

Afghanistan a UN priority: chief

AFP, KABUL

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon yesterday declared Afghanistan a priority for the United Nations and pledged to do the utmost to support key presidential elections this year.

Ban made a surprise visit to Kabul as the embattled country prepares for its second-ever presidential vote in August while facing an insurgency at its highest point since a US-led invasion ousted the Taliban regime in 2001.

"For the United Nations, Afghanistan will be a priority in 2009," Ban told reporters at a news conference with President Hamid Karzai.

"I am here to demonstrate and to convey my strong commitment and support for peace and stability, and development of Afghanistan's people," he said.

The August 20 elections would be a challenge, Ban said.

"But we will do our utmost to ensure that the Afghan Independent Electoral Commission, with the technical assistance from the United Nations, is adequately supported by donors," he said.

The poll, expected to cost around 223 million dollars, has been delayed for three months to allow time for adequate security and logistics over fears that insurgent violence could compromise the ballot.

"The voter registration process has proceeded smoothly. We must ensure that the electoral process proceeds as smoothly as possible," Ban said.

The UN chief also called for international military and political efforts to be "balanced" in

Afghanistan.

The presence of international troops was important but so was "an Afghan-led political solution based on the constitution," he said.

He was likely referring to Kabul's efforts to persuade Taliban rebels to drop their fight against Karzai's Western-backed government and accept the new system.

Ban, who was last in Afghanistan in 2007, also stressed the importance of improved coordination among the nation's many international donors and "tangible changes" to people's lives in the country.

The United Nations has boosted resources for Afghanistan -- announcing in December it would double its budget in the country for 2009, allowing for more staff to be employed and more offices opened.

Besides holding talks with Karzai, Ban was also due to meet Afghan lawmakers and a range of international officials, including commanders of the NATO-led force of 55,000 troops and representatives of UN agencies, the UN said.

The United Nations has said security reached its lowest point in Afghanistan last year since the Taliban was removed from government with a spike in attacks, including on aid workers.

"The situation in Afghanistan is serious and it's getting worse," the UN's top relief official, John Holmes, said in Geneva on Tuesday.

The reasons were "escalating conflict and also because of the serious drought which has been raging there for two years in some parts of the country," he said.

Taliban abducts 30 Pakistani policemen

AFP, Peshawar

Taliban militants kidnapped 30 Pakistani policemen after a punishing day-long siege, in an embarrassing blow yesterday for the army battling to win back control of the Swat valley.

The abduction, carried out at night when police and army reinforcements had suspended efforts to break the siege, underscores the huge challenges facing the security services.

Despite a wave of government offensives, the military has failed to impose its authority on the valley, a scenic former holiday region near the border with Afghanistan.

Thousands of Taliban besieged a police station in the area of Shamozai on Tuesday. The army was mobilised to rescue the police and break the circle of rebels, security officials said.

Clashes continued throughout the day but as dusk fell, the operation was suspended. Then, overnight, the Taliban broke into the office, kidnapped the officers and blew up the building, said Swat police chief Dilawar Khan.

Khan confirmed that the rebels kidnapped 30 policemen.



PHOTO: AFP

This picture released by Sri Lanka's ministry of defence yesterday shows government soldiers outside a camp believed to be used to train Black Tiger suicide bombers found by advancing troops in the northeastern district of Mullaitivu. The ministry said troops on February 3, 2009 captured what was believed to be a training facility of Black Tiger suicide cadres.

Talks a must in signing any treaty

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National Standing Committee.

Asked in which forum to discuss the issues, Delwar said, "It is the government's responsibility to choose that forum."

The meeting was going on at Chairperson Khaleda Zia's Gulshan office with Khaleda in the chair at 10:30pm when the report was prepared.

Delwar said it seems that the government is busy fulfilling the desires of those who were behind cancelling the January 22 national election.

"It should be ensured that our garment sector gets quota-free access in the US market, but so far as I know the matter was not included in the Tifa [Trade and Investment Framework Agreement]. The

US has no Tifa accord with India," he said.

