

Obama salutes US soldiers in Xmas message

AFP, Washington

President Barack Obama and his wife Michelle sent Christmas greetings to Americans and particularly US soldiers serving abroad in a special holiday message.

As families gather for the holidays "we wanted to take a moment to send greetings from our family -- from me, from Michelle, from Malia and Sasha -- and from Bo (the dog)," the president said in a video and audio broadcast.

"This is our first Christmas in the White House, and we are so grateful for this extraordinary experience," said Michelle Obama, standing next to her husband in the video.

"To all our soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines and Coast Guardsmen -- I have no greater honor than serving as your Commander in Chief," said Obama, who on December 1 ordered another 30,000 troops to be sent to Afghanistan.

"I've been energized by your dedication to duty from Baghdad to the Korean Peninsula. Michelle and I have been moved by your determination-wounded warriors at Walter Reed and Bethesda (military hospitals), fighting to recover, to get back to your units."

After years of warfare and multiple tours of duty, "as you carry on with our missions in Iraq and Afghanistan, your service... is an inspiration to

Two cops

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People caught the two plainclothes policemen as they were running away after snatching \$320 from illegal money exchanger Tajuddin around 8:30pm.

Police rescued the law enforcers and took them to the police station.

Preparations were going on for filing a case in connection with the incident.

Govt to take

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BBC Bangla Service last night.

He said the monitoring system for market has been strengthened and the ministry's monitoring cell would regularly check the market situation and take actions against the persons responsible for the artificial price hike.

He said the government would soon import good quality lentils from Nepal, which has recently withdrawn ban on lentil export to Bangladesh. Lentil is now retailed for Tk 135-140 per kilogram on the market.

Commenting on the recent price hike of rice, the commerce minister said the price of rice has been stable and hoped it would go down soon.

Rice prices increased by Tk 2 per kilogram in the last two weeks.

Canals left

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dozens of important canals originating from them.

"When we conducted surveys on rivers, dozens of canals came to our notice. All the officials and surveyors felt that these precious waterways should be included in the survey," said a Dhaka district administration official involved in supervising field level survey.

The number of encroachers would double in the records if those natural canals are brought under the survey and steps are taken to protect them, he added.

"If you do not save the branches of a tree what is the use of saving its trunk only," said the official explaining how a land hungry section is systematically destroying these canals.

In the eastern side of Dhaka, dozens of canals spawning from river Balu have disappeared in the hands of big real estate developers. The Trimohoni canals, infamous for extremely polluted water, are disappearing fast due to siltation and encroachment.

Beyond the flood protection embankment in the western part of the city, a dozen of canals have already disappeared from the vast low-lying areas. Real estate developers are indiscriminately filling up hundreds of acres of wetland crisscrossed by these canals.

us and to every American," he said.

Michelle Obama said one of her "greatest privileges is to visit with military families across the country," some of whom have lost loved-ones but "somehow still find the time and energy to serve their communities."

"To all Americans, from our family to yours, Merry Christmas," she said.

Obama urged Americans to visit the White House website to learn how they can help US troops deployed abroad. "Every American can do something to support our troops, even if it's as simple as just saying thank you," he said.

Hasan

FROM PAGE 1
defend the wrong statement made earlier by BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia.

"I think both the opposition leader and her followers are making such remarks due to their ignorance about the purpose of the Copenhagen summit."

The state minister said this at a press conference held at the Government Muslim High School in Chittagong yesterday afternoon in reply to the remarks made by BNP leaders at a press conference in the capital on Thursday.

He was a guest at the centenary jubilee celebration programme of the school.

He said Bangladesh's stance and proposals for placement in the summit were prepared at a special meeting of the parliamentary standing committee on environment ministry with committee Chairman Abdul Mobin Talukder in the chair.

Mobin is a BNP lawmaker. Two BNP lawmakers Nilufer Chowdhury and Majharul Alam Prodhan went to Copenhagen with the government delegation, he said.

He said, "What would the BNP leaders say about the role of parliamentary standing committee Chairman Abdul Mobin Talukder as he approved our stance?"

He said Bangladesh successfully voiced its concerns at the recently held Copenhagen Climate Summit under the leadership of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. Bangladesh drew the attention of the international community to its vulnerable condition, he added.

