

Israel rebuffs US call for total settlement freeze

AP, Jerusalem

Israel said yesterday it will press ahead with housing construction in West Bank settlements despite a surprisingly blunt US demand that it stop all the building.

US Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said Wednesday the US wants a halt to all settlement construction including "natural growth." She was referring to Israel's insistence that new construction is necessary to accommodate the growth of families already living in existing settlements.

Government spokesman Mark Regav responded to the demand by saying "normal life in those communities must be allowed to continue." He confirmed that this meant some construction will continue in existing settlements.

The new conflict with Washington comes on the day President Barack Obama is meeting Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas at the White House. Abbas has said the Palestinian demand for freezing settlements will be at the top of his agenda in the talks.

The new US administration has been more explicit in its

criticism of Israeli settlement policy than its predecessor. But Regav said the fate of existing settlements will be determined in peace negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians.

The US and much of the world consider the settlements an obstacle to peace because they are built on land the Palestinians claim for a future state. More than 280,000 Jewish settlers live among more than 2 million Palestinians in the West Bank.

Regav said Israel has pledged to build no new settlements and to remove unauthorised Jewish outposts in the West Bank.

Israel and the US each have new leaders with strikingly different approaches to Israeli-Palestinian relations. Netanyahu refuses to endorse Palestinian independence, a notion supported by Obama, his predecessor and the previous Israeli government.

Clinton said Obama told Netanyahu last week when the two met at the White House that the US sees stopping settlements as key to a peace deal that would see a Palestinian state created alongside Israel.

Dhaka elected chairman of the 98th ILC conference

BSS, Dhaka

Bangladesh for the first time has been elected chairman of the 98th International Labour Conference (ILC).

The ILC conference will be held at the headquarters of the International Labour Organization (ILO) in Geneva, Switzerland from June 1 to 19, Labour and Employment Secretary Ataharul Islam told a press briefing yesterday.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina will address the conference on June 16.

Labour and Employment and Overseas Employment Minister Engr Mosharruf Hossain will preside over the conference. So, this year's ILC conference is being considered as very important, Islam said.

In the conference, he said, the prevailing global employment crisis, state of child labour, labour rights, trade union, HIV/AIDS and implementation of different articles of ILO Convention will be discussed.

The labour and employment secretary said with the participation in the conference, Bangladesh's image will be enhanced abroad and scope for ensuring jobs of 70 lakh expatriate Bangladeshis will be created.

A 14-member delegation, led by State Minister for Labour and Employment Begum Munnujan Sufian, will join the conference. The team includes labour and employment secretary, Bangladesh's permanent representative to Geneva, labour leaders and government officials.

The labour and employment minister will leave here for Geneva on May 30 to attend the conference, he said, adding that 'global summit' of the conference will be held on June 15-16.

Replying to a question on the trade union, Islam said the present government after coming to power had lifted the embargo on trade union which was banned by the past caretaker government.

He said trade union remains effective all over the world and there will be no barrier to trade union in our country.

WAR CRIME

Maulana Yusuf, 8 others get bail

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The High Court (HC) yesterday granted anticipatory bail for six months to Jamaat-e-Islami leader Maulana Abul Kalam Mohammad Yusuf and eight others in a war crime case.

After hearing a bail petition jointly filed by the accused, an HC bench of Justice MA Wahhab Miah and Justice Marzi-ul-Huq also issued a rule upon the government to explain within four weeks why the petitioners should not be granted regular bail in this case.

All the nine accused yesterday appeared before the HC bench for bail.

One Liyakat Ali Khan of Murelganj in Bagerhat filed a case on May 13 with additional judicial magistrate's court in Bagerhat stating that Abul Kalam Mohammad Yusuf and others in association with the Pakistani occupying forces had killed freedom fighter Abu Bakar and some others in May in 1971.

The magistrate asked the Officer-in-Charge (OC) of Murelganj police to launch an inquiry into this case.

The OC on May 17 filed a first information report (FIR) with the police station against 19 people of Murelganj, including the nine who got bail yesterday, on charges of killing Abu Bakar and others during the War of Liberation in 1971.

Petitioner's counsel Barrister Abdur Razzaq told the court that the case had been filed against his clients out of political vendetta and to harass them.

16 killed

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Rezaul Karim Reza, 28, Habibur Rahman Tarash, 50, Babu Islam, 25, Haider Ali, 55, and Mofazzal Hossain, 52, are among those who died. Identity of the others could not be known immediately.

Police and locals rushed the injured to Sirajganj Sadar Hospital, Bogra Ziaur Rahman Medical College Hospital and different clinics.

