The routes to Narita, New York, Frankfurt and Paris are some of the profitable ones that Biman Bangladesh Airlines kept suspended and we have a plan to operate for those destinations," said Captain Nasimul.

"We will surely make profit. Experience is our capital, we want to prove that it is possible to make profit if an airline is run professionally," he said.

Three private airlines -- GMG, United and Bismillah -- are currently operating from Bangladesh.

VoIP operators

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optic line between the submarine cable in Cox's Bazar and Chittagong's phone network is cut-off by miscreants, the VSATs provide a slower but workable backup.

"Again, we suspect that some vested interests involved in illegal VoIP operations, are involved in snapping the fibre optic line. To eliminate this, the BTTC must take the solid fibre optic line of the Power Grid Company of Bangladesh (PGCB) as backup. The PGCB line is set up on high tension power lines. Miscreants will find it difficult to snap those. Besides, the BTTC had signed the primary agreement to rent the PGCB line for Tk 20 crore two years ago as a backup system," the official said.

ILDTs policy highlights
The government framed this policy amid tight secrecy to avoid pressure or influence from the illegal but very powerful VoIP lobbies. It aims at facilitating, liberalising and legitimising ILDTs including VoIP.

"The policy is primarily focused on providing affordable communication means to people... encouraging local entrepreneurs, encouraging new technologies to grow and ensuring due earning of revenue for the government," says its preface.

The 13-page policy's most important aspect is the licence awarding procedure. It says, "IGW, ICX and IX licences will be issued only to Bangladeshi entities... Foreign entities... and non-resident Bangladeshi entities cannot be eligible to the Owners/Directors/ Shareholders/ Investors/ Partners of these licence entities. All financial transactions must be through a scheduled bank of Bangladesh."

The licences will be awarded through open auction. IGW, ICX and IX operators will issue Initial Public Offer (IPO) in the stock market of Bangladesh.

IP Telephony licences will be issued only to the holders of ISP operators licence except PSTN/PLMN operators having ISP licences. The licence shall not be transferable.

The policy notes, "Indiscriminate use of VSAT has been one of the means of conducting unauthorised VoIP call business. As such it is crucial to control unauthorised use of VSAT. VSAT will not be allowed for voice services except IGWs. VSAT connected to IXs will be allowed for data communication only."

All operators will provide call detail record and any other monitoring facilities of voice and data calls for on-line and off-line monitoring by the BTTC.

Illegal VoIP operations
A source pointed out that the drive against illegal VoIP operation launched earlier this year surprisingly revealed that all mobile and 30-plus Public Switch Telephone Network (PSTN) companies as well as majority of the ISPs were involved in this illegal activity.

These include City Cell, Gramophone, AKTEL and Banglalink.

Regarding investment, he said, "I guess there will be new business consortiums, instead of just one investor for each of the bid. Surely the phone companies will not be in this field even indirectly. We hope the BTTC follows strict transparency and does not favour certain quarters."

According to him, an investor for IG or ICX would recover the cost of investment within 18 months even after giving up to 82 percent of the gross revenue to the government and the BTTC. Then onwards, the IG operator will get huge returns.

Policy criticism
Phone companies are critical about the policy's investment restriction saying that it will ultimately make overseas calls costly and affect end-users.

"This policy aims at creating middlemen. Majority of the subscribers are mobile phone users. So, when the new system adds new operators, they would charge the phone companies extra for each call. This charge will be ultimately passed on to the subscribers," said an executive of a phone company requesting not to be named.

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Fresh flood

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of Tepa Kharibari union, said Chairman of the union Rabul Islam.

Flood Forecasting and Warning Centre meanwhile reported that Sylhet is experiencing flash flood, but the situation was likely to improve in next 24 hours.

Two major rivers the Jamuna and the Padma are showing more or less a falling trend, but may rise at some points in next two days.

