

MISSISSIPPI FLOODS Thousands flee as floodgates open

BBC ONLINE

Thousands have evacuated the US state of Louisiana after floodgates were opened on Saturday to relieve pressure from the swollen Mississippi River.

More floodgates are to be opened in the coming days, for the first time in several decades.

The man-made floods will damage thousands of homes and hundreds of thousands of acres of farmland.

Officials say this is the only way to save more populated areas along the river like Baton Rouge and New Orleans.

Most residents heeded the warnings and headed for higher ground; by Sunday, some areas were virtually empty as the water from the Mississippi River slowly rolled across the Atchafalaya River basin, the Associated Press news agency reported.

Opening the Morganza Spillway floodgates is set to inundate up to 3,000 sq miles (7,770 sq km) of land in an attempt to protect large cities along the Mississippi River, which forms a large section of the border between Louisiana and Mississippi states.

High-powered

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The high-powered team made a five-hour journey in the river on three engine boats although movement of such boats is "strictly prohibited" during breeding time (March-June) according to a 2007 gazette notification.

Led by local Awami League lawmaker ABM Fazle Karim, other members of the team included representatives from the ministries of water resources, agriculture, fisheries and local government and rural development.

Ali Azadi, professor of zoology at Chittagong University, said major bends like Machuaghona, Barighona, Ankurighona, Sonaimuri and Gurdouara, which were once the major breeding grounds have been cut in the last 90 years.

People usually cut those bends to slow down the river current for saving their homes and lands from erosion.

Prof Azadi told The Daily Star that protecting the river banks in those points is crucial but the government has done nothing in this regard.

During the team's visit, most of the 13 sluice gates built by the Water Development Board in 1970s were found dysfunctional.

The sluice gates that were set up to help irrigation now stand in the way of free movement of the mother fishes.

A number of link canals were also found filled up with sand allegedly by a section of influential people.

Yusuf, a fisherman, said Tarique Badsha and Saleh Zahur of Maishkram area grabbed the Nobin Chandra canal at Maishkram in the last two months.

Also to blame are fishermen. Many of them indiscriminately collect mother fishes, as they are very expensive, said Ilias, an egg collector and trader.

Following the visit, Fazle Karim, the AL lawmaker, told journalists that the government wants to save the Haldia and protect its breeding grounds.

Roads will be built on both the banks and steps will be taken against sand lifting and for waste management, he added.

Lightning

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Officer-in-charge (OC) of Nikli Police Station AKM Mahubul Alam said a thunderbolt struck a group of people when they were fishing at Naogaon village around 7:30am.

Three of them died on the spot while three others sustained injuries, the OC said.

Shamsuddin, Manik and Russell were killed by lightning at Purbagram village when they were working at a paddy field in the morning, the OC added.

Public transport

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The meeting was convened in the face of frequent chaos between transport operators and passengers over charging irrationally higher fares after the government increased the prices of petroleum on May 5 and CNG on May 12.

As per a consensus between the two sides, all modes of transport will charge the previous rates till tomorrow.

"If anyone charges additional fare before that, the government will certainly cancel the route permits of those transport," Communications Minister Syed Abul Hossain told the meeting.

The diesel-run inter-district bus and minibus fares were also increased by more than 22 percent. The new fare will be Tk 1.15 per km which is now Tk 0.94.

Earlier a committee comprised of government officials and transport owners fixed new transport fares. It fixed bus and minibus fares at Tk 1.50 and Tk 1.45 per km respectively while Tk 1.10 per km for inter-district buses.

But leaders of transport owners' association Khandaker Enayetullah and Moshir Rahman Ranga did not agree when the committee, headed by Bangladesh Road Transport Authority

Chairman Ayubur Rahman, placed the new rates before the meeting.

They demanded fixing the bus and minibus fares at Tk 1.60 and Tk 1.50 per km respectively, while the minimum fare at Tk 1.0.

Commuters in many places bargained with the transport operators for charging higher fares without any official authorisation.

Sukumar Sarkar, a counterman of BRTC special bus service in Gulistan-Manikganj route, said their authority has increased the fare for the last two days.

"We are taking Tk 85 from Farmgate to Paturia Ghat, which was Tk 75 two days back," he added.

Syed Abdul Ahad, a passenger of Onabil bus service on Manikganj-Uttara route, said they were giving an additional Tk 10 to go to Uttara from Manikganj for the last few days.

"Most of the counter bus services on this route have increased fares and the passengers have been bearing the brunt of it," noted Ahad.

Many drivers of CNG-run three-wheelers are charging additional Tk 20 to Tk 30 from the passengers.