The bodies retrieved have been sent to morgue for autopsy.

Most of those killed hailed from Sirajganj town and Tarash upazila.

Police sources said traffic fatalities on the highway have increased for lack of a road divider. Besides, most drivers ignore traffic rules and drive their vehicles recklessly.

Hatikumrul Highway police records show that in last three months at least 41 people have been killed and some 70 others injured in accidents on the road under their jurisdiction.

Other sources however said the figure would be much higher.

Send expert team

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does not cancel the project.

"The project is a death trap for Bangladesh," he said while addressing a press briefing at his Banani residence.

Earlier, on Wednesday, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina after a meeting with the Indian high commissioner said an all-party parliamentary team would visit the project area to assess its impact on Bangladesh and submit their recommendations in the House.

But Hafiz said a parliamentary team should not visit such a controversial place and hoped that government would take initiatives to resolve the problem through bilateral discussion with India.

Hafiz on October 29, 2007 at a meeting at Saifur Rahman's house was appointed the acting secretary general of the reformist faction of BNP. He returned to the mainstream party before December 29 election and got party nomination but failed to win.

Terming the proposed Indian hydroelectric project a 'national crisis for Bangladesh' he said that if the government goes lax over the project it will result in desertification in the northeastern region.

The former minister said

since the formation of the joint river commission in 1972 Bangladesh had been opposing any dam construction over the Barak and objected to it formally but India is yet to respond to those letters and did not provide Bangladesh with any information and data of the project.

Indian water resources minister at the last two meetings of the commission in Delhi and Dhaka had given assurance that they would not withdraw water from upstream of the Meghna but now they are implementing the project keeping Bangladesh in total obscurity, he added.

Asked about the 'reformist' group of the party Hafiz said, "It is not in existence now; it is a matter of the past. Our proposals were included in the party constitution and now we all are united under the leadership of Khaleda Zia."

He also condemned the government's move to oust the party chairperson from the house she had been given by the state.

Meanwhile, BNP is mulling over staging a long march against the Indian plan to construct the Timaimukh dam, party sources said, adding that a team of senior leaders and experts are already working on it.

Down in dumps

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People of Ruhirbeel, Sripur, Chuibaria and Kurikawnia told the same story to The Daily Star correspondent during visits there yesterday.

The entire Pratapnagar union is surrounded by two rivers—the Kobodak and the Kholpetua. During the storm the embankments at several points got breached and water of these rivers still enter the union during high tide forcing villagers to live on the parts of embankments that are still intact.

Jahanara, wife of Ishaq Ali Sana of Shubhadrakathi, said the Kobodak washed away their three houses and around 80 maunds of rice they had stocked for rainy days.

"We had only watered rice [Panta bhat] with salt yesterday (Wednesday) and nothing since then," he said.

She also said they received only half a kilogram of flattened rice and some molasses yesterday morning. "How could I feed my eight-member family with this tiny amount of relief?" she said.

Al Amin, a resident of Kurikawnia, said the main problem is drinking water. "We have no alternative to drinking the contaminated water of the few tube wells that have surfaced."

Abdul Mannan, chairman of Pratapnagar, said people of his union are passing hard days. They have no shelter.

"I have tried to distribute relief in every village of my union," he claimed.

Diarrhoea is spreading in the villages of Pratapnagar union.

Abdul Motilal, a resident of Ruhirbill, said his son and daughter-in-law have been suffering from diarrhoea for the

last three days after drinking contaminated water.

Residents of Ruhirbeel, Chuibaria and Kurikawnia also said diarrhoea victims are increasing in number in their villages.

Expressing his fears of a diarrhoea outbreak, Motilal said immediate measures should be taken to prevent a large-scale outbreak.

Cyclone Aila destroyed almost all the thatched houses in Pratapnagar union.

Only one concrete house remains standing in Shubhadrakathi. Most of the people of this village made shanties on the embankments.

Abdul Hossain, a resident of Shubhadrakathi, is now living in a tiny shanty with his five-member family. "We can't sleep in the night as the place is too small for accommodating the five of us," he said.

Many were seen living on the boats or roads inside the villages.

Embankments along the villages of Pratapnagar had breached during the storm. Many villagers were seen trying to repair the dykes on their own.

"We need the embankments to be repaired as soon as possible otherwise the entire area will go under water during every high tide," said Abdul Malek, a resident of Sripur village.

"As the high tide begins, our houses go under water," he said, adding, "Only God knows what will happen in the coming rainy season."

