

Pressure mounts on Murdoch empire

News Corp drops BSKyB bid; US lawmaker urges probe

AFP, London

Rupert Murdoch's News Corp. has withdrawn its bid for British satellite broadcaster BSKyB in the wake of the growing scandal over newspaper phone-hacking, the company announced yesterday.

The announcement came shortly before Britain's House of Commons was to debate a government-backed motion calling on Murdoch to halt his attempt to acquire the 61-percent of BSKyB his company does not already own.

"We believed that the proposed acquisition of BSKyB by News Corporation would benefit both companies but it has become clear that it is too difficult to progress in this climate," said Chase Carey, deputy chairman, president and chief operating officer of News Corp. in a statement.

"News Corporation remains a committed long-term shareholder in BSKyB. We are proud of the success it has achieved and our contribution to it."

Pressure seems to mount on Murdoch from all fronts as the phone-hacking scandal rocking his media empire threatened to spill over to the United States.

Earlier, in a rare show of unity in parliament against the one-time kingmaker of British politics, the coal-

ition government looked set to back an opposition motion urging Murdoch to withdraw his bid for control of the broadcaster.

In the United States, Senate Commerce Committee Chairman Jay Rockefeller warned Tuesday of "severe" consequences if it was found that the phone-hacking scandal rocking Murdoch's realm had spread to his US operations.

"I encourage the appropriate agencies to investigate to ensure that Americans have not had their privacy violated," the Democrat said in a statement.

"I am concerned that the admitted phone hacking in London by the News Corp. may have extended to 9/11 victims or other Americans. If they did, the consequences will be severe."

British Prime Minister David Cameron yesterday announced details of the two inquiries he had promised into the long-running phone hacking row.

Giving details for the first time since he announced the inquiry last week, he said it would cover "the culture, practices and ethics of the press, their relationship with the police, the failure of the current system of regulation."

Cameron said the inquiry, led by Lord Justice Brian Leveson, would have the power to summon "newspaper report-

ers, management, proprietors, policemen and politicians of all parties to give evidence under oath and in public."

The inquiry would report in one year, he said.