Saarc states

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recommended nine sub-regional and regional projects including a rail corridor between Colombo and Chennai and air connectivity between Male-New Delhi and New Delhi-Islamabad among others for consideration of the Saarc member states.

"Members states would be examining the viability and desirability of these projects for reporting to the third meeting of the inter-governmental group on transport scheduled to be held in Sri Lanka in the second week of March next year," an official press note said after the meeting.

The meeting deliberated on the report of the Saarc Regional Multimodal Transport Study (SRMTS) prepared and funded by the Asian Development Bank and recommended extending the study to include Afghanistan.

The participating ministers from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, also elected India's Shipping, Road Transport and Highways Minister T R Baalu as the chairperson of the meeting.

Baalu said there should be a focussed list of road, rail, water and aviation corridors, which are easily implementable.

"We should strengthen the air connectivity with the Saarc capitals which are not yet directly linked to accelerate the connectivity," he said.

UN expert

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their client in prison -- felt pressured, having only met with her at the end of hearings. The lawyers also had difficulties accessing case files and other important information, "thus compromising their ability to ensure an adequate defence," he said.

"The atmosphere during the trial was reportedly intimidating with military and police presence both outside and inside the courtroom, and access of the public and the media to the courtroom was considerably restricted," Despouy said.

The UN expert further said these alleged irregularities violate the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which Bangladesh has ratified, and also called on the country's authorities to respect Sigma's right to a fair and public trial during any appeals process.

Besides, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Louise Arbour yesterday said her office is seeking clarification about the situation surrounding Sigma Huda's conviction and possible appeal.

The office of the HCIR is seeking confirmation directly from Bangladesh government, the UN mission in Dhaka and Sigma's relatives.

The high commissioner noted that in a statement last month, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, after requesting and receiving information from Bangladesh on the nature of the charges brought against Sigma and their linkages to her functions as Special Rapporteur, concluded that she is not being tried on charges related to her work as a UN independent expert.

Indoor politics

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The decision on lifting the ban on indoor politics would be taken at the highest level of the government," he added.

The military-backed interim administration slapped the ban on indoor politics on March 7 and the law enforcers locked offices of the political parties.

A day after the EC's announcement for talks with the 15 parties, the advisory committee on law and order at a meeting discussed the current situation.

The government had already planned to lift the ban, and things would have been different had there been no incident at Dhaka University, he told reporters after the meeting.

Meanwhile, senior political leaders seem divided over the necessity for withdrawal of the ban for the talks to take place.

"The Awami League should be prepared for the dialogue even in the case of restrictions not being withdrawn," AL Presidium Member Amir Hossain Amu told reporters yesterday.

"Given that the government won't cause any obstruction, I see no problem in sitting with the Election Commission with the ban still in force," he said contradicting many of his party colleagues' view.

On the other hand, Adviser to the BNP chairperson Bgr Gen (ret'd) ASM Hannan Shah said it is not possible to take part in the talks with the EC as long as the ban is there.

Hasina's wealth
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She has about Tk 2 crore deposited in eight accounts with Sonali, Rupali, Pubali and Agrani banks.

In the statement, properties owned by Hasina include a jute warehouse on ten kathas of land at Dighulia in Khulna. The jute warehouse worth about Tk 50 lakh is shown as a property inherited from Hasina's mother Fazilatunnesa Mujib.

Ten kathas of land and a pond on six katha at Gopalganj is also shown as her property inherited from her grandfather Sheikh Lutfar Rahman. She and her sister Sheikh Rehana jointly inherited several big has of land from her father in Tungipara.

Hasina also owns two cars she received as gifts from AL leaders.

Sudha Das residence worth about Tk 50 lakh in the name of her husband at Dhanmondi in the capital has also been shown as property.

Russian police hunt for fugitive oil billionaire

AFP, Moscow

Russia issued an international arrest warrant on Friday for a fugitive oil billionaire who has denounced a campaign of "unprecedented persecution" against him by the Kremlin.