Moreover, many others are carrying passengers on contractual basis since the price of CNG was hiked, according to commuters.

Gen Moeen

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a mid-term election and that the party would not accept any "caretaker government conspiracy".

Khaleda was addressing a party meeting Sunday at the Grand Room of Grosvenor House Hotel in London. Leaders from the UK and other European countries attended the meeting.

Sources said two factions of the party workers hurled empty plastic bottles at each other at the beginning of the meeting which made Khaleda upset.

"Moeen wanted to be Zia [late president Ziaur Rahman]. Fakhruddin Ahmed, then chief of the caretaker government, was his puppet while he [Moeen] was backed by foreign forces. He wanted to be the president of the country by forming a political party," said Khaleda, adding that Moeen and Fakhruddin had left the country to save their skin from the people.

She said conspirators wanted to destroy BNP by implementing "minus one formula" although they were talking about the "minus two formula".

Censuring the incumbent government, Khaleda, also leader of the opposition in parliament, said the government has exhibited absolute failure, which frustrated the people. Besides, the law and order has deteriorated and the parliament has become dysfunctional.

"I will make a tour across the country after May 30, the death anniversary of Ziaur Rahman, and announce agitation programme after returning home," she said urging expatriate Bangladeshis to wage a movement against the government.

The ruling party is conspiring to hold the next election under a caretaker government loyal to them but BNP would not accept such scheme, she said.

Mia Monirul Alam, acting president of the party's UK chapter, presided over the meeting conducted by its General Secretary MA Salam.

BNP leaders Osman Farruk, Shamsur Mobin Chowdhury and Abdul Awal Minto, among others, spoke at the meeting. Party's Senior Vice Chairman Tarique Rahman did not attend the meeting although he was to.

The opposition leader on May 15 reached the UK on her seven-day tour. She is expected to return home on May 29 after visiting the US.

Housewife

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"My daughter married Mamun three years ago following an affair. Ever since, he has been torturing my daughter," he added.

Mamun and all his family members went into hiding, said Abul Bashar, officer-in-charge of Keraniganj Police Station.

He said they are looking into the matter.

The body was sent to Mitford Hospital morgue for an autopsy.

JS body

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ACC act.

Sources in ACC confirmed they received an invitation letter to join a meeting of the committee scheduled for next Thursday afternoon.

The letter asked them to send an officer. However, ACC Chairman Ghulam Rahman said they will send a written statement to the committee.

The ACC had been in the dark about the changes until the cabinet endorsed those this year.

Of the 10 amendments, four are considered to have a damaging impact on the effectiveness of the commission. The changes would also diminish its independence, observed the ACC.

According to information gleaned by The Daily Star, the most undermining change would be the provision to obtain prior permission before filing cases against officers and employees of the republic.

The parliamentary body will scrutinise the changes before placing in parliament for final approval.

The amendments are expected to be finalised as the government enjoys two-thirds majority in the House.

Ensure adequate

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Antonio Divino Moura.

Heads of state and government and ministers of member countries and territories attended the high-level segment of the congress.

Earlier on her arrival at the centre, the Bangladesh Premier was received by WMO Secretary-General Michel Jarraud.

Speaking on the occasion, the Bangladesh Premier placed emphasis on crafting a binding agreement on greenhouse gas emissions cut against the backdrop of looming danger of global climate change.

She said the only way to save our planet and ourselves is collective action for reducing the emissions of greenhouse gas as some countries are facing the climate challenges today but tomorrow the whole world will suffer.

"The emission reduction has to be on the basis of equity and the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities with the participation of all countries," she asserted.

Referring to successes of the world leaders in evolving

a consensus in the Kyoto Protocol and the Bali Plan of Action after the Rio Summit, and their failure in Copenhagen and Cancun, Sheikh Hasina said they should not miss the opportunities in Durban.

Laying emphasis on improving the ability to predict climate and to help users incorporate the information into their decision making, she said Global Framework for Climate Services needs to operate at global, regional and national levels.

On Bangladesh's vulnerability to climate change in terms of scale and intensity, Sheikh Hasina said despite a negligible emitter of greenhouse gases, Bangladesh is the worst victim of global warming.

For several decades, she said, Bangladesh has been experiencing erratic patterns of floods, river erosions, cyclones, earthquake murmurs, tidal bores, encroachment of salinity in the low-lying coastal areas due to sea rise, and desertification.

"These natural disasters have been threatening our

food, water and health security, biodiversity, ecological balance, as well as diminishing livelihood options and income levels," she added.

On her country's endeavours to tackle climate change challenges, she said her government has adopted a 134-point Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan to this end.

