

US blocks ME peace bid: diplomats

AFP, United Nations

The United States blocked a European bid to break the deadlock in the Middle East peace process at an international meeting this week, diplomats said yesterday.

Washington would not agree to the diplomatic Quartet on the Middle East holding a meeting in Berlin on Friday, diplomats said. Top officials from the United States, European Union, Russia and the United Nations had already had one meeting in March pushed back.

WB to give

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World Bank (WB), Dhaka office told BSS yesterday the loan assistance proposal would be approved by the board of the bank by this month.

The government on March 28 requested the WB to provide the loan for the payment of airfare of the Bangladeshis returned from troubled Libya and for their rehabilitation.

In this context, the Dhaka office of the bank prepared a proposal and sent it to its head office in Washington.

Contacted, Expatriate Welfare Secretary Dr Zafar Ahmed Khan told BSS a total of 35,163 Bangladeshis so far returned from Libya. Of them, around 25,000 came with the help of the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

Out of 25,000, the air fare of 10,000 Bangladeshis would be paid by the government which will cost \$10.02 million, he said.

The government has already taken an initiative to make a database of returnees for their rehabilitation, Zafar added.

Some 54,000 Bangladeshis are still waiting in Libya and its bordering states to return home, sources at the expatriate welfare ministry said, adding that the authorities concerned have been maintaining contacts with IOM and other international organisations to bring them back.

DU students

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The clashes put the traffic movement on Mirpur road and Panthapath to a halt for around an hour, causing public sufferings due to long tailbacks.

The students set a police motorbike ablaze and vandalised several vehicles.

Among the injured are an assistant commissioner of police, two sergeants and two constables of traffic police and five DU students.

Witnesses said the chaos ensued around 10:30am after a BRTC double-decker bus, leased by DU authorities for carrying students, flouted the traffic signal.

The students attacked the traffic men as they stopped the bus, Syed Nurul Islam, additional deputy commissioner (Ramma) of Dhaka Metropolitan Police told The Daily Star.

Students from another double-decker bus, which was crossing the intersection by that time, joined the attacking group.

Proctor of DU Saiful Islam Khan, however, claimed the bus hurried to cross the signal as many of the students were going to attend examinations. Just then, a police constable made an indecent comment prompting the clashes.

Injured student Moinuddin Chisti said his fellow Mosafizur Rahman of philosophy and Shafiu Azam of International Business departments were admitted to Dhaka Medical College Hospital, while Dipak of mathematics department was rushed to DU medical centre.

Shafiu complained police hit on his head with brick. "At one stage, I fell unconscious. When I regained consciousness, I discovered myself lying on a seat of our bus."

Process was underway for filing a case, said Enamul Huq, officer-in-charge of Kolabagan Police Station.

Lawyers stage

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Witnesses said over 2,000 lawyers gathered at the court premises around 2:30pm demanding withdrawal of Judge Mohammad Zohurul Haque of Metropolitan Sessions Judge's Court.

The agitating lawyers also threatened of boycotting the court if their demand was not met in the next 12 hours.

According to them, the filing of the cases was instigated by the judge, in spite of repeated requests made by Chief Metropolitan Magistrate (CMM) AKM Enamul Haque, Dhaka Bar Association (DBA) President Sheikh Hemayet Hossain and DBA General Secretary Iqbal Hossain.

The demonstrators termed Zohurul Haque as corrupt and urged the government to withdraw him from the court immediately.

After getting an assurance from DBA president, its general secretary and senior lawyers of the Bar, demonstrators ceased their agitations around 5:30pm.

Meanwhile, a vacation bench of the High Court (HC) yesterday granted bail to the seven accused lawyers including Khorshed Alam and Minara Begum.

On Sunday, a group of lawyers snatched Nurul Islam, a lawyer accused in a fraud case, from the dock of a Dhaka court after Metropolitan Magistrate MA Salam rejected his bail petition and ordered him to jail.

The lawyers also broke furniture and windowpanes of the courtroom.

Nurul Islam later surrendered to the court at 5:30pm on the same day.

PM gives nod

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Supreme Court and other constitutional officers on grounds of misconduct and incapacity.

The other proposals include restoration of the SC's sweeping control over subordinate courts to make separation of the judiciary effective and revival of article 70 of the constitution to lessen restrictions imposed on lawmakers in parliament.

Hasina, also leader of the House, gave the consent at a meeting with the parliamentary special committee for constitutional amendments last night.

Some members of the committee disclosed this to The Daily Star after the meeting held at the Gono Bhaban.