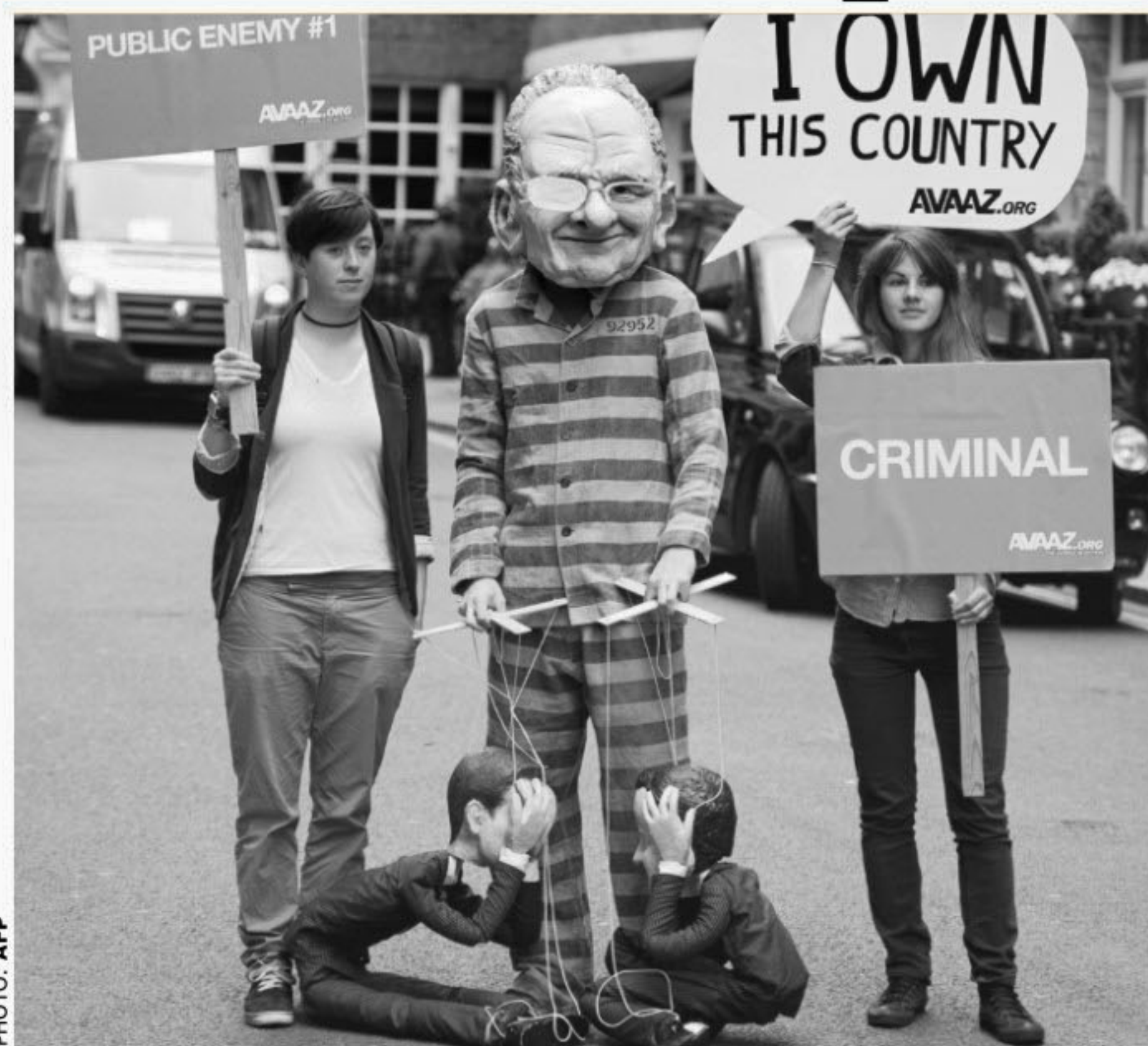
Anyone involved in the scandal should be barred from British media ownership, said Cameron.

After Cameron's statement, lawmakers were to debate the motion introduced by Ed Miliband, leader of the main opposition Labour party, asking Murdoch to withdraw his BSKyB bid "in the public interest".

Murdoch flew to London on Sunday to take control of the crisis, and lawmakers have invited him, his son James and his top British executive to give evidence on phone hacking and allegations that News International papers paid police for information.

Meanwhile Murdoch's British newspaper arm strongly rejected claims by former British prime minister Gordon Brown that it had hired "criminals" to access his private information.

The Sun tabloid fought back against claims it used illegal methods to break the news of Brown's son Fraser's cystic fibrosis, splashing the headline "Brown wrong -- We didn't probe son's medical records" across its front page.



A demonstrator (R) wearing a mask depicting News Corporation Chief Rupert Murdoch poses for pictures with puppets of British Prime Minister David Cameron (2nd L) and British Culture Minister Jeremy Hunt (L) as they protest outside Murdoch's London home yesterday.

News Corp mulls selling off UK wing

AFP, Washington

In the wake of the News of the World reporting scandal, Rupert Murdoch's News Corp. is considering the sell-off of its remaining British newspapers, the Wall Street Journal reported yesterday.

Citing unnamed sources, the Journal said News Corp. has explored whether there are any potential buyers for News International, which includes British newspapers the Sun, the Times of London and the Sunday Times.

The Journal, which is also owned by News Corp., said Murdoch himself has long opposed such a move and considers News International one of his favourite components of his media empire.

The Journal, citing the same sources, said that there did not appear to be any buyers because of the poor state of the newspaper industry, but said the company may revisit the idea in the next six months.

NEWS IN brief

Ai Weiwei accepts chair at German university

AFP, Berlin

Dissident Chinese artist Ai Weiwei has accepted a guest professorship at Berlin University of the Arts, it said yesterday, although it was unclear when he will be able to take up the post.

