

Bangladesh among 23 nations under €1b EU food facility scheme

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Bangladesh will be one of 23 developing countries expected to benefit from the first phase of European Commission's (EC) €1-billion food facility programme.

Besides, the EC adopted a €314-million package projects to support agriculture and improve food security situation in 23 developing countries.

"Europe has already made humanitarian responses to prevailing food crisis through emergency aid. The 'Food Facility' is the development response - €1 billion over three years - to get agriculture back on its feet," said Louis Michel, the Development and Humanitarian Aid Commissioner.

This will be the first financing decision in the €1-billion Food Facility framework adopted at the end of 2008 as a response to food security problems faced by many developing countries.

The Commission's financing decision will also benefit Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Myanmar, Burundi, Central African Republic, DR Congo, Cuba, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gambia, Guinea Bissau, Haiti, Honduras, Kenya, Liberia, Mali, Mozambique, the Philippines, Pakistan, Palestine, Sierra Leone and Zimbabwe.

Addressing the period in-between emergency aid and medium - to long-term development cooperation, the Food Facility will operate for a three-year-period (2009-2011).

Three types of activities will be supported are: a) measures to improve access to agricultural inputs like fertilisers and seeds and services like vets and advisers; b) small-scale measures aiming at increasing agricultural production like micro credit, rural infrastructure, training and support to professional groups in agricultural sector; and c) safety net measures, allowing for social transfers to vulnerable population groups, often in the form of labour-intensive public works (roads, irrigation projects etc).

The Commission has also agreed to an overall plan for the use of the entire facility amount, targeting a total of 50 developing countries.

"Over the months ahead, we must not forget the impact of the financial crisis and economic downturn on developing countries -- this is only now becoming clear and could be much worse than expected. Europe is quite rightly focused on recovery plans for our own economy. That should not in any way diminish our commitment to developing countries - as one of the decisions made today clearly shows," Michel said.

On December 18 last year, the European Parliament and the Council adopted a regulation establishing the €1-billion Food Facility as the main EU response to the worsening global food security situation in 2007/08.

Lankan troops kill 420 rebels in 3-day battles

AP, Colombo

Sri Lankan forces have killed 420 Tamil Tigers in the last three days and pushed the rebels back into a "no-fire" zone set up to protect civilians trapped in the fighting, the military said yesterday.

Government troops captured the entire Puthukkudiyiruppu area, the last rebel stronghold on the edge of the safety zone in the last pocket of land in the island's war-ravaged north, military spokesman Brig. Udaya Nanayakkara said.

He said the Tamil Tigers are now confined to the "no-fire" zone in a narrow strip of land along a beach in north-eastern Sri Lanka.

Government forces have been saying for months they are in a final push to defeat the rebels. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and end 25 years of civil war, after a string of major victories in which the rebel administrative capital and main bases were captured.

A military statement said the rebels are "now facing a total annihilation as the soldiers are engaged in a man-to-man combat against them in the last terror pocket."

The military does not give figures for its own casualties, and accounts of battles can-

not be verified because independent journalists are barred from the war zone.

The "no-fire" zone was declared earlier this year by the government as a place for tens of thousands of civilians trapped by the fighting to go. The small strip of coastal land measures just 7.7 square miles (20 square kilometres).

The military and aid organisations have already accused the rebels of firing artillery shells from the "no-fire" zone and holding the civilians there as human shields. The rebels have denied the charges.

The United Nations and aid rights groups have expressed serious concern about the civilians caught in the fighting.

The UN says an estimated 150,000 to 190,000 people are trapped, resulting in dozens of deaths each day. But the government says more than 23,000 civilians escaped last month and 30,000 to 40,000 still remain.

The Tamil Tiger rebels have fought since 1983 to create an independent homeland for ethnic minority Tamils, who have faced decades of marginalisation by successive governments controlled by ethnic Sinhalese. More than 70,000 people have been killed in the violence.

Russia to unveil spaceship plans

BBC, Online

The Russian space agency is expected to unveil development plans for a next-generation manned spacecraft today.

Roscosmos should name the ship's prime developer, which has competed to win government funds for the project.

The proposed new spacecraft should enter into service sometime towards the end of the next decade.

It will replace the venerable three-seat Soyuz capsule, which has carried Russian cosmonauts into orbit for more than four decades.

Although Roscosmos has remained tight-lipped about the upcoming presentation, the agency has quietly released its requirements for a future manned transport system to the Russian space industry.