Meanwhile, Health Minister AFM Ruhul Huq said adequate relief was dispatched and it needed proper distribution.

Visiting Ashashuni upazila, he urged all to come forward and help the Aila victims.

Dhaka renews

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on the occasion.

President Zillur Rahman, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, UN under secretary general for peacekeeping operations, chiefs of three services, inspector general of police and UN resident coordinator in Bangladesh gave separate messages.

In his message, Ban Ki-moon urged all concerned to draw on the power of women to strengthen UN peacekeeping while helping women and girls to transform their destinies for the better, reports BSS.

"As the Security Council has acknowledged, women frequently suffer most during the conflict, including from horrific acts of sexual and gender-based violence. By including female police among our ranks, we foster a safe environment for victims to get the help they need and deserve," UN secretary general said.

To observe the day, Bangladesh Armed Forces have chalked out various programmes to mark the day. The day's programme will begin with "peacekeepers run" which will be inaugurated by Foreign Minister Dipu Moni at 7:00am, said an ISPR release yesterday.

A reception to the close relations of fallen peacekeepers

Tk 10cr sought

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On May 24, Finance and Planning Minister AMA Muhit announced that the government would have a block allocation in the next budget for holding the war criminals trials.

Shafique Ahmed said the government is thinking about setting up the tribunal in government buildings on Abdul Gani Road in the city but the matter has not been finalised yet.

He said this while speaking at the weekly press briefing at the conference room of the law ministry yesterday afternoon.

State Minister for Law Qamrul Islam was also present.

The law minister said a fund has to be allocated for setting up courtrooms, office rooms for the judges of the tribunal, investigators, prosecutors and the office staff and other facilities and logistic support.

"The government is very sincere in holding the trials of the war criminals and there is no confusion about it as the parliament has made the decision," he said.

Responding to a question, Shafique said the government will decide under which law the Pikhana carnage case will be tried after receiving the investigation report from the Criminal Investigation Department (CID).

Asked whether the government is avoiding the conventional justice systems as the enquiry committee, headed by Anisuzzaman Khan, recommended holding the trial of the Pikhana carnage case under the Army Act, he said the CID would give the detailed report against all the individuals who were involved in the incident.

The prosecution will analyse the CID's investigation report and then it will be decided under which law the case will be tried, he said.

Bureaucrats

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"If they erect the bridge, it will be a permanent disaster for the Turag as no water transport will be able to pass under it," commented a high official from BIWTA.

"If the government officials don't obey the laws, how can we expect that the commoners will do that?" the official asked.

The workers carrying out the construction yesterday said it would be a Bailey bridge.

Now no water vehicles can go under the Ashulia Bridge across the Turag due to its low height. The BIWTA is planning to make a higher bridge at the Ashulia point for the passage of the vessels.

"The condition of Turag is really horrible. Not only grabbing, if the government does not stop construction of the bridge, it will permanently ruin the river," said the BIWTA official.

Earlier in the 80s, the Rampura Bridge created a permanent obstacle to a river route that used to connect the Balu river with Karwan Bazar. The bridge eventually led to the end of the Begunbari and Hatighil canals.

The bridge connecting the administration officials' housing project and Ashulia road is likely to bring in similar fate for the river route there.

MP privilege

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liability and to ensure their accountability a rule must be formulated soon determining matters concerning privileges, power and immunities, other speakers at the discussion said. This would also ensure independent functioning of institutions like the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), they added.

General Secretary of Shushashoner Janney Nagarik (SHUJAN) Badiul Alam Majumder in his keynote paper said, "The Anti-Corruption Commission has been constituted through a special law to combat corruption and institutions established under special law do not fall within the jurisdiction of the Public Undertakings Committee."

Referring to the repeated summoning of the anti-graft body by the parliamentary standing committee on public undertakings, the keynote paper said the committee that summoned the ACC is led by a corruption case convict, MK Alamgir, which is neither justifiable nor ethical. The ACC did not announce its own independence; it was made independent by the law to ensure flawless and fearless functioning, it added.

In his paper, Badiul also demanded expulsion of former speaker Jamiruddin Sircar from parliament if the allegations of corruption against him are proven.

Speaking at the discussion, Prof Muzaffer Ahmad of Transparency International Bangladesh said, "A parliamentary watch committee should be established so that a change comes in the attitude of the lawmakers. Political parties also should practise democracy to bring such changes in their lawmakers' attitude."

Columnist Syed Abul Maksud said, "Immunity and democracy are contradictory to each other. Democracy cannot exist if there is immunity because democracy requires accountability."

