

PM assures UZ chairmen of solving their problems

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has assured the upazila chairmen and vice-chairmen of empowering them by solving their problems in performing duties properly.

She gave the assurance at a meeting with leaders of Bangladesh Upazila Chairmen and Vice-chairmen Association at the Gono Bhaban last night, meeting sources said.

When some leaders pointed out that a section of upazila chairmen and vice-chairmen would stage a token hunger strike at the Central Shaheed Minar soon, the premier said her government has no objection to this.

About their earlier threat to resign en masse, Hasina said in that case there will be by election in the upazilas concerned.

Agriculture Minister Matia Chowdhury, who attended the meeting, told The Daily Star, "We have already empowered the upazila chairmen a lot and pledged to solve through gazette notifications the problems they are facing or will face. This will empower them even more."

China and Vietnam to strengthen military ties

REUTERS, Shanghai

China and Vietnam have agreed to strengthen military cooperation, increase contacts between high-ranking officers and establish a hotline for the two defence ministries, in a bid to cool tensions between the Communist-led neighbours.

The two countries, which have a history of distrust, also agreed to launch a pilot project of joint patrols along their land border, continue joint naval patrols in the Beibu Gulf and increase mutual visits of naval warships, the official Xinhua news agency reported on Saturday.

Earlier in the week, China and Vietnam signed an agreement seeking to contain a dispute over the South China Sea, a potentially oil and gas rich body of water spanned by key shipping lanes that sees the Philippines, Brunei, Malaysia and Taiwan -- also stake conflicting claims of sovereignty over parts of the waters.

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have never suspended the project," he told Channeli.

Meanwhile, World Bank Country Director Ellen Goldstein yesterday said the bank's integrity vice presidency has shared information on the Padma bridge project with the government as part of its "due diligence".

"The World Bank Group works in challenging governance environments, while maintaining standards of integrity that allow most effective use of our resources," Goldstein said after the launch of World Development Report 2012 at the Westin hotel in the capital.

In Bangladesh, the World Bank is firmly committed to transparency in everything it does to ensure that Bangladeshis get the full development benefits of the bank's support, she said in a statement.

Her statement comes after publication of news reports on the WB integrity vice president handing over a letter and a probe report on the project to Finance Minister AMA Muhith in Washington.

On September 21, Leonard F McCarthy, integrity vice president of World Bank, handed over the letter to Muhith in Washington raising corruption allegations against Communications minister Syed Abul Hossain and his business firm SAHCO.

The WB is coordinating the project's funding. It is also the biggest donor with a funding of \$1.2 billion. The ADB is providing \$600 million, Jica \$400 million and IDB \$140 million.

'Corporate greed'

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crisis-hit countries like Greece, and then worldwide -- last month reaching the centre of global capitalism in Wall Street.

A large crowd gathered near the Colosseum in central Rome, where there were reports of a bank being attacked and cars were set alight.

In London, protesters plan to converge on the City for an "Occupy the London Stock Exchange" action.

Organisers of the 15 October worldwide protests said on their website that the aim was to "initiate the global change we want".

"United in one voice, we will tell politicians, and the financial elites they serve, know it is up to us, the people, to decide our future," it said.

Slogans painted in the Spanish capital Madrid are full of anger at politicians accused of serving the banks, not the people, and frustration over an economic crisis which has hit the poor and the young very hard, the BBC's Sarah Rainsford reports.

Organisers in Rome expect 100,000 people and television pictures showed streets packed with protesters, waving banners.

Most of Saturday's other rallies, however, have been small, with traffic barely disrupted.

Hundreds of people marched in the New Zealand cities of Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch while in the Australian city of Sydney, some 2,000 people -- including representatives of Aboriginal groups, communists and trade unionists -- gathered outside the central Reserve Bank of Australia.

"Occupy" protests were also being held in South Korea, the Philippines and in Hong Kong.

At least 100 people gathered at the Taipei stock exchange, chanting "we are Taiwan's 99%", and saying economic growth had only benefited companies while middle-class salaries barely covered soaring housing, education and healthcare costs.

It remains to be seen if any of the demonstrations turn into protest camps, such as Occupy Wall Street, which began with a small group of activists in New York's financial district a couple of months ago and has now grown to include several thousand people at times, from many walks of life.

Observers, however, say that, while protesters in Spain had concrete demands such as seeking a cut in working hours to tackle unemployment, many "Occupy" protesters are vague in their demands.

Political

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democracy to function properly.

Right to participate in voting, freedom of expression and an independent electoral system are the key components for holding a free and fair election, he pointed out.