She said without waiting for assistance from others, her government has established a Climate Change Trust Fund with an initial capital of \$200 million.

Mentioning scientific studies, she said that a meter rise in sea level by 2050 would submerge one-fifth of the country displacing over 20 million people.

Health Minister Dr AFM Ruhul Haque, PM's Health Adviser Prof Syed Modasser Ali, State Minister for Environment and Forests Dr Hasan Mahmud, Mustafa Jalal Mohiuddin, MP, Awami League's Health Affairs Secretary Badiuzzaman Dablu and Press Secretary to the Prime Minister Abul Kalam Azad, among others, were present.

US drone attacks kill seven in Pakistan

AFP, Miranshah

Two US drone strikes targeting a militant compound and a vehicle in Pakistan's lawless tribal district of North Waziristan killed at least seven militants yesterday, officials said.

Both the attacks took place in Mir Ali town, some 40 kilometres east of Miranshah, a stronghold of Taliban and al-Qaeda-linked militants and the main town in North Waziristan tribal district along the Afghan border.

Two US drones fired two missiles into a militant compound, and minutes later another drone fired two missiles at a vehicle close to the compound, officials said.

"At least seven militants were killed in both the US drone strikes. The vehicle was completely burnt and the compound was also destroyed," a security official in Miranshah told AFP.

No plan

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Libya. If necessary, these expatriates will be repatriated, they said.

Bangladesh has so far repatriated 35,000 Bangladeshi nationals from Libya and the "safety, security as well as safe return of the remaining people are now the priority of the government", said another official.

The officials said a four-member special delegation from Libya was due to arrive in Dhaka on May 5 to brief about the latest situation of Libya and its position, but the tour had been postponed by the Libyan side.

"We will welcome if the Libyan delegation comes to Dhaka as a significant number of Bangladeshis are still in that country," said another senior official.

He said the US government as part of its current foreign policy has launched a global campaign against Gaddafi regime calling upon nations to sever diplomatic ties with Tripoli.

When asked, he said Bangladesh government does not consider the letter as a pressure and has not changed its policy on relations with Libya.

Meanwhile, foreign ministry sources said the US Embassy in Dhaka has expressed discontent over the leak of its official communication to a newspaper.

Contacted, a spokesperson of the embassy told The Daily Star that the Gaddafi regime has lost all legitimacy. Its records of violence and its repeated refusal to abide by UN resolution has discredited it in the eyes of the Libyan people, the region and the world.

UAE

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Bangladesh could be sent back home any time soon," Latiful Hoq Kazmi, labour councillor at Bangladesh Embassy in Abu Dhabi, told The Daily Star yesterday.

Abu Dhabi police arrested nearly 300 workers from China camp in Musaffah Industrial Area. Of them, 230 were Bangladeshis and the rest were from India and Pakistan, he said.

However, only four of them had valid documents and were released later, Latiful said.

The workers went to Abu Dhabi from Dubai and Sharjah. Sujana, a Bangladeshi construction contractor, employed them in Musaffah Industrial Area.

They worked there for four months, but Sujana paid them only two months' salary and kept them in an unhygienic camp.

He said police also arrested Sujana after they lodged complaint against him with the police.

The UAE, which has stringent labour laws, has recruited nearly 18 lakh Bangladeshis since 1976, second only to Saudi Arabia, said Latiful.

In February, Dubai authorities deported 71 Bangladeshis on charges of instigating a labour strike over pay hike.

Saudi diplomat

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The ambassador suggested "terrorists", a reference to Muslim militant groups such as al-Qaeda, carried out the attack.

The shooting occurred days after unidentified attackers threw two hand grenades at the Saudi consulate in Karachi, Pakistan's commercial hub. No one was hurt in that attack.

Saudi Arabia, one of the United States' most strategic allies, is the world's biggest oil exporter and any signs that its security is threatened could move global oil prices.

A Saudi Interior Ministry official, who declined to be identified, told Reuters in Dubai that security would be stepped up to protect Saudi diplomats living in "dangerous" areas.

Riyadh described the killing of the diplomat as a "criminal attack" and said it would investigate alongside Pakistani authorities, the state news agency said.

Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have long been close allies and Islamabad needs all the

support it can get after the discovery of bin Laden embarrassed the unstable South Asian country with a troubled economy.

"We trust the Pakistani authorities and hope they will identify the terrorists and bring them to justice," ambassador-al-Ghadeer said. "The authorities in Karachi are working very hard and we trust them. We are working together. We trust Pakistan will do its best to ensure the terrorists are caught and identified."

Pakistan's Taliban -- who have strong ties to al-Qaeda -- also said they could not confirm their fighters killed the Saudi diplomat but expressed "full support" for the attack.