He claimed that the clauses regarding initiatives for the most vulnerable and least developed countries were included in the summit deal due to strong intervention and sincere effort of Sheikh Hasina.

The prime minister also played a key role in forming a global fund for the most vulnerable and least developed countries, he said.

Bangladesh, for the first time, took part in such a summit in a unified manner, taking people including experts, NGO representatives, and opposition party lawmakers in the government delegation to Copenhagen.

Schoolboy strangled in city

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Unidentified miscreants strangled a boy at Tejaon industrial area in the city.

Police recovered the body of Mohammad Sujon, 12, a student of class IV of Tejaon Central Press Government Primary School, from Begunbari canal yesterday afternoon.

Police later sent it to Dhaka Medical College Hospital morgue for autopsy.

Sujon was strangled to death, morgue sources said.

Abul Hossain, father of the deceased and a street hawker, said Sujon remained missing since last Saturday.

On that day, he started for school from his Begunbari residence in the morning but did not return, Hossain added.

Sahab Uddin, sub-inspector of Tejaon Industrial Area Police Station, said street boys saw Sujon's decomposed body and informed the police.

Suzon might have been killed following an altercation with some of his friends, he said.

Police are investigating the incident, he added.

Buriganga

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The river Turag has also gathered one metre deep sludge on its bed near Tongi Bazar. This area will also come under the excavation drive later.

"We will use four local dredgers to remove waste materials and substances. A process of floating tender in this regard is going on," the official said.

It is very difficult for day labourers to do the job due to high concentration of sludge and waste, he said, adding that they would still try it again on the first day of the drive.

"The normal dredgers can do very little in removing garbage out of the riverbed. We need Amphibious dredger but it involves an expenditure of Tk 5 crore," he said.

The removed sludge will be dumped somewhere at Amin Bazar, he added.

The estimated cost of the drive is around Tk 5 crore, which will come from the revenue budget. A project to remove the garbage from the beds of Buriganga and Turag has also been taken.

The development project proposal titled "Removing garbage including polythene from the river bed" is underway. The estimated cost of the project is Tk 150 crore. The proposal will be submitted to the shipping ministry by the first week of January.

Under the project 20 km area of Buriganga stretching from Kholamora to Fatulla and 4 km area of river Turag at Jitama point will be excavated, said another official.

The Amphibious dredger will be used to excavate the garbage under the project, he said.

Boro worries

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83,811 hectares of land, which is 1,245 hectares less than last year's 85,056 hectares.

The DAE sources said the boro cultivators have prepared seedbeds on some 8,000 hectares of land in the nine upazilas of Rajshahi.

Road accidents

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deceased who died on the spot was identified as Ilias, 12, while the other two not immediately identified succumbed to their injuries at Narsingdi District Hospital.

The injured were rushed to the hospital, he added.

BDR

FROM PAGE 1
top-ranking BDR official yesterday told The Daily Star, "If the departmental trial is not completed before CID turns in its charge sheet, the trials at the special courts might be delayed with the accused taking out stay on the proceedings."

The BDR DG however would not comment on the matter.

Sources in the force and home ministry said the government wants to complete the departmental proceedings first to avert potential legal complexities.

In November, BDR formed six special courts headed by its director general to try around 7,000 boro troops on charges of mutiny.

The courts have already begun proceedings in Rangamati, Bandarban, Sathkira and Feni.

According to the rules, charges are pressed and arrest warrants issued on the opening day of the special trial, and the following day, the accused are produced before the court.

At the end of the second day, the court is adjourned giving the accused 27 days time to prepare for defence.

Woman knocks

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Peter's Basilica.

Video footage showed the woman in a red sweatshirt leaping over the barricade and grabbing the 82-year-old pope as he began the traditional procession to the altar on Thursday.

Pope looked in good form Friday as he delivered his traditional Christmas message, urging tolerance for migrants, a day after falling during an assault at St Peter's Basilica.

"In the face of the exodus of all those who migrate from their homelands and are driven away by hunger, intolerance or environmental degradation," the Roman Catholic Church calls for "an attitude of acceptance and welcome," the pope said.

The 82-year-old pontiff appeared upbeat and calm as he gave the "urbis et orbis" (to the city and the world) address to tens of thousands of pilgrims gathered in St Peter's Square and millions around the world. The spiritual leader of the world's 1.1 billion Roman Catholics then gave blessings in 65 languages from Maltese to Mongolian.