In doing so, the agency has shed some light on the ship's likely design and its possible missions.

The spacecraft, currently known only by the Russian abbreviation PPTS, for Prospective Piloted Transport System, would be able to reach low-Earth orbit or to enter orbit around the Moon.

SEVERAL CONFIGURATIONS The Earth-orbiting version of the ship would have a mass of 12 tonnes, carry a crew of six, along with no less than 500kg of cargo, while its "lunar cousin" would weigh 16.5 tonnes, have four seats and be capable of delivering and bringing back 100kg of cargo.

The unmanned cargo version of the vehicle would be required to carry no less than 2,000kg to Earth orbit, and return at least 500kg back to the planet's surface.

Roscosmos has reserved the option of making the crew module of the spacecraft reusable, reckoning that a cone-shaped capsule could fly up to 10 missions during its 15-year lifespan.

In providing the technical specifications for the new spacecraft, the agency has also given a glimpse of its vision for the future of the Russian space programme.

Although the most capable version of the ship is meant to support expeditions to the Moon, "intermediate" configurations are intended for a variety of other tasks.

For example, the agency

wants the future developer to evaluate the possibility of sending the ship into high-inclination orbits extending towards Earth's poles, usually frequented by Earth-observation and spy satellites.

While in Earth's orbit, the new spacecraft would have to be able to fly 30-day-long autonomous missions; or stay no less than a year in space when it is docked to the International Space Station, or to a possible future Russian space station.

(Currently, Soyuz spacecraft, which serve as "lifeboats" for the International Space Station, have to be replaced roughly every six months due to potential deterioration of some of their systems, such as batteries and propellant).

MARTIAN POSSIBILITIES In addition to docking to the station, the spacecraft would have to be able to conduct servicing of unmanned vehicles in space and even remove pieces of space junk from their orbits, as well as conduct unspecified military tasks.

The lunar version of the ship would be capable of flying no less than 200 days in space when docked to a space station in orbit around the Moon.

A number of Russian reports have described recent studies looking at the possibility of a lunar orbital station, LOS. Such an outpost would also serve as a hub for lunar modules, which would deliver crews from lunar orbit to the surface of the Moon.

The 200-day mission requirement probably provides some hint about Russian plans to eventually build a permanently occupied lunar outpost, similar to NASA's lunar base developed under its Constellation programme.

In a recent interview with the ITAR-TASS news agency, Aleksei Krasnov, the head of the manned space flight directorate at Roscosmos, said that the future spacecraft could serve as the "core" technology for a future Martian mission.

This apparently referred to the role that the vehicle might play as a delivery and return craft for the large complex that would be needed to raise a manned assault on the Red Planet.

By the time the new Russian spacecraft could enter service

around 2018, the Soyuz family will have logged more than half a century in service.

In recent years, Russia and Europe did look at the possibility of developing the next-generation vehicle together, but the two parties could not agree on the work share. Europe will now separately pursue the possibility of upgrading its robotic ATV space freighter to a manned ship, but still using some Russian technology.

POWERFUL LAUNCHER As reported by BBC News last month, Roscosmos has already completed a tender for the new rocket that would carry the future manned vehicles into space.

Although the agency has delayed the announcement of the winner until at least 6 April, many unofficial sources in Russia maintain that TsSKB Progress, based in Samara, will lead the development of the new rocket.

3 held with snake venom

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) personnel recovered three pounds of snake venom and arrested three people in this connection at a hotel in the city's Karwan Bazar last night.

The arrestees were Mominur Rahman, Mehdi Parvez Robin and Mahfuzur Rahman.

A Rab-10 team led by Flight Lieutenant Humayun Kabir, in the guise of venom dealers, went to Hotel Super Star and arrested the three with the venom worth around Tk 4 crore, sources said.

Earlier, Rab infiltrated the gang placing a mole and he set a meeting at the hotel to buy venom. Accordingly, the sellers appeared at the hotel with the venom, Rab sources added.

They took the arrestees to Dhulapur, Rab-10 office for interrogation.

During primary interrogation, the arrestees said they collected the venom from Nilphamari a week ago, Rab sources added.

The sources said venoms are used as raw materials for different medicines.

Trapped by nexus of brokers

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medical tests within one month of arrival and then the employer secures work permits for them. These 21 workers paid their agents RM 200 thrice for medical tests but the tests were never done. Besides, Motijheel Management SDN, which hired these workers, kept their passports.