Police have accused Ai of tax evasion and the government said he was freed because of his "good attitude" in admitting to the charges against him, his willingness to repay taxes he owes and on medical grounds. He has diabetes.

Rights groups have however said the outspoken 54-year-old, who is known for his fierce criticism of the ruling Communist Party, was detained as part of a wider clampdown on activists launched in February.

Riots rage for 2nd day in Northern Ireland

AFP, Belfast

A second night of rioting erupted in Northern Ireland at the height of the Protestant marching season, with two police officers briefly set on fire by petrol bombs and numerous arrests, police said yesterday.

Rioters threw petrol bombs, bricks, bottles and fireworks at officers and set cars alight in the Ardoyne area of north Belfast. Riot police fire baton rounds and water cannons in response.

There was also trouble in south Belfast, where two parked cars were set on fire and a member of the public was hit by thrown masonry, and in the city of Londonderry.

Five French soldiers killed in Afghanistan

AFP, Kabul

Five French soldiers were killed yesterday in a suicide bombing in Afghanistan's northeastern province of Kapisa, Nato's alliance force and a local police chief said.

The office of French President Nicolas Sarkozy confirmed five French soldiers had died in the attack and said an Afghan civilian had also been killed.

Four more soldiers and three more local civilians were "gravely wounded" in the attack on a unit which was protecting a local tribal council meeting, the presidential statement said.

The attack was the deadliest blow to French forces in Afghanistan since August 2008, when 10 soldiers were killed and 21 injured when a patrol was ambushed by Taliban guerrillas in the Sarobi district east of Kabul.

Gaddafi troops retake village south of Tripoli

REUTERS, Zintan

Forces loyal to Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi yesterday retook a village south of the capital seized by rebels a week ago, delivering a setback to rebel plans for a march on Tripoli.

The loss of the village of Al-Qawalish, about 100 km from the capital, underlined the faltering pattern of the rebel advances that has led some of the rebels' Western backers to push for a political solution to the conflict instead.

A senior Libyan opposition leader rejected yesterday accusations by Human Rights Watch that rebel forces committed abuses in recent weeks but he admitted some took place at the start of the revolution.

Japan PM urges nuclear-free future

AFP, Tokyo

Japan Prime Minister Naoto Kan said yesterday that the country must gradually reduce its reliance on atomic power with the eventual goal of becoming nuclear-free.

Four months after the March 11 quake and tsunami triggered the Fukushima nuclear accident, the world's worst since Chernobyl 25 years ago, Kan has argued that Japan must boost solar, wind and other renewables.

Speaking in a televised press conference, the embattled premier said: "By reducing reliance on nuclear power gradually, we will aim to become a society which can exist without nuclear power."

Kan had earlier announced a full review of Japan's energy plan, under which atomic power had been set to meet over half of demand by 2030, up from about one third before the massive quake disaster.

But the premier went a step further yesterday by outlining his goal of the eventual closure of all the more than 50 nuclear reactors in the quake-prone island nation.

Speaking about the Fukushima accident, which has forced the evacuation of over 80,000 people, he said "it may take five years, 10 years or longer to reach the final stage of decommissioning the reactors".

The premier, a one-time environmental activist, has said he wants to make clean energy sources a new "major pillar" of the energy mix of the world's third biggest economy and major export powerhouse.

Brazil plane crash kills 16

AFP, Rio De Janeiro

A small plane crashed early yesterday near the Brazilian city of Recife after reporting an onboard emergency, killing all of its 16 occupants, rescue officials told AFP.

The Noar Linhas Aereas plane, which was bound for Natal, the capital and main city of Rio Grande do Norte in northeastern Brazil, crashed within 10 minutes of taking off, authorities said.

"The information from that our crews working at the site of the accident is that there are no survivors," a spokesman for the Recife fire department told AFP.