Delwar also said there is no need for international investigation into bribery and corruption because there are many laws here in the country to deal with these matters.

On the much-talked-about transit issue and curbing terrorism jointly, he said, "Both Richard Boucher [US assistant secretary of state for South and Central Asian affairs] and Pranab Mukherjee [Indian external affairs minister] are visiting the country and we observe a haste. But the national interest must not be ignored."

The BNP secretary general once again demanded reinstatement of special security protection for party

Chairperson Khaleda Zia. "BNP Chairperson and Leader of the Opposition Khaleda Zia is now getting less security support than Sheikh Hasina when she was the opposition leader."

Leaders of the BNP and its front organisation yesterday held a rally at Muktangan where they asked the government to ensure appropriate and full security for Khaleda immediately. They said they would launch a movement to press home their demand if the government fails to take any effective measures.

Delwar Hossain, BNP Vice-President Sarwar Rahman, joint secretaries-general Mirza Abbas and Selima Rahman, among others, addressed the rally.

Let world know what Bangladesh

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"This is the same message I heard last year in west Africa; I heard it in north Thailand, in Greenland," she said.

That is why it is so important to have adaptation strategies and disseminate the knowledge that is already out there in a more coordinated way, she said, adding that the Bangladesh example of putting climate change in front of national development efforts gives her a strong reason for optimism.

"I promise you that what I learnt here will not stay here in my head. I will let the case of Bangladesh be known to the whole world so that we know why we have to act and why we have to act now," said Hedegaard.

"It would be possible to face the challenge together as part of the truly global deal if we have truly additional funding for this purposes," she added.

She said transferring technologies from developed countries to the least developed countries is absolutely crucial so that those who are having development and growth can do it with the best possible technologies instead of old ones in a common interest of all of us.

That is why the developed countries have to contribute

much more," she stressed. Asked what she means by a "truly global deal", Hedegaard said the deal includes setting goals of short, mid and long terms and acting accordingly.

"It is easy to set a target but hard to take care of it. I think global leaders will come up with some targets that they would take care of," she said.

She also said, "We should also take care of technology transfers, which should be a mechanism built in the deal."

Asked if she thinks the European Union's target for reducing emission by 20 percent by 2020 is fair enough, Hedegaard said the EU's target is so far the most ambitious deal set by any region. The EU has also set to achieve 20 percent renewable energy by 2020.

"Now we need the US to come up with specific suggestions," she observed. "I noticed that last Monday US President (Barack) Obama promised that the US would now show the international leadership in climate change negotiations. I think that is very crucial."

When asked about her opinion on whether Obama is really going to make it or not, she said the US president is approaching it in a manner that is "very differ-

ent" from his previous ones. He is combining bailout packages of economic recovery plans with energy security and energy efficiency and to cope with the climate challenge, which is very interesting, she said.

"So, I believe that his vision, counting climate change together with energy efficiency and together with also creating new jobs, is a new way ahead. I think it is good he is seeing this effort as a fight for job creation," Hedegaard said. "When you focus on renewable energy you create thousands of thousands jobs."

Regarding the role of developing countries including India and China, Hedegaard said the bargain of developing countries would be one of the important issues in the Copenhagen deal.

"They are not going to reduce the emission as the United States and the EU... On the other hand, we know that two-thirds of all global emission come from those now known as developing countries. So, somehow it is also interesting to all of us, what kind of technologies are going to grow their economies in next many years and that would be part of the issues around the negotiation," she said.

Extra-judicial

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"We do not condone any such incident and will bring the responsible officials to justice," the foreign minister said in response to questions at the Universal Periodic Review of Bangladesh at the Human Rights Council in Geneva yesterday.

Dipu Moni said, "Poverty is both a cause and consequence of violation of human rights. Eradication of poverty, therefore, is the top priority of the government."

During the question-answer session, the foreign minister enumerated the steps taken by the government to protect and promote human rights in Bangladesh, including the establishment of the National Human Rights Commission last year.

She said the government has initiated the process to try war criminals as a signal to end the culture of impunity. "We realise that, as long as the matter remains unresolved, it will continue to disrupt and fracture the politics of our nation," Dipu added.