The committee, formed in July last year, started briefing the premier on its amendment proposals on Monday, and briefed her for the second time yesterday.

Revival of parliament's authority to remove constitutional officers such as the

JS body to open

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member who requested not to be named, as he was not authorised to speak on the matter.

On condition of anonymity, another member said only leaders of the political parties with representation in the current parliament might be invited.

The committee will begin the talks after wrapping up the ongoing discussion with the prime minister, he continued. "Today, we will sit with the PM again to discuss the progress of our work."

Contacted over phone, Suranjit Sengupta, co-chair of the committee, termed yesterday's discussion with the prime minister "very positive and encouraging".

He, however, declined to elaborate on the matter.

Earlier in the day, Suranjit urged BNP to join the special committee.

Speaking at a press briefing in parliament's media centre, he said, "The main opposition was offered a seat on the committee. If they want, they can demand more seats. The prime minister will of course consider their demand."

On July 21 last year, the House formed the committee for drawing up proposals to amend the constitution in line with the Supreme Court verdict on the fifth amendment, and also to make

other necessary changes.

Headed by Deputy Leader of the House Syeda Sajeda Chowdhury, the 15-member committee is comprised of only ruling alliance lawmakers, as BNP declined to nominate a representative.

The main opposition party, however, has been blasting the government for what it said was a move to amend the constitution unilaterally.

Drone 'friendly fire' kills two US troops

AFP, Washington

A drone missile strike killed a US Marine and a Navy corpsman last week by mistake, in what appeared to be the first instance US troops had been killed in a "friendly fire" incident involving an unmanned aircraft, defence officials said Monday.

The military has launched a probe into the incident, which appeared to stem from confusion on the battlefield in the southern province of Helmand, US officials told AFP.

Fighter jets and combat helicopters are usually called in to provide close air support for coalition troops pinned down by insurgent fire, while drones tend to be used for manhunts targeting Taliban figures.

PM's REMARKS BNP's demo Saturday

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The main opposition BNP yesterday declared a countrywide protest programme on Saturday over a recent remark of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina about Tarique Rahman and Arifat Rahman Koko.

"Prime minister's remark is nothing but an outcome of her political vengeance," party's Acting Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir told reporters after a joint meeting of party leaders at its central office in the capital's Nayapaltan.

He termed Hasina's comment a part of her government's conspiracy to interfere in the judiciary.

According to media reports, the cabinet on Monday discussed money laundering cases against Tarique Rahman, Arifat Rahman Koko and Giasuddin Al Mamun. The prime minister told the meeting that she wanted to see the disposal of those cases.

As part of the protest programme, the party will hold rallies across the country.

Mirza Alamgir alleged the government is moving forward to a one-party rule and is trying to divide the nation through a 'controversial' women development policy.

He also accused the rulers of creating a new crisis by running the country without any constitution.

Selima Rahman, Altaf Hussain Chowdhury, Amanullah Aman, Ruhul Kabir Rizvi, Habib-un-Nabi Khan, Shirin Sultana, among others, participated in the meeting, with Alamgir in the chair.

Fukushima

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cumulative quantities of radiation released.

NISA said the amount of radiation released into the atmosphere from the plant, 240 km north of Tokyo, was around 10 percent that of Chernobyl.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Naoto Kan told a press briefing yesterday, "The situation at the Fukushima Daiichi plant is slowly stabilising, step by step, and the emission of radioactive substances is on a declining trend."

As another major aftershock rattled the earthquake-ravaged east of the country a fire broke out at the plant, but engineers later extinguished the blaze.

However, the operator of the stricken facility appears to be no closer to restoring cooling systems at the reactors, critical to lowering the temperature of overheated fuel rods.

"Although the level has been raised to 7 today, it doesn't mean the situation today is worse than it was yesterday, it means the event as a whole is worse than previously thought," said nuclear expert John Price, a former member of the Safety Policy Unit at the UK's National Nuclear Corporation.

A level 7 incident means a major release of radiation with a widespread health and environmental impact, while a 5 level is a limited release of radioactive material, with several deaths, according to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

Several experts said the new rating exaggerated the severity of the crisis, and that the Chernobyl disaster was far worse.

"It's nowhere near that level. Chernobyl was terrible - it blew and they had no containment, and they were stuck," said nuclear industry specialist Murray Jennex, an associate professor at San Diego State University in California.

The blast at Chernobyl blew the roof off a reactor and sent large amounts of radiation wafting across Europe.