The aviation official said that the pilot reported an "emergency situation" aboard the aircraft to air traffic controllers and said he was going to attempt an emergency landing on a nearby beach shortly before crashing.

STATEHOOD BID AT UN Palestinians push for US support

Afp, Ramallah

The Palestinians have called on the United States to reverse course and support their United Nations membership bid, Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erakat said yesterday.

Erakat, speaking at a news conference in Ramallah, said the Palestinians had been in touch with Washington after a meeting of the Middle East peacemaking Quartet this week that failed to produce a final joint statement.

"In the aftermath of the Quartet meeting, yesterday we urged the United States administration to revisit, reassess, re-evaluate its position vis-a-vis our attempt to gain Palestine admittance to the UN," he said.

The Quartet meeting on Monday, which brought together representatives from the United States, European Union, United Nations and Russia, was intended to discuss potential peace initiatives that could head off the Palestinian UN bid.

But the talks ended with no joint statement and no action plan. The Palestinians say they will not return to the negotiating table without a freeze on settlement construction and clear parameters for new talks, including that any borders will be based on the lines that existed before the 1967 Six Day War, with mutually agreed land swaps.

But Israel has rejected any new settlement moratorium, and says setting preconditions for talks prejudices the substance of negotiations.



A picture taken on Tuesday shows a Somali mother with her children arriving at a camp in southern Mogadishu. The Somalia's transitional government has set up a new Internally Displaced People (IDP) camp for the families uprooted by a severe drought.

Child malnutrition in Somalia at dire levels

WFP considers resuming operations

AGENCIES

One in 10 children in parts of drought-hit Somalia is at risk of starving to death, twice as many as recently as March, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) said yesterday.

"Levels of malnutrition have reached a new peak and are currently the highest in the world," the ICRC said in a statement.

The independent aid agency said nearly 11 percent of children under five had severe acute malnutrition in the comparatively developed region of the country. Rates were believed to be significantly higher in other areas.

Meanwhile, the World Food Programme said it was mulling a return to Somalia's rebel-held regions to help residents facing hunger due to a harsh drought.

Around three million Somalis, about a third of the entire population, are in need of humanitarian aid and last week the al-

Qaeda-inspired Shebab rebels said they would allow foreign aid groups two years after expelling them.

The Shebab, who control much of southern and central Somalia, in 2009 banned foreign aid organisations on accusations that they were against Islam.

During a visit to the region last week, the UN refugee agency chief Antonio Guterres said Somalis face the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

Germany and the United States have pledged millions of dollars in aid of the drought victims, while British aid agencies last week launched a joint fundraising appeal for the Horn of Africa region.

Twelve million people in parts of Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia and Ethiopia have been affected by the drought that has decimated livestock, depleted food reserves and devastated livelihoods.

Attacks kill 14 in Mexico

AFP, Ciudad Juarez

Gunmen opened fire on a group of people gathered on a soccer field here, bringing to 14 the total number killed in three separate attacks in northern Mexico, officials said.

The attacks on Tuesday were the latest in a wave of deadly shootings that have gripped the country, where some 37,000 people have been killed in largely drug-related violence since 2006.

The soccer field attack was carried out in Ciudad Juarez -- Mexico's most violent city -- by unknown gunmen wielding AK-47 assault rifles, a police source said.

Earlier in the day, five people between the ages of 15 and 20 were gunned down by gunmen riding in two vans in Santa Catarina.

Govt won't interfere

FROM PAGE 20 would be further strengthened," she said.

The premier made the remarks when outgoing British High Commissioner Stephen Evans paid a farewell call on her at her office in the morning, said PM's Press Secretary Abul Kalam Azad.

Referring to the Habiganj by-poll, mayoral election in the Chittagong City Corporation and the local body elections, Hasina said these polls had proved the government's sincerity towards free, fair, neutral and acceptable elections.

The premier reiterated her government's determination of showing zero tolerance towards militancy and terrorism. "We never allow any sort of terrorist activities," she said.

She also vowed to uphold human rights and justice in the society.