About the upcoming Narayanganj City Corporation polls, the CEC said closed circuit television (CCTV) will be set up in over 100 vulnerable centres and over 5,000 members of law enforcement agencies will be deployed.

Printed leaflets containing detailed information of all the candidates will be distributed among the voters to enable them to pick their representatives.

Shushashoner Jonnyo Nagorik (Sujan), a non-governmental civil rights body, will be involved in the distribution of leaflets.

NUB Vice-chancellor Prof M Shamsul Haque spoke at the function, among others.

Work goes on

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Khan discussed the matter a few days back. Both of them visited to see the dredging at different spots yesterday. Shipping Secretary Abdul Mannan and CPA Chairman Commodore Anwarul Islam among others were present during the visit in Firingibazar, Sadarghat and the Third Karnaphuli Bridge areas.

Speaking to journalists after the visit, the minister admitted that some allegations were raised and gave an assurance to investigate the matter. The CPA and the contractor would solve the problems through discussion, he said.

Shahjahan, however, claimed that the dredging work has so far been done smoothly despite those constraints and hoped that the project would be done on schedule.

Sources said the shipping minister in a meeting with the MMDC officials at the CPA Rest House yesterday afternoon assured them of all-out support. He also directed the CPA officials to finalise the design soon.

As per the project profile, around 2km of the river -- stretching from Sadarghat jetty to some 500 metre off the Third Karnaphuli Bridge -- would be dredged and a 2,615-metre-long marine driveway with bank protection and a 400-metre jetty would be constructed.

Once the project is implemented, the government hopes navigability of the river would be improved while vessel congestion would also be reduced significantly and waterlogging in the port city would be solved.

Execution

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committed such a crime which deserves death sentence. "They [Bangladeshis] killed a citizen of another country and thus they were executed upon completion of a judicial process," he said at a regular press briefing at the foreign ministry yesterday.

The eight Bangladeshis were not killed in Saudi Arabia, he added.

"If we believe in the rule of law, we then must accept the trial of Saudi Arabia. We may have difference in opinion about the process of death penalty, but there is no way to disagree with the trial," the foreign secretary said.

He further said the execution of death sentence is also legal in Bangladesh. "The process of execution differs from country to country, in Bangladesh death sentence is executed by hanging, in some country through electric shock or electro fire. And there are also countries where death sentence has been abolished," he said.

The Saudi authority beheaded eight Bangladeshis on October 7 for killing an Egyptian citizen in Riyadh in April, 2007.

The foreign secretary said the Bangladesh government had made all-out efforts to save the Bangladeshis. The then president Prof Iajuddin Ahmed even wrote to the Saudi King for clemency and negotiations were done through Egyptian Ambassador in Riyadh to get pardon from the victim's family members.

In the kingdom, the king does not have the authority to pardon a murder convict but the victim's family members can forgive in exchange for blood money.

Living with danger

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one. But the six inheritors of the building had failed to reach a consensus on it.

The other inheritors remained tight-lipped about the matter.

More than a hundred families like hers live in such vulnerable structures in Shakhari Bazar.

Many of them mentioned disagreement between inheritors as the main reason for failure to rebuild the old structure or construct new ones. In most cases, a single building has several owners while some are owned by as many as 50 people.

Some house owners referred to the Vested Property Act as the main obstacle to constructing new buildings demolishing the old ones.

"Our centuries-old building has six inheritors. Twelve families live in 24 tiny rooms of our three-storey building," said 48-year-old Shib Charan Dhar, who trades in bangles in Shakhari Bazar.

"We all agreed to knock it down to build a new structure. But we were barred from doing that since the building had been listed as enemy property."

Many house owners in Shakhari Bazar are unable to build new structures because of the Vested Property Act, formerly Enemy Property Act, he said.

Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) and Rajdhani Unnayan Karttripakkha (Rajuk) identified 32

houses as highly vulnerable and 91 as risky in Shakhari Bazar in 2009 after a huge chunk of plaster broke off the roof of Madan Mohan Mandir, one of the oldest ornamented buildings in the area, leaving three people injured.

In June 2004, 11 people were killed and several others injured when a century-old building came crashing down on them.

On recommendations from an expert committee, the government in 2008 had decided to declare Shakhari Bazar a heritage site where several hundred families live in 142 buildings on both sides of a 600-foot-long narrow alley.

Some house owners are accommodating to the idea, while many others strongly oppose it.

If Shakhari Bazar is made a heritage site, the house owners there will not be allowed to knock down any old structures or renovate them without government permission.