In the assault on Thursday, a 25-year-old woman leapt over a security barrier and managed to knock down the pope in a dramatic start to his celebration of Christmas Eve mass.

Masses of pilgrims gasped as a security guard failed to stop her from grabbing Pope Benedict's vestments near the neck and pulling him to the floor as several other people fell over in the melee.

Relieved applause broke out as the pontiff got back on his feet within moments.

Pope Benedict went on to celebrate the mass undaunted by the assault, speaking out in his homily against selfishness as Christians across the world celebrated the birth of Jesus Christ.

Meanwhile the Vatican identified the pontiff's assailant as Susanna Maiolo, 25, and said she was hospitalised for "necessary treatment."

Vatican spokesman Federico Lombardi told AFP that Maiolo, of dual Swiss and Italian nationality, as "apparently unbalanced."

She tried to get near the pope on the same occasion last year but security guards held her back, the spokesman said.

Prominent French Cardinal Roger Etchegaray, 87, broke a

leg in the incident though he was several metres (yards) away.

He will undergo surgery for a fracture to the neck of a thigh-bone, the Vatican said.

Lombardi played down Thursday's incident, praising Pope Benedict's "great self-control and control of the situation."

Headed: "It was an assault, but it wasn't dangerous because she wasn't armed."

The Christmas Eve mass is one of few occasions when tourists and pilgrims can get close to the pontiff.

Papal security has been tightened since Mehmet Ali Agca, a Turk, shot and nearly killed Benedict's predecessor John Paul II in St Peter's Square in May 1981.

Thursday's incident occurred less than two weeks after a man with a history of mental problems attacked Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi after a political rally in Milan, breaking his nose and inflicting other facial injuries.

The attack on the pope took place amid concern over his health after a Vatican decision to schedule the mass two hours earlier than the traditional midnight hour due to the pontiff's advanced age.

Lombardi insisted that the change, a Vatican first, was only a "sensible precaution" for the octogenarian pontiff, adding that it was "no cause for alarm."

Lombardi said the move was aimed at making Christmas "a little less tiring for the pope, who has many engagements during this time."

Benedict has had no notable health problems since his 2005 election apart from a fractured wrist from a fall in July while holidaying in northern Italy.

Four years before he became pope, however, then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger spent nearly a month in hospital following a brain haemorrhage, according to the German daily Bild. It said he has suffered from fainting spells.

John Paul II insisted on observing the tradition of beginning the mass at midnight despite years of ill health, notably the ravages of Parkinson's disease, at the end of his life.

He died in April 2005 aged 84.

1.5 lakh bags

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1,14,397 bags and 34,000 bags respectively for a storage charge of Tk 2 per sq ft.

Apart from their own godowns, the commission agents had to hire space from Bangladesh Jute Corporation (BJC), Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Corporation (BIWTC) and some other private landowners to store the fertiliser at Sadarghat and Bangla Bazar.

Sources said Beacon Engineering Works took lease of the BJC land and later rented out to Babul Enterprise for storing 70,000 bags of fertiliser.

"As the fertiliser remained stockpiled and got damaged over the years, the joint forces during the rule of caretaker government filed a case against me on February 2, 2007 and confiscated the fertiliser. However, confiscation order could be removed later with the help of Chittagong Chamber of Commerce Industry (CCCI)," said Babul Chandra Ghosh, proprietor of Babul Enterprise.

"CPA magistrate in a drive on May 6, 2007 gave a directive to take away the fertiliser, which is seeping into Karnaphuli river and causing water pollution, or to face legal actions," he added.

"If we take away or dump the fertiliser elsewhere without permission, Ripon Group would have scope to file case demanding compensation from us," said Babul.

"A number of times I tried to reach Ahsan Habib, proprietor of Ripon Group, over phone but did not get any response. I have sent several legal notices to Ahsan Habib and others of the group but nothing happens. But I have to pay several lakh taka as outstanding space charge from my pocket," he added.

"It prompted me to file a case with chief metropolitan magistrate court, Chittagong, in October last. I'm now waiting for the court order to go ahead accordingly," said Babul.

Another commission agent Md Yakub, proprietor of MY Enterprise, also came up with the same allegation and called upon the authorities to help them settle the matter.