The accident contaminated vast areas, particularly in Ukraine and neighboring Belarus, leading to the evacuation of well over 100,000 and affected livestock as far away as Scandinavia and Britain.

Nevertheless, the increase in the severity level heightens the risk of diplomatic tension with Japan's neighbours over radioactive fallout, with China saying yesterday it was still concerned about the calamity.

Down and out in Paris and Rome

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Just then a tourist couple strolled by and Munir stopped his exchange with the fellow tower-seller.

"Bonjour madam," he greets with his arms waving towards his merchandise. "Cheap."

Three towers for one euro. Five euros for a big one. That's cheap indeed.

The tourists ignored him with nonchalant gaze and walked away.

"I am doing it for the last one year. Day in and day out. Snow or no-snow. Cold or hot. I am stuck," Munir said. It was spring now and yet bitterly cold. Black dirt had gathered in the cracks of his skin. Hot water must have been a rarity where he lived.

Munir is stuck. And so are the other Bangladeshis who had lined up on this hilltop with Eiffel Towers.

"I had paid the adam (the slang for a manpower agent) Tk 12 lakh to come to Italy," Munir, who speaks quite good English and had a trading business in Dhaka, said. "I went there as an agriculture labourer."

"I paid Tk 15 lakh," another fortune seeker Khair chipped in.

Then they all found that there was no job in Italy, one of the economic laggards of the European Union. As things got worse, they just slipped over to France and sought political asylum.

Thousands of them have

crossed over not only to Paris but also to the UK. They managed all fake papers of persecution -- police cases and all.

Somewhere in Noakhali, some police officers must have made a fortune in giving them the documents.

As an asylum-seeker, they get 325 euro each. In Paris that is really nothing where a decent meal can cost upwards of 15 euros.

"This is Dog's life," Munir says. "We have rented two rooms for 20 of us. We have one toilet."

This sleeping space costs Munir 200 euro a month. He gets a metro ticket at a subsidized rate. The rest goes for food and it is anyone's guess what food they get with that amount.

"Bonjour monsieur. La Italiano?" Munir suddenly stopped conversation and waved hands at a woman with a kid. "Cheap price. Come."

Again the tourist walked away.

This thing was being repeated from morning. Still he had to get his first sale.

"Sometimes, I can make 30 or 40 euro a day. That is not bad. But the problem is elsewhere," he said.

The problems are the police and the African asylum-seekers. Just as a Bangladesh, footpaths are controlled by the musclemen and often the Africans who are greater in number have

the sway over who can hawk and who not.

"Eiffel Tower is under their control," said Khair. "It has more tourists and so a lucrative place for street hawkers. If we try our luck there, the Africans will chase us away."

But here either is not very easy. Only this morning, the Bangladeshis had a fight with the Africans over control of footpath. Just then a tall giant black man strode in. He was talking over cellphone and scanning the hawkers. His eyes were on Munir and his company.

"Here comes the gang leader," Munir murmured. The hawkers had all gone stiff. The tension was palpable.

"Just ignore him. Don't talk to him if he asks something," one Bangladeshi advised another.

But the black man did not draw nearer. He walked by.

The reason was visible. A police patrol car rolled into the churchyard.

"Mama aisey (The uncle has come)," the alarm was raised from one vendor at the far end. A flurry of activities began. The hawkers hastily gathered their Eiffel Towers, lifted the bags on shoulders and hurriedly melted in the crowd.

"Please tell our people in Bangladesh not to come here. It is hell for us," Munir said before he disappeared.

Just then the chapel chime started ringing.

Libya is 'out of control': Medvedev

AFP, Moscow

Russian President Dmitry Medvedev said yesterday that the situation in Libya had slipped out of control and indicated that its strongman leader Muammar Gaddafi needed to resign.

Speaking in an interview with Chinese television, a transcript of which was published by the Kremlin, Medvedev said no-one appeared to be able to control the situation in Libya including Gaddafi, rebels or Nato.

"It has already spun out of control, no-one controls it," he said. "It has already spiralled out of control, and this is very sad."

Reiterating Russia's position, he criticised Nato's military campaign saying the plan to enforce a no-fly zone over the country had been reduced to the use of force.

"Nevertheless the result has been achieved and as far as I understand, everyone has different plans in this regard. The Europeans say one thing, the Americans say another thing, one day we will participate, another day we will not participate."

On Medvedev's orders Russia abstained from the UN Security Council resolution that authorised the military action, refraining from using its veto which would have prevented the motion being adopted.

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