However, the government agencies concerned have not yet made any move to that end.

It will be really difficult for the house owners to renovate the centuries-old buildings, if the place is made a heritage site, said advocate Kishore Kumar Basu Pintu, who was born and brought up in Shakhari Bazar.

"We have not heard anything from government agencies about renovation of buildings in Shakhari

Bazar," he said.

Officials of the Department of Archaeology said it could not take any initiative to conserve the site for fund constraints.

Historians say the 300-year-old quarter was built during the Mughal period for craftsmen, who make Shakra (bangles made of conch). The quarter was later expanded during the British rule.

Unplanned renovation over the years has diminished the aesthetic value of the buildings that boast a distinct architectural style.

Myanmar allows unions, strikes

BBC ONLINE

Workers in Burma will be allowed to form unions and go on strike under a new law signed this week by the president, officials say.

The law permits unions with a minimum of 30 members to be formed and allows strikes if a notice period is given.

Unions have not been allowed to operate in Burma since 1962.

The law appears to be the latest in a series of changes being introduced by Burma's new military-backed, civilian-led government.

Signed on Tuesday, it also sets out penalties for both employers and employees who do not abide by its terms.

Shame weighing down on us

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resolved, it is obvious that the government is in a lonely corner.

Its dilemma now is one of damned if it does and damned if it doesn't. Which is a pity, for this government happens to be one which came in through promising change in the country. The change, it was fair for the nation to assume, was to be of a defining kind, of a sort that would lead Bangladesh to newer vistas of progress, metaphorically as well as literally.

Now that the WB has made its fury known over what it believes is the gross corruption involved in the Padma Bridge project, that promise of change seems like a thing going back to a long-ago past. And what we must deal with now is watch how the government rolls back the damage and by doing so how it means to retrieve the ground it has lost in these past few weeks.

That its popularity is speedily on the wane is a fact writ large all over the place. That it must act is now an imperative. That it has not acted so far has only contributed to the making of a disaster.

The WB has, as we understand it, pointed its fingers at Communications Minister Syed Abul Hossain and his family-owned firm SAHCO. There are too the rumours flying around some other influential people close to the corridors of power being in the thick of this gathering scandal. For his part, the minister has denied any wrong-doing. He has every right to state his point of view, especially in matters where he feels his name is being dragged in the mud. Whether his denial is credible and therefore acceptable is quite another matter, though.

What is of significance here is that oft-repeated thought of democratic accountability. Even if one gives the minister the benefit of doubt, even if all these allegations turn out to have been without basis, it is only ethical for the minister not just to offer to resign but actually resign so that the government can move on with the task at hand.

The incredible part of the story here is that the minister has demonstrated no willingness to resign. Worse than his reluctance to quit has been the bizarre. And that has come through the studied silence of the government on the issue. Barring Finance Minister AMA Muhith (and that too because he recently had the unenvi-

able job of listening to World Bank officials in Washington enlightening him on the Padma Bridge allegations), the machinery of the government has stayed silent. Here we have a crisis which increasingly undermines the image of the government, both at home and abroad, and yet the government will not act.

It should have been for Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to go for decisive action, for two reasons. The first is that the scandal, unless it is swiftly dealt with, will balloon out of control, leaving her government open to accusations of wrong-doing even as it pursues all those cases of corruption against the BNP government of the period 2001-2006. And the second concerns the dent that has been made in the government's armour abroad with these charges of corrupt practices emerging into light.

Let there be no mistake. The Padma Bridge is, for both the government and the people of Bangladesh, an issue of national self-esteem. With the economy not in good shape (and that is saying it euphemistically), the country is in sore need of funds, of an enhancement in its foreign currency reserves. But when a few individuals, abusing their positions in the corridors of power, put an entire nation to shame, it is the moral responsibility of the government to take corrective measures.

For Sheikh Hasina, there are all the scandal-related stories happening around the globe in modern times to take lessons from. Besides, she and her party, already badly bruised (with some of the wounds being self-inflicted) in varied areas, will do themselves a world of good to remember that their term in office proceeds rapidly toward the end, that they need to wage a new electoral battle if they mean to return to office.

In critical times, silence is always devastating. And denial is self-defeating. For the government, the moment is here to come clean with its version of the Padma Bridge scandal. If heads need to roll, let them roll. And it does not matter how close the owners of those heads are to the more powerful of individuals in the government. The choice is between sacrificing a corrupt few and sacrificing the interests of the country. Sheikh Hasina must surely be aware of the ramifications of any move that ignores the interests of the

country.