"Being leaseholder, we have to pay the rent of the space to BJC regularly and court loss," said Ahmad Ullah, manager of Beacon Engineering Works and BJC

land leaseholder.

He added that they along with Babul Enterprise and three others had to face case filed by the joint forces during the caretaker government.

When contacted, BJC Acting Manager Golam Mostafa Majumder said, "We are getting the rent of the land leased out to Beacon Engineering Works. Yet, we are serving notices regularly to the lease holder to vacate the space that remained blocked for such a long time."

In this regard DoE, Chittagong Director Abusobhan said, "We have sent notices several times asking all concerned including the commission agents, owner of the land and Ripon Group to take away the damaged fertiliser that have been causing water and air pollution for such a long time."

"But we have not got any response from Ripon Group till date while others expressed their inability to remove the fertiliser without approval of the importer fearing legal complexities," said the DoE director.

"We also failed to collect specific address of the importer to take legal action against him," he said.

"We are now looking forward to the result of the case filed by one of the commission agents (Babul Enterprise) against the importer," said the director.

Nurul Alam Akhand, deputy general manager of Chittagong BIWTC, declined to make any comment on the matter or to talk to this correspondent without written permission from the higher authorities.

When contacted, Tipu Sultan, the then marketing manager of Ripon Group, said the group has been dissolved. However, he expressed his inability to say anything regarding the latest development.

Ripon Group proprietor Ahsan Habib could not be reached over phone despite repeated attempts.

A source close to Ripon Group said proprietor Ahsan Habib protested declaration of the fertiliser as unusable and demanded its release.

If the fertiliser was tested before taking delivery from vessels and payment to the exporter then it could have been sent back to save Tk 20 crore spent on the import, said the source quoting Habib.

Cox's bazar

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across the globe.

Zahirul Islam, Md Faisal, member of Bird Club and student of the biology department at the Jagannath College, DoE officials Md Bashir Uddin and Md Hasibur Rahman conducted the census with the help of volunteers from Sonadia, Maheshkhali and Shahparir Dwip.

Both Sonadia and Badar Mokam beach have been favourite spots of migratory birds. Spoonbill Sandpiper has been spotted in the two areas since 2006.

Migratory birds make a stopover there to collect food before flying to further south. Some species of migratory birds even spend the whole winter there.

Zahirul said the sandy beaches, wetlands and coastal mangroves adjacent to Sonadia are very crucial for these wetland birds.

He said over 60 percent of the mangroves have been destroyed for setting up shrimp enclosures.

"The presence of migratory birds in Sonadia brings a ray of hope despite existence of various problems in the country and environmental hazards," said the executive director of Marine Life Alliance.

Migratory birds fly at least 7,000 kilometres to get shelter and food there. About 40,000 to 50,000 migratory and local wetland birds stay in the coastal areas of Sonadia and Maheshkhali in the winter, said Zahirul.

He said although Kaladia, Paikdia, Alordia and Beledkera near Sonadia are well-known bird sanctuaries, the government has moved to set up a deep seaport in the area much to the frustration of environmental activists.

Indian team

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team for the tri-nation series, which will also feature Sri Lanka.

The 16-member ODI team led by MS Dhoni has six specialist batsmen, two specialist spinners, five pacers, one all-rounder and two wicketkeepers.

Speedster Sreesanth and pacer Ashok Dinda were included in the squad for the ODI series.

Ishant, who is in poor form, and left-arm spinner Pragyan Ojha were left out of the ODI squad.

Harbhajan Singh along with leg spinner Amit Mishra will lead the Indian spin attack.

Zaheer Khan, Ashish Nehra and Sreesanth will lead the pace attack with two rookies -- Sudip Tyagi and Ashok Dinda.

The members of the Indian ODI squad are MS Dhoni (Captain), Virender Sehwag (Vice Captain), Gautam Gambhir, Virat Kohli, Suresh Raina, Rohit Sharma, Ravindra Jadeja, Harbhajan Singh, Zaheer Khan, Ashish Nehra, Yuvraj Singh, Sudeep Tyagi, Dinesh Karthik, S Sreesanth, Ashok Dinda and Amit Mishra.

Christmas

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with singing of Christmas carols and hymns were staged before and after the prayers. Santa Claus also gave Christmas presents to children.

Hundreds of Christians thronged the city churches and hotels, where special arrangements were made to mark the day.