She also responded to questions relating to human trafficking, death penalty and rights of religious and ethnic minorities.

As many as 49 member states took the floor to comment on the reports on the human rights situation in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh Ambassador in Geneva Debapriya Bhatnagar responded to questions that Bangladesh is trying to ensure right to food, employment, shelter and education for sustainable enjoyment of political and civil rights.

Empowerment of women is also being pursued as a complementary strategy, Debapriya also addressed.

A news release from Geneva said there was an overwhelming support for the recent transition to democracy and the ongoing efforts to strengthen institutional framework for promotion and protection of human rights. Most delegations appreciated the efforts made by Bangladesh to achieve the Millennium Development Goals and improve the socio-economic situation of the people.

The Bangladesh delegation at the session included, among others, Attorney General Mahbub Alam, Member of National Human Rights Commission Munira Khan and human rights activists and media personnel.

Illegal VoIP trade back

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Along with many internet service providers, multinational mobile phone service operators were also caught handing over the illegal technology.

BTRC recently awarded six licenses to the private sector to handle international voice and data traffic.

Among the six call handlers, three international gateways (IGWs) are mainly responsible for handling international voice calls along with the state-run Bangladesh Telecommunications Company Ltd (BTCL).

Two other legal interconnection exchanges (ICXs) transmit the calls between the IGWs and telecom operators, while the lone private international internet gateway (IIG) is responsible for handling data traffic.

The three new IGWs are handling 12 million minutes of calls a day while BTCL was handling 20 million, till December 2008.

But the numbers nosedived in January as illegal VoIP operators made the comeback.

"Around 40 percent of the calls are now being handled by the black marketers," claimed

Mir Nasir Hossain, chairman of Mir Telecom, one of the three legal IGW operators.

He said international carriers also expressed their concerns over the recent significant rise of illegal VoIP businesses in the country.

VoIP is a technology that allows someone to make voice calls using a broadband internet connection instead of any phone line.

For its affordable business features, VoIP has become one of the most lucrative businesses in Bangladesh.

Unscrupulous people ranging from IT professionals to entrepreneurs and political party backed young individuals are getting involved in the illegal business.

According to the anti-VoIP team of BTRC, anyone can launch a VoIP service by spending only Tk 2.5 lakh, which might cost more depending on the volume of the VoIP exchange.

In terms of tariff, VoIP calls are cheaper than traditional phone calls as well. According to the licence agreement, IGWs are charging 4 cents for handling each international call, while VoIP black market price is at most 2.5 cents on an average.

The Bangladesh market is very lucrative for VoIP operators, as around 6 million Bangladeshis live abroad, and the number has been increasing by the year.

The issue of illegal VoIP business became very important to the government, as due to the use of the technology the government is losing a large amount of revenue.

Legal telecom operators also came forward to help BTRC and law enforcers in routing out illegal VoIP businesses, since they feel they have been getting a bad rap as VoIP based telecom services cannot operate without their collaboration.

Representatives of legal telecom operators yesterday at a meeting with the BTRC chairman made the commitment. BTRC also took a plan to strengthen its drive against VoIP businesses.

"If mobile phone service operators come forward to help, it will be easier to stop illegal VoIP businesses," said Manzurul Alam, the chairman of BTRC, assuring that the regulatory commission will continue to play its role, like it did through the two years of caretaker regime.

Star-Aktel initiative

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by The Daily Star Editor and Publisher Mahfuz Anam and Aktel Managing Director and Chief Executive Officer Jifri A. Tambi at a simple ceremony at the Spectra Convention Centre in the capital.

Under the three-year programme, three complimentary copies of The Daily Star will be distributed to around 1,000 schools each in 64 districts five days a week.

Every week, there will be a special page containing materials on English language useful for teachers and students in and outside the school. The teaching materials on this page will follow the books prescribed by the education ministry.

The page will also include ways to write to the editor, speaking and listening lessons, presentation and public speaking lessons and health and social awareness contents.