Dr Tofael Ahmed and M Hamid also spoke at the roundtable, among others.

Lanka ducks

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troops were alleged to have subjected rebel-held areas packed with civilians to intense, indiscriminate shelling.

But Samarasinghe dismissed Western criticism as "double standards."

"They are opposed to the independent action we took to counter and defeat, but they are silent about what is happening in Iraq, Afghanistan and in Gaza," Samarasinghe said.

"This final result shows that Sri Lanka stands on top in terms of wide support across the globe," Foreign Minister Rohitha Bogollagama said. "This constitutes a major achievement in terms of international relations."

The UN estimates that more than 7,000 civilians were killed in the first four months of this year alone.

UN human rights chief Navi Pillay had told the Council there was credible evidence that both Sri Lankan forces and the defeated Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) grossly violated international humanitarian laws.

But Sri Lanka -- backed by Asian countries including China, India and Pakistan -- managed to push through its own resolution.

The text condemns only the Tamil Tigers, and "welcomes... the liberation by the government of Sri Lanka of tens of thousands of its citizens that were kept by the LTTE against their will as hostages."

It was adopted with 29 countries voting for, 12 rejecting and six abstaining from the vote -- effectively handing the island's hawkish government a diplomatic seal of approval for its offensive.

Defence policy

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The army report mentions a growing shortage of officers at various units within the army. It said 20 percent of the officials are engaged in the UN missions.

Referring to Forces Goal 2020, a set of goals outlined in 2004 for modernisation of the army in congruence with the country's economic realities, it says accomplishing those will help plug the army's organisational shortcomings and raise its operational capacity.

Bemoaning the lack of funds making the targets harder to attain, it says the government should approve Forces Goal 2020 in principle, committee sources said.

The committee chairman said they have asked the navy to come up with a report on its present situation at the next meeting.

At yesterday's meeting, the committee also discussed demarcation of maritime boundary and disputes with neighbouring countries over the issue.

"Bangladesh Navy does not have the capacity to collect data required to strengthen our maritime boundary claims. So, we recommend procuring a hydrographical survey vessel," said the committee chief, adding that the purchase might cost around Tk 100 crore.

Besides the committee members, chiefs of three services attended the meeting.

Indigenous rights

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reported from across the globe due to the economic crisis.

"The governments in different states should not forget about their poor people while facing the economic crisis," Irene Khan said in an interview with the BBC.

According to the report, at least 54 people in Bangladesh were estimated to have died in suspected extra-judicial executions by police and the Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) in the first half of this year alone.

The report said according to the government mandatory judicial enquiries were carried out into all fatal shootings by police and Rab and those were found to be justified. The number of judicial enquiries conducted and the findings of such enquiries were not made public.

Regarding women the report said women continued to be discriminated in law and in practice and violence against women including beatings, acid attacks and dowry deaths were reported.

In March 2008, the government announced amendments to the National Women Development Policy in order to further promote equality for women but failed to have it implemented in the face of fierce resistance from Islamist groups who rallied in protest saying the amendments defied the Islamic law of inheritance.

Rights groups and Western diplomats were furious.

"The Human Rights Council missed the opportunity to send a message" to human rights violators, said a Canadian diplomat in Geneva.

Switzerland also criticised the "significant gaps" in the text, including a failure to make explicit reference to granting humanitarian groups full access to up to 300,000 displaced Tamils.

Ethnic Tamils displaced by the fighting are now being held in camps ringed by barbed wire and security forces, who say they need to weed out former rebel fighters disguised as civilians.

"The Human Rights Council did not even express its concern for the hundreds of thousands of people facing indefinite detention in government camps," said Juliette de Rivero, Geneva advocacy director at Human Rights Watch.

"It is deeply disappointing that a majority of the Human Rights Council decided to focus on praising a government whose forces have been responsible for the repeated indiscriminate shelling of civilians."

Two top Indian

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seized the passport and a driving license of Rauf.

Asked whether Rauf has any link to the smuggling of 10 truckloads of arms and ammo seized in Chittagong, a top DB official seeking anonymity said, "After primary interrogation we can say if he was just hiding in Bangladesh or he came here with a mission."

"After primary interrogation we'll decide if he needs to be quizzed in the sensational arms haul case in which name of Daud Ibrahim came up in the confessional statement of some accused," he said.

According to the confessional statement of detained former Director General of National Security Intelligence (NSI) Brig Gen (ret'd) Abdur Rahim had a meeting with ARY group in Dubai on the smuggling of seized firearms. Daud Ibrahim was allegedly present at the meeting.