Here is what the opposition BNP must now do, again in the larger interest of the nation. It can march into parliament when it convenes later this month and raise, loudly and purposefully, all those questions which have been exercising the minds of the people since the WB first let us in on the corruption it thinks is holding up progress on the Padma Bridge. It can compel the ruling dispensation to come forth with the truth and do us all a favour, despite all the dark deeds it itself remains accused of committing in the past.

The nation waits to know where things have gone wrong with the Padma Bridge project. How much does the prime minister know about the scandal? And when did she know? And when will she act?

This haemorrhaging of governmental dignity is fast leading to a shooting down, one after the other, of societal priorities.

Law-enforcers'

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hit their legs?" he posed the questions.

Law enforcers often claim that they open fire in self-defence. Though it is legal, there is a specific definition of it. All the claims about self-defence are not legal, he mentioned. "Only the judiciary can decide which is legal or not. Let them take a decision on this."

Lawmen even try to legalise an extrajudicial killing citing one's previous criminal record, which is not legal either, added Mizanur.

Regarding persons going missing, the NHRC chief said right to life is the top-most basic right of the people. In a democratic country it is not acceptable that a person will go missing.

The state has to take the responsibility regardless of whether it finds them out or not. There is nothing to play hide and seek in this regard, he maintained.

Commissioner of Dhaka Metropolitan Police Benazir Ahmed pointed to lack of manpower in the judiciary for a huge backlog of cases. He suggested enhancing the capacity of the judiciary by 10 times to minimise the case backlog.

Additional Director General of Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) Col Majibur Rahman, Director of its legal and media wing Commander M Sohail and Chief Executive of Bangladesh Human Rights Foundation Alena Khan addressed the programme, among others.

Myanmar

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The refugees at the camps had declined to return, he said hoping that they may have the confidence to go back now as Myanmar has a new government.

Bangladesh, Myanmar and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) took a fresh initiative to return the refugees to their homeland, said Quayes, who attended Foreign Office Consultations held in Myanmar on August 25.

Both governments are in discussion to launch synchronised patrol of the common border by border guards of the two countries to stop fresh influx of Myanmar citizens into Bangladesh, Quayes said.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is set to visit Myanmar soon to discuss this issue among others but the date of the trip has not been fixed yet, he added.

According to different sources, there are more than 300,000 unregistered Rohingyas living among the local population, in slums and villages mostly throughout Cox's Bazar district but also in smaller numbers in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

The foreign secretary told the press conference that the huge number of undocumented Rohingyas was damaging the environment, creating social problems and disrupting our job market abroad.

Their presence is damaging the forests in Cox's Bazar and the CHT, and the social environment of the locality as many are involved in different types of anti-social and criminal activities, like prostitution and smuggling.

Rohingyas began fleeing Burma in the late 1970s, although the biggest influx was in 1992 when an estimated 250,000 fled to Bangladesh. Most of them were repatriated following an agreement between Bangladesh and Myanmar with the UNHCR supervision.

Experts decry

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civil aviation rules.

BAF operates helicopters, which do not need a runway, and occasionally the C-130 Hercules relief cargo plane that requires a 4,600-foot (approximately 1.4 kilometres) runway at best. The length of Tejgaon airstrip is 9,800 feet (around 3 km), said Habib.

Officially, Shah Amanat International Airport in Chittagong is the alternative to Shahjalal International Airport, he added.

Prof Sarwar Jahan, president of BIP, said the arguments placed by BAF are hollow.

According to Dhaka's master plan, the airstrip should be turned into a national square with amenities for national and international events, exhibitions, open theatres, public meetings and children's park, said speakers of the roundtable.

Moreover, neither the airstrip nor Dhaka cantonment fits in the core of the capital that badly needs transport facilities and open space, said Prof Jahan.

Mizanur Rahman Khan, assistant editor of the daily Prothom Alo, said maintaining Tejgaon airstrip as an airport is legally untenable as per the government gazette on Dhaka's master plan and the Supreme Court verdict in Rangs Bhaban case.

ASM Ismail, chief architect of the government, said BAF's objection is devoid of reason.

It is not desirable to have a once-abandoned (25 years ago) airstrip impose embargo on the city's growth or to have strategic military plan for a battle field in the core of the capital, said founder chairman of Biswa Shaktiya Kendra Prof Abdullah Abu Sayeed, who chaired the discussion.

Mubasshar Hussein, president of Institute of Architects Bangladesh, among others, spoke at the roundtable moderated by Md Shamsul Alam, editor and publisher of Mukto Akash.