Authorities are seeking the arrest of Mikhail Gutseryev, CEO of oil major Rusnft until he resigned last month following a series of tax fraud inquiries that he said were aimed at forcing him out of the business.

He has since fled to London, according to Russian newspaper reports.

"There is an international arrest order out for him. The information has been passed on to Interpol. We cannot reveal where we think he is," a spokesman for Russia's interior ministry told AFP.

Gutseryev's presence in Britain could exacerbate diplomatic tensions between Moscow and London, which are already at odds over the extradition of Russian nationals wanted in Russia, such as fugitive oligarch Boris Berezovsky.

Rusnft, not to be confused with state-controlled Rosneft, Russia's main oil producer, is one of the top 10 energy companies in Russia, accounting for around 2.8 percent of total production.

On Thursday, Vagit Alekperov, the CEO of top private Russian oil producer Lukoil, expressed concern about the growing role of state companies in the energy industry.

For many industry observers, the inquiries against Gutseryev are reminiscent of the fate of another maverick oil billionaire: Mikhail Khodorkovsky, whose Yukos empire was once Russia's biggest oil producer.

In a series of tax investigations widely seen as steered by the Kremlin, Yukos was dismantled starting from 2003, and Khodorkovsky is now serving out an eight-year prison sentence in far eastern Siberia for fraud.

While Khodorkovsky was arrested by masked and gun-toting security officers in his private jet on an air strip in Siberia, though, Gutseryev has so far managed to escape from Russian police.

After a warrant was issued for his

IDB

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rural infrastructure and power. Ahmad Mohammad Ali assured the finance adviser of IDB's further cooperation in the years to come.

The IDB president also assured the Bangladesh government of providing assistance for rehabilitation of the flood-hit people in Bangladesh. He said they will send a mission soon for making an assessment of damage caused by the floods.

The IDB approved about \$520 million for Bangladesh as economic assistance as of January 2007. In addition, it also provided \$4,187 million as trade financing, mainly for importing crude oil by the BPC.

Addressing the 24th annual general meeting (AGM) of Islami Bank Bangladesh Limited (IBBL) at China-Bangladesh Friendship Conference Centre in the morning, the IDB president said Bangladesh will receive \$2 billion from the Islamic Solidarity Fund for Development (ISFD) to implement poverty alleviation schemes.

IDB has designed \$10 billion fund to reduce poverty in its member countries under a 10-year programme.

"We've undertaken a massive initiative to alleviate poverty from the member countries, including Bangladesh," he said.

He said Bangladesh has set up a model of working with the poor and IDB will be very keen to replicate the model elsewhere, specially in Africa.

US reminds Musharraf

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discussions were taking place.

He said Musharraf was trying to "brush out differences with ruling party leadership, which opposes an amendment which will pave the way for Benazir or Sharif to hold the prime minister's office for the third term."

Sharif said on Thursday that he would fly home on September 10 after seven years in exile to lead a "decisive battle" against Musharraf, who ousted him in a coup in 1999, and contest general elections due by early 2008.

Benazir, considered a natural ally for Musharraf because of her more liberal stance, has also pledged to come back from her exile over corruption charges, although she is still pushing the president for a pact.

For Pakistan People's Party, the country's largest, said that it was still waiting for a response from the president's camp but dismissed reports it had delivered a deadline of Friday.

Musharraf, who has kept his army positions since seizing power in bloodless coup in 1999, "has said he's going to deal with this issue and made a commitment to deal with this issue in accordance with the constitution," State Department spokesman Tom Casey said.

"That's a commitment he has made. We expect him to honour that commitment," Casey said, when asked whether Washington wanted Musharraf, a key US "war on terror" ally, to give up his military role.

He declined to elaborate on what he meant by Musharraf's commitment to deal with the uniform issue in accordance with the constitution.

But a senior US official told AFP "it actually means he (Musharraf) has given us assurance that he is going to resolve the issue of the