Hasina said the judiciary is now independent and the

government always makes its best efforts to maintain rule of law.

"The present government believes in friendly relations with all neighbours," she said, adding that when good relation prevails among the neighbouring countries, it benefits all their peoples.

The premier told the British envoy about the government's strategy of Public-Private Partnership (PPP) to boost investment sector.

Hasina informed that the present government has a plan to dredge the Mongla port area on regular basis.

The outgoing British high commissioner praised the prime minister's visionary and active leadership.

Evans thanked Hasina and the government for their support in discharging his duties in Bangladesh.

PM's Principal Secretary M A Karim, among others, were present in the meeting.

EXTRADITION CASE Court defers Assange ruling

AFP, London

Judges at Britain's High Court yesterday deferred a decision in the appeal of WikiLeaks chief Julian Assange against his extradition to Sweden to face rape allegations.

Judge John Thomas did not give a date for when the panel of two senior judges would hand down the ruling on Assange's bid to overturn February's ruling that approved Sweden's request.

During a two-day hearing on Tuesday and yesterday, lawyers for the 40-year-old Australian argued that the allegations would not constitute sexual assault in England, and that the European Arrest Warrant issued by Sweden was flawed.

Farmer drove truck

FROM PAGE 1 said Habib, head operator of the rice mill.

It was Mofiz's sheer recklessness and irresponsibility that the truck fell into the ditch and killed the children, he said.

Locals said Mofiz had been working as the helper for the last seven years. Three years ago he started sitting at the wheel, taking the truck to places close by.

A farmer most of his life, Mofiz completed only primary education. He went to Kuwait three years after the second Gulf War but returned home failing to make it there.

"Then he managed to get a forged licence for Tk 6,000-7,000," Harun-Ar-Rashid, brother-in-law of Mofiz, said when The Daily Star visited his house in Mayani union.

Father of three sons and a daughter, Mofiz left home around 9:00am Monday and was on duty as the driver since the actual driver was

unavailable.

"Actually, Mofiz was due to go to Shovurpur in Feni to bring some rice for the mill in the morning. But local leaders and teachers of Abu Torab Government Primary School insisted on his taking the kids to the match. They said they'd be able to return by noon," said Habib the mill operator.

The Daily Star learnt that Jahir Uddin, chairman of Abu Torab Government Primary School managing committee, also a popular Awami League activist, hired the truck for only Tk 200 to take the students to the football match at a stadium in Mirsarai.

On their way back when the truck flipped over into the muddy water of the ditch, Mofiz got out of the cabin through the window.

"I begged the driver to stay and help me save lives," said Mohammad Alamgir, the survivor who rescued many

of the victims. Mofiz did not listen and made a run for life.

Alamgir said Mofiz narrowly averted accidents twice before in that trip. He did not listen when the children begged him to drive slowly.

A nephew of Mofiz, Shakhawat Hossain Nayan, a student of class-V, also died in the accident.

Meanwhile, police said they are hunting down Mofiz.

PROBETEAMVISIT
The three-member probe body formed to investigate Monday's tragic accident at Mirsarai visited the spot yesterday afternoon, reports our staff correspondent in Chittagong.

The committee led by its convener Ibne Alam Hasan, additional chief engineer of Roads and Highways Department (RHD) Chittagong zone, reached the spot around 5:00pm. The team then visited a victim's family at Saidaly village and talked to the family.

Later, they visited Abu Torab Bahumukhi High School to talk to teachers and locals.

Before leaving, Ibne Alam Hasan told journalists that the committee would submit its report within a week.

Meanwhile, a five-member monitoring committee, headed by chairman of Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA), accompanied the probe body to the spot.

Committee chief and BRTA Chairman Ayubur Rahman Khan told reporters that they would propose strengthening the laws on talking on mobile phones while driving. He said they are going to take stern action against reckless driving soon.

He claimed that law enforcement agencies have been directed to take steps against drivers without valid driving licences and vehicles without fitness certificates.