The Dhaka Sheraton Hotel, Pan Pacific Sonargaon Hotel, Radisson Water Garden Hotel Dhaka and Dhaka Regency Hotel arranged special events including singing and games.

Security in the capital and other parts in the country was strengthened to ensure peaceful celebration of Christmas. Members of Rab and police were deployed at different strategic points.

President Zillur Rahman hosted a reception at Bangabhaban on the occasion for members of the Christian community.

Archbishop Paulinus Costa, foreign diplomats and professionals also joined the reception.

The president welcomed the guests and exchanged greetings with them. He also cut a huge Christmas cake for them.

State Minister for Religious Affairs M Shahjahan Miah and State Minister for Cultural Affairs Promod Mankin were also present at the reception.

Father Kamal Koraria, director of the Christian Communication Centre, said Christmas was observed peacefully across the country with great enthusiasm and festivity.

The largest Mass was held at the Tejaon Church where about 8,000 people attended four prayer sessions.

Special Christmas prayers led by Father Archbishop Paulinus Costa were offered at the St Mary's Cathedral in Kakrail. Verses from the holy Bible were recited there.

Commonwealth is 'face of future'

Says Queen Elizabeth in Xmas message

AFP, London

Queen Elizabeth II said the Commonwealth was the "face of the future" in her annual Christmas message and described 2009 as a "difficult year."

The queen said the diversity of its 54 member states and its billion-strong population aged under 25 showed the Commonwealth could transcend political, religious and racial boundaries.

Each year that passes seems to have its own character. Some leave us with a feeling of satisfaction, others are best forgotten," she said.

"2009 was a difficult year for many, in particular those facing the continuing effects of the economic downturn," the 83-year-old monarch said.

"We may ourselves be confronted by a bewildering array of difficulties and challenges, but we must never cease to work for a better future for ourselves and for others."

As the deadliest year for British armed forces since the Falklands War with Argentina in 1982 drew to a close, the queen paid tribute to servicemen and women fighting in Afghanistan.

"I am sure that we have all been affected by events in

Home minister

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the militants in future," said the home minister at a reunion at the city's Siddheswari Girls High School.

She urged the new generations to come forward to make the "Digital-Bangladesh" a reality.

The minister earlier inaugurated the two-day celebration of the school's 75th anniversary and students' reunion. She spent the day on the school premises and met her batch-mates.

Shaikh Rojzul Alam Moyna, chairman of school managing committee, and State Minister for Law advocate Qamrul Islam, among others, attended the programme.

Iraq attacks

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a bomb placed some 20 metres (yards) from the site of the first attack, and it exploded as they arrived, causing numerous injuries among passersby and the police."

In the sacred Shia town of Karbala, 110 kilometres (70 miles) south of Baghdad where pilgrims were converging for Ashura ceremonies culminating on Sunday, a bomb killed one person and wounded 12, security sources said.

The late afternoon attack occurred despite the deployment of 20,000 police.

In Baghdad, eight people were killed and 30 others injured when two explosive devices went off earlier in the afternoon.

The first bomb was attached to a car near a commemoration ceremony in Sadr city, the poor Shia neighbourhood north of the capital, leaving five dead and 25 wounded, according to a military spokesman.

The second, which killed three people and injured 20, exploded in Zafraniya, south of the city centre, where a preliminary Ashura ceremony was also taking place.

Ashura, which means tenth in Arabic, falls on the tenth day of the Muslim month of Muharram and commemorates the death of Hussein, a grandson of the Prophet Mohammed.

Tradition holds that Hussein was decapitated and his body mutilated by the armies of Sunni caliph Yazid in 680 AD.

In Mosul, 350 kilometres (220 miles) north of Baghdad, a 23-year-old Christian, Bassel Icho Yuhanna, was killed when gunmen opened fire on his minibus as he was parking it in front of his house in the east of the city, police chief Mohammed Jassem said.

In Kirkuk, 240 kilometres (150 miles) north of Baghdad, local army captain Zamel Mohammed was killed in a bomb attack on his car as he was driving through the north of the city.

In Sharikat, 290 kilometres (180 miles) north of Baghdad, a member of the Sahwa anti-al-Qaeda militia group was killed and three of his com-

Afghanistan and saddened by the casualties suffered by our forces serving there," she said.

"Our thoughts go out to their relations and friends who have shown