Malaysia introduced outsourcing of hiring workers and employing them at companies on contract in 2006. However, there are several hundred registered companies that do not have any capacity to recruit workers at all. These companies are supposed to arrange minimum pay, food and shelter for the workers even if there are no jobs.

But, in the absence of monitoring, these companies hire too many workers and ultimately failed to find jobs for them. They then started selling workers to brokers who supply them to other companies with a little or no pay.

Moniruzzaman said, "As we did not have work permits we came to the high commission hoping to get back our passports. We informed the officials here of our situation more than a month ago, but nothing has happened so far."

"Liton of recruiting agency Hirak Barnali in Dhaka said we have to pay RM 1,300 each to get back our passports and RM 3,000 to return home in case we do not get back passports. But where will we get the money?" said the hapless youth who had spent Tk 2.3 lakh to go to Malaysia.

Jahangir Mollah, 40, of Faridpur, is one of 29 workers who have been in Malaysia for around 18 months. He was, however, employed for just three months. Maps Vision, a company that does not have the capacity to recruit workers at

all, hired these workers and supplied them to another company named Pilot.

"In the contract form, my basic salary was RM 30 a day, but I was paid RM 25," said Jahangir who spent Tk 2.10 lakh to go to Malaysia. "When we wanted our salary, some Tamil men beat us up," he said.

After getting back passports they sought the high commission's assistance in getting jobs, but they did not get any job and their work permits expired.

"I then brought Tk 55,000 from home... I spent RM 1,800 to renew my work permit without any result," he said. "My wife and children are having hardship back home. I cannot send home any money. Police also raid regularly. Who will get me released if I am arrested?" he added.

Talking to The Daily Star, Florida Sandanasamy, lawyer of human rights organisation 'Tenaganita in Kuala Lumpur, said they filed thousands of cases with the labour court and police. "Whatever money the workers earn in rightful ways is shared as commission to the outsourcing companies and agents. Also, employers keep passports and give those back for big amounts," Sandanasamy said.

When work permits are not renewed, the immigration gives a worker a special pass for three months, but the worker has to pay RM 100 a month, she said. "Ironically, workers with special pass are not allowed to work... How is a worker going to pay that RM 100 a month? And where do they go at a place far from their families?" she said.

Re-election

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polls there just now, the Election Commission (EC) said.

The EC urged the country's distinguished personalities particularly the members of parliament (MPs) not to visit the upazilas concerned to keep the local elections free from any influence.

"It will be good for all if the distinguished people, especially the MPs, do not visit the election areas," Election Commissioner Brig Gen (ret'd) M Sakhawat Hossain told reporters at the EC secretariat yesterday afternoon.

"We hope, they (MPs) will not create any embarrassing situation by visiting the (polling) areas," Sakhawat said.

The election commissioner said that they (EC) have taken all-out preparations to hold the upazila elections in a free and fair manner. "We hope the polls will be free and fair."

He said, "We don't want the repetition of the causes for which the January 22 (upazila) elections had to be postponed."

The judicial magistrates have already been appointed for the election areas and they were asked to carry their duties in coordination with the district level officials, Sakhawat said.

Replying to a question, the election commissioner said

the commission has decided to hold the election to Ukhiya upazila later as the law and order situation is not conducive for holding the polls in this upazila.

The election, he said, was postponed in Ukhiya as one candidate, who lost his candidature due to loan default, had hijacked the ballot boxes and beat some election officials.

"The court's clearance is required for holding the polls there," Sakhawat said, adding that the commission would decide to hold polls in Ukhiya considering all things conducive for the elections.

Asked about the allegations and irregularities found in some 16 upazilas where the elections were held on January 22, he said the judicial investigations have been going on in those upazilas.

"The independent inquiry is being carried out there. If anyone tries to influence the investigations in any place, the elections would be cancelled and re-election would be held," he warned.

The election commissioner urged all people concerned to cooperate with the investigation teams to complete their inquiries in time as the commission had found that some quarters are creating impediments in some places.

Advertisement for Apex Bangladesh Petrolium and Petrochemicals Ltd. (বাপেক্স) regarding recruitment. It includes details about the company, recruitment process, and application requirements.

Advertisement for Toyota Car Saloon Model-1999. It describes the car's features, price, and contact information for the dealer.

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