The schools -- two in each district headquarters and two in each upazila headquarters -- will be selected on performance basis. Half of these institutions will be girls' schools.

Different types of activities including competition on spelling, vocabulary, puzzle, general knowledge and book reading will also be arranged regularly to make learning English interesting.

The teachers will be requested to use relevant newspaper articles and pages at the classrooms.

Lauding the initiative and assuring all-out support,

Education Minister Nurul Islam Nahid said, "This programme will greatly help the students in learning English."

The minister who spoke as the chief guest said the standard of English teaching in some schools is very high, but the picture is just the opposite in most other schools for lack of good teachers and teaching materials.

Stating that current enrolment at primary level is 90 percent but dropout rate is also very high, the minister said, "We'll take initiative to reduce dropout."

Nurul Islam Nahid suggests involvement of local educated people in the process for better results.

"The highest priority of Bangladesh is the language of our education system must be there. But at the same time we need to learn a strong second language, English, to compete in the world of globalisation," said Mahfuz Anam, editor and publisher of The Daily Star.

Books are good for learning English, but they may not always be interesting to students, he said adding that newspapers could be interesting reading materials for having contemporary issues, cartoons, features and photographs. The sports section can specially attract the young readers, he added.

Mahfuz Anam said under the EIS programme, motivational conferences will be arranged for school teachers at divisional level besides competitions at national level.

"We hope to create new

inspiration for English language exercise among students," he said, adding the number of schools might be increased on the basis of one-year performance of the programme.

Aktel Managing Director and Chief Executive Officer Jifri A. Tambi said English has become the most widely-spoken language in the world and there is no alternative to learning it to compete in the global arena.

"We realised that the standard of English in Bangladeshi schools, except a few, is not very high. But as the young are going to lead the country, they must learn the language to be global players," he said, adding this is the reason Aktel has come up with such an initiative.

Bishaw Sahitya Kendra Chairman Prof Abdullah Abu Sayeed said there is no alternative to mother language for education, but learning a widely-spoken second language is a must for global standard education.

"Expansion of English should go on as much as possible," he said, adding Bangladesh went backward in terms of economy, business and jobs because of their earlier negligence to English.

The children of the well-off families had the advantage to learn English until now, and it is good news that efforts are now underway to spread English among the less fortunate students, Abdullah Abu Sayeed added.

Aktel Chief Commercial Officer Bidyut Kumar Basu also spoke.

BNP still waits

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Chowdhury and MK Anwar met Speaker Abdul Hamid at the latter's parliament building office and demanded reinstatement of the Special Security Force (SSF) detail for BNP Chairperson also Leader of the Opposition Khaleda Zia, who is a former prime minister as well.

They also discussed with the speaker the issue of seating rearrangement in the parliament.

"We will return to the House at once, if the speaker places a specific acceptable proposal regarding our demand for rearranging the seating," MK Anwar said.

"We didn't get any specific proposal from the speaker till today, and decided to wait till Monday," Anwar added.

He said they noticed in the media that the speaker said he will consider their demand, while the seating arrangement still remains unchanged.

"We don't want to boycott the parliament, we want to participate and play our role in the House," Anwar said.

The opposition has been demanding three more seats in the front row on the left side of the speaker's podium.

The immediate past speaker, Jamiruddin Sircar, had unilaterally allotted all 10 seats in the row to opposition lawmakers, including one for the lone Liberal Democratic Party lawmaker Oli Ahmed.

On the treasury bench's demand, new Speaker Hamid rearranged the seating allotting only four of the front row seats to the opposition lawmakers including one for Oli Ahmed.

SPEAKER'S VERSION Talking to reporters in his office last evening the speaker said he again urged opposition lawmakers to return to the parliament assuring them of considering their demand.

"I am hopeful that I'll be able to do something regarding their demand, but I can't specifically say how much," Hamid said.

"I even told them that I must do something before the next session begins. It's difficult for me to bring changes in the seating arrangement in this session, unless the chief whips of the treasury and the opposition reach a consensus on the matter," the speaker added.