"Whoever has done this has done a very good job because, like Pakistan, Saudi Arabia is also an American slave. In fact, it's two steps ahead of Pakistan. Whichever organisations are engaged in such activities, we fully support them," said a Taliban spokesman from an undisclosed location.

Theodore Karasik, a

Dubai-based security analyst, believed the attack could have been retribution for bin Laden's death.

Part of al-Qaeda doctrine is to attack Saudi Arabia. That is part of al-Qaeda (in the Arabian Peninsula's objective, and it certainly is and could be becoming more within the sights of particular Pakistani jihadist groups," he said.

Militants swearing allegiance to al-Qaeda attacked Western targets, government sites and oil facilities in Saudi Arabia, between 2003 and 2006.

The operations included suicide bombings at Western housing compounds, the Saudi Interior Ministry headquarters in the capital Riyadh and petrochemical companies.

Saudi Arabia responded with a security crackdown in 2007 and 2010, arresting more than 170 suspects, including some trainee pilots preparing for suicide attacks. Analysts described the campaign as successful at the time.

Tax-free income limit

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may have to pay 10 percent tax on an income up to Tk 3 lakh, which is now Tk 2.75 lakh.

Business people and various quarters put forward proposals to the National Board of Revenue (NBR) to increase the ceiling of tax-free income.

The Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI) has recommended fixing the limit of tax-free income at Tk 2.25 lakh, which it said should be Tk 2.50 lakh for women and Tk 3 lakh for elderly citizens.

The proposal was raised in a meeting organised by the NBR and the FBCCI on Sunday.

The FBCCI said inflation has been on the rise for the last four years, and cost of living and prices of essentials

went up shrinking people's purchasing power. It recommended reviewing the tax rate taking these matters into account.

Wishing anonymity, a finance ministry official said the prime minister has advised the NBR to consider increasing the limit of tax-free income.

Tax rate for savings instrument was increased with a cut on interest rates in the current budget. It resulted in a drastic fall in sales of savings instrument. The net sale of savings instrument between July and February in the current fiscal year fell by 65 percent, whereas it increased by 274 percent during the same period in the previous fiscal year.

People in middle income brackets thronged the stockmarket in the hope of making higher profits, as

interest rates on savings instrument had been lowered. It made share prices surge but many investors lost their savings when the market crashed.

The government's borrowing from the banking system increased as the sale of savings instrument went down. The government borrowed Tk 11,382 crore from the banking system in 10 months in the current fiscal year, whereas it did not borrow any money, rather returned more than Tk 8,000 crore to banks in the previous fiscal year.

The finance ministry contemplates cutting by half the 10 percent tax on savings instrument imposed in the current budget. However, it has not yet decided whether interest rates will be increased.

IMF chief faces

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Meanwhile, a court in New York has remanded Strauss-Kahn in custody on charges of sexual assault. The judge said Strauss-Kahn, 62, is a flight risk, BBC adds.

Strauss-Kahn was arrested on Saturday in New York after a chambermaid who had been cleaning his 3,000-dollar-per-night hotel suite alleged that he had come out of the bathroom naked and sexually assaulted her.

His lawyer expressed disappointment at bail being denied, but said his client would be exonerated. "This battle has just begun," defence lawyer Benjamin Brafman told the court.

Prosecutors told the court it was not the first time Strauss-Kahn had been involved in such an incident and argued he had been arrested attempting to flee

the country.

However, in February 2007, Tristane Banon was a guest on a television chat show and recounted how a senior politician had lured her to a virtually empty apartment in the guise of agreeing to give an interview and then assaulted her.

In the broadcast version of her comments the name of the politician, whom she branded a "rutting chimpanzee", was bleeped out, but a year later Banon confirmed to the AgoraVox website that she was referring to Strauss-Kahn.

"I put down the recorder straight away to record him. He wanted to hold my hand while he replied, because he told me 'I wouldn't be able to manage unless you hold my hand'," she alleged in the Paris Premiere broadcast.

my arm, then a bit further, so I stopped straight away," she explained. "It finished very violently -- as I told him clearly 'No, No!' -- and we finished up fighting on the floor."

"There wasn't just a couple of blows. I kicked him, and he tried to unclip my bra, to open my jeans," Banon alleged, adding that she eventually made her escape and considered pressing charges before abandoning the idea.

"I didn't want to be for the rest of my days the girl who had had a problem with a politician," she said.

Banon's mother, Socialist politician and blogger Anne Mansouret, confirmed to the news website Rue89, that she had advised her daughter at the time not to make a formal complaint, for fear of hurting her career in journalism.