Asked whether the detainees will be deported to India, the official said government would decide it.

A mercenary sharpshooter Rauf was convicted of pulling the trigger on the music baron as he stepped out of a Shiv temple on the outskirts of Mumbai on August 12, 1997.

Rauf convicted in April 2002 following a long-drawn-out trial fled India for Bangladesh last month while on furlough, according to website reports.

Once every two years a convict can avail of furlough on court order of Indian High Court, which is essentially a 14-day leave from jail to visit family or for personal work.

Sources in the DB said detained Zahid is a top-listed criminal of India who had been hiding in Bangladesh for the last eight years.

Zahid arranged the shelter for Abdul Rauf in the house of one Kamal Mian on Chhotta Shakil's order, ringleader of Mumbai-based criminal gang, Chhotta Shakil is also a close associate of Daud Ibrahim.

They also hired a house at Shekherket in Mohammadpur to get hold up.

More help

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food. We are already providing subsidies to this end, and will do so in the next budget, if necessary," she said at the launching ceremony held at Bangladesh-China Friendship Conference Centre in the capital.

Food Planning and Monitoring Unit (FPMU) prepared the policy with support from the National Food Policy Capacity Strengthening Programme funded by the USAID, European Commission (EC) and Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO).

In the next budget, the government will provide more assistance to farmers for quality seeds, fuel and irrigation, Matia Chowdhury said.

The minister sought assistance from development partners to boost agricultural production. She regretted that sometimes conditions are imposed regarding food stock and subsidies, and said these should go.

Food and Disaster Management Minister Abdur Razzaque said the government will expand safety net programmes so that every citizen of the country gets food.

Inadequate storage capacity has been a major hindrance to raising government food stock

to have an impact on the market, which is needed to ensure fair prices for farmers, he said.

Three more silos will be set up to increase food storage capacity by three lakh tonnes, he mentioned.

The minister said raising domestic production of food is much more important than importing food in this era of trade restrictions.

"Agriculture is the backbone and springboard for the development of economy of the country," said FAO Representative Ad Spijkers. More investment and expansion of technology are imperative for development, he added.

Re-excavation of the Gorai river that can augment agricultural production in the south and south-western districts is of utmost importance, he said.

US Ambassador James F Moriarty, EC Ambassador Dr Stefan Frowein, FPMU Director General Ruhul Amin and Research Director Ruhul Amin Talukder also spoke at the programme chaired by Food and Disaster Management Secretary Mokhlesur Rahman.

Whips gobbled

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Pirpor-3 Tk 25,000, Shahid Ahmed Khandaker of Dohar Tk 50,000, Shahidul Alam Talukder of Patuakhali-2 Tk 25,000, Amjad Hossain Sarkar of Nilphamari-4 Tk 25,000, Kabir Hossain of Rajshahi-4 Tk 2 lakh, Saifuzzaman Chowdhury Jewel Tk 50,000, Shamsuddin Ahmed Ishak of Narsingdi-1 Tk 1 lakh, Abdur Razzaq Khan of Patuakhali-4 Tk 50,000, late Abdus Samad Azad of Sunamganj-3 Tk 1 lakh, Tajul Islam Chowdhury of Kurigram-2 Tk 1 lakh, Mufti Maulana Abdus Sattar of Bagerhat-4 Tk 1.5 lakh, Rawshan Ara Hena Tk 1 lakh, Alamgir Mohammad Mahfuzullah Farid of Cox's Bazar-2 Tk 75,000, Kofil Sonar of Naogaon-4 Tk 50,000, late Syed Manjur Hossain of Chapainawabganj-2 Tk 2 lakh, Abdul Gani of Meherpur Tk 1 lakh, Shahiduzzaman Beltu of Jhenidah-4 Tk 1 lakh, Mashiur Rahman of Jhenidah Tk 1 lakh and Kazi Mojammel Haque Tk 50,000.

AL lawmakers of the ninth parliament, Dabirul Islam and Imajuddin Pramanik, also took Tk 75,000 and Tk 25,000 while Jatuya Party lawmaker Mojibur Rahman of Lalmonirhat-2 took Tk 50,000.

FUEL ALLOWANCE

The sub-committee yesterday started examining the documents related to payments of fuel allowances for vehicles used by the VIPs of the last parliament.

Shajahan said former speaker Jamiruddin Sircar was entitled to use four vehicles while his deputy Akhtar Hamid Siddiqui and Delwar were each entitled to use three vehicles. "But the former speaker used additional three