On the significance of the dispute, the speaker said it is nothing major.

On BNP's demand for reinstating SSF security for Khaleda, he said he assured opposition lawmakers that he will convey their sentiment to Leader of the House Sheikh Hasina.

Asked whether the opposition leader sought protection from the speaker as she could not go to her office in the parliament building on security grounds, Hamid replied in the negative.

Ramna blasts

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Huji chief Mufti Abdul Hannan, Arif Hasan Suman alias Abdur Razzak, Shahadat Ullah alias Jewel, Maulana Abdur Rouf and Maulana Abu Taher were earlier arrested in connection with the case and they are now in jail custody. Another accused Maulana Akbar Hussain was earlier granted bail from the High Court (HC).

After the hearing, Metropolitan Sessions Judge ANM Bashir Ullah accepted the charge sheet of the case filed under the Explosive Substances Act and issued the arrest warrants against the fugitives.

The court asked Mufti Abdul Hannan and Abdur Rouf whether they had appointed lawyers or not to defend them. But they told the court that they had no lawyers.

The court then asked the district magistrate to appoint state defence lawyers on behalf of Mufti Hannan, Abdur Rouf and eight absconding accused to defend them.

The court also fixed February 18 for its next hearing and directed different police stations to submit reports on the arrest warrants issued against the accused to the court during the next hearing.

Meantime, the court fixed the same date for hearing on charge framing against the same accused in a murder case filed in connection with the Ramna Batamul blast.

Lawyers of Akbar Hussain submitted a discharge petition that's hearing was fixed on the next scheduled date. All the accused, including Mufti Hannan, who were earlier arrested and now in jail custody, were produced before the court during the yesterday's hearing.

Metropolitan Public Prosecutor Abdullah Abu appeared for the state while advocate Aminul Goni Titu, Mahbubur Rahman Siddiqui and Mohammad Mosheduzzaman defended the accused.

Criminal Investigation Department (CID) Inspector Abu Hena Mohammad Yusuf, also the investigation officer (IO) of the cases, submitted the charge sheets to the Chief Metropolitan Magistrate's Court of Dhaka on November 29 last year.

The IO included the name of Mufti Abdul Hannan and 13 others in the charge sheets of the cases.

During investigation of the cases, Hannan, Akbar and Suman gave confessional statements to the magistrates at different times.

The carnage at Ramna Batamul took place during Pahela Baishakh celebrations on April 14, 2001 that left 10 people dead and scores injured.

VACANCY NOTICE

United Nations Development Programme in Bangladesh announces vacancy for Driver position for Disaster Response Facilities programme.

The duration of the Service Contract is twelve months initially, which is extendable upon satisfactory performance and availability of fund.

Duties and Responsibilities: The incumbent will drive the project vehicle within / outside Dhaka city to meet the transportation requirement of the project, day-to-day maintenance of the vehicle, maintain log book, arrange repairs where necessary, collect / deliver mail or documents when required

Qualifications and Experiences: The incumbent should have at least secondary education or equivalent level, with at least five years relevant experience. The incumbent must have a valid heavy / light vehicles driving license. Good knowledge of road network in Dhaka and surrounding areas and adequate knowledge and skills in vehicle maintenance and minor repair are essential. She / he must have working knowledge of communicative English, and must possess good manner. Experience of UN or government organizations would be an asset;

Submission of Application: Application should be marked 'Confidential' and the position applied for (i.e. Driver - DRF) should be clearly written on the A4 Size envelope. Application including curriculum vitae and a recent passport-size photograph should be sent to the HR Cluster, UNDP-Dhaka, GPO Box: 224, Dhaka-1000, or deposited at the Deposit Box at the IDB Bhaban (Ground Floor), Begum Rokeya Sharani, Agargaon, Dhaka-1207. For details of the Job Description and instructions to apply, please visit our website: <http://www.undp.bd/jobs>. Applications should be submitted no later than 17:00 pm, Saturday, 14 February 2009.

Submitted documents will not be returned to the applicants and only short-listed candidates will be contacted